

Perfectionism: Who's at Risk?

by Dr. Jane Bluestein

Born that way?

“...in every resource where inborn factors were mentioned, there was also an acknowledgement of the impact of environment and experiences in and outside of the home. Nowhere was there a suggestion that perfectionists are wholly at the mercy of their genetic makeup. This is a good thing. Because although we may not have much control over an innate biological design that predisposes people toward certain perfectionistic traits, being able to recognize cultural traditions, personal behaviors, and interaction patterns that foster these pathological tendencies gives us a good bit of control of our ability to diminish those factors that would otherwise “escalate into a lifetime pattern of perfectionism.” (page 29)*

Risk factors have greatest impact on children who

- Feel *conditionally* valued, connected, visible, or secure in the family or at school, depending on their behavior, appearance, achievement, or status they have to offer others, and who attempt to secure attachment through perfection.
- Get approval from others based on their ability to please—or not elicit negative reactions like rejection, disapproval, anger, impatience, or contempt.
- Have adults in their lives who depend on the kids for their sense of completion or adequacy. (“Make me look good.” “Don’t embarrass me.”) Poor boundaries.
- Have “perfect parents” or high-achieving older siblings they’ll never be “as good as.”
- Have significant adults who have little patience for mistakes (self or others) *or* who are afraid to let children experience discomfort or failure (overprotective).
- Are held accountable for adults’ feelings or behaviors. (“I feel so sad when you get bad grades.” “I’m happy when you clean your room.”)
- Frequently receive feedback and messages that associate them with labels—good *or* bad!
- Are exposed to numerous media messages about value and worth, either directly or via messages expressed by family members or peers. (“I wish I had her figure.” “You can’t go out like *that*.” “I only date ‘10s’.” “*Her* son got into Stanford.”)
- Have internalized media messages as values and standards to which they believe they must aspire (and achieve!) in order to be valued, included, or loved.

What does “good enough” look like?

How many of us see “good enough” as being beyond our reach?

*Quote from *The Perfection Deception* by Dr. Jane Bluestein. (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2015), 29. This excerpt includes quotes from Melinda Beck, “Inside the Minds of the Perfectionists” and Ann Smith, “The Never Enough Syndrome.”