

PERFECTIONISM AND BEHAVIOUR ISSUES IN SCHOOLS

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WHEN WE WATCH THE NEWS, READ THE PAPER, TALK TO A NEIGHBOUR OR A MAN DOWN THE STREET, IT IS APPARENT THAT SCHOOLS ARE EXPERIENCING A SIGNIFICANT RISE IN BEHAVIOUR ISSUES.

Behaviour issues in schools are on the rise. Diagnosis of ADHD is constantly increasing as are other behavioural disorders such as Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Conduct Disorder and others. On top of this, there is an increase in general unwanted behaviours. So what is going on with our kids? There are many schools of thoughts. Some will say it is a result of poor diets, two working parents, higher rate of families breaking up, parents losing their rights to parent, higher demands on students and so on. Each of these points may have their merits in some individual situations, however there are also many other factors.

I've been working as a behaviour specialist in a clinical setting, schools and other departments since 2002. And, yes, I see the behaviour issues increasing. But I also see what I call the hidden epidemic of perfectionism increasing. Perfectionism, in my experience, is a key contributor to many unwanted behaviours in the school and home setting.

WHAT IS PERFECTIONISM?

Perfectionism is when a person is trying to achieve the impossible - expecting that they (and sometimes others) should be flawless in all they do.

A PERFECTIONIST'S EXPECTATIONS

- They know everything already, thus resist being taught something new. Comments such as "I already know..." are common.
- To win every single time they play a game, run a race or participate in any competition.
- To go first, or be the first in anything - finishing school work, sitting in line, out the door etc.

- To never go outside the lines when colouring in, or writing or make any error with their work.
- Their writing to be impeccable along with everything else they do.
- To get 10/10 always. A 9 can be considered failure
- Their hair, clothes, overall image to be flawless.
- Never to receive a correction or support in any form. All these indicate "I'm not already perfect".
- Other people's behaviours and words to match 100 per cent of the time - when they don't they judge the other person poorly.
- Other people to follow the societal rules impeccably - and if you don't, a perfectionist is likely to correct you.
- Themselves to be the best, the smartest, the greatest in all that they do.

This list is endless. It must be noted that each person with perfectionism reacts to differently. For example, one person may not be concerned for their image, but reacts instantly to receiving a correction. For another person this could be reversed. I have not met a person who has not experienced perfectionism in some form.

THE ISSUES WITH PERFECTIONISM

- Perfectionism is setting people up for failure. It is impossible to be perfect in all that you do.
- Perfectionism is guaranteeing increased anxiety. With increased anxiety, the chance of error increases - thus a vicious cycle.
- Perfectionism = increased anxiety = behaviour deterioration.
- Perfectionism is having people's self-esteem plummet and anxiety increase. Why? Because people become identified by what they do and think they are only worthwhile based on what they do.
- Perfectionism results in many people choosing to fail. Choosing not to try because I might



get it wrong, choosing not to start the task, choosing to give up. The choice of failure is within a person's control, however when you give something a go, you might not do it perfectly - hence the choice to fail.

- Perfectionism is a major contributing factor to behavioural issues in schools.

PERFECTIONISM VS ATTENTION TO DETAIL

There is a very fine line between attention to detail and perfectionism; the key is one is supportive and one is harming. Attention to detail focuses on the quality of which a person applies in task completion. When a correction is required, the person knows they are not a failure, rather simply an increased quality is required here. This approach does not increase anxiety. Perfectionism results in anxiety levels increasing when any mistake or potential mistake is made as any correction is seen as "I am a failure".

COMBATING PERFECTIONISM

Embracing the word "whoops" followed by "What can I learn here?" is a valuable key to freeing yourself from the perfectionism prison. With each mistake we have the opportunity to learn and embrace that making mistakes is a great thing. Freeing yourself/others from perfectionism often requires support. Initially the key is to observe your own dialogue and expectations and simply ask, are you setting yourself or others up for a foundation that is realistic and supportive?

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