

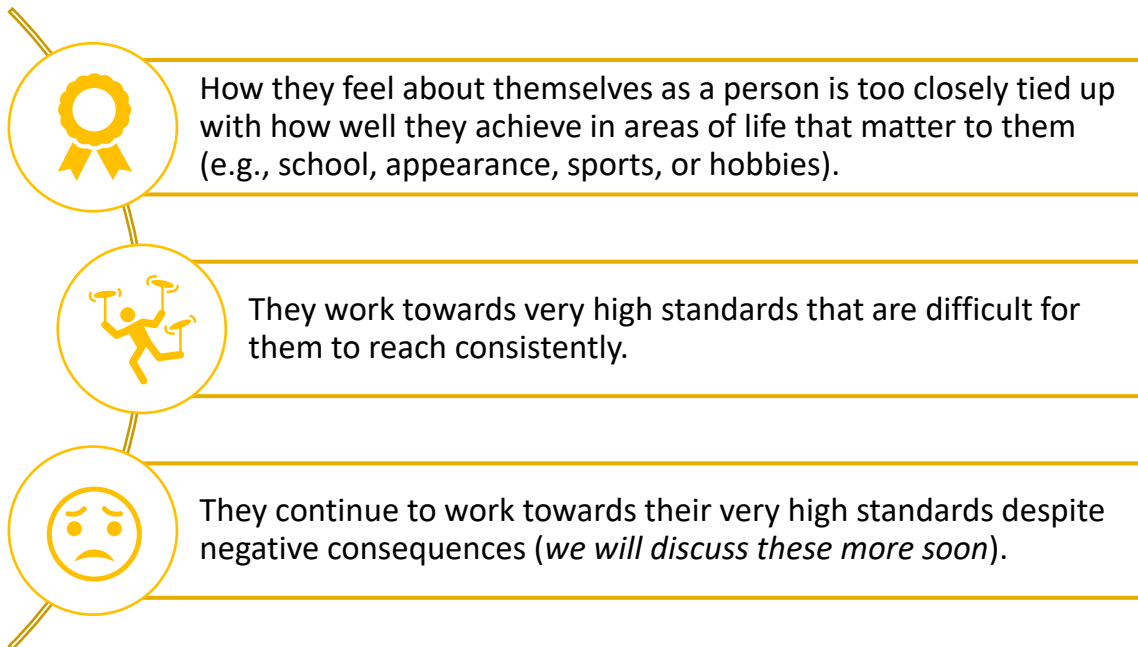
Module One: Learning About Perfectionism

This module will cover:

- What perfectionism is.
- Why perfectionism can be problematic.
- The relationship between perfectionism and performance.
- Potential fears about reducing perfectionism.

What is perfectionism?

In this program, when we talk about perfectionism, we are talking about people who experience the following three things¹:



¹ Shafran, R., Cooper, Z., & Fairburn, C. G. (2002). Clinical perfectionism: A cognitive-behavioural analysis. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 40(7), 773-791. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0005-7967%2801%2900059-6>

There is nothing wrong with your child seeking to achieve high standards or excellence. There are ways of approaching this that are helpful and are not associated with unpleasant outcomes. However, perfectionism goes beyond just striving towards high standards or excellence, as described in the table below.

Perfectionism	Striving for excellence
Feels like a failure if they don't reach their goals, no matter how close they get.	Sees value in their effort even if they don't achieve what they set out to do.
Spots tiny imperfections in their work and themselves.	Can notice small errors without losing sight the things they have done well.
Feels <u>pushed</u> toward their goals by a fear of not reaching them.	Feels <u>pulled</u> toward their goals by a desire to achieve them.
Sets their goals so high that they might be out of reach.	Sets goals that are difficult but realistic.
Focuses more on the outcome and the fear of failing than the process of improving.	Enjoys the process of chasing a goal as much or more than reaching it.
Becomes self-critical and discouraged when they don't achieve their goals.	Can be kind to themselves despite disappointment and shows resilience.
Worries so much about failure that they feel paralysed and unable to start.	Is more likely to make progress toward valued goals.



Are you noticing anything familiar here?

