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# Introduction

## *Perfectionism in Childhood and Adolescence*

*I assume that perfectionism, i.e., thinking that ideal or perfect solutions may be demanded, is a danger.*

—ABRAHAM MASLOW (1968, p. 146)

**H**is conclusion that perfectionism is a danger is one of many reasons why Abraham Maslow was decades ahead of his time. Maslow was doubtlessly attuned to the fact that pervasive fears of failure and not measuring up to expectations are antithetical to becoming self-actualized and reaching one's full potential. Indeed, Maslow (1968) concluded that the quest for perfection would lead ultimately to the experience of "ultimate hostility against normative hopes" (p. 147).

This book is essentially about how perfectionism can amount to danger when it defines children and adolescents. We live in an era in which too many young people are living lives that require them to be perfect or in which they feel they need to be perfect. This pervasive pressure exists despite wide acceptance that no one is perfect.

Our focus in this book on perfectionism in children and adolescents reflects the growing surge of interest in this topic among contemporary researchers and members of the general public over the past decade. The perfectionism field was transformed in the early 1990s by conceptual advances focused on multidimensional perfectionism and ways to measure it (Frost et al., 1990;

Hewitt & Flett, 1990, 1991). However, most initial research addressed perfectionism in adults. It was not until the turn of this century that there was a discernible increase in the volume of research on perfectionism in children and adolescents.

Our shared journey as partners in perfectionism research follows this same general pattern. Our first decade of collaboration focused on perfectionism among adults. Research on perfectionism in children was quite limited during the initial 10 years of our working together. Our efforts in this regard were centered mostly on the development and evaluation of the Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale. The beginning of this century marked more earnest efforts in our laboratories to study multidimensional perfectionism in children and adolescents with a primary focus on the associations among perfectionism, stress, and distress. The most recent decade has involved a more extensive program addressing the developmental roots of perfectionism as well as its expression in applied contexts. Of course, there has always been an emphasis on reducing the costs and consequences of perfectionism in children and adolescents.

This book reflects our attempt to provide a comprehensive and contemporary summary of what has been learned thus far about perfectionism in young people and how perfectionism develops. Why is it important to focus specifically on the development of perfectionism? We noted in 2002 that research on perfectionism has grown exponentially (Flett & Hewitt, 2002b), and this growth has continued. In some respects, when looking at the field as a whole, for graduate students and early career researchers with some interest in perfectionism research and theory, the volume of papers on perfectionism can seem like a tsunami that is coming directly at them. Here we are reminded of Donald Hebb's sage observations about the growth of the literature. He lamented back in 1974 that "data are all over the place" (p. 71) and the sheer number of publications can make it difficult to maintain perspective and to truly see the trees in the woods that are worth seeing because they are being obscured by "the undergrowth of insignificant detail" (p. 71). Hebb's words stand as a reminder to focus on the fundamentals of knowledge. This is wise advice when the goal is to understand perfectionism.

When it comes to perfectionism, of course, scholars must decide for themselves what is truly significant. Personally, we believe it is important to circle back to the foundations of perfectionism in terms of how it is initially shaped and the factors and processes that continue to contribute to its development in children. Indeed, when the key developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence are considered, there is clear potential to arrive at a significantly enhanced understanding of the nature and origins of perfectionism. Masten and Coatsworth's (1998) influential analysis of the emergence of competence and resilience includes a list of key developmental tasks for the three periods: infancy to preschool, middle childhood, and adolescence. Each period is defined by at least four developmental tasks according to these authors. Many of the developmental tasks identified by Masten and Coatsworth are considered at some point in this book because of their clear relevance to perfectionism. For instance, the infancy-to-preschool period includes the task of developing an

attachment to caregivers. This topic is explored at length in Chapter 7. Middle childhood includes the tasks of achieving academically and getting along with peers. Chapter 8 explores perfectionism in terms of achievement and performance in academic settings, and Chapter 9 examines perfectionism in terms of interpersonal issues and outcomes. Finally, a primary developmental task of adolescence is to form a cohesive sense of self and identity. Self and identity issues are examined throughout much of this book.

Our overarching goals in writing this book are to increase awareness and understanding of perfectionism in children and adolescents and perhaps help provide the spark for further discoveries. Ideally, research findings and new insights get channeled into action. We hope this book will help fuel broad efforts to reduce perfectionism and improve the lives of young perfectionists who are suffering as a result of their own perfectionism and perhaps the perfectionism of people in their lives.

