

How Parents Turn Their Children Into Problematic Perfectionists (M)



Perfectionism is a problematic personality trait that is on the rise.

High parental expectations and constant criticism are both linked to increased perfectionism among college students, research finds.

Unfortunately, high levels of perfectionism can also lead to elevated neuroticism, [depression and anxiety](#) as well as an [increased suicide risk](#). The personality trait of perfectionism is also [strongly linked](#) to developing obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Perfectionism involves being highly self-critical, constantly striving to meet the standards of others (typically parents or mentors) and being unsure about the efficacy of one's own actions.

While a certain amount of perfectionism is adaptive and necessary, when it becomes an obsession, it can lead to a vicious cycle.

Dr Andrew P. Hill, study co-author, said:

“The pressure to conform to perfect ideals has never been greater and could be the basis for an impending public health issue.”

Types of perfectionism

An analysis of 21 separate studies including over 7,000 college students found that parental expectations were linked to increases in three different types of perfectionism:

1. **Self-oriented:** the desire from within to be perfect.
2. **Socially prescribed:** trying to live up to perfectionist standards imposed by others.
3. **Other-oriented:** applying unrealistic standards of perfectionism to others.

Both self- and other-oriented perfectionism were linked to increased levels of parental expectations.

In other words, the more parents expected of their children, the more likely their children were to develop perfectionist personality traits.

Dr Thomas Curran, the study's first author, said:

“Parental expectations have a high cost when they're perceived as excessive.

Young people internalize those expectations and depend on them for their self-esteem.

And when they fail to meet them, as they invariably will, they'll be critical of themselves for not matching up.

To compensate, they strive to be perfect.”

Self-oriented perfectionism was higher among U.S. students than in Canada or the U.K..

Dr Hill said:

“These trends may help explain increasing mental health issues in young people and suggest this problem will only worsen in the future.

It’s normal for parents to be anxious about their children, but increasingly this anxiety is being interpreted as pressure to be perfect.”

Excessive expectations

A second review of 84 studies including almost 25,000 students found that parental expectations, pressure and criticism have steadily increased over the last 32 years.

Dr Curran said:

“The rate of increase in young people’s perceptions of their parents’ expectations is remarkable.

[However], parents are not to blame because they’re reacting anxiously to a hyper-competitive world with ferocious academic pressures, runaway inequality and technological innovations like social media that propagate unrealistic ideals of how we should appear and perform.”

He added:

“Parents are placing excessive expectations on their children because they think, correctly, that society demands it or their children will fall down the social ladder.

It’s ultimately not about parents recalibrating their expectations.

It’s about society — our economy, education system and supposed meritocracy — recognizing that the pressures we’re putting on young people and their families are unnecessarily overwhelming.”

Dealing with a flawed world

The problem for perfectionists is that they find it harder than others to deal with a world that is fundamentally flawed.

Failure is a normal part of life and parents need to let children know it is acceptable, said Dr Curran:

“Focusing on learning and development, not test scores or social media, helps children develop healthy self-esteem, which doesn’t depend on others’ validation or external metrics.”