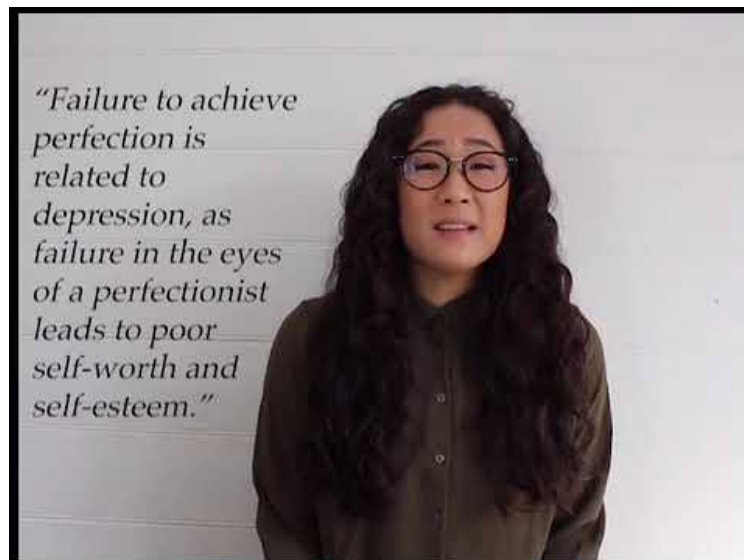
In the box below, write a short reflection on the signs of perfectionism you see in your child.

- What area or areas of life seem to strongly impact their sense of self-worth?
- What standards or expectations do they seem to have for themselves in these areas?
- Have you noticed them experiencing any problems because of this?

What's the problem with perfectionism?

Please watch the video below to hear Grace introduce some of the negative effects associated with perfectionism. Clicking on the thumbnail will open the video in your browser, but if you can't access it that way, you can also reach it from this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WynxfVX0eok>



This table outlines some of the common negative outcomes associated with perfectionism:

Area	Consequences
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anxiety (e.g., feeling nervous or worried).• Depression (e.g., feeling sad or flat).
Social life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being isolated from others.
Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most time is spent on areas of perfectionism, instead of other interests.• Not doing or rarely doing things just for the sake of enjoyment.
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trouble sleeping.• Feeling tired.• Muscle tension.
Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trouble concentrating.• Rumination (thinking about mistakes over and over again).• Self-criticism.• Low self-esteem.
Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Repeatedly checking your work (looking for errors).• Repeating tasks (e.g., rewriting and editing things many times over).• Spending much more time than needed on tasks.• Avoiding or procrastinating tasks (putting tasks off).• Making lists (instead of doing things).• Being over-thorough – that is, doing more than you need to.
Goal attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Performance gets worse when stress is very high.• Making less progress towards valued goals in the long-term. <p><i>Note: we will provide more details about this below.</i></p>



What are the negative consequences for your child?

Please tick the negative consequences of perfectionism that you have noticed in your child:

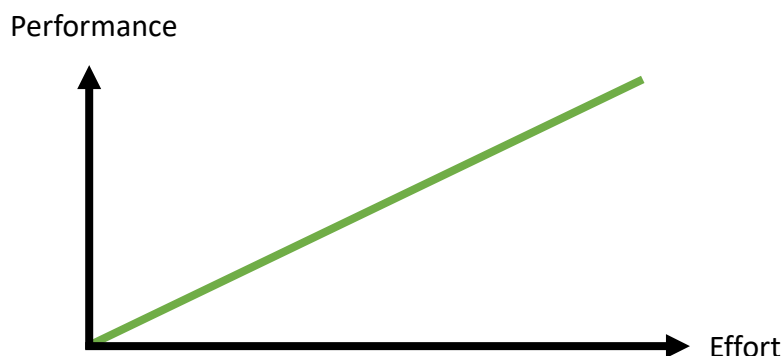
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling nervous or worried | <input type="checkbox"/> Self-criticism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling sad or flat | <input type="checkbox"/> Low self-esteem |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spending less time with friends | <input type="checkbox"/> Repeated checking |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Having few interests | <input type="checkbox"/> Repeating tasks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not doing things for enjoyment | <input type="checkbox"/> Spending too much time on things |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble sleeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding or procrastinating tasks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling tired | <input type="checkbox"/> Making lists |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension | <input type="checkbox"/> Being over-thorough |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Trouble concentrating | <input type="checkbox"/> High stress impacting performance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thinking about mistakes a lot | <input type="checkbox"/> Less/slower progress toward goals |

