

# Introduction

Everyone makes mistakes—they're part of human nature.

When some people make mistakes, they don't think about it very much. They simply go on about their business, and that's that. Some people pay attention to mistakes, but see them as guides for what to do next time. If they spend time thinking about their mistakes, it's usually to learn something valuable. The overall result is a sense of growth.

Other people become very upset by mistakes. They dwell on their errors and missteps, revisiting them over and over. They feel embarrassed, ashamed, and angry at themselves. Eventually, they may begin to feel extremely anxious or afraid of making mistakes. They might even feel paralyzed by their fear.

Do you recognize any of these feelings in your children—or in yourself? If so, do you know what makes mistakes so upsetting?

In this book, I'll consider some of the possible answers to this question. Mistakes mean something to each of us, and while most people aren't happy about making mistakes, some people are much more upset by it than others. In particular, if it seems to you that making a mistake means that something is wrong with you, and if you think that mistakes make you less acceptable in the eyes of others, then making a mistake can feel awful. You are less likely to let go of a mistake, or to think of it as a chance to learn. And your desperate desire *not* to make mistakes can actually get in the way of your success.

Many people who feel bad about themselves for making mistakes will simply avoid making decisions about things, so that mistakes are less likely to happen. Others will get very busy making sure that everything they do will be perfect. Not just very good, or even excellent—*perfect*. They reason that if they can do things perfectly, maybe they'll feel good about themselves. This is what perfectionism is all about, and that's the topic of this book.

## Seeing the Signs of Perfectionism

Does your child or teen . . .

- seem highly competitive and constantly compare himself to others?
- find it hard to relax and enjoy the present moment?
- hesitate to take risks for fear of failing or of making a mistake?
- berate himself when he does make mistakes?
- experience frequent stress and anxiety?
- seem prone to discouragement?
- procrastinate often because of a need to do things perfectly?
- have difficulty in relationships because he expects too much of himself, or of others?
- appear to be a compulsive planner?

If you've noticed any of these tendencies, your child or teenager may be a perfectionist. None of them alone is a sure sign, but the more of them you've noticed, the more likely perfectionism is at work.

A perfectionist is someone who feels extremely upset when a mistake is made and the unrealistic goal of perfection can't be met. Perfectionism can be seen at any age, even in very young children. It manifests in many ways, making it a challenge to combat. All the more reason to learn as much as you can about it.

## Help for Your Child—and for You

Chances are, you're reading this book because you want help in dealing with your child's perfectionist ways of thinking and behaving. You don't want your child to be limited and frustrated by them. And frankly, your child's perfectionism may be driving you crazy.

You may also be wondering if you or others in your family have perfectionist tendencies that fuel those of your child. If so, reread the list above and see if any of these tendencies apply to you or to other adults in your household or family. If the answer is yes, then this book may be even more helpful than you had hoped. You will learn not only a new approach to your child's perfectionism, but also new ways of handling perfectionist tendencies in yourself or other important

people in your life. This book is about changing how you and your child relate to one another, so it involves everyone in the family.

If your family is affected by perfectionism, it makes sense that you hope to make some changes. Perfectionism is painful. Perfectionists suffer greatly from self-criticism. Even if they do well at something, they can't enjoy it because they feel they should have done better. Their high expectations and critical tendencies make everyone around them ill at ease. Intimacy seems elusive, because perfectionists avoid the vulnerability and risk-taking that intimacy requires. Work becomes overwhelming, because everything must be done just right. Creativity slows to a trickle. Physical exhaustion is common, and little "juice" is left in life.

No wonder you want to make changes.

I'm glad you're taking the time to read these pages and think about ways to get out from under the burden of perfectionism, whether you see it in your child, yourself, or other family members. Your interest in working on this means that your children and your family life are important to you, and that's the cornerstone of the plan I'll be showing you for overcoming perfectionism.

## You're in Good Company

Perfectionism is a concern for many people. Whenever I speak publicly on any topic related to parenting or relationships, people in the audience are always eager to talk about their experience with perfectionism. No one can say just how widespread perfectionism is, partly because there are several ways to define it, but we do know that the modern winner-take-all attitude of our culture encourages it.

I've been a psychologist and marriage and family therapist for more than 40 years, and perfectionism has always interested me. I've read, written, and lectured widely on the subject, and I've helped many clients free themselves from perfectionism. In this book, I'll pass along to you what I've learned about perfectionism and how to overcome it. In doing so, I'll draw on not only my professional experience but my personal insights as well.

