

Children and Perfectionism – How to Help Children Manage the Thoughts That Drive Perfectionism

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Posted March 14, 2018 by Karen Young

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It's a condition of entry into the human race that we're going to make mistakes. Sometimes they will be epic. When mistakes or failure happen, there are two ways to deal with it. We can let our imperfections drive into our core like rusty nails, or we can allow ourselves to feel 'enough' despite them – good enough, brave enough, wise enough, strong enough – even when we stumble. There's nothing wrong with having high standards, but the problem with perfectionism in children is that for them, enough is never enough. It's exhausting and when perfectionism takes over, the whip-cracking chase for 'good enough' can feel endless – but we can change that.

Perfectionism in Children – Where does it come from?

Perfectionism in children isn't so much about wanting to be perfect, but about wanting to avoid the consequences of failing or making a mistake. Those consequences can be real or imagined, but either way, they're powerful.

Perfectionism is driven by anxiety, a very normal human response designed to keep us safe from threat – and humiliation, shame, and embarrassment all count as threat. Perfectionism is the attempt to protect against these threats. ‘If I don’t try, I can’t fail, which means I won’t be humiliated.’ ‘If I don’t make any mistakes, I won’t look stupid.’

It doesn’t matter how likely or unlikely the threats are, an anxious brain is an overprotective brain (also a strong, healthy, phenomenal brain), and it will work just as fiercely to protect against things that ‘probably will’ happen as it will against things that ‘might but probably won’t’ happen. When thoughts of what ‘could’ go wrong take hold, the drive to avoid those outcomes can be immense.

Helping Kids Manage Perfectionism – The Chat(s)

Behaviour is driven by thoughts, but not all of these thoughts will be in our awareness. The thoughts that fuel perfectionism tend to work from behind the scenes, out of awareness. All your child might be aware of is that the thought of making a mistake feels dreadful. Thoughts are often at their most powerful when they are out of awareness. This is when they can run amok, unchallenged, and have us dancing for approval, control, or safety – even when there is no need to dance.

The key to shifting perfectionism is to shine a massive, floodlight on any negative thoughts that might be driving perfectionistic behaviour, and bring those thoughts into the open. This won’t necessarily get rid of the thoughts straight away, but awareness is the first step in stripping them of their influence on behaviour. Think of it like this. If you move around in a dark room, you’re going to bump into things. You’ll scrape and bruise because of the things that are in your way. When you turn on the light, the ‘things’ will still be there, but you can choose to navigate around them if you want to.

First, empower them with the information: ‘There’s this thing called self-talk ...’.

Kids are powerful when we empower them, and one of the best ways to do this is with information. To do this in relation to perfectionism, they first need to understand how powerful their self-talk is, and how it can influence their behaviour without them even realising. This might happen over a few conversations, and there’s no hurry. The idea is to keep exposing them to the information so they can open themselves up to it when they are ready. The points to get across in your chats are:

- Our thoughts can influence our behaviour without us even realising.
- It’s important that our self-talk (the thoughts about ourselves) is always compassionate and kind.

And the chat might go something like this ...

Thoughts can be little tricksters. Sometimes the quieter they are, the more powerful they are. It's as though they speak directly to your feelings or your actions without you realising. These type of thoughts are called self-talk, and we all do it. Some self-talk is excellent, and you can never have too much – 'I can do this,' or, 'I'm giving this a go and whatever happens, I'll be okay,' or, 'Geez my freckles are gorgeous!' Then there are the other thoughts – the ones that make you feel not so good, and maybe a little bit 'squashed'.

Think of it like this. If someone was to tell you over and over that you're a total legend – brave, smart, funny, kind, awesome – you would start to feel good about yourself. On the other hand, if someone important to you told you over and over that you were stupid and lazy and had as much going for you as a little bin rat you would probably start to feel pretty awful.

It works the same whether it's other people telling you, or you telling you. Actually, it's probably worse if it's you telling you because you hang out with yourself all the time. There's no escape from mean vibes when they're coming from you! Negative self-talk can make you scared to try new things, brave things, or things that feel difficult. It might sound like, 'If I make a mistake it will be a disaster,' or, 'Best not to try because if I do, I might mess it up and look like a loser'

Your self-talk belongs to you, so you're completely in charge. The only difference between the people who do brave, hard things, and the people who don't, are the things they say to themselves. You're a superstar, and you can cope with anything – you just have to let yourself know. Before you do anything, it can be helpful to bring your self-talk out into the open so you can see what you're dealing with, and tweak it to something that feels better if you need to.

What does their negative self-talk sound like? Let's you and them see ...

To help them uncover the thoughts that are driving their behaviour, try naming what you can see in a gentle, non-judgemental way:

'I notice that when you make a mistake you get really upset with yourself. What do you think it says about you/ your work when you make a mistake?'; or

'I understand you don't want to try out for the soccer team, even though you love soccer. Trying new things can be scary. I'm wondering what you imagine might happen if you try out'; or

'It's important to you that you don't make a mistake isn't it. What might happen if you make a mistake/ if it isn't perfect? What are the thoughts that run through your head to make you keep trying and trying/ want to give up?'