Perfectionism and performance

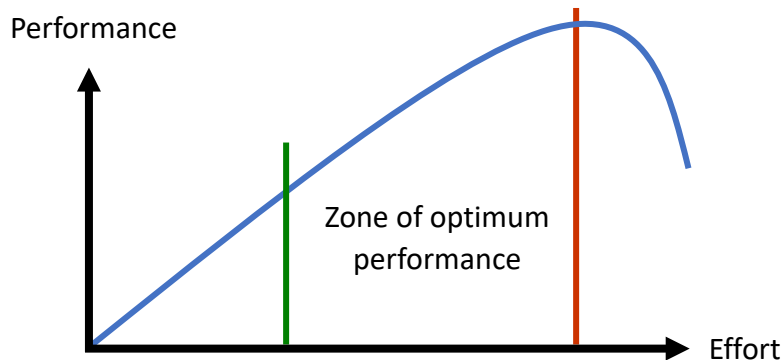
You might think, “sure, there are downsides to perfectionism... but you have to work as hard as possible to achieve well in life”. This is a common idea, but we want to suggest another way of thinking about the relationship between effort and performance. If this statement is true: “*the harder you work, the better you will do*”... what will this graph look like?



Well, we would expect it to look something like this:



However, the Yerkes-Dodson Law² tells us that the graph will look more like this:



The key information to take away from this is:

- Up to a certain point, it is true that more effort is linked to better performance.
- Performance is best when there is not too little or too much effort/stress.
- After a certain point, additional effort is associated with *worse* performance.
- If you are putting in an extreme amount of effort, it is possible that putting in less effort will lead to better or equivalent performance and less stress/exhaustion!

Productivity: Perfectionism or aiming for excellence?

We can learn more about the relationship between perfectionism and performance by considering research that compares perfectionism with striving for excellence³.

One of the main things that sets striving for excellence apart from perfectionism is the nature of the goals you set. When striving for excellence, the goal is to be *competent* and to have *excellent* performances, whereas in perfectionism, the aim is to be *perfect* and to have *perfect* performances (i.e., making no room for mistakes along the way).

Another main difference is the way you work towards goals. When striving for excellence, the person feels satisfied that they have achieved success when they get an excellent result. In perfectionism, the person may pursue excellence as an original goal, but once they achieve it, they are not satisfied and will continue to pursue higher standards that become more and more unrealistic over time and lead to self-criticism when not achieved.

² Yerkes, R.M., & Dodson, J.D. (1908). The relation of strength of stimulus to rapidity of habit-formation. *Journal of Comparative Neurology and Psychology*, 18(5), 459-482. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cne.920180503>

³ Gaudreau, P., Schellenberg, B. J. I., Gareau, A., Kljajic, K., & Manoni-Millar, S. (2022). Because excellencism is more than good enough: On the need to distinguish the pursuit of excellence from the pursuit of perfection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 122(6), 1117-1145. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000411>

When researchers compared perfectionism with aiming for excellence, they found that:

1

People aiming for excellence got higher grades, improved more on their previous grades, and were more likely to get straight A grades than people with perfectionism.

2

There was no evidence that perfectionism offered any benefits over striving for excellence in terms of making progress towards goals, life satisfaction, or mood.



The key information to take away from this is:

- It is worthwhile to aim for high, achievable goals, and to work hard to reach them.
- However, aiming to put in as much effort as you possibly can and achieve perfection is unlikely to result in additional reward.
 - In other words, **work smarter, not harder!**

Fears about changing perfectionism

When someone is thinking about making a change, it is normal for them to experience some worry or fear about what the results of the change might be. Your child may have some of these concerns when you talk to them about this program. You might also have your own concerns about what could happen if your child changes their perfectionism.