*My kids were pancake lovers, especially when the cakes were poured in the shapes of their initials. I often did the cooking. My own perfectionism made me something of a loner in the kitchen, since things had to be done a certain way.*

*One day, our daughter wanted to participate in the cooking. Fine with me, I thought. We could have a good time together. Quickly, though, I found myself getting nervous, and even angry. She was making a mess and doing lots of things “wrong.” I soon realized that my pointed commentaries were spoiling the fun for both of us and decided it was best if I left the job totally in her hands. She proudly took it on and made delicious pancakes, but my perfectionism cost me the chance to cook with my child that day.*

In this book, you’ll find many stories like this one. Some are about me and my family, but most are about other people I’ve known, including clients, workshop attendees, friends, and relatives. The stories are real; names, and sometimes genders, have been changed in order to protect people’s privacy. The stories serve to illustrate important points and are meant to do three things: 1) remind you of similar experiences in your own life, 2) show you that you are not alone, and 3) demonstrate that perfectionism can be overcome.

## **Make This Your Book**

The most important stories in these pages are yours. Throughout the book, you’ll find invitations to “Make a Note of It.” These are places where I give you ways to notice and reflect on your own experiences with perfectionism in your family. Use a notebook to jot down examples of what you observe. I’ll give you lots of hints that will help you know what to look for. By using your own observations, you can tailor the book to your own situation and needs.

The notes can be anything from one-word reminders to lengthy journal entries. They are meant to help you see patterns that might be significant. You might even find it useful to make a note of other things going on at the time. For example, is your child’s perfectionism more pronounced when she’s tired, or has just been in an argument, or is feeling bad about something else that has happened?

*A note of caution:* You might be tempted to read your notes to your child or other family members as a way to point out their perfectionist traits, with the intention of letting them know what they are doing *wrong*. In reality, as you can imagine, this might only make them more self-critical or defensive. Instead, use your observations and note taking to help you become clearer about your concerns and get into a supportive conversation about what’s going on.

You will also find invitations to “Talk It Over” throughout the book. These invitations consist of questions and activities to help you start conversations about perfectionism with your child and your whole family. Talk between family members is a powerful way to understand more about one another, and to build stronger family bonds. I recommend that you start talking with your family members as soon as you read the “Talk It Over” suggestions, and continue the conversations over time. They will naturally evolve as each person contributes, gains insights, and makes changes.

When having these dialogues with family members, make sure they observe your genuine involvement and curiosity—make eye contact, stay engaged, and be supportive. As you speak with your perfectionist child, you’ll have a great opportunity to get inside her world. Attempting to understand your child’s vantage point will bring two benefits at once: you’ll get important information about why she acts the way she does, and your interest in her world will feel good to her—she’ll feel understood, cared about, and hopeful. The same will be true of other family members when you show interest in their viewpoints.

The “Talk It Over” activities in this book can be done with your partner or child, or with the whole family. You may want to talk some things over with only one child, especially if there’s some rivalry between your children. For other discussions, it would be helpful if everyone in the family is involved and can be a part of examining how the family works and how it could work better. Some families have more than one perfectionist child, and each exhibits perfectionism differently. Use your judgment on how to proceed with the “Talk It Over” activities, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is to have everyone involved at some time.

*A tip about taking action:* If a family conversation leads to a suggestion that you do something differently, adopt an experimental attitude. Agree to try it for a week or two (depending on what seems appropriate), and then plan to check in with each other to see how it went. If the change was helpful, continue it. If not, talk about other ideas you could try.

## Getting to the Bottom of Perfectionism

As you read the chapters and do the activities, *Moving Past Perfect* will help you understand and minimize perfectionism in your family. In

Part 1, you'll explore what perfectionism is, what its root causes are, and how to recognize it. In Part 2, you'll discover how to help your child overcome perfectionism and, if necessary, how to overcome it yourself. "Read More About It" lists offer recommendations for resources that can help you learn more. You'll also find a checklist in Chapter 1 that you can photocopy for your own use and for other family members.

Throughout the book, I will often suggest that you take a look at your own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and at the role you might be playing in your child's perfectionism. The purpose of this self-observation is not for you to take on blame but to help you take a wider view of the ways perfectionism may be present in your family so that you can respond to it more effectively. Since I have done this myself and have helped many other parents do so as well, I can tell you that it is worth the effort. In the end, your child will be free of a burden—and you will be free as well.

