

*Identifying and Managing  
Perfectionism in Children and  
Adolescents:  
A Workshop for School Personnel*

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# Plan for the Day

- Overview of perfectionism
  - Pros and cons of perfectionism
  - Origins of student stress
  - How to engage kids in discussions about perfectionism
  - Learning to live according to values, rather than expectations
- Break-out sessions for lower school and middle school staff
- Addressing the needs of upper school students
- Summary and time for questions



# OVERVIEW OF PERFECTIONISM

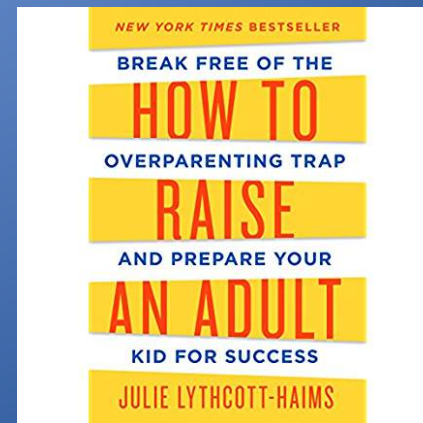
# The Nature of Perfectionism

- Perfectionists are, “people whose standards are high beyond reach or reason” and “who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment.”  
(David Burns, 1980).

- Although having high standards is helpful, perfectionism is associated with *such* high standards, they actually interfere in performance.
- Perfectionism is associated with anxiety and depression.

*Antony & Swinson, 1998*

*Allowing freedom within limits to try and fail and get better is the only way children (or anyone) will ever learn how to do things for themselves. Perfectionism is not only the enemy of the good; it is the enemy of adulthood.*

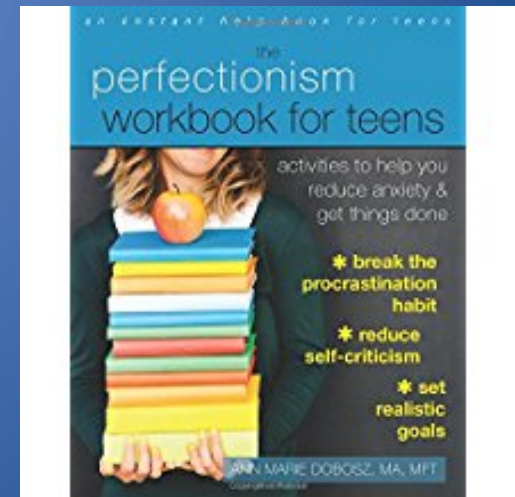
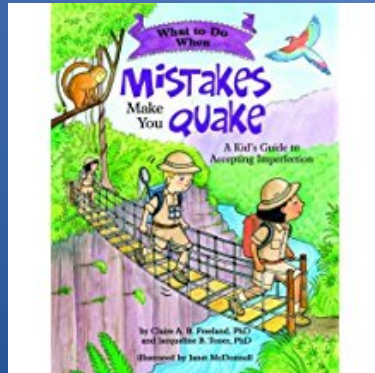


- Recent work has looked at perfectionism as “a transdiagnostic process” (Egan, Wade, & Shafran, 2010).
- What does this mean?
  - Perfectionism OCCURS across different disorders.
  - Perfectionism is a risk factor for various disorders.
  - Perfectionism is a maintaining factor for various disorders.
  - Perfectionism might explain the co-occurrence of disorders.
  - Perfectionism has been shown to negatively impact treatment outcome, including in children.

- Studies found that CB approaches...
  - Reduced perfectionism
  - Reduced anxiety & depressive symptoms
  - Reduced eating disorder symptoms
- Treatment was found to be useful across many modalities....
  - Individual
  - Group therapy
  - Guided self-help using published books
  - Web based treatment

# Treatment of Perfectionism in Kids and Teens

- Little research has been done. BUT,
  - Perfectionism measures have been adapted for use with children.
  - New manuals have been written for kids and teens who are perfectionists.
  - Will hopefully spark research.





**WHAT DOES A  
PERFECTIONIST LOOK  
LIKE?**

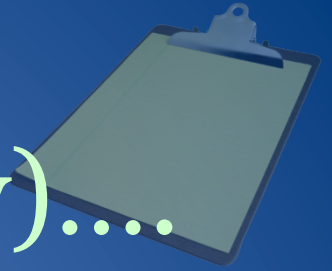
# Clues of Perfectionism – What Parents and Teachers Might See

- This child does well at everything – school sports, activities.
- Other parents/teachers dream of having a child like this. You never have to remind him/her to do homework or practice piano.

BUT....

- This child is too hard on herself; I wish she could just be a kid.
- This child is wound like a spring.
- This child's never looks like he is having fun!
- This child freaks out about little things like a grade on a small quiz, or a night with more homework than usual.

# And sometimes (but equally importantly)....



- This child has such potential, but never gets anything done.
- This child is so smart, but can't start a project.
- This child procrastinates.
- This child is always handing his work in late.
- The teachers don't know how bright he is, because they never see his work
- Perhaps unwilling or does not share what he/she does know

# What clinicians see....



- Patients who are invested in coming across as successful in every way.
- Patients who don't let their guard down when they first meet you.
- Patients who are often “mature” beyond their years (6<sup>th</sup> grader already knowing where they want to go to college).
- Patients who often look quite perfect.
- *But, a frailty/fear seems to lurk just below the surface.*

# Figuring out where perfectionism fits in the bigger clinical picture

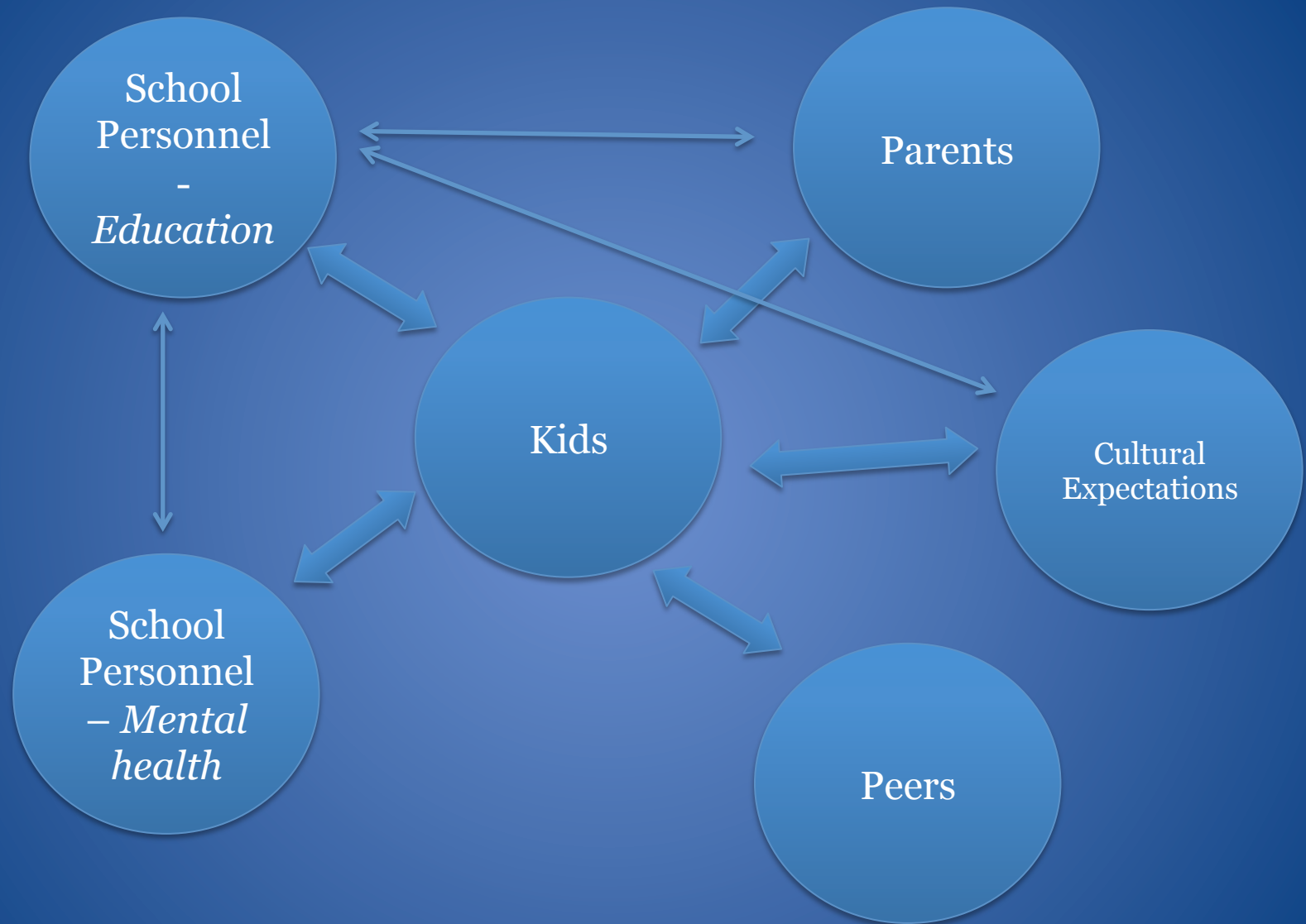
- Perfectionism is not a disorder. It is a personality style.
  - Some perfectionists do not meet criteria for any psychological disorders.
  - Despite perfectionism not being a disorder per se, we see perfectionists whose personality style is getting in the way of them leading a happy and productive life.
  - There is a lot of overlap of perfectionistic personality style and DSM disorders.
    - GAD, OCD, depression, eating disorders, social anxiety, etc.