Do you have any worries or fears about your child changing their perfectionism? Please write them in the box below (we will come back to them later in the program).

In the following table, we include some examples of the kinds of fears that your child (or you) may experience, along with some responses to those fears:

Fear	Response
<i>If I reduce my perfectionism, I will put in less effort and my performance will be worse...</i>	Hopefully, from the previous section of this module, you will have learned that putting in more effort isn't always associated with better outcomes. It is possible to strive for <i>high standards or excellence</i> , rather than <i>perfection</i> .
<i>If I am less critical of myself and my performance, I will have less motivation and my performance will be worse...</i>	We will cover this more later in the program, but in fact, being more self-compassionate, as opposed to self-critical, is associated with better progress towards important goals.
<i>If I put less effort into finding and correcting every mistake, other people will notice my mistakes and think badly of me...</i>	People might not be as observant or as judgmental as you think! In one online poll ⁴ , 63% of respondents (by far the largest group) said that they notice typos but think "we all make mistakes" – that is, they don't think badly of the writer. Another 7% said that they don't notice typos at all!
<i>What if I try to change my perfectionism and I fail...?</i>	The important thing with this program is not to do the program <i>perfectly</i> and <i>completely</i> get rid of perfectionism. Instead, we want you to try out some new ways of thinking and behaving and see if they work for you. Just by trying, you've already achieved what the program wants you to do!

We've reached the end of the first module! Here are the main things we covered:

Key points from Module 1

- Someone who experiences perfectionism puts too much emphasis on achievement when judging their self-worth, aims for exceptionally high standards, and keeps trying to meet these standards despite negative consequences.
- The negative consequences of perfectionism can affect emotions, social life, interests, physical health, thinking, behaviour, and progress towards goals.
- Perfectionism is not necessary for academic achievement and can be unhelpful – instead of aiming for perfection, it is better to aim for excellence.

⁴ Crosby, B. (n.d.) *Do you notice grammar errors and typos when you read posts or articles?* LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bethcrosby_yourstoryisyourstrength-writing-whatsyourmessage-activity-6772907602121658368-6U4g/



How do these key points relate to your child? Write any reflections you have here. The reflection could include things you learned or things you already knew but have a greater understanding or appreciation of.



Module One Homework Exercises

Have a conversation with your child about perfectionism, using the following handouts:

1. The information sheet titled '*Introducing Perfectionism!*', which your child can read with you to learn about what perfectionism is and why it can cause problems.
2. The questionnaire titled '*Perfectionism Quiz*', which you can use to:
 - Ask your child about the aspects of perfectionism they feel they experience.
 - Agree with your child on a particular area of perfectionism to focus on in future modules.
 - Discuss any fears your child may have about changing perfectionism.
3. The worksheet titled '*Adam and Lucy*', which your child can complete with you to practice identifying perfectionism and how it is different to striving for high standards or excellence (you might like to complete this worksheet too, so you and your child can talk about your answers together!).
 - Kindly be aware that two variations of the '*Adam and Lucy*' worksheet are available. The first version includes examples and language designed for children who lean toward the younger end of the 7–12-year-old age range. We encourage you to exercise your judgment in selecting the version that best suits your child's needs.

Important Note: It is not necessary to complete the module and homework exercises in one sitting. Dependent on your child's needs, you may want to work through the module and exercises in blocks throughout the week.

Introducing Perfectionism!

Have you ever heard of **perfectionism** before?

Let's talk about what that word means!

What is perfectionism?



People with perfectionism try to do things that are very hard to do.

Some very hard things to do are getting straight As on your report card, finishing first in every race on Sports Day, and winning every dance competition you are in.



When they can't do the things they try to do, they feel bad about themselves.

They might feel sad if their school grades aren't as good as they hoped, or if they lost a competition. They may think badly about themselves, like thinking they are stupid or that people don't like them.

What's so bad about perfectionism?

There's nothing wrong with trying to do well!

It's okay to try hard at things you like and it's okay to feel sad if you can't do something you were hoping to do.

But, when someone has perfectionism, more problems can come.



