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Your kid's a perfectionist? That's not a good thing

ERIN ANDERSSSEN

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When Payton Shuck was 3, she dressed up as a pink princess for Halloween. But not far from her house, she fell. When she discovered a dime-sized black smudge on her skirt she was inconsolable, and insisted on going home.

Seven years later, what seemed like a funny quirk has become a near-paralyzing perfectionism for the bright child, says her mother Paula, in London, Ont.

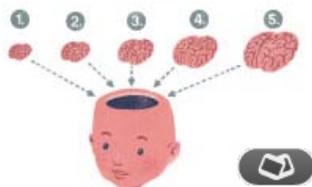
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In Grade 4, Payton started hiding math tests because the grade wasn't perfect. She faked stomach aches to avoid going to school. She refused to do her math homework: After breezing through the English and science, she didn't want to try a subject that didn't come easily.

Her anxiety levels skyrocketed, her mother says. "I want my kid to be honest with me, and feel comfortable bringing home a C."

And what kind of life would she have if she couldn't adjust to messing up once in a while?

Sylvia Plath, the American poet, called perfectionism her "demon" – the constant striving she felt to be perfect, or to "run away screaming



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if I am going to be flawed, fallible." Her tragic life defined the double-edged personality trait: Ms. Plath was a brilliant poet who could never savour success. After years of struggling with depression, she committed suicide.

In these highly competitive days, the perfectionist demon rules in the classroom. Why achieve when you can overachieve? Your Grade 8 student locks himself up in his room with his English essay, obsessing over *Hamlet*. Your daughter weeps over the mistakes

that cost her an A. That's good news, right? They care about school. They're motivated. They will succeed.

Maybe not, or at least maybe not *happily*. There's a difference, psychologists caution, between striving for success and being debilitated by a need for perfection.

Sometimes, parents who are intent on university scholarships and high-status jobs for little Tommy misunderstand what's driving all that wee-hour double-checking. What's more, they fail to see the role they may have played in creating a child who doesn't just want to be perfect, but needs to be: The drive to succeed has become a torment when she falls short even by the smallest measurement.

"Failures and mistakes are ultimately opportunities to learn and grow and get better, but to the perfectionist it's a catastrophe," says Simon Sherry, a Dalhousie University psychologist who studies perfectionism. He sees the results in his office every spring, when graduates show up for therapy with the ink barely dry on their *magna cum laude* diplomas.

They're destined to be defeated by a workplace where bosses don't hand out A-pluses, or they may land a top job and a good salary, but be miserable.

Perfectionism is strongly linked to depression and anxiety, eating disorders and poor personal relationships.

"Perfectionists really seem to struggle to play nicely with others, including their romantic partners," says Dr. Sherry. And not only can they not enjoy success, he says, but perfectionism often stymies success. A recent study he co-authored found that psychology professors with higher perfectionist traits published less often than colleagues who weren't perfectionists.

People with these characteristics are less likely to take risks and more likely to procrastinate. "Perfectionists are often overwhelmed by the enormity of their own expectations," he says. "But they don't happily watch TV or lounge about. They sit paralyzed and relentlessly criticize themselves."

They are also the most at risk during major life transitions. Aneesa Shariff, a counsellor at University of British Columbia student services, sees this kind of student hit hardest a few months into school, when they receive marks that are lower than they expected. She also sees graduate students who are missing important deadlines, or are unable to type the first page of their thesis. "They are so worried that it won't be the best," she says.

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