If they aren't sure, they might need a hand:

'Some of the things I've thought when I'm doing something that's important to me are, 'If you make a mistake, people will think you're a total mess-up.' What happens for you?'

Now to nurture self-talk that will lift them. Here's how ...

1. Meet them where they are ...

You don't have to change their thoughts and you don't have to fix anything. They're the only ones who can do that, and it will happen when they're ready. It's always easier to make a change when someone is right there with you. You can help to steady the ground for them by showing that you get it, or that you want to understand more without needing to change anything: *'That sounds exhausting. What's it like feeling as though people will think you're not very smart if you make a mistake?'*

2. Let their beautiful imperfections connect with yours ...

You're their hero, so if you can turn down your own negative self-talk or make a mistake and get through it, it will give them the strength to do the same: *'I really get that. Sometimes I feel the same,'* or, *'Sometimes I can feel really scared that I'll mess something up, but then I remind myself that I can deal with anything – even mistakes,'* or, *'Do you remember when we got lost on our way to the beach that day, but then we ended up finding that really great ice-cream shop?'*

3. What they need to know about making mistakes.

If you have a perfectionist in your midst, he or she probably has a pretty fixed idea of mistakes and it's likely to be something like, 'Mistakes are bad and must be avoided at all costs.' The idea is to open them up to another way of thinking about mistakes. This conversation doesn't have to happen all at once, and in fact, it's likely to take many conversations before it starts to feel right for them. That's okay – there's no hurry. You're working on a long-term plan – building small humans into brave, strong, bigger ones takes time. Here are some ideas you might want to include in your chats along the way:

The points to get across are:

- Mistakes might feel bad, but they are a great way to learn.
- If you make mistakes, you're in exceptional company – it's how all brilliant people learn to be brilliant.
- Sometimes the thought of making a mistake can get in your way more than actually making a mistake.
- Even if things don't go to plan, you'll be okay.

And the chat might go something like this ...

None of us are perfect, and in fact, none of us want to be. Mistakes are how we learn and discover great ways to do things. Sometimes though, your very magnificent brain imagines all the things that could go wrong (like feeling embarrassed if you make a mistake), and it works super-hard to protect you from that. One way it does this is with self-talk. If your brain is working a little too hard to protect you, your self-talk might also work a little too hard to 'scare' you away from anything that might turn out differently to how you expect. This might sound like, 'You really should keep checking your work in case you've messed things up,' or, 'You

seriously should forget about trying out for the team. It would be sooo humiliating if you missed out. You'll never cope with that.' Brains love us (awww sweet) – but sometimes that self-talk can be fierce! An overprotective brain will do anything to stop you from making a mistake, but when it works too hard to do this it can get in your way.

The problem with this sort of self-talk is that it forgets some very important things about mistakes. The first is that everyone makes mistakes. In fact, people who are brave and brilliant tend to make more – that's how they get brave and brilliant. When you make a mistake, you learn what doesn't work, which takes you closer to what does. Mistakes can be the best teachers in the world. The more mistakes you make, the closer you are to being an expert.

It also forgets that even if things don't go to plan, you'll be okay. You're amazing and you can do ANYTHING, even hard things like getting through a mistake or a mess up. If you're making mistakes, it means you're brave enough to give things a go. All champions make mistakes. They wouldn't learn how to be champions if they didn't.

4. And the hero is ... self-compassion.

When you're learning or trying something new, you've got the right to make as many mistakes as it takes. It's important that your self-talk is filled with words that inspire you, even if that means making plenty of mistakes along the way. The way you talk to yourself has to be brave, strong, and positive. Most of all, it has to be compassionate. This means treating yourself with love and kindness, even when you make a mistake or mess things up.

To be the boss of your brain and replace your negative self-talk with something that is better for you, try, 'I'm enough – more than enough, even when things don't go to plan,' or, 'There's no such thing as failure – I'll either get it right, or I'll learn. Either way, I'm doing great,' or 'Well hello there Mistake. What can you teach me today?'