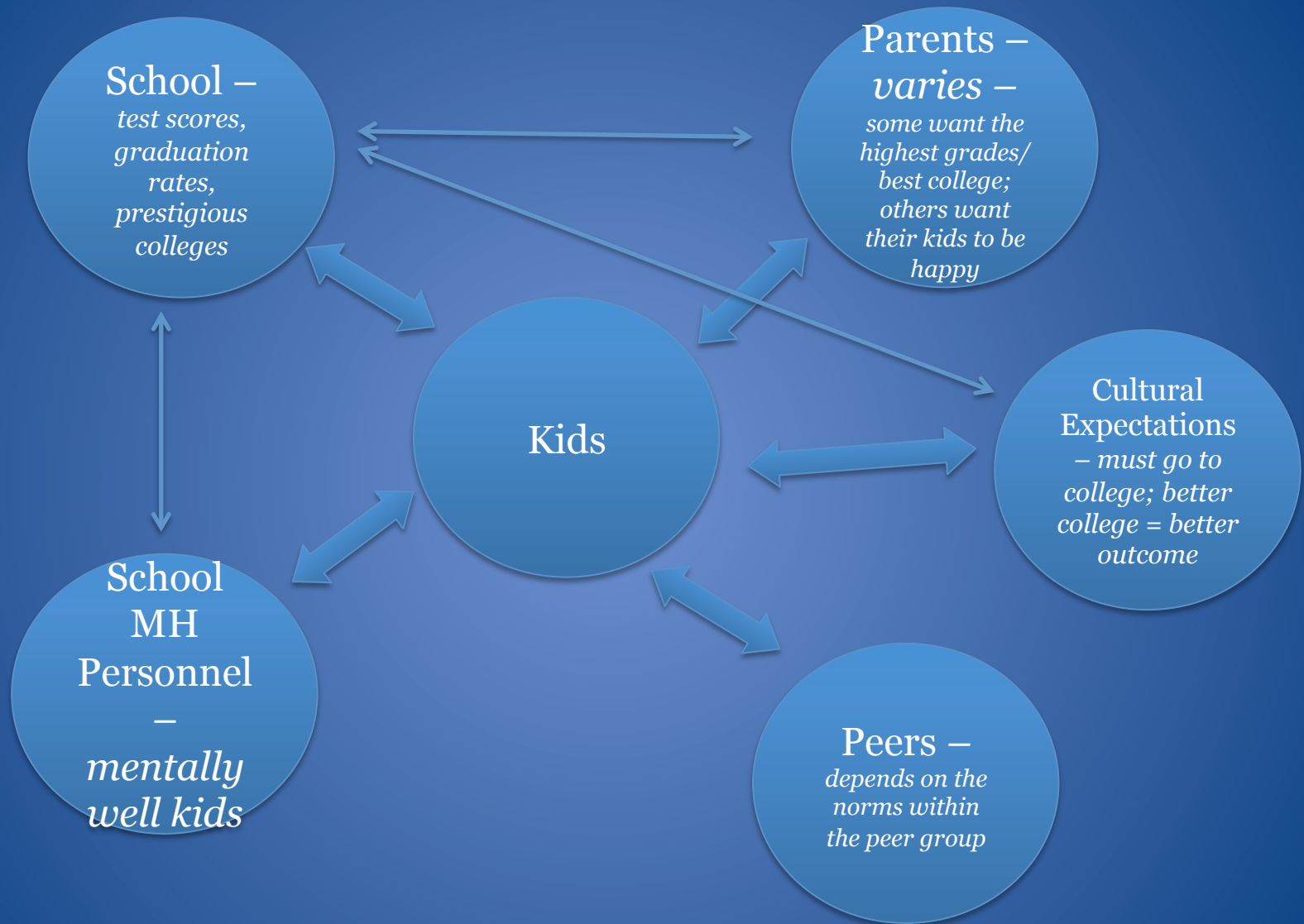
**WHERE IS THIS PRESSURE  
TO BE PERFECT COMING  
FROM?**



# Push and Pull....

- Kids are affected by their schools, peers, parents, and culture.
- To differing degrees, kids in turns affect their schools, peers, parents, and culture.
- Schools are influenced by parents and by the culture, and vice versa.
- Problems arise when all parties do not share the same goals and/or when parties have inconsistent goals.





# Schools as a Source of Stress

- Pride in school comes can come across as unreasonable expectations (“Penn Charter kids.....”)
- Public praise for highest grade, best essay, etc. When was the last time a kid was recognized for best effort or overcoming a struggle?!
- The cult of the A (i.e., the belief that everyone can get As)
- The belief that you can be an A student in everything
- Shaming of kids who don’t “get it” right away
- The general message given to kids (work harder, study more, spend more time) is a dangerous message for perfectionists

- Too much homework, especially at young ages – kids are losing out on time to be creative/learn through doing.
- The “opportunity” to re-take tests makes kids think only acceptable grade is an A. Never gives kids the chance to sit with the feeling of having done hard work but not done well.
- Streaming of courses from a young age can make kids feel like they have “missed the boat”.
- Pressure to take particular courses in order to get into college can cause kids to lose touch with their interests and passions.

- Schools are under pressure to enroll their grads in elite schools and to report that as close to 100% as possible have enrolled in a 4-year college.
- Drives the assumption that college is the right choice for all students – and that often the same group of colleges are the right choice for all students.
- Too much time in high school focused on college admissions process.
- Particular pressure for parents who are financially able – if you have the resources, you better do that prep course, get that coach, enroll in that summer program, etc.
- We see burnout once kids get to college because they have expended so much effort getting there.
- And, so much focus on grades and applications that kids don't have the life skills to succeed in college.

# Peers as a Source of Stress

- Birds of a feather flock together – high achieving kids tend to hang together, setting increasingly high standards within peer groups
- In our practice, we have noticed that kids say they don't compete with their friends BUT –
  - They don't tell their friends which colleges they are applying to.
  - They don't reveal stress, anxiety, depression to friends for fear of showing weakness.
  - Will only share grades if they were good, otherwise pull the “I don't remember card” or change the subject.
  - Saying something was “easy” that other kids struggled with.

# Parents as a Source of Stress

# Where does pressure come from?

## blame the parents

- While preparing this workshop, we had to search for examples where parents pressuring outright
- Clearly some parents focused exclusively on status, achievement, athletic performance
- Pushing kids to have to achieve, get in best school, play travel team, yelling at them when make mistakes
- However, many parents of perfectionistic kids are not promoting it and wish their kid would get a bad grade or be satisfied with less

# **“Where did this Kid Come From?”**

- not particularly concerned with what others think of them
- do not hold out terribly high standards for their kids
- may actually need some help to understand and empathize with their children and pressure they feel
- Acceptance differences if goals are healthy

# **“The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far From the Tree”**

Perfectionistic kids who have perfectionistic parents.

- Some say “I know where he gets it from”
- Other parents need help to recognize that either through genetics, or learning, or both, their child’s perfectionism comes from them.

# Everyone else in between

- Subtle beliefs and ways of interacting that parents may or may not be aware of.
- Messages and actions do not match  
e.g. treatment goal of child raising hand and giving wrong answer on purpose
- Parents who give one message to their children but live their own “perfectionist” life



# Anxious parents



- Some parents overly value status and performance – social, academic or athletic
- For others, parental anxiety may come from the fear that their child does not have capacity to cope or succeed and catastrophic predictions of future
- Discuss the reasons for this privately with parents- origin of beliefs, own experiences
- Look for any ambivalence about stance for themselves or impact on their kids
- Do similar pro and con analysis
- Especially note the impact of perfectionism on the relationship (what they share, can like themselves, ask for help)

# Tips of the Trade for School Personnel

# Talking to Kids about Perfectionism

- Help kids to get curious about the way perfectionism is impacting them.
  - What is your day/week like?
  - Do you have leisure time between school work and activities?
  - Do you think leisure time is “okay” or “forbidden” for you?
  - What do you like to do? Hobbies? Interests?
  - Are there hobbies and interests you would like to pursue, but can’t because there is no time?
  - What are your goals for the future? What do you believe you must do to realize these goals?

- What kind of standards do you have for yourself at....

