

PARENTING TIPS



# Helping Your Perfectionist Child



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## Helping a perfectionist child

Many children have a perfectionist streak that can lead to them being very self-critical about their work and achievements.

They can become frustrated and upset when things don't go their own way. This frustration can be expressed towards themselves in self-criticism and self-anger and can inhibit a child from learning and damage their self-esteem over time. It is also very hard to witness as a parent.

While some aspects of perfectionism are down to personality, this natural drive can also be moulded and encouraged to be expressed more positively.

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## SOOTHE YOUR CHILD

When you witness a burst of self-criticism, it is important to first acknowledge their feelings and help your child understand them.

You might say “you sound frustrated” or “I know you wanted to get all those figures right – it’s hard when it doesn’t happen.”

The key is having an empathic, calm tone – you **listen** and **understand** but you don’t get upset in response.

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## GENTLY CHALLENGE

It is helpful to get your child to talk about what is going on in their mind when they are being self-critical. For example, if they say they are stupid, you might ask "What makes you say this?" **calmly** with an **inquisitive** tone.

...Then you can gently challenge the perfectionist idea underpinning it - "Just because you got one wrong doesn't mean that."

EXAMPLE: If your child says people think they are stupid, you can ask "Do people really think that?" and invite them to think this through – "Why would someone say that? Perhaps they are insecure or jealous. Does it matter what they think anyway?"

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## BUILD INSIGHT

Explain to your child that perfectionism is something **external** to them, so that they can learn to challenge it themselves. For example, you could say:

“Some adults and children think they have to do things perfectly. It is like they have a little voice in their heads that says ‘you are stupid if it is not perfect’. This voice can make you very upset when things aren’t perfect. But of course it is only a little voice that you don’t have to listen to. Does this ever happen to you?”

The goal is to help your child put their perfectionism in perspective and not let it dominate them.

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## PRAISE POSITIVE QUALITIES

Avoid over-praising success, which could aggravate your child's perfectionism and instead praise their efforts and what they have done right, whatever the outcome. For example, you can say:

"You made a great **effort**, well done" or "You spent lots of time on that work, that is great **persistence**."

It is also important to praise your child anytime you see them managing their perfectionism.

"You gave it another go in a calm way, that is great."

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## GIVE ALTERNATIVES

You can also give your child alternatives to some of the harsh self-judgments they might make.

Instead of saying "I'm stupid" to themselves, they could be encouraged to say "I did my best" or "I learn when I make a mistake" or "nobody's perfect".

Make this into a game and get them to identify their negative thoughts and then write out replacement self-statements that they can use when upset.

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## MODEL SELF-ACCEPTANCE

The more you can model a constructive way of managing your upsetting feelings, the more your child will learn from you.

For example, you might talk out loud in front of them when something goes wrong for you "I'm a bit disappointed that it did not go well . . . but hopefully it will be better the next time."

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## BE A SUPPORTIVE PARENT

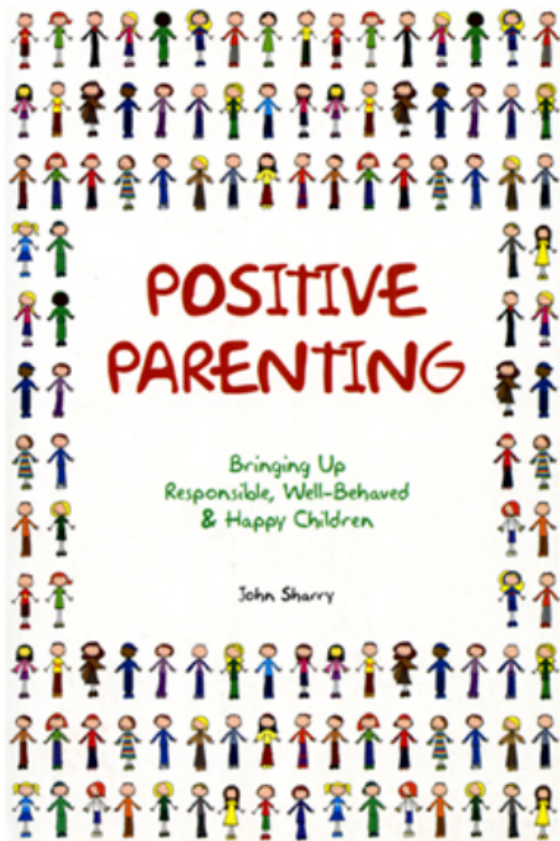
It is important to remember that there are many positives to the perfectionist side of your child's personality such as drive, energy and attention to detail.

Your goal as a parent is to encourage these positive aspects while reducing the negatives by encouraging more **self-compassion** and **acceptance**.

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## FURTHER READING



There are lots more ideas to help support your children in my book, **Positive Parenting**.

Available in libraries and all the usual bookshops.

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