Another aim in writing this book is to provide an account of perfectionism and perfectionists that meets our guiding criterion of “the ring of truth.” That is, we hope to paint a picture of perfectionism and perfectionists that readers find resonant because it seems to capture the nature of perfectionism and how it is experienced and expressed across settings in the lives of young perfectionists.

We refer to both perfectionism and perfectionists as a reminder that perfectionism can be studied as a personality construct in the usual academic ways, but we are not simply describing variables. The approach we have embraced is clearly person centered. That is, there is a strong emphasis on the people who are considered perfectionists. As suggested earlier, the ultimate purpose of this book is to make life better for the people who struggle with perfectionism as well as the people in their lives who find themselves “in the crosshairs” and are targets of this perfectionism.

## **ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK**

We organized this book roughly into three sections. Part I introduces perfectionism as a multifaceted construct. This section culminates with a chapter on the assessment of perfectionism (Chapter 6). Part II examines perfectionism from a developmental perspective and extends this to how it is expressed and experienced in the academic and social domains. Part III is more clinically focused. It examines the adjustment costs of perfectionism and proposes approaches to reducing perfectionism and its destructiveness. We now briefly describe each chapter.

Chapter 1 introduces perfectionism according to core themes that are part of the perfectionism construct. A primary takeaway message here is that the perfectionism construct is broader and more complex than most people realize. Although the field has grown exponentially, this growth has been paralleled by significant expansion in the number of definitions that have been provided to capture the various elements of the perfectionism construct. We list these definitions as part of this first chapter.

Chapter 2 briefly traces the history of research on perfectionism in children and adolescents as a further introduction to the topic. We consider general developments throughout the previous century and then summarize key contributions that see perfectionism move from a unidimensional to a multidimensional focus.

Chapter 3 addresses some important questions. First, when does perfectionism emerge, and can it be detected in young children? Evidence suggests that perfectionism is clearly identifiable among young children. This section is intended as a preface to our subsequent chapter on the development of perfectionism. Second, how prevalent is perfectionism among children and adolescents? Clear indications from multiple sources suggest that it is widespread. Forms of perfectionism that are clearly dysfunctional are pervasive and present at a frequency that should be a cause for concern.

Chapter 4 is one of the larger chapters in this book. It introduces the comprehensive model of perfectionism first outlined in Hewitt et al. (2017) but adds three components that are particularly relevant to children and adolescents who feel a need to be perfect: failure sensitivity, mistake sensitivity, and perfectionistic reactivity. This chapter furthers the general theme that the perfectionism construct is a complex entity with several central components.

Chapter 5 focuses on core themes that we emphasize in an attempt to go beyond mere description in order to arrive at an enhanced understanding of perfectionistic children and adolescents. Topics considered here include the approach–avoidance conflict and perfectionism as ego involved and a reflection of a contingent sense of self-worth. A central theme is that perfectionism reflects self and identity issues in ways that go right to the heart of how perfectionistic children define themselves. This emphasis on ego involvement and perfectionism as a way of compensating for a negative or uncertain sense of self is why we believe that the tendency to be driven is often guided by “self-esteem striving.” The often-used term *perfectionistic striving* seems benign at times when it does not reflect the reality that the striving is so often tied directly to a deep-seated quest for self-worth. Strivings are less problematic when someone is absorbed in a task in a seemingly selfless manner. Clearly, it is vital to distinguish between perfecting something outside the self versus perfecting the self.

Chapter 6 examines the measures used to assess perfectionism in children and adolescents. Chapter 6 is a lengthy chapter. We introduce and evaluate the main scales used in research and clinical settings to measure perfectionism in children and adolescents. The detailed description and analysis in this chapter reflects our hope that this chapter will be a useful resource for researchers, counselors, and clinicians seeking psychometric information, including norms, and who might need to select measures for research investigations but also assessments of individual children and adolescents.

Chapter 7 focuses on the development of perfectionism. Clearly, given the title of this book, Chapter 7 is at the core and center of this book. Here we elaborate on themes in an earlier chapter by Flett et al. (2002), as well as a more recent chapter that considers the perfectionism social disconnection model from a developmental perspective (Hewitt et al., 2017). Our current

chapter revisits some of the themes introduced by Flett et al. (2002) and considers child factors as well as parental, family, peer, and societal factors that impact the development of perfectionism. Conceptual models of the development of perfectionism introduced by Flett et al. (2002) are reexamined along with relevant research evidence. This chapter also summarizes contemporary research on developmental trajectories. This sophisticated research further underscores the differences among perfectionism in children and adolescents.