- School

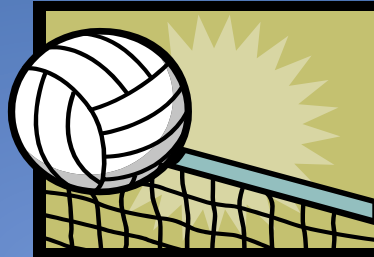
- Sports

- Other activities

- Looks

- Social stuff

- Behavior/morality





- What is your world like?
  - Are your mom and dad perfectionists?
  - What about your siblings?
  - What do mom and dad think about your schedule? Your standards?
  - What is your school like?
  - How are your coaches?
  - Do your friends hold themselves to high standards like you do or are they more laid back?

## Another Way to Approach the Discussion: Articulating the Pros and Cons of Perfectionism

Understanding the pros:

- Investigate fully and write down- pros first
- Check what feedback they get- and make sure they know it is okay to like it
  - e.g. some kids say like being known as the smart one
- Often find motivation is issue
  - e.g. if not pushing not care or average

# Understanding the cons

- Ask kids:
  - How is this strategy really working for you and how is it not?
  - How does this pushing yourself stress you out or get in way of things you like
  - How do you want your life to be?
  - How do you want your tomorrow to be?
  - If you were not working all the time what would you want to do with your time?

# Perfectionism Pros and Cons

## Pros

- Praise, praise, praise (from friends, teachers, parents, etc.)
- Never getting in trouble; never getting nagged to do stuff
- Feel good when get good grades or do well at an activity – all the “pain” is forgotten when there is a “gain”
- Being known as the smartest or the best feels good.

## Cons

- Always need to keep up or improve last performance – because people always expect that from me. I can never mess up.
- A slip (even a minor one) is terribly painful and upsetting (like an A for a kid who always gets A+s)
- No choice – perfectionism takes over and no time for fun, relaxing, wasting time, doing something not related to my goals.
- No time for friends
- Every assignment feels as important as a final exam so everything is stressful.
- Not enough sleep, tired all the time.

# Serious pro and con- 17 yo GAD

- Pros (always 1<sup>st</sup>)
- Being smart & unique
- Get recognized for smartness peers and teachers
- My identity has been my work
- Like feedback teachers
- Specific satisfaction work done emotionally complete
- Cons
- Spend too much time on things
- Concern become apathetic one of herd
- Physically wrecked
- Emotionally drained
- Hard every day to meet expectations

# 12 yo GAD perfectionism NVLD

## Pros

- Makes me feel good to get good grade
- People say you do good
- Keeps me from being lazy
- Teachers like me more

## Cons

- Freak out
- People don't say I am good now
- Teacher mad at me

# Perfectionism is supposed to help do better but often backfires instead

- Too upset to work.
- Procrastinate because the workload is so overwhelming.
- Can't turn in work you have done because it is not perfect so incomplete.
- Start paper over or switch topics so you end up with barely 2<sup>nd</sup> draft vs. finished work.
- Work looks more messy because of corrections than if mistakes left in.
- Can't finish or be proud story or drawing.
- Play more poorly in your sport b/c pressure.



# Worry makes you on guard for trouble

- Trying to control everything keeps you anxious because you are always on guard
- You are watching and waiting for trouble.
- Leaves you feel scared and upset a lot
- How do other kids feel when you do that?
- Does it help you with your friends and getting along with classmates?
- It can't be your responsibility- your role is to learn and have fun.
- Give keeper of rules job back to teacher.
- Solution is same for your friendships and for beating anxiety- you are fired from that job so you can go back to being a kid

# Most important message: options and solutions

Tell the difference between drive, motivation and  
aiming to do best work  
vs. have to and shoulds

- ❖ There is a way out
- ❖ Do not have to compromise goals and dreams
- ❖ But need more time, joy, relief
- ❖ Choice and flexibility
- ❖ Scary but worth it and have to prove it to yourself

Standards are like a rubber band.....

Right now....



Perfection – I am stretched to my limits.

I fear if I give up my standards, I will be a slacker....



Slacker

Can we together find some middle ground?



High standards, and a life.

- Although we can try to convince kids of these three key messages, they will internalize it best...
  - If they work on changing their own thinking (rather than grown ups convincing them).
  - If they work on changing their own behavior and see that the consequences are not dire (via behavioral experiments/exposures).
  - Or even more, they reclaim their time and enjoyment which sustains itself.

# Examples of Active Experiments: School Related (Older Kids)

- Bring homework to session for exposures
- Set time limit for homework.
- Set time limit for studying.
- Leave item on homework undone.
- Purposefully make mistake on homework.
- Purposefully hand in “messy” homework.
- Take a night off (leisure time exposures are very important!)
- Take a test with no studying at all.



- 7 yo articulate and adorable
- Intense temperament- positive lights up the room and negative cry, scream, tantrum
- So upset can't register a yes let alone tolerate a no
- Describes her “panics”
- Frequently argumentative when stuck
- When does not go as hoped self critical
- OCD symptoms including perfectionism- meltdown homework erases or rips up schoolwork and drawings
- Eyelash pulling

# 7 yo description anxiety

- Oh no- this is a big deal
- Huffy puffy
- Heart beat faster
- Fall off roller coaster
- Freak out tantrum
- Cry and yell

I am dumb!  
I shouldn't  
think I am  
Dumb  
I sh But  
adint



I am  
Dumb



# First session

- Call it dummy head
- Puppet boss back
- Make faces wrong- write messy as possible
- Her own boss back
- It's dummy head
- Do what you want
- Don't erase good enough

# OCD exposures

- Practice writing homework leaving mistakes in
- Remove erasers
- Cover up previous line to prevent fixing
- Practice laying out clothes night before keeping with same outfit even if does not look or feel right
- Getting in trouble when did not do anything

# OCD exposures in and out session

- Boss back (next phase)
  - Do what you want
  - Don't erase it is good enough
  - This is just me upset
  - Be quiet worry brain

Took ownership of treatment

By own choice chose to redecorate room her way – move things, throw away toys not playing with

Did homework all wrong telling herself “I am not the only one”

# Treatment course

- 7 sessions
- Mom on meds w primary MD first session or two after seeing drawing. Feeling much better and yelling less
- Child temper tantrums much less
- Homework and mornings not horrible
- Ownership of treatment and strategies
- Able to calm self and talk more
- Eyelashes growing back
- After while, went to local therapist bc I was far away and had to wait for session. Only saw ADD and meds
- Return for FU after a year for booster

Dr siklin

nothing to wrex  
a baoot you are good  
Don't get frustradi

ok



fustradi

Don't get mad!

JB

# Perfectionism in the broader culture and its impact on young people



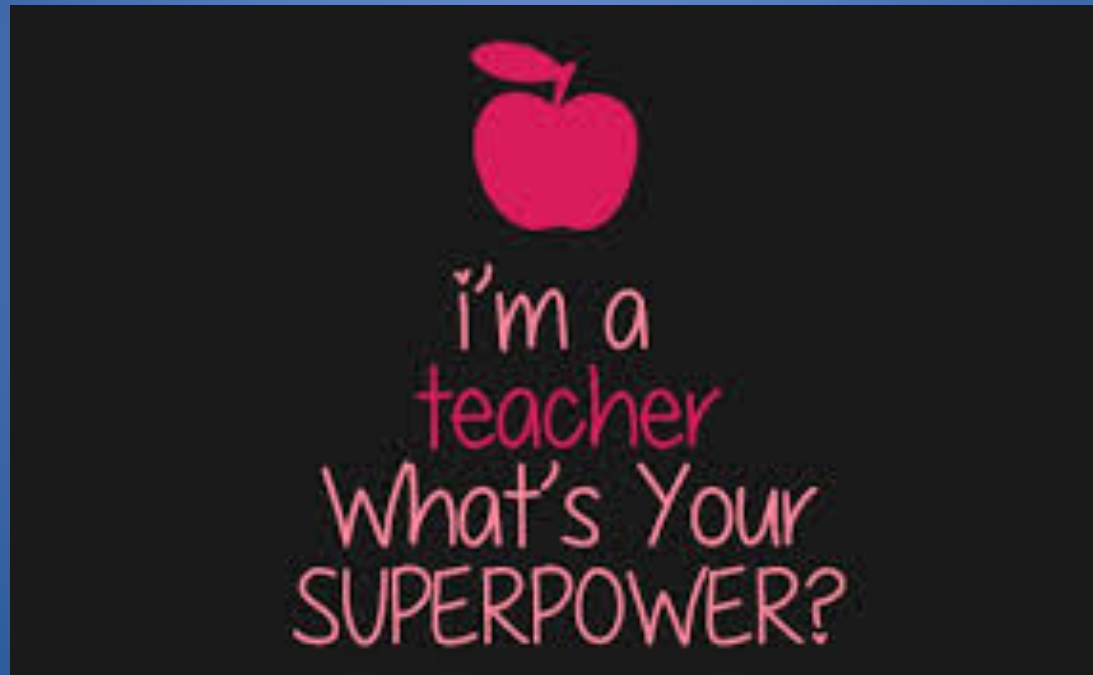
# Enough as she is - Rachel Simmons

- MESSAGE: What you accomplish matters more than what you learn
- **RESULT:** Loss of extrinsic motivation
- MESSAGE: everyone is doing, being and succeeding more than you are
- **RESULT:** Pervasive insecurity, tense, competitive relationships
- MESSAGE: You must find your life's passion by high school
- **RESULT:** Forced passions lead to big costly decisions

