Researchers have identified two types of perfectionism, a healthy one, and one that is not so healthy.

Children who are ‘adaptive’, that is to say healthy, perfectionists, have achievable goals and a motivation to excel. Healthy perfectionists are also able to patiently persist on the odd occasion when they encounter obstacles.

Unhealthy perfectionists display anxious and avoidant behaviours. As adults, they may be habitual procrastinators. They may resent their own lack of productivity and underachievement. This is because ‘maladaptive’ (that is, unhealthy) perfectionists set unachievably high standards, overthink their mistakes, believe that others expect them to be perfect, and avoid challenges in case they should fail.

It is only when these behaviours become more frequent, and when a child wants to avoid participating in an increasing number of opportunities and events, that perfectionism may be a problem needing attention.

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3 WAYS TO REACH A HEALTHY KIND OF ‘PERFECT’

- Don’t let them avoid or put off challenges. Allowing the child to avoid facing uncomfortable challenges can translate to meaning that their fears are justified, further escalating their anxieties.
- If a preschooler will not draw or scribbles out their work, explain that you could not draw or write very well either when you were three, but you kept practising until you could do it better. Tell them that mistakes helped you find out how to do things well. Be prepared to repeat these concepts many times.
- ‘Scaffold’ their efforts before they give up. Cut out clothing to make a person for example, and suggest that your child add the head, hair, or other body parts. When the work is finished, praise specific achievements (“that was a good circle you made for the head”).
- Next, you can change your own behaviour. If your child believes that they are ‘clever’ because you told them so, then they will doubt your judgement the first time they are unable to do something well or easily – and that day will come, no matter how gifted they may be. Change the praise so that effort will be more prominent in their mind.
- When reasoning with an older child, tell them that it takes at least 10,000 hours of dedicated ‘deliberate practice’ to achieve mastery in any field. That may be daunting, but it can help soothe your child’s unrealistic self-expectations. Emphasize that persistence is an essential characteristic in realising our potential.