As noted earlier, we begin in Chapter 8 to focus on perfectionism in specific contexts that can involve specific pressures facing perfectionistic children and adolescents. Chapter 8 addresses the achievement domain and issues that apply to children at school or in other performance settings. We provide an overview of what is known thus far about perfectionism in gifted children and adolescents, and we revisit the long-standing tendency to equate perfectionism with intellectual giftedness. Most notably, however, Chapter 8 examines perfectionism and its role in underachievement and learning and performance difficulties when the pressure to be perfect is too great.

We also noted earlier that Chapter 9 considers the interpersonal domain through an analysis of interpersonal factors, processes, and outcomes that pertain to perfectionism in children and adolescents. This chapter was inspired, in part, by predictions from our perfectionism social disconnection model and research conducted to evaluate its core assumptions.

Next, the focus shifts to how perfectionism and pressures to be perfect contribute to individual differences in life adjustment. Chapter 10 examines perfectionism and depression, and Chapter 11 considers the role of perfectionism in suicide and suicidal tendencies. It is in Chapter 11 that the destructiveness of perfectionism is most evident from both variable-focused and person-centered perspectives.

We focus specifically on depression and suicidal tendencies in these chapters, but it is important to recognize that perfectionism is transdiagnostic; that is, it is relevant to many diagnosable conditions, and it is often one element of complex cases of young people who have comorbid conditions (for an extended discussion, see Hewitt et al., 2017). Indeed, research on perfectionism and its associations with a host of difficulties (e.g., anxiety, eating disorders) is considered in various segments of this book. The approach we are taking recognizes that perfectionism in individual children and adolescents is often combined with other vulnerabilities and multiple adjustment difficulties. This approach allows for the fact that perfectionism can be involved in the etiology of a specific type of distress or dysfunction, but when perfectionism is combined with other diagnosed or undiagnosed conditions (e.g., problems in learning, medical health conditions), it substantially complicates the picture in ways that can make for greater difficulty in coping with these conditions.

The book concludes with two chapters geared toward decreasing perfectionism and its destructiveness. Chapter 12 examines the treatment of perfectionism in children and adolescents. Past research is described along with recommendations for approaches to treatment. Finally, in Chapter 13, we shift our focus in an attempt to conclude the book on a more positive note by

discussing ways to prevent perfectionism by boosting the reliance and adaptability of children and adolescents who are perfectionistic. It is in Chapter 13 that we revisit our earlier article on the prevention of perfectionism (Flett & Hewitt, 2014) and possible ways of reducing the prevalence of perfectionism. This chapter also serves as a summary of some key themes discussed in previous chapters.

## **AUDIENCE FOR THE BOOK**

This book on perfectionism in children and adolescents has been written to appeal to a wide range of readers with various backgrounds. We have focused primarily on the psychology of perfectionism in children and adolescents from an academic perspective, but given the pervasiveness of perfectionism and the need to understand it, it is our hope that some aspects of this book will prove helpful for people from various backgrounds. We have learned from our previous experiences over the past 3 decades that some readers will be parents who have turned to various resources because they are desperate for insight into how to help their children survive and thrive under the weight of the pressure to be perfect. Parents really can't go wrong if they support their children's need for autonomy and show affection and interest that is unconditional so that children realize that they matter in ways that are not at all conditional on achievements or doing the right thing. This advice is reflected in Chapter 13, and it is in this final chapter that other suggestions and possible solutions can be found.

## **A FINAL NOTE**

We close this introduction with a note about the cover of this book. The child on the book cover and the scene depicted illustrate several themes about perfectionism and perfectionistic children. The book cover design reflects a child playing a magnified version of a popular game that involves constructing a tower higher and higher out of different-shaped blocks without letting them fall. The scene shows a child with a goal or ambition that is clearly out of reach, and the child, at present, is not equipped with a way of reaching this highly ambitious goal. It should also be noted that this child is playing alone, which is in keeping with the social isolation experienced by so many perfectionistic children. The child was depicted as gender neutral to convey that perfectionism is found to a comparable degree among girls and boys.