# Enough as she is - Rachel Simmons

- MESSAGE: Be amazing at everything you do
- **RESULT:** Diminished self worth and relentless stress
- MESSAGE: Avoid new ventures, especially where you might fail
- **RESULT:** Diminished curiosity, exploration and healthy risk taking
- MESSAGE: Having lots of choices = control over your life
- **RESULT:** False sense of control, taking setbacks personally

# What teachers can do in the school environment to battle perfect~~X~~onism



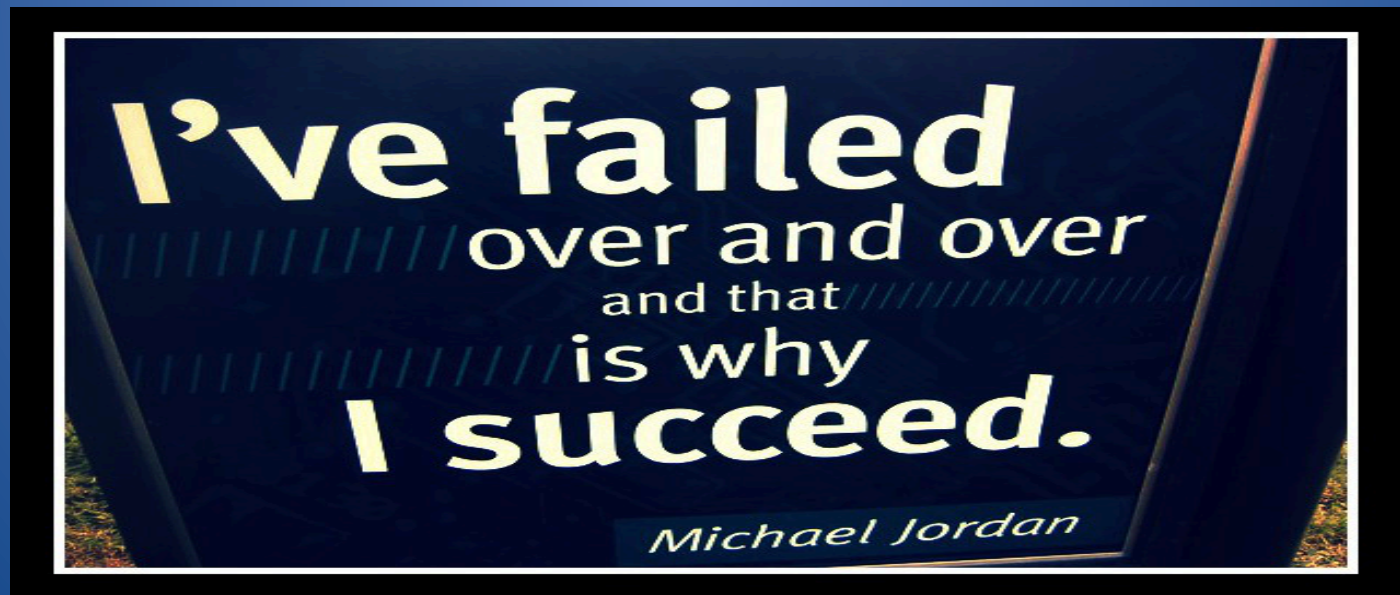
# Penn Charter

- Heard from multiple students- most faculty and administration are supportive, trying to help and get it
- Much more pressure from students
- And sometimes from parents
- How can you use the classroom, your environment and your interactions to help:

# The counter message

- Your achievements are not who you are
- A lot of pressure to be defined by them
- You are so much more
- Your worth is not related to that grade or that sport or activity
- Even your teachers who are giving the grades know that- why don't you
- Do it for the right reason- because you are interested, it makes you curious, you like to see progress or improvement, or even because it totally confuses you

Help with the interpretation  
of mistakes and failure to  
learning and life



# Embracing mistakes at school

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_we\\_should\\_embrace\\_mistakes\\_in\\_school](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_we_should_embrace_mistakes_in_school)

## **Because they help us learn**

- **Focus on failures don't ignore them**
- **Fail first, learn next**

productive failure -students struggled and failed at solving problems until the teacher stepped in to help them analyze their failed attempts and find the correct solution.

- **Be confident and be wrong:**

the more confident you are in the wrong answer, the more likely you will remember the right answer after you are corrected.

# Helping students respond to perceived failure

[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_we\\_should\\_embrace\\_mistakes\\_in\\_school](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_we_should_embrace_mistakes_in_school)

- **Build positive relationships with students:** “I see your strengths, and I believe in you.
- **Focus on resilience:** “Even though this is tough, you will find your way.”
- **Adjust the learning context:** “Let’s try this another way.”
- **Encourage persistence:** “Keep trying. Don’t give up!”
- **Model self-compassion:** “Be kind to yourself when you’re confused; it’s okay.
- ***Reward struggle or saying you are confused***

# How I view myself and what my teacher thinks of me

- Many kids care a lot about how teacher view them
- Afraid to approach even if want to
- They often get wrong what you care about
- Let them know explicitly- hard work, that you try, you want to learn, ask for help
- Tell me you are confused or spent a really long time on task- I want to know
- Helps me be a better teacher

# How I view myself and what my teacher thinks of me

- I am not going to care about you or like you less if you find it hard
- I am going to respect you most that you tell me you don't know or are confused- that is how you learn and how I can help
- Discussion for whole class to benefit
- Incredible power of 5-10 minute conversation alone with a child
- I know the kind of student you are, I see how you work. I will not have a problem and want you to write me a note if try homework and need to sleep

# Teach what to do when you make a mistake or fail

- Take a one time good look at what happened
- Did I work at this but just not understand or is this something I am still figuring out
- Or did I not put in effort or take the time or prep as I needed
- Both answers are ok

*In addition harder to accept bad things just happen and there is no reason sometimes*

# Teach what to do when you make a mistake or fail

1. Stress or failure always goes big, global and impossible or disaster

2. Get specific

just this thing- this assignment, this topic, this quiz. Finding decimals hard not math

- not about you as a person or how smart you are or ability

3. Figure out a plan if one is needed- keep trying, ask for help and then move on

So many kids and teens talk about how helpful it is to have a teacher they like and respect model a different way



# Set the tone- comparisons

- I cannot enforce this but how about we make a deal that no one announces or compares grades. I do not want to hear it in my class
- Many of you do not want to share grades but feel your friends ask you
- Kind and respectful to opt out of that
- Impact on your peers either bragging about your grade, saying you did so badly when you usually do well
- More importantly stop and think how it feels for the classmate who works hard and struggles and has to work to get the B- that you feel is so terrible
- Not intentional but still not helpful
- Try it for next few weeks outside of class

# Teacher interventions

- Not in punishing way or rigid
- My deadline is the deadline- flexible once in a while but not a standard way
- The goal is to write a good enough paper in the time allowed in a busy week
- I am not expecting the best or perfect paper from you I am expecting you to do what you can with your other demands. That is what life is like
- Trust me that I am going to look at your work over the semester and the year so each and every grade is not especially important- will take into account effort and overall learning
- Learning is being open to new ideas and making progress not being good at it from the start

# Teachers who self disclose

- You can make your own choices but do not have to
- Almost always very positive- my teacher says they deal or dealt with anxiety. Feel they understand and can help me
- Best modeling is coping modeling – struggling but coping rather than watching an expert
- Not helpful if you are overwhelmed by it and can only share the pain
- High schoolers or even younger see OCD, anxiety or perfectionism even if you do not disclose

# Please be aware about negative messages about mental health

Do not make derogatory comments about mental health concerns and if you did apologize and make it right

Teens on medicine or in therapy often hear pointedly in off hand:

- weak
- not trying hard enough
- taking the easy way
- Need to grow up or face reality
- Response is either self criticism or shame or anger, disengagement and distrust

# What is your role?

- Role is educator and not friend or therapist
- Adult figure who listens and offers a different perspective
- A new or alternative way to think
- If a student is sharing things with you that you do not know how to handle seek assistance
- Can help with the connection

# Coaches

- Model loving the sport or the game
- Emphasize improving skills- time in running, better passing, defense
- Learning to work as a team
- This will lead to winning but that is not the only goal
- Coaches who give feedback on what to work on not put down or criticism
- Stress and sports Speak Up- the coaches who say they loved most their not best sport. Encourage athletes to diversify especially in younger grades
- Going to play athletes more who take care of body and mind

# Help students reflect and discern important questions

- It is ok and good to ask why am I doing what I am doing
- Do I want to step off the treadmill?
- Do I feel like I am moving from one thing to next without choosing or thinking
- What do I fear will happen if I do?
- What do I fear will happen if I don't?

