

# Psychology Today

## Where Does 'Unhealthy Perfectionism' Come From?

Parenting styles can cause people to develop perfectionistic personalities.



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A new [study](#) published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* explains how unhealthy levels of perfectionism pass from parent to child.

Long-time collaborators and lead authors of the research, Martin M. Smith and Simon Sherry from the University of British Columbia and the University of Dalhousie, respectively, landed on the topic of perfectionism and parenthood after conducting multiple prior studies suggesting that perfectionism, in most cases, does more psychological harm than good.

“In my practice as a clinical psychologist, I see young adults pushed and criticized by demanding parents to the point of making those young adults mentally ill,” says Sherry. “In fact, a family environment characterized by parental criticism and demands is an incubator for perfectionism and illness in children.”

According to the authors, perfectionism can be thought of as having three distinct aspects:

- Self-oriented perfectionism, or the tendency to demand perfection of the self
- Other-oriented perfectionism, or the tendency to demand perfection from other people
- Socially prescribed perfectionism, or the tendency to believe that other people demand you to be perfect

“Our findings revealed that people who reported having parents who had relentlessly encouraged them to do better and set their standards higher were more likely to be higher on self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism,” explains Smith.

The researchers found that parental criticism — which is a critical and punitive parenting style where children never do well enough and parents react negatively to their children's mistakes — pushes children toward higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism while parental expectations — which describes parents’ lofty and unrealistic standards for their children — generally pushes children toward higher levels of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism.

“We found that demanding, hyper-critical parents raise perfectionistic kids,” says Sherry. “In particular, hyper-critical, demanding, and controlling parents raise self-critical, demanding, and perfectionistic kids who feel other people are disappointed in them.”

Perfectionism, according to the researchers, derives from a myriad of different factors. Biological factors include genetics and temperament. One’s relationships with family, friends, teachers, and other socialization agents also matter. There are also societal and cultural pressures for perfection. And, to make things even more complicated, the authors note that all of these levels impact each other.

“It takes a village to raise a perfectionist,” says Sherry. “Parents, siblings, peers, culture (e.g., social and mass media), workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods all play a role in developing a perfectionist along with genetics.”

The authors offer the following advice for parents who might be inadvertently pushing their children towards perfection:

- Try to communicate to your child that you value them not only based on what they do but who they are
- Strive to be less controlling, critical, and overprotective of children
- Teach children to tolerate and learn from their mistakes
- Finally, emphasize hard work and discipline over the pursuit of perfection