They might feel worried or afraid.



They might feel sad.



It might be hard for them to sleep.



They might get angry with themselves.



They might put things off until the last minute.

Do any of these things happen to you? If they do, it would be good to talk to an adult about how you are feeling.



Perfectionism Quiz

The following are some questions you can ask your child to figure out what aspects of perfectionism they feel they experience. You can tick off the ones that they agree with, so that you end up with a list of their main perfectionism-related concerns.

No.	Question to ask your child	Tick boxes
1	Do you keep trying your hardest to do very, very well at things?	
2	Do you think a lot about times when you <i>haven't</i> done so well, rather than when you <i>have</i> done well?	
3	Do you feel scared of not doing very, very well?	
4	If you do well on something, do you usually want to do even better next time?	
5	Do you feel bad about yourself when you don't do as well at something as you'd hoped?	
6	Do you keep trying your hardest to do things, even if it means that you miss out on other things?	
7	Do you try to avoid doing things because you feel scared that you won't do them well?	

Once you've completed the quiz, we invite you to talk to your child about whether they think perfectionism causes problems for them. You might like to have page 2 of the handout '*Introducing Perfectionism!*' ready to help you with this discussion – it includes some of the common problems linked to perfectionism in child-friendly language.

There's space on the next page for you to record their responses, with example prompts you could use in italics. Feel free to use your own prompts to guide the discussion, including asking about any aspects of perfectionism you notice in your child that they don't mention.

“Do you think perfectionism causes problems for you? What kinds of problems?”

Example prompts:

- “Do you often feel worried or afraid?”
- “How about often feeling sad?”
- “Is it hard for you to sleep sometimes?”
- “Do you get cross with yourself when you make a mistake?”
- “Do you put things off until the last minute, and then have to do it in a rush?”

Now, it’s time to set a goal for the program. Using the following prompts, ask your child about what area of perfectionism they want to focus on in the program. We have included some examples, but there’s space to add your own. We suggest that you tick the one you pick to help you remember what you agreed on. Try to agree on just one thing as the focus.

“What would you most like to change about your perfectionism?”

Additional prompts to help start this conversation (if needed):

- “What’s the worst part of perfectionism?”
- “What do you wish was different about perfectionism?”

**Focus of
the
program?**

How high their standards are

Thinking about when they *didn’t* do well, rather than when they *did* do well

Feeling scared of not doing well

Feeling like they always need to do better next time

Feeling bad about themselves when they don’t do as well as they hoped

Missing out on other things because they’re trying so hard

Avoiding doing things because of a fear of not doing them well

Other (*please enter*)

Fears about changing perfectionism

Now that you've agreed on something you'd like to focus on in this program, it's a good time to talk to your child about any concerns they may have about changing perfectionism. You might even be able to use the information from the module to respond to some of your child's fears.

Remember this key point if you're not sure what to say: it's okay for them to have some worries! The only way to find out if their fears will come true is to try making some changes. If the new ways of doing things don't work for them, they can always go back to doing things the way they used to.

You can record your child's response in the section below, which includes prompts to help you with this conversation.

"Do you have any worries about changing perfectionism?"

Additional prompts to help start this conversation (if needed):

- *"Is there anything that scares you about changing perfectionism?"*
- *"Do you have any worries about us doing this program together?"*

Once you've completed this handout, you're ready for the final handout in this module's homework – 'Adam and Lucy' – which is also designed to be completed with your child.



Adam and Lucy

We want you to meet some people: Adam and Lucy.



This is **Adam**. He is 10 years old and loves playing video games. Adam's eyes light up with excitement whenever he talks about his favorite games, and he's always eager to learn more about them. Adam is on a quest to become the best gamer in his group of friends. He spends hours practicing and perfecting his gaming skills every day after school, even on weekends.

Now, Adam's dream is to win every video game tournament he enters. He wants to be the champion, and nothing less will do. When he doesn't win, Adam feels sad. He might even get a little frustrated with himself and think he's not good enough. Sometimes, that feeling of disappointment sticks around for a while.