# Why? Discuss

Just because you can do it or are good at it does not mean you have to

So if a kid can handle all advanced classes should he/she be placed in them.

Or because he/she can play travel soccer should he/she

No one in the world is supposed to be good at everything. Perhaps you want to focus on science and do less intense work in history

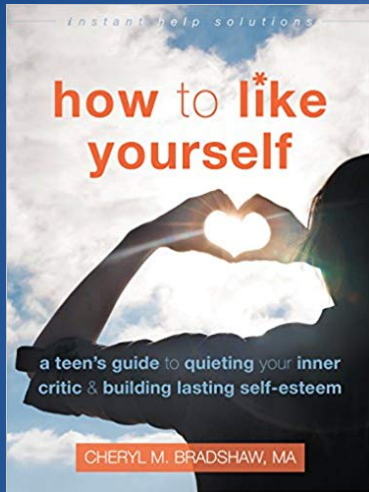
If you don't take this "opportunity" or challenge now it influences everything

# Echoing Green Foundation work on purpose

- What issues or ideas make your heart beat faster, whether because you are deeply compelled by them, because you are angered by them or because you are overjoyed by them
- What is the primary topic of the articles you read, and the movies, books, and TV shows that most attract you
- Who are your people?
- When you imagine the world you want to live in, what 3 words come to mind
- Have you ever stood up for anyone? Who? Why? Who would you stand for and why?
- What social or environmental problem do you ache to see solved?

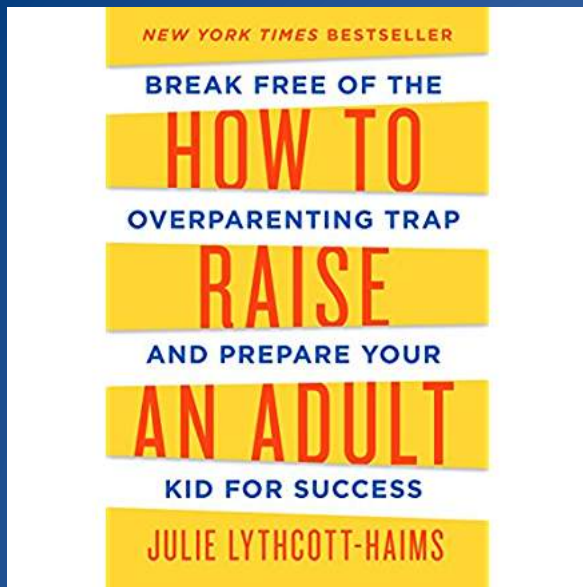
AND OK if you don't know or are still figuring it out

# Some great resources....



## Highlights:

- we spend 100% of our time with ourselves – this is the most important relationship we will ever have, yet we are never taught how to have a healthy relationship with ourselves.
- “We compare someone else’s filtered information to our own unfiltered information....we receive more information about other people’s successes that we do about their failures”
- Great exercise in Ch. 6 – list of “who I am,” “who I want to be” and “who other people want me to be”.
  - closer these lists are, happier you are.
  - if who you are is very different from who you want to be, you will feel a sense of longing and inadequacy
  - if who you are is very different from who others want you to be, you feel pulled in different directions like you are always letting others down.



WOW, WOW, WOW! Read this book!

-our kids are “failure-deprived”  
-“The best predictor of success is a sense of resiliency, grit, capacity to fail and get up”

-Helpful tips for teachers

- replace “do your best” with “try to give it your best effort”
- give specific, authentic feedback – “I like how you used all the colors in your picture,” “I like how you really managed to get inside the head of your character in your story” rather than “it’s perfect,” or “you’re amazing!”
- And, know how to criticize. Critique the action, not the person. “I am having a hard time reading your writing. Please re-write this sentence so it’s a little clearer.” instead of “You’re so messy” or just giving a bad grade.

# I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH

HOW TO OVERCOME  
LOW CONFIDENCE

BY DR CHRIS WILLIAMS

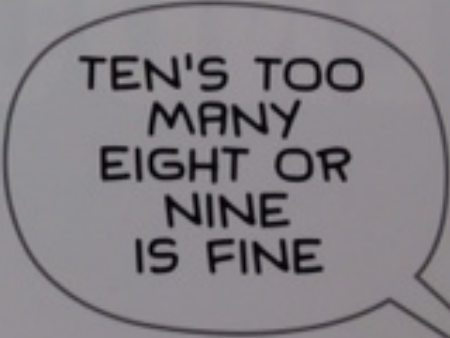
**GOOD  
ENOUGH  
IS GOOD  
ENOUGH**

## **Don't beat yourself up**

In the real world, you don't have to be a perfect ten to be happy, successful and popular.

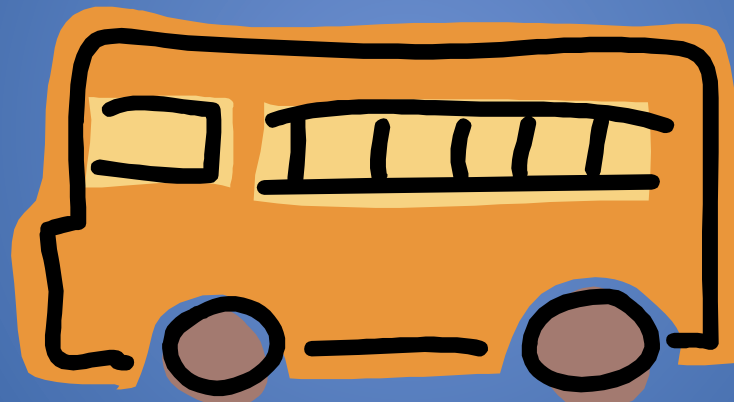
Millions and millions of people are OK being good enough. In fact the world's happiest people are those who are content with themselves as they are.

So whenever you're being hard on yourself for not doing something perfectly, not coming top of the class or finishing first in the race, say this to yourself -



TEN'S TOO  
MANY  
EIGHT OR  
NINE  
IS FINE

# Treatment Collaboration with School



# Integrating the School



- Level of school involvement should be on a need to know basis.
- Necessary if...
  - Child showing distress in school- crying, looking anxious, asking excessive questions, getting very upset about good grades or while writing tests.
  - Or everyone thinks child is fine- but, up all night working or studying.

# Common school trouble spots



- Open ended essays.
- Opinion pieces or more vague tasks when hard to know what is “right.”
- Long term projects many pieces (discomfort with feeling of doing it step-by-step over long time-try get all done way in advance; maintain standards for so many disparate parts).
- Group projects – take it all on or be the boss of everyone.
- Having to post online- everyone sees my responses.

# Coaching teachers: How to respond in the classroom

- No more reassurance!
- Okay for teachers to remind kids that they can understand “well enough.”
- Limit questions per day.
- Devise step by step challenges (therapist, teacher and patient working together).



# Classroom tasks to target early in treatment

- Early on, arrange with teachers not to grade specific assignments where kids take risks.
- Begin with lower risk assignments
  - Homework only looked over for completion not collected.
  - Quizzes that only count for minimal percent of grade.
  - Begin by doing quickly/studying minimally; later don't do at all/don't study at all; surprise teacher with purposeful mistakes or messiness.

# Other classroom tasks to target

- See if teacher can guess the half ass day or less neat paper- care about penmanship?
- Limit number of questions per day or subject.
- Sometimes set times to write questions and ask teacher 2x in day.
- Set a tell time for worries but limit.
- Refrain from asking teacher about test grade.
- Refrain from completing group work for other group members.



# Interim OCD strategies



- Re-reading
  - read with card above you, covering up what you already read to prevent re-reading.
  - Read aloud.
  - Read with book on tape to keep up.
  - Do quizzes in early sessions to show OCD you can understand on first go-round.
- Re-writing
  - Use computer – cover up delete key.
  - Use pencils with no erasers or work in pen.
  - Allow only one piece of paper per assignment.

# School based accommodations OCD

- Limit amount of time per subject.
- Grade on what is done, b/c work will be incomplete at first.
- Have teacher estimate time assignment should take- aim to stay within 10%.
- Stay within assignment constraints (if assignment is to write one paragraph, write one paragraph!).
- Show proof of concept rather than all items.
  - one of each type of problem
  - Do every other question
  - harder with writing or English

- Trouble spots good for overall or breakout more younger

# Break Out Sessions

# PERFECTIONISM IN THE ELEMENTARY YEARS

Tricks of the Trade

# Case Example – Annie

- 4<sup>th</sup> grade girl, Catholic school
  - Excellent student
  - Wants to go to Penn
- Both parents doctors
  - Dad wound tight, very hard worker
  - Mom was perfectionist when younger but has worked hard to change
  - Very caring (maybe overbearing??)
- Younger sister – not a perfectionist
- Social stuff is confusing to Annie
  - best friend is a boy
  - “blissfully naïve” about drama
  - Possible that perfectionism and social awkwardness are both indicative of being on the autism spectrum??

