

Daughters

For Parents of Girls

Reprint/\$2.49

May/June 2006

LIFESKILLS

Putting perfectionism in its place

By Barbara Gruener

As a child, I loved to please people by doing everything perfectly. I worked hard, made straight As in school, and looked forward to parent-teacher conferences, when the people I loved to please most would discuss how well I was doing. So imagine my shock when my father returned from my 6th-grade teacher conference with a stern look on his face. "Barbara," he said, "you got two Bs on your report card." Two Bs? I remember feeling my legs go numb and my heart rate accelerate. Bewildered and fighting off tears, I stammered out two little words: "In what?" With a half-smile, he replied, "Your name."

I laughed, of course, but I'll never forget that night and the unrealistically high standards I set for myself. And I hope I'll never forget how easily our own daughters can fall into the same trap of perfectionism. Therapists and other experts who work with girls say that perfectionism affects many more girls than boys. When girls are unable to achieve perfection, they can feel they are failures, which in turn makes them more likely to experience depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and chronic stress-related ailments.

Perfectionists, says Thomas S. Greenspon, author of *Freeing Our Families From Perfectionism* (Free Spirit, 2003), often feel fear, anxiety, anger, and shame. Perfectionism breeds a kind of Catch-22, because any effort that's

less than perfect can leave girls feeling inadequate about their ability to excel and be, well, perfect. As they strive to be superior, they often end up feeling inferior.

Girls can learn perfectionism from parental behavior, Greenspon says, particularly from supermoms who try to "do it all" and do it perfectly. Thus, one way to help our daughters tone down their perfectionism is to chip away at our own, by modeling acceptance of fallibility and managing our own feelings of anxiety or anger. Instead of beating ourselves up when we make a mistake, for example, we can use it as a learning opportunity.

Here are some strategies to help girls let go of their need to be perfect.

- Create an environment that is both accepting and encouraging. Let your daughter know that you appreciate her and that you value who she is more than what she can achieve.
- Give her permission to mess up and allow self-expression without judgment. Sometimes we don't realize how our judging comments can make a girl feel. Eva put it this way: "I feel like I'm a criminal in my own home every time I mess up."
- Be willing to share your personal struggles so that your children see your imperfections. Respond to her imperfections with unconditional positive regard.
- Hold family meetings. This is

an avenue for healthy expression of thoughts and feelings. And without blaming, remind girls that their perfectionism can have an exhausting effect on everyone in the household, as they try to keep up with her demanding standards.

- Encourage her to keep a journal of writing or artwork. This is an excellent way to help her process feelings. It also allows for reflection. When she goes back and reads it, she can chart emotional growth.
- Try bibliotherapy. Find stories that promote discussion of the positive and negative effects of perfectionism. *Perfect Pals: How to Juggle Your Way from Perfection to Excellence* (by Janet M. Bender and Amy R. Murray, National Center for Youth Issues, 2003) provides great insight into the consequences of perfectionism, especially for younger girls. *Perfectionism: What's Bad About*

Subscribe to
Daughters
newsletter.

6 issues—\$24.95

www.daughters.com

1-888-849-8476

Being Too Good? (by Miriam Adderholdt and Jan Goldberg, Free Spirit, 2005) is a good how-not-to for teens.

- Use humor. Learn to laugh at mistakes rather than ruminate over them.
- Encourage your daughter to sign up for something that's just for fun with no grade or expectations attached.

If we model healthy ways to manage our feelings so they aren't stuffed away until they sour hearts and minds, we can free ourselves from our own unrealistic expectations. And Dad, it's really okay to have 2 Bs on your report card, even if your name isn't Barbara. ★

A recovering perfectionist herself, counselor Barbara Gruener lives with her family in Friendswood, Texas.

© 2006 Dads and Daughters, from *Daughters: For Parents of Girls*, Duluth, MN. www.daughters.com