

Teaching Strategies to Help Perfectionist Students

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I used to say that, “There is a special place in heaven for 1st grade teachers” until I was reminded that the same is true for gifted and talented teachers! Our highest-achieving students are often also the quirkiest, because they experience the world in a truly unique way. They often have heightened emotional sensitivity, and many suffer from high levels of anxiety due to either perceived or real pressures that are inflicted upon them -- or pressures they inflict upon themselves. This anxiety results in what I call an “Emotionally intense” child, but it can sometimes present itself as perfectionism. As classroom teachers, it can often be difficult to help these students find or regain balance. Lisa Van Gemert, author of “Perfectionism: A Practical Guide to Managing ‘Never Good Enough,’” suggests the following **teaching strategies**:

Teaching strategies: Adopt the Motto “Excellent is Good Enough”

There are some students who will accept nothing but perfectly executed work. They are the ones who won't edit their writing by crossing out a word, but instead will erase, erase, and erase -- and then rewrite the whole thing. They expend the same amount of 110 percent effort on everything -- whether it be a quick exit ticket, a homework assignment, or a major project. They cannot distinguish between or prioritize assignments because in their mind everything is equally important. One way we can help them is to provide a rating scale, along with the expected amount of time the task requires. For example, on a scale of 1-5, a homework assignment would be a 3 and should take no more than 30 minutes. Students would write 3/30 at the top of their paper next to their name. Likewise, an important unit test may be a level 5 and studying should take 60 minutes. Therefore 5/60 would be written at the top of their review sheet. Eventually, students will be able to assess the assignments for themselves - ask them “How would you rate this assignment?” and see if they are on target. You can create a colorful rating scale anchor chart or bookmarks with concrete examples as visual reminders. This alleviates a lot of anxiety for our perfectionist students because they now have very clear parameters and expectations.

Establish a Classroom Culture Where Failure is a Perfectly Acceptable Option

As Henry Ford once said, “Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again. This time more intelligently.” Closely tied with growth mindset, accepting failure and analyzing mistakes as a means of improving learning can be really tough for a perfectionist. I always start the year by watching a clip from the Pixar movie “**Meet the Robinsons**.” In this movie, a young inventor learns the valuable lesson of learning from his mistakes. “Great Failure!” quickly becomes a classroom motto. Another strategy is to post a “Favorite Mistakes Board” where students share their work along with a post-it explanation of how they fixed it. As a teacher, I have a LOT of my own mistakes to share, and showing my vulnerability also helps develop a deeper, more trusting relationship with my students.

Listen, Ask Questions, and Help Frame Predictions

As adults, teachers, and parents, we often tell our children and students how to feel rather than ask them how they feel. For example, if a perfectionist gets a 98 on a test and yet is visibly upset, a common response would be “What's wrong? A 98 is great work! Don't feel badly -- you should be proud!” However, a better response for this student would be “I can see you are unhappy with this 98. What would a 100 have told you that the 98 doesn't?”

This puts the ownership back on the student and forces them to re-evaluate their mindset and thinking. Here are some other questions Van Gemert suggests you might ask:

- Why does this feel so painful to you?
- What is bothering you most about this?
- Were you surprised by this?
- Did you feel embarrassed by this?
- Did you feel pressured to___?
- On a scale of 1-10 how upset are you?
- Do you think you will still be this upset tomorrow?
- Do you feel like you have the power to feel better?

By asking, and not telling, you are showing your students that you genuinely care and value their feelings, but are also helping them analyze, regulate, and manage their emotions in a more appropriate way.

Another strategy is to **frame predictions**. A perfectionist student's anxiety and fear is often simply caused by the unknown. Therefore, I will often ask the following questions:

- What is the BEST thing that can happen?
- What is the WORST thing that could happen?
- What is MOST LIKELY to happen?

By helping them verbalize and visualize the answers to these questions, their anxiety can be minimized. It seems very natural for most of us to say, "What's the worst that can happen?" and move forward, but these kids frequently need a little more guidance.

Post the Choices. Finally, there will be occasions when your perfectionist will become overwhelmed or frustrated beyond the point of reason. When this happens, you must have some strategies to help them regulate and regain their self-control. Post the choices! In my classroom, I created an anchor chart that list the following:

IDEAS FOR DEALING WITH FRUSTRATION/ANGER

- I will write in my journal.
- I will read a book of my choice for 20 minutes.
- I will make a list of 20 things I do WELL.
- I will breathe deeply 10 times.
- I will draw a picture or color.
- I will blow bubbles.
- I will play with putty for 10 minutes.
- I will listen to music with headphones.
- I will get a calming jar.

These are just some examples you could use, but the idea is to allow students to choose what works best for them. Give them the space to regroup, and then check in with them after an allotted amount of time. You will find that as students become more self-aware of their triggers and feelings, they will also become equally proactive in finding ways to manage them.

Give these a try! What's the worst that can happen? Just remember - NOBODY's perfect!

References

Gemert, L. V. (2017). "Perfectionism: A practical guide to managing 'never good enough.'" Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.