- If a test is out of 100, and has 4 bonus points, she must get 104
- Studies every subject, every night – including religion
- Studies far in advance of every test and quiz
- Goes to nurse and calls home if a test didn't go perfectly
- Cried for entire basketball game when 2 minutes late
- On outings, needs to do all attractions in order
- Always needs a plan
- Corrects people a lot, including peers – group work is terrible
- Piano – cries if misses a note, will keep practicing till she gets it, will bang keys
- Makes lots of lists of things she needs to do
- Lots of rules “Lemon bars are for summer”

# What Did We Do?

- D/c calling from school – distinguishing an emergency from anxiety.
- Worked on her lists – not allowed to put mom and dad's stuff on it (like balancing the check book). Distinguishing mom and dad business from kid business.
- Put limits on reviewing, homework and studying

# First Scary Exposure

- Vocabulary Quiz next Wed, wanted to start studying this Wed (12 words)
- Agreed to wait till Sunday, and limit to 15 minutes per day
- Annie came in and had got 101 on the quiz!
- “I don’t have to stress about everything”
- ”Studying should depend on what kind of test it is”

# Other Interventions

- Checking in with your thinking and coming up with different ways to look at things
  - Important for impossible standards like making a perfect baby Jesus cake for Xmas, or learning dance routine for school play on first day of practice
  - I can't do this YET, other kids find this hard too, I have time to learn this, I'll get better the more I work on it, Give yourself a break!
- “Let it go” (working on flexibility)
  - PG-13 movie at friends house
  - Rainy day at the beach – what can you do at the beach besides going to the beach?
- Social skills
  - Annie spoke with excessive detail to make sure her point came across perfectly.

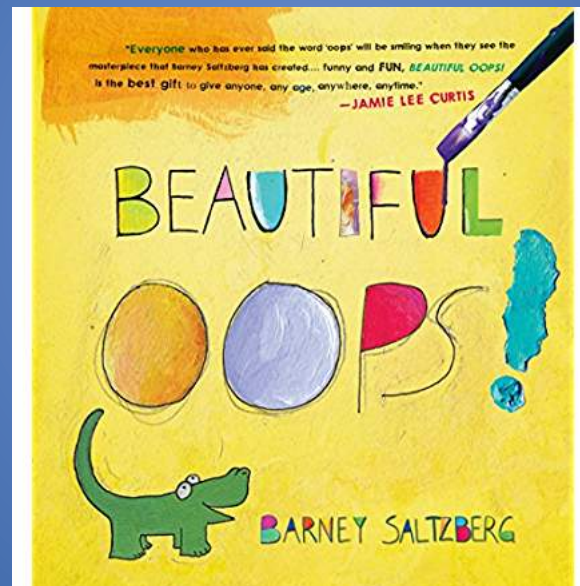
# Kids listen to our words and are watching our every move!

- *It's important that we make this really neat.*
- *Let's make this perfect!*
- *Practice makes perfect!*
- *Everyone should be able to get all of these right.*
- *If it's not perfect, you'll have to re-do it.*
- *Teacher erasing a word on the board because it isn't "just so".*
- *Teacher hand-writing – so hard for kids to emulate!*

# Instead....

- Let's try our best!
- The more we practice, the better we'll get.
- All students have things they are good at and things they need to work harder at.
- The goal of re-doing work is to learn (for example, re-writing incorrectly spelled words), rather than to be perfect.
- Whoops, that looks kind of funny. Oh well! (in other words – intentionally leaving a boo-boo).

# Lots of cute books to illustrate your point....

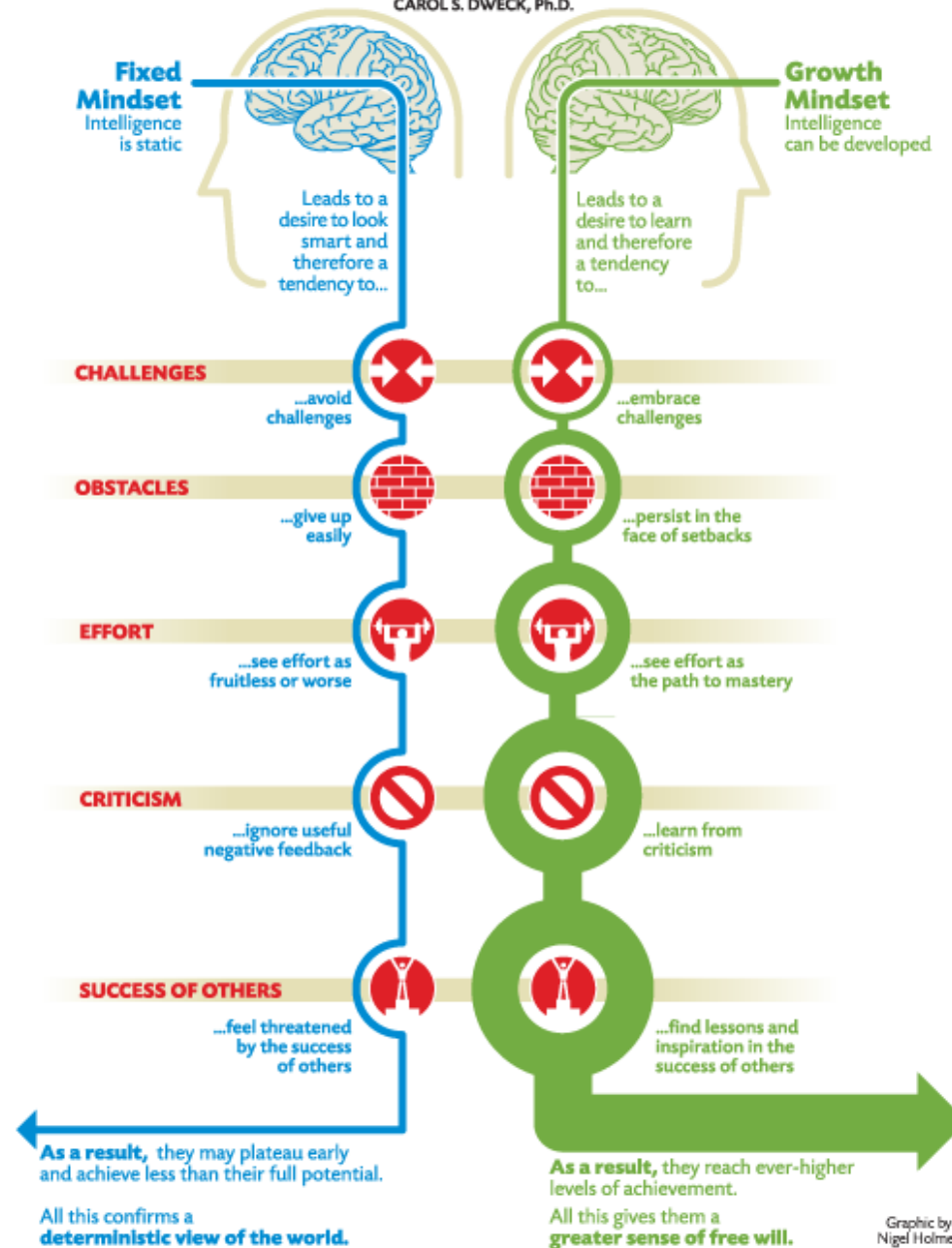


Why we want to avoid a focus  
on perfection....

The work of Carol Dweck

## TWO MINDSETS

CAROL S. DWECK, Ph.D.



# Carol Dweck: Mindset



What parents and teachers say	What kids hear
You learned that so fast! You're so smart!	If I don't learn something quickly, I am not smart.
Look at the drawing. Is he a Picasso or what?	I shouldn't try drawing anything hard, or they'll see I am no Picasso.
You're so brilliant! You got an A without even studying.	I'd better quick studying or they won't think I am brilliant.

# Wisdom from Dweck

- “Praising children’s intelligence harms their motivation and it harms their performance.”
- “If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is to teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort, and keep on learning.”
- We should be praising kids for “practice, study, persistence, and good strategies.”
- Protecting kids from failure feels good in the short run, but teaches them nothing in the long run.

# How can we share this with kids?

- [https://www.mindsetkit.org/static/files/YCLA\\_LessonPlan\\_v10.pdf](https://www.mindsetkit.org/static/files/YCLA_LessonPlan_v10.pdf)
- <http://onetimethrough.com/10-ways-teach-kids-growth-mindset/>
- <https://www.characterlab.org/growth-mindset>

- Learn about how our brains work – they are like a muscle and grow with hard work and practice.
- Teach the power of “yet”
- Teach kids how to counter negative self talk with realistic self talk.
- Discuss how EFFORT is more important than SUCCESS.
- Distinguish PROCESS over PRODUCT.
- Talk about struggles and failures as an important part of the growing process.
- Model a growth mindset in your own life – share with kids something you are learning to do.