5. Step back, and tell me what you see ...

Stepping back is a powerful strategy that can help kids and teens look at their experience more objectively, and with more self-compassion. The idea with stepping back is to encourage them to look at the situation as a bystander, as though they were watching it happen to someone else:

Encourage this by asking:

- *'What would you say to a friend if they made a mistake?' What stops you from saying that to yourself? Let's write it down for when you need it. If you like, imagine me saying it to you first, and then you can take over.*
- *'Think of the things you say to yourself sometimes. Now, imagine you're a bystander and you're watching someone saying those things to someone else. How do you think that person might feel hearing those negative things? What do you think they might need to hear to feel great again? Let's write it down and stick it on your mirror'; or*

- *'Imagine you're watching someone else in the school play, and even though they've worked really hard, they forget their lines the same way you did. Would you think any less of them? What would you say to them? What do you think they might need to hear?'*

6. Help them see the thought for what it is – a thought, not a reality.

Some thoughts can be so persuasive, it can feel as though they could actually be real. Being able to 'look at' thoughts with mindful compassion is a way to stop thoughts directing feelings and behaviour. It invites a gentle detachment, allowing for the thoughts to be seen as a thought, not as a reality. Here's how to encourage this:

'Sometimes, your brain reacts the same way to your thoughts, as it would if that thought was actually happening. If you say to yourself, 'If I make a mistake, it will be a disaster,' an overprotective brain might really believe that something dreadful will happen if you make a mistake. That's why sometimes you might keep checking your work over and over, or why you might take ages to finish something, or why you might talk yourself out of trying something new or brave – it's because your brain is certain that the thought is true, and that it really will be a disaster if things don't go to plan.'

Sometimes it might feel a little embarrassing if you make a mistake, but we all feel like that sometimes. In fact, those embarrassing things that happen will make the BEST stories one day! It's also important to remember that feelings are just that – feelings. They aren't you. Just because you feel embarrassed, doesn't mean you are embarrassing. Just because you feel disappointed, doesn't mean you're disappointing. The trick is to be the boss of your brain so your negative self-talk doesn't take over and either stop you from trying things, or make you feel bad if things mess up.

To be the boss of your brain try this: As you become aware of a negative thought, imagine it floating around in a cloud or bubble in front of you. Rather than 'feeling' what you're thinking, just imagine watching the thought with a curious, open mind: 'Oh there you are! You're the thought that makes me terrified of making mistakes,' or, 'You're the thought that tries to talk me out of doing brave things.' Then, imagine responding to the thought with kindness and compassion. 'It's okay. I know you're trying to look after me, but I don't need you today. We're all good here. I'm just going to let you float around, and then I'm going to let you go.' or 'Oh hello thought. I know what you're doing. You're trying to stop me from trying something new in case it doesn't work out. The thing is, I don't actually need you today. I'm brave enough to be okay whatever happens. You can stay for a little while, but I'm not going to hold on to you.'

7. What would you say to a smaller, younger version of you?

This is a way to help kids feel safe enough to explore what their positive self-talk might sound like:

It's important that your self-talk is loving, respectful, compassionate and kind. This is how to be your own hero. If it's difficult to imagine what this sort of self-talk would sound like for you imagine what you would say to a smaller, younger version of yourself. There is a small child in all of us. It's the part of you that loves to play, and that loves feeling safe and cared for. It's in

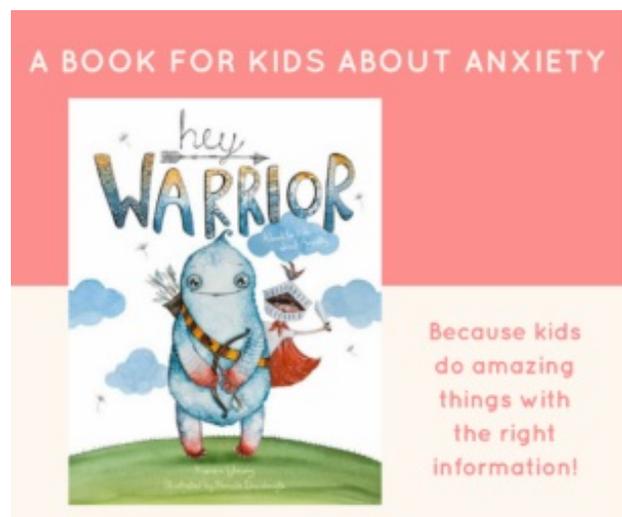
everyone. *What would you say when they made a mistake? What would you say if they were scared to try new things? What would you say to make them realise how wonderful they are. The truth is, you're a magic maker. You have a wonderful capacity to make people feel like kings and queens and heroes. Let's start with making you feel like it first.*

And finally ...

Behind every perfectionist is a strong, determined person who is brimming with courage and grit. Sometimes the need to stay safe can be a stifling one, but with the right information and a guiding hand, we can help our kiddos untangle themselves from any anxious self-talk that holds them back. Our kids shimmer where they stand. We know this, and by nurturing brave, compassionate self-talk, we're giving them what they need to make sure they know it too.

A Book for Kids About Anxiety ...

'Hey Warrior' is the book I've written for children to help them understand anxiety and to find their 'brave'. It explains why anxiety feels the way it does, and it will teach them how they can 'be the boss of their brains' during anxiety, to feel calm. It's not always enough to tell kids what to do – they need to understand why it works. Hey Warrior does this, giving explanations in a fun, simple, way that helps things make sense in a, 'Oh so that's how that works!' kind of way, alongside gorgeous illustrations. ([See here for the trailer.](#))



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