

Did You Learn Toxic Perfectionism From Your Parents?

Psychologists Martin M. Smith and Simon Sherry discuss the relationship between parenthood and perfectionism.



By **Mark Travers, Ph.D.** | March 8, 2022



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

I recently spoke to psychologists Martin M. Smith and Simon Sherry, lead authors of the study from the University of British Columbia and the University of Dalhousie to understand the phenomenon in greater detail. Here is a summary of our conversation.

Perfectionism is usually looked at as an aspirational quality but psychology seems to suggest otherwise. Could you tell us what inspired you to study perfectionism, especially in the context of parenthood?

Dr. Martin M. Smith: Great question. Whether perfectionism is more a blessing or a curse was actually what inspired me to study perfectionism in the first place. Indeed, about eight years ago, my longtime collaborator and mentor, Dr. Simon Sherry, contacted me to discuss how he was increasingly noticing a disconnect between how perfectionism was discussed and portrayed in the media versus what he saw in his clinical practice.

This, in turn, led to our first collaboration in which we decided to synthesize prior research to obtain a concrete answer to whether [perfectionists were more or less likely to experience depression](#). We found that, consistent with our hunch, people higher in perfectionism were indeed more likely to experience [depression](#). And, in the years proceeding, using the same technique, we've demonstrated that [perfectionists are also at higher risk for anxiety, bulimia, hopelessness, narcissism, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors](#).

To this end, we felt that we had pretty firmly established that perfectionism was far from something that should be promoted as healthy, which then made the million dollar question, 'ok, then where does perfectionism come from?'. And though we believed that there are many pathways to perfectionism, we saw parenthood as the natural starting point given that long-standing case histories and theoretical accounts have been implicating parents in the development of perfectionism for over half a century.

Dr. Simon Sherry: 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. In fact, a family environment characterized by parental criticism and demands is an incubator for perfectionism and illness in children. Consistent with what I see in my clinical practice, our research shows [young people report higher levels of perfectionism than ever before](#).

Your study emphasizes the multidimensionality of trait perfection and the different ways in which it manifests in people. Could you give us a brief description of the two types of parenting styles you studied in relation to the different kinds of perfectionism?

Smith: Perfectionism can be thought of as having three distinct aspects that everyone differs on to varying degrees:

- The first aspect is called **self-oriented perfectionism** and describes the tendency to demand perfection of the self.

- The second aspect is called **other-oriented perfectionism** and refers to the tendency to demand perfection from other people.
- Lastly, the third aspect is called **socially prescribed perfectionism** and refers to the tendency to believe that other people demand you to be perfect.

And what our findings revealed was 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.

In contrast, interestingly, the tendency to report having parents who harshly criticized anything short of perfection was related to socially prescribed perfectionism, but not self-oriented or other-oriented perfectionism.

Sherry: Parental criticism is a critical and punitive parenting style where children never do well enough and parents react negatively to their children's mistakes. Parental expectations focus more on parents' lofty and unrealistic standards for their children. These parents accept nothing less than the best from their children and expect outstanding performance at all times.

Parental criticism pushes children toward higher levels of socially prescribed perfectionism, whereas parental expectations have a wider impact that pushes children toward higher levels of self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism.

What was your methodology in conducting the research and what would you say was the most important finding of your study?

Smith: We conducted a meta-analysis, which is just a fancy way of saying that we used statistics to synthesize the results of 46 studies. And the reason why we did this is that it allowed us to examine two different proposed explanations of the role that parents could play in their child's perfectionism.

The first, termed the **social learning model**, is essentially the notion that children learn to become perfectionistic by observing and imitating their parents' perfectionistic behavior. And it is an idea that is often captured in idioms such as 'the apple does not fall far from the tree', 'like father, like son' etc. And, if the social learning model is true, it means that perfectionistic people should have perfectionistic parents and non-perfectionistic people should not have perfectionistic parents. However, surprisingly, we found relatively weak support for this. Namely, parent-reported perfectionism explained 11% or less of the variance in child-reported perfectionism. This, in turn, alludes to the presence of factors other than parents in the genesis of perfectionism.

Conversely, our results were generally more supportive of the second model, termed the **social expectations model**, and suggested that the tendency to see one's parents as holding unrealistically high expectations is pertinent to the genesis of all trait

perfectionism dimensions. In contrast, the tendency to perceive one's parents as overly critical only appears linked to socially prescribed perfectionism.

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

What are the other factors at play when it comes to the inculcation of perfectionism?

Smith: Perfectionism derives from a myriad of different factors. Biological factors at play in developing perfectionism include genetics and temperament. At a different level are one's relationships with family, friends, teachers, and other socialization agents. And then, to make things even more complicated is the broadest level, which involves things such as societal and cultural pressures for perfection. Lastly, to cap it off, these levels impact each other!

Sherry: Our interest was in how parenting behaviors make a contribution to perfectionism's development. But cultural factors also inculcate perfectionism. Social media showcasing "perfect" lives makes a contribution to perfectionism's development. Wider cultural factors, such as hyper-competitiveness, individualism, and capitalism, also make a contribution to perfectionism's development.

Perfectionism no doubt emerges from a complex interplay between nature and nurture, with research suggesting perfectionism is moderately heritable. Inherited dispositions combine with familial and socio-cultural environments to raise the likelihood a child develops perfectionism.

Is it fair to assume that parents are the primary determinants of the occurrence of the trait of perfectionism in their children?

Smith: I think our results underscore that though parents play a role in perfectionism, they are only one of many potential determinants.

Sherry: It takes a village to raise a perfectionist. 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.

Any possible words of advice for parents who might be inadvertently pushing their children towards perfection?

Smith: My recommendation for such parents is to try and communicate to their child that they value them not only based on what they do, but also who they are.

Sherry: Today's parents should work to be less controlling, critical, and overprotective of their children. Teach children to tolerate and learn from their mistakes. And emphasize hard work and discipline over the pursuit of perfection.

Do you have plans for follow-up research? Where would you like to see research on perfectionism go in the future?

Smith: We are currently investigating other potential determinants of perfectionism, such as teachers, friends, and siblings as well as evaluating potential treatments.

Sherry: Perfectionism research is a burgeoning field! Right now, we are studying how perfectionism breeds conflict between close friends.