## 10 Growth Mindset Statements

FIXED MINDSET



What can I say to myself?

INSTEAD OF:

I'm not good at this.

I'm awesome at this.

I give up.

This is too hard.

I can't make this any better.

I just can't do Math.

I made a mistake.

She's so smart. I will never be that smart.

It's good enough.

Plan "A" didn't work.

TRY THINKING:

GROWTH MINDSET



1 What am I missing?

2 I'm on the right track.

3 I'll use some of the strategies we've learned.

4 This may take some time and effort.

5 I can always improve so I'll keep trying.

6 I'm going to train my brain in Math.

7 Mistakes help me to learn better.

8 I'm going to figure out how she does it.

9 Is it really my best work?

10 Good thing the alphabet has 25 more letters!

(Original source unknown)

@sylvia duckworth

# Strategies to Battle Perfectionism – Adapted to the classroom

- Cognitive strategies
  - Give the worry brain a name
  - What is your worry brain telling you?
  - Can you question your worry brain?
    - Do you know for sure? What's happened before? Is there another way to think about it?
  - What can you think instead?
- Behavioral experiments
  - The only way to really learn is to test out your beliefs



Worry brain: Your sunshine looks so stupid. Everyone is going to laugh at your drawing. Tear it up!

Teacher: Wow! Your worry brain is being mean. What usually happens with your pictures?

Child: You hang them up. They make our classroom look nice.

Teacher: That is true! Do the kids usually laugh at your pictures?

Child: Nope. But, this one is so bad!

Teacher: How about we put it up and find out? Maybe your worry brain is telling you lies!



Telling me lies Mr. Worry Brain!

# Other Ways to Boss Back:

- It 's the Oh nooo reaction
- Wrong again – you always say not good enough or not enough time hardly ever true
- Yadda yadda yadda or whatever
- Sick of this or tired of this
- Shut the heck up
- Just has to be good enough
- This is really not helpful to me



- Remember to check back in –
  - Teacher: I am enjoying your beautiful picture! I'm curious. Have you seen anyone laughing at it? Or, was the worry brain telling you some lies?



# Pushing the Boundaries with Behavioral Experiments

- Intentionally draw a “wrong” picture
- Intentionally make your writing messy and see if teacher or friends can read it
- Intentionally make a mistake on a worksheet or leave something out
- Whole Class
  - Do something embarrassing day – have each kid choose an embarrassing/imperfect thing to do and write it down – at the end of the day, have the class write down the embarrassing thing that each child did (if anything). Did anyone notice??

# Ideas for Embarrassing Day

- Hiccup or burp when it is quiet in the room
- Leave your pant zipper open or a button open on your shirt
- Call the teacher mom or dad
- Shout the wrong answer in a very confident tone of voice
- Say the Pledge of Allegiance extra loud
- Answer a question super quietly
- Start whistling or humming a tune during a quiet time in class
- Call a classmate by the wrong name
- During self selected reading, cry or laugh out loud while reading your book
- Wear a shirt with a big stain on it
- Do everything with wrong hand all day.
- Wear mismatched clothes
- Wear a crazy hair-do

# PERFECTIONISM IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS

Tricks of the Trade

A different family dynamic- parent anxiety leading to over-involvement and anger



# Case 12 yo GAD perfectionism

- NVLD diagnosis recent
- Processing very slow, visual memory
- Integrating info and flexibility weak
- Trouble reading and understanding social cues
- Increasing anxiety over last 1-2 years
- Melting down at home and school
- “Obsession with grades”
- Self criticism
- Mood changes
- Stomachaches, hyper and restless, crying

# His view

- Did not say very anxious
- Did admit he cared about grades a lot (can't get below 90, summary of good things done, shown to other people and college, not let me in because not good enough)
- Tests rewriting and checking, feels might have accidentally cheated
- Checks bookbag and computer a lot
- Careful because have to be absolutely certain
- Loves animation, plays piano, fencing
- Loves humor

# 12 yo GAD perfectionism NVLD

## Pros

- Makes me feel good to get good grade
- People say you do good
- Keeps me from being lazy
- Teachers like me more

## Cons

- Freak out
- People don't say I am good now
- Teacher mad at me

# Family issues

- Mom highly anxious
- Question untxed mood or other disorder
- Angry and irritable, a bit scattered, question of boundaries
- Very concerned about his abilities and catastrophizing his future
- Embarrassed about how acting at school
- Trying to do everything right but a bit frantic-my appt and psychiatrist appt same day
- All new from recent testing results

# Family issues

- Father “anx all my life” –get all work done
- Marital issues mom unhappy, unsupported by husband, stressful job she hated and could not leave
- Intergenerational – fa’s fa took care eccentric wife
- Father seemed unaware of what I was describing when talked about wife’s anx
- Both parents bench researchers and question of Asperger traits for both

# Treatment plan: Divide and conquer

- Simple strategies to work with child
- Need to change family interaction pattern first since most upsetting to all
- Coordinate with the school given behavior there

# Interaction change

- Work with mom 1<sup>st</sup> just empathic response-  
This looks hard for you – you're stuck  
You are feeling really upset
- Then disengage and say remember what works best is some time to cool out
- Child liked and asked for time alone and only return to discuss if problem to be solved
- Exception repeating issue or safety
- Mom relieved not responsible to do more
- Able to follow thru some of the time

# At home reminders- early tx

At first could not remember thoughts so had teacher note what he said in upset

Boss back

- This is not working for me
- Causing problems and not my best work
- It's the perfect trap
- Can't have my freedom or fun rest of day because of worry

# Early strategy school support

Goal: to do my best work and lower anxiety so I can focus

Know my trigger:            I don't get this  
   This is not right

Boss back:        I am not supposed to know  
                         Can find another way to approach

Allow to take break

Break rules: watch clock 5 min before asking a question

# Examples of Active Experiments: School Related (Older Kids)

- Bring homework to session for exposures
- Set time limit for homework.
- Set time limit for studying.
- Leave item on homework undone.
- Purposefully make mistake on homework.
- Purposefully hand in “messy” homework.
- Take a night off (leisure time exposures are very important!)
- Take a test with no studying at all.



# Other classroom tasks to target

- See if teacher can guess the half ass day or less neat paper- care about penmanship?
- Limit number of questions per day or subject.
- Sometimes set times to write questions and ask teacher 2x in day.
- Set a tell time for worries but limit.
- Refrain from asking teacher about test grade.
- Refrain from completing group work for other group members.

# Other Ideas for Kids with Specific Difficulties



Difficulty	Behavioral Experiment
Too much erasing and re-writing to make words and numbers just so	Practice doing work without an eraser.
Can't get started on a writing assignment – what if the topic isn't the best, what if I change my mind?	Give five minutes to brainstorm ideas. Then choose one by picking out of a hat or closing eyes and pointing.
Kids who overstudy for tests	Take a test without studying at all.
Kids who re-read in order to understand perfectly.	Cover passage with a cue card as you read. Have teacher quiz you on understanding when you haven't been able to go back and check.
Kids who spend too much time on homework	Give time limit to family. At end of time, give work to parent to put in car for next day. AND/OR Take a night off from homework completely.

# Ideas for Embarrassing Day

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- Group projects – take it all on or be the boss of everyone.
- Having to post online- everyone sees my responses.

# Social costs



- Group projects feel that you have to do it all yourself or try to take charge of everyone.
- For you, you end up doing extra work or get the reputation that everyone leaves it to you.
- How do kids view you and how do you want to be viewed?
- Can you relax enough to play and to enjoy learning and being with peers?
- How does it appear to kids who are struggling with school when you are upset about a 90?

# Model options and alternatives

- Clearly say there are options or it is not true
- With younger kids middle schoolers who say I don't want to get below 90
- Why is that- why have you picked that
- Often no clue – just supposed to or just because
- That is not what we are going to be about in this class or this year
- Everyone and the best discoveries have come from mistakes and things did not go as planned and figuring out why

# Parents of younger kids and pre teens

- May have to set limits that the child does not want at all or does not have goal
- Many parents have trouble setting any limits so especially hard around anxiety and upset
- Empower parents to set sleep rules, limit on time to do homework, limit on computer time and limit on parent help time
- Often times it can help to have back up or plan from teacher (this subject only 20 minutes)
- Verizon- family controls



# Homework

- In general do not help with homework except in youngest grades
- Make sure you give permission to parents to not have a role
- If high conflict or meltdown with parents definitely abandon for a new plan
- Parents can be helpful in creating schedule, setting and environment for homework
- If parent and child really enjoy or bond over homework in a subject great
- Reiterate attempt homework but kid write a note about difficulty and parent can initial if you wish

# From Day 1 middle school teachers- Marti M

- Respect
- Sensitivity
- Tolerance

What does that mean to you?