Before Adam got deep into gaming, he had other hobbies he enjoyed. He used to love riding his skateboard and exploring the nearby woods. But lately, with all the gaming and practicing, he hasn't had much time for these other activities.



This is **Lucy**. She's 7 years old and absolutely loves playing with her colorful blocks. Last year, she built the tallest tower ever! Lucy spends a lot of time playing with her blocks every day.


Sometimes, Lucy catches a little cold. When that happens, she takes a break from playing with her blocks until she feels better.

Lucy really wants to build an even taller tower this year. Most of the time, she makes amazing block creations, but every now and then, her towers fall. When that happens, she feels a bit sad for a little while. But then, she remembers that even the best tower builders sometimes knock their towers over, and she starts building again with a big smile!



Let's talk some more about Adam and Lucy...

Did you notice something? Adam and Lucy both work hard to do well at things they care about. But the way they do this is a little different.

 What do you think is different about how Adam plays videogames and how Lucy plays with blocks?

Please write your answer in this box





Why do you think Adam does extra videogame practice even when it stops him from doing other fun activities?

Please write your answer in this box


It's not nice that Adam thinks he's stupid and feels sad. We would like it if he felt better about himself. It would also be nice if Adam could still skateboard and explore the nearby parks.

The good news is that Adam could feel better. Brain scientists tell us that we can change our feelings by changing two things: what we **think** and what we **do**. So, if we keep training our brains, we can feel happier – pretty cool, right?


To train our brain to feel better, we can try to:

- **Think** nicer things about ourselves
- **Do** more things that we enjoy



 What could you say to Adam to help him feel better? What could he **think** instead of “*I’m stupid*”? What could he **do** in his spare time to feel good?

Please write your answers in this box



Thank you for helping Adam! Please talk about your answers with your parent or caregiver. They might be able to learn from you. They might also have some ideas you didn't think of.



Well done for finishing this activity!





Adam and Lucy

We want you to meet some people: Adam and Lucy.



This is **Adam**. He's 12 years old and loves playing tennis. Last year, he even won a competition! Adam has tennis training two times a week. He plays tennis matches on the weekend. Sometimes, Adam gets sick. When he gets sick, he doesn't go to training until he feels better.

Adam wants to win another competition this year. He often wins his tennis matches, but he sometimes loses. When he loses, he feels sad for a bit. But, he knows that even the best tennis players in the world lose sometimes. So, he doesn't feel sad for very long.

Adam has other hobbies too, like reading and drawing. He likes to read and draw on the days he doesn't have tennis training or matches.




This is **Lucy**. She's 11 years old and thinks science is awesome. She always gets the top grade in her class for science! She does extra science homework every day after school. She even does extra homework when she's sick or really tired.


Lucy wants to get an A for every science project. She also wants to get an A for all her other classes. When she doesn't get an A, Lucy feels really bad. She gets angry with herself and thinks she's stupid. Then, she feels sad for a whole week.

Lucy used to enjoy other things, like riding her bike and helping her parents cook. But now she does so much extra homework, she doesn't have time for riding her bike or cooking!

Let's talk some more about Adam and Lucy...



Did you notice something? Adam and Lucy both work hard to do well at things they care about. But the way they do this is a little different.

 What do you think is different about how Adam trains for tennis and how Lucy studies for science?

Please write your answer in this box





Why do you think Lucy does extra work even when she's sick?

Please write your answer in this box

It's not nice that Lucy thinks she's stupid and feels sad. We would like it if she felt better about herself. It would also be nice if Lucy could still ride her bike and help her parents cook.

The good news is that Lucy could feel better. Brain scientists tell us that we can change our feelings by changing two things: what we **think** and what we **do**. So, if we keep training our brains, we can feel happier – pretty cool, right?


To train our brain to feel better, we can try to:

- **Think** nicer things about ourselves
- **Do** more things that we enjoy



? What could you say to Lucy to help her feel better? What could she **think** instead of “*I’m stupid*”? What could she **do** in her spare time to feel good?

Please write your answers in this box



Thank you for helping Lucy! Please talk about your answers with your parent or caregiver. They might be able to learn from you. They might also have some ideas you didn't think of.



Well done for finishing this activity!