## Families, Genders, and the Words We Use

This book is about children and their families, and families come in many forms. Yours may include biological or adoptive parents, stepparents, unmarried partners, or other adults sharing in your family life in an important way. While no one word describes all these other adults that may be part of a family's life, I will mostly be using the word "partner" to do so, since each significant adult in your family life is in some way a partner in helping to shape your child's experiences. Feel free to substitute another word if it fits your family situation better or to ignore it if you don't have any partners in parenting.

When we're speaking about one person, no English pronoun covers both sexes. In this book, I'll alternate between using *she/her* and *he/his* in order to make it easier for you to relate to what you're reading, regardless of the sex of your child or partner.

The most important word in this book may be *hope*. That's what it offers. If you're willing to learn, observe, and talk with your family about perfectionism, you can begin to free yourself from it and have a more satisfying and enjoyable family life. Best wishes on your journey!

**Tom Greenspon**

*True perfection exists only in obituaries and eulogies.*

—ASHER PACHT

## Perfectionism at a Glance

1. Check the statements that apply to your child.
2. Check those that apply to your partner (spouse or other family adult).
3. Check those that apply to you.

### ***How a Perfectionist Acts***

|   | YOUR CHILD | YOUR PARTNER | YOU |
|---|------------|--------------|-----|
| Overcommits himself                                       |            |              |     |
| Rarely delegates work to others                           |            |              |     |
| Has a hard time making choices                            |            |              |     |
| Always has to be in control                               |            |              |     |
| Competes fiercely   |            |              |     |
| Arrives late because one more thing had to be done        |            |              |     |
| <i>Never</i> arrives late                                 |            |              |     |
| Always does last-minute cramming                          |            |              |     |
| Gets carried away with the details                        |            |              |     |
| Never seems satisfied with his work                       |            |              |     |
| Constantly busies himself with something or other         |            |              |     |
| Frequently criticizes others                              |            |              |     |
| Refuses to hear criticism of himself                      |            |              |     |
| Pays more attention to negative than positive comments    |            |              |     |
| Checks up on other people's work                          |            |              |     |
| Calls himself "stupid" when he does something imperfectly |            |              |     |
| Procrastinates  |            |              |     |

### ***What a Perfectionist Thinks***

|   | YOUR CHILD | YOUR PARTNER | YOU |
|---|------------|--------------|-----|
| If I can't do it perfectly, what's the point?     |            |              |     |
| I should excel at everything I do.                |            |              |     |
| I always have to stay ahead of others.            |            |              |     |
| I should finish a job before doing anything else. |            |              |     |

*continued* →



**Perfectionism at a Glance continued**

|  | YOUR CHILD | YOUR PARTNER | YOU |
|--|------------|--------------|-----|
| Every detail of a job should be perfect.   |            |              |     |
| Things should be done right the first time.  |            |              |     |
| There is only one right way to do things.  |            |              |     |
| I'm a wonderful person if I do well; I'm a lousy person if I do poorly.                            |            |              |     |
| I'm never good enough.   |            |              |     |
| I'm stupid.  |            |              |     |
| I can't do anything right.   |            |              |     |
| I'm unlikable.   |            |              |     |
| I'd better not make a mistake here or people will think I'm not very . . . [smart, good, capable]. |            |              |     |
| If I goof up, something's wrong with me.   |            |              |     |
| People shouldn't criticize me.   |            |              |     |
| Everything should be clearly black or white. Grays are a sign of confused thinking.                |            |              |     |

**How a Perfectionist Feels**

|  | YOUR CHILD | YOUR PARTNER | YOU |
|--|------------|--------------|-----|
| Deeply embarrassed about mistakes she makes            |            |              |     |
| Disgusted or angry with herself when she is criticized |            |              |     |
| Anxious when stating her opinion to others             |            |              |     |
| Extremely worried about details                        |            |              |     |
| Angry if her routine is interrupted                    |            |              |     |
| Nervous when things around her are messy               |            |              |     |
| Fearful or anxious a lot of the time                   |            |              |     |
| Exhausted and unable to relax                          |            |              |     |
| Plagued by self-hatred                                 |            |              |     |
| Afraid of appearing stupid                             |            |              |     |
| Afraid of appearing incompetent                        |            |              |     |
| Afraid of being rejected                               |            |              |     |
| Ashamed of having fears                                |            |              |     |
| Discouraged  |            |              |     |
| Guilty about letting others down                       |            |              |     |





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