

Perfectionism

There is a difference between striving for excellence and striving for perfection. Is your child an overachiever? In this article we look at how to identify if your child is becoming an over-achiever and how you can help to reduce their stress.

We all agree that some students need a push to get their work done, but some students are already pushing themselves too hard for their own good. Some students are natural high flyers for whom school work comes easily. They play A Grade sport (often more than one) and set their sights on elite universities. Often too, they make it look easy. But for others, such high achievement exacts a heavy toll, causing acute stress and physical and emotional overload which can impact on the whole family.

Students seeking perfection in their work can experience physical symptoms such as headache, stomach ache, muscle pain and fatigue. They can display chronic anxiety and nervousness, increased anger and irritability, difficulty concentrating and changes in eating and sleeping habits. Rather than excelling at their favourite sport or activity, they can shut down and withdraw, also from friends and family. Neither is it un-common for a student who is putting themselves under unrealistic pressure to succumb to cheating. Surprisingly too, high and over achieving students often suffer from low self-esteem. They berate themselves for a B+ and vow to work harder. Does any of this sound familiar?

How can you reduce stress for your child.....and for you?

- Have realistic expectations and consider an array of options that are within your child's grasp when they are making plans for the future. It's always good to have a plan B.
- Help your child to set personal limits. Take note of how much they can comfortably handle and what puts them over the edge. It's not OK to be doing 4 hours of homework each night in Year 9, for example. Don't allow it to hap-pen.
- Teach stress management techniques, such as deep breathing, thinking calming thoughts, progressive muscle relaxation and taking regular breaks.
- Avoid focussing on marks. Some students need encouragement, but the over-achiever needs to be reminded to have a rest, take a break or a day off and to have some fun. Facilitate this if necessary.
- Express your love and acceptance. Remind them what wonderful human beings they are. Let them know that academic success is only ONE aspect of who they are, and NOT the most important one at that.
- Encourage them to get enough rest and exercise. Provide regular, healthy food options and discourage the use of excessive caffeine such as coffee, coke (including lo-joule options which are often very high in caffeine) and other energy drinks (such as Red Bull). Sleep, exercise and healthy eating habits are the core of self-care and it's easy for over achievers to lose sight of these. Coffee and energy drinks may provide temporary boost of concentration but cause long term ill effects, not least being interference with the ability to sleep and get proper rest.
- Teach and encourage positive self-talk. Excessive self-doubt and criticism and feelings of not being good enough are a warning sign. Help your child to realise that no-one is perfect and that we all make mistakes. Share personal stories of challenges you've faced and mistakes you've made while you were young. Let them see you laugh and let them know it hasn't ruined your life!
- Use positive but not superlative language. "This is good work." as opposed to "Wow this is amazing. It's perfect."

- When your child is struggling or procrastinating on handing in an assignment, help them to decide what needs to be done to complete the task. Help them to decide when it's "good enough", when it's "finished". Striving for "perfection" sets them up for a lifetime of failure.
- Encourage down time. Time with friends, playing with pets, listening to music, hanging out with the family. Insist they come to the table for dinner (as opposed to eating while they work in their rooms) and try to make the evening meal an enjoyable family event... at least some nights of the week. Having fun is an important aspect of being a well-rounded and successful person. What's more, taking time to chill and refresh actually enhances productivity and performance.
- Insist your child gets the minimum sleep requirement (9 ¼ hours is the magic number for growing children and teens) Remind them that it actually enhances memory and retention, so they will be doing themselves an academic favour!
- If you notice social withdrawal, engage your child in some fun, non-competitive games at home. Some backyard cricket, or charades. Laugh together and show that it's not all about who is the best, and that your love is unconditional.
- Be alert for the "Perfect Façade" especially when you suspect otherwise. If you're hearing a lot of, "I'm fine, I'm fine, everything's fine," then it probably isn't. Help with the homework from time to time, even when she insists, "It's fine" and she doesn't need your help. This will enable you to check whether the perfectionism or procrastination is happening and you will be able to re-minder her about "good enough" and "it's finished".

Of course, all parents want their children to succeed in school and parents play an important role in managing their child's expectations. It's reasonable to have high parental expectations, but how you react when they are not met is pivotal. It's important not to be too critical. Make sure your children see YOU modelling a work-life-fun balance. Some stress is inherent in the educational process, but success should never overshadow students' mental and physical well-being. The cost is much too high.

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