What does it mean in this room?

What would it look like?

# PERFECTIONISM IN HIGH SCHOOL

Tricks of the Trade

# College choices

For teens tell me why that matters to you

- Where did you get that idea?
- Why are you applying to those schools?
- Would you be doing this\_\_\_\_\_ (activity) if it made no difference about college?

Great if you like a certain faculty member, way of approaching education or program

However rarely the case and very non specific

This school is better- better for what

In reality why are you applying to a place where you are unlikely to get in even if you are very qualified?

What kind of experience awaits even if you get in and do you want that?

# Helping kids and parents step out of frenzy

- Finding the right match for your child not the “right match”
- Pros and cons for child, parents and family of frenzy
- What environment are you sending your young person to if they succeed
- Real risk of burn out in college
- One thing done well and with passion better than thousands
- How do you want to spend this last year with your kid?

# Pressure of college admissions

- Economic anxiety recently
- What we hear is you have to take advantage of every opportunity or you fall behind or never catch up
- Somehow translates into college choice
- Use data very different better employment post graduation from other schools and more opportunities

Good review of the data

- Lythcott-Haim, J *How to Raise an Adult: Break Free of the Overparenting Trap and Prepare Your Kid for Success*,
- Bruni, F. *Where you go is not who you are: An antidote to the college admissions mania*



# **Messages We Should Be Giving To Kids**

# Step out of the Cookie Cutter



- There are over 3000 4-year colleges in the US (not 8 as some would lead us to believe).
- The assumption that the elite, top schools are for everyone is wrong. They may not even be the best fit for the smartest kids.
  - What do you want to learn about and experience?
  - Is there a particular activity they want to be involved with?
  - Is there a place in the country that you would like to try living in?

# It's Okay to NOT KNOW!

- Kids *seem* to know from an early age where they want to go to university and what they want to be.
- Kids who don't know feel very anxious.
- NOT KNOWING is different from having no goals or academic standards.
- Do a survey – ask grown ups you respect, when did you know? And how did you arrive there? What changed along the way?
- If you go to college closed minded, you might miss the influence of an amazing class or professor.

# Beliefs Facts

- **Take a step back and ask questions...**
  - The only school for me is X.
    - How could you know that?
- Think about how you want to spend your time during your Junior and Senior years of high school.
  - Prep courses
    - They do yield a benefit, but it is modest – about 30 points on the SAT and 1 point on the ACT.
  - Re-taking SATs and ACTs
    - What score is “good enough”?
  - Visiting schools.
    - The myth of finding the “perfect school”.
  - Activities that look good on the college applications.

# How about....



- Being in the school musical?
- Trying a new sport?
- Doing volunteer work?
- Hanging out with friends?



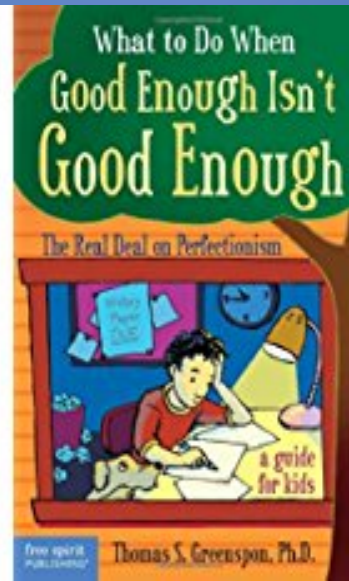
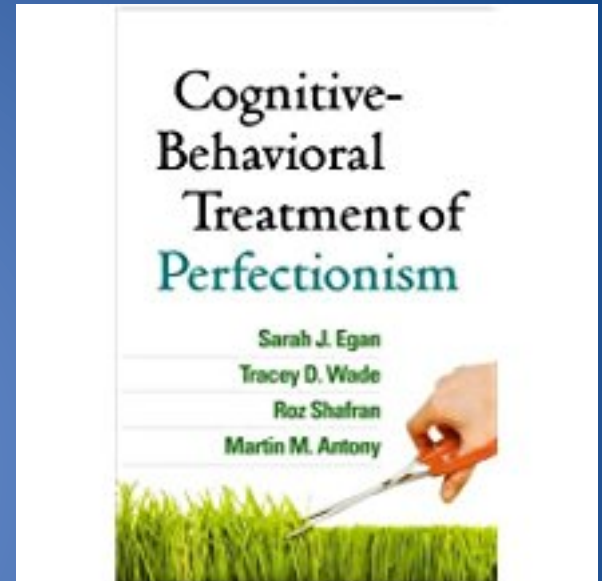
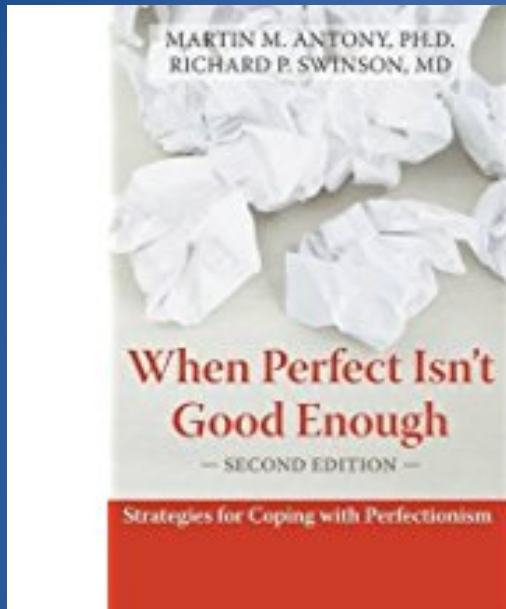
# Messages to Give to Parents

- Part of this process involves examining your OWN beliefs.
  - What would it mean for YOU for your kids to not attend an elite school?
  - Would you feel embarrassed, like you failed as a parent?
  - Where did you go to school? How do you think your choice affected you?
  - What are your hopes and dreams for your child?

# Parents of perfectionistic kids need support

- Need to know you get them and get their kids
- What are their hopes and concerns on the surface and underneath
- Do they feel pressure to conform in their community even if they don't want to
- What are their supports in stepping off
- What does it look like to step off- what to say
- There are solutions out there – opportunities and benefits but risk taking

# Resources



# Extra slides

# Help parents process expectation vs actual outcome

- Big picture
- Rubber band
- What is actual outcome of exposure  
What is actual consequence of mistake
- Values picture what kind of life they want  
for themselves, family and child



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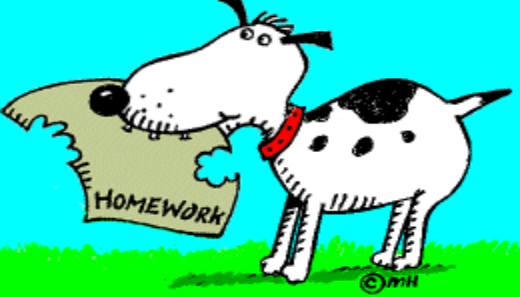
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- If parent and child really enjoy or bond over homework in a subject great
- Reiterate attempt homework but kid write a note about difficulty and parent can initial if you wish



# Role in exposure

- Model how to help or type of help with homework
- Model how to talk to their child
- I know doing good work is important to you I am on your team for that
- Right now your brain/anxiety is saying this has to be started over
- I know and a part of you know that is not true – it feels like the only way
- For this project or night, we are aiming for good enough
- Tomorrow we will see if it is any different than your work
- Requiring just 15 minute breaks can help child reset

# Parent positions



- Not necessarily putting pressure on kids but perfectionism is how they live their life and can't conceive of anything different
- Look for parent reactions to proposed targets (turn in things incomplete, deliberately wrong, raising hand with wrong answer)
- See them pale in recognition of own inability to do that or concern about even asking kid to do that
- Goal to have them practice and model messing up for kids and coping

# Social costs



- Group projects feel that you have to do it all yourself or try to take charge of everyone.
- For you, you end up doing extra work or get the reputation that everyone leaves it to you.
- How do kids view you and how do you want to be viewed?
- Can you relax enough to play and to enjoy learning and being with peers?
- How does it appear to kids who are struggling with school when you are upset about a 90?

# Playing and losing a game

- Always playing 2 games (Jed Baker).
- Actual game and relationship game.
- Can lose actual game and still win relationship game.
- If you lose the relationship game doesn't matter if you win actual game.
- Do you make rules for games or quit when they want to just have fun- how likely is it you will be asked to play.



# Social role

- Keeper of rules
- Everyone has to be perfect and follow teacher rules in class
- Remind others of misbehavior
- Tell others how to play games
- Can't handle changes in rules
- Quits in middle
- I understand that you are anxious about something bad happening if you don't



# Social perfectionism

- I have to have the right interactions- right conversations
- I have to be seen in a certain way or certain light by others
- Identity to maintain as athlete, cool one, slacker
- Can take option of opting out and not trying - procrastination
- Escape to alcohol, drugs, partying