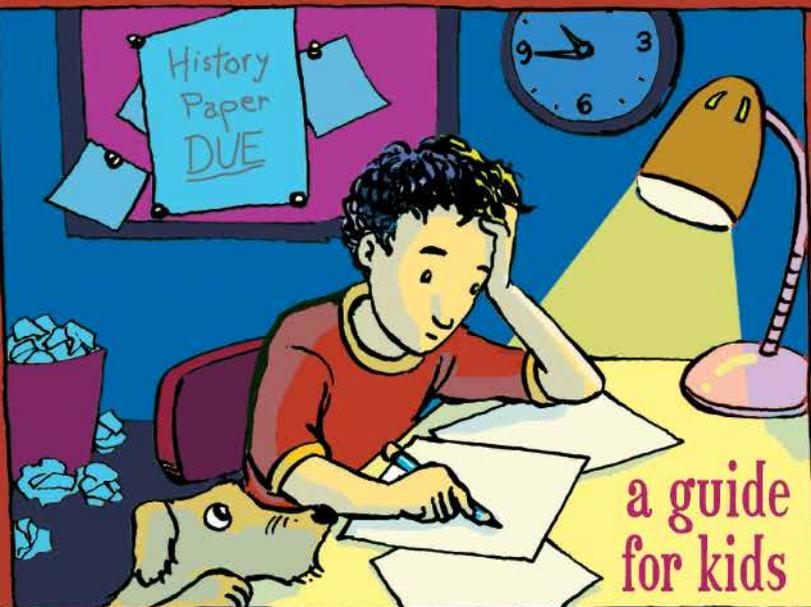


# What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough

The Real Deal on Perfectionism



a guide  
for kids

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Thomas S. Greenspon, Ph.D.

What to Do When  
**Good Enough**  
**Isn't**  
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The Real Deal on Perfectionism

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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to Lily Adele Holker, and to Baby Two.

## Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks to the many parents and young people who have offered their questions and insights on perfectionism over the years. Special thanks to my editor, Eric Braun, for his probing questions and his respect for my message, for which I accept full responsibility, and to my wife and professional partner, Barbara Chain Greenspon, for a decades-long intense and fruitful peer consultation.

# Introduction

Has this ever happened to you? The teacher hands back your book report and you got an A minus, which is a great grade—right? But somebody else in class got an A, and that little minus haunts you the rest of the week. You act grumpy to your family and you can't stop worrying that the teacher thinks you're stupid. You might even call *yourself* stupid.

Or how about this: you have to turn in a social studies project in one week, but every time you start it something seems wrong so you rip it up and start over. As the due date gets closer, you worry more and more, but you still can't seem to get started. Every time you try, it isn't good enough. The worrying gets so bad you can't sleep well. Finally, the night before you have to turn it in, you stay up late throwing something together that could have been way better if you'd just started earlier.

Are you afraid to try new things because you might not be good at them? Are you afraid to speak up in groups because you might say something stupid? Do you get really upset when people criticize you?

All of these things can be signs of **perfectionism**, and many people experience them. Perfectionism can make a person feel lots of pressure, worry, fear, and even anger. And it can be exhausting.

People who know about their perfectionism will sometimes say it is a burden to them. It's like an annoying noise in the background all the time, or a heavy weight on their shoulders. A famous writer, Anna Quindlen, has talked about her own perfectionism as a "backpack full of bricks." What makes perfectionism such a burden is the almost constant fear and worry about how well you're doing. You're *always* on the alert, because there might be something you forgot . . . or one more thing you should do . . . or something you just did that is not quite right. No wonder perfectionism can be exhausting! Every perfectionist has a fear, deep inside, of not being good enough—of not being acceptable to others—and it's always there. That's a heavy load to carry around, and one that can prevent you from relaxing, being happy, and doing your best.

The good news is that you *can* lighten your load. With time and a willingness to change, you can learn to have less worry and fear and feel good enough no matter how well you do at things. *And you can do just*

*as well as you always have.*

Lightening the load of perfectionism

doesn't mean thinking it's okay to do a crummy job at anything. It just means worrying less about how you do.



I want to help you make the burden of perfectionism lighter. I am a psychologist, and I have helped many kids and their families with their perfectionism. Over the years I have learned a lot about what perfectionism is and where it comes from. The things that helped those kids and families are the things that are in this book—they can help you too!

## Sneak Preview (What's Inside This Book)

**Part 1** of *What to Do When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough* focuses on what perfectionism is, how it affects your life, and what you can do to make life easier and more fun for yourself.

- **Chapter 1** shows you how perfectionists **act**, **think**, and **feel**, so you can see just what “perfectionism” means. Some pencil-and-paper exercises help you decide how much of a problem perfectionism is for you.
- **Chapter 2** explains how trying to do things well is different from being a perfectionist.
- **Chapter 3** has seven “Load Lighteners,” or coping skills you can use to feel better any time.
- **Chapter 4** explains how people become perfectionists. It also explains something called your “self-view” and what role that plays in perfectionism.

- **Chapter 5** has some pencil-and-paper activities to help you learn to think of yourself differently, so you can accept yourself without having to be perfect.
- **Chapter 6** is a really important chapter that shows you how to get your parents or other trusted adults to help. Overcoming perfectionism is easier if you can talk about it with people who are important to you.
- **Chapter 7** discusses some of the ways to keep handling your perfectionism in the future. It's hard work overcoming perfectionism, and you will have ups and downs. This chapter suggests ways to keep at it, even through the downs.

**Part 2** focuses on bigger issues that can be hard to handle on your own.

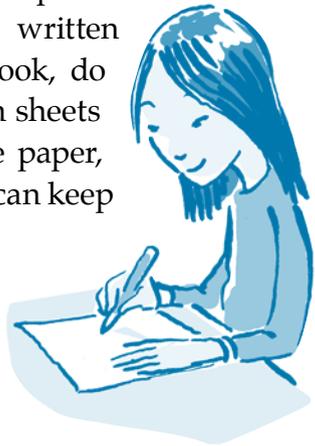
- **Chapter 8** discusses other problems that can sometimes get mixed up with perfectionism, or make it worse. Perfectionists often worry a lot or feel sad and hopeless, and sometimes this means there are other things going on besides perfectionism. You'll learn how to tell if this is true for you, and what to do if it is.
- **Chapter 9** explains what it's like to go to counseling. If you have one of the problems described in chapter 8, or if you're having a

very hard time with perfectionism, you'll learn how an expert can help.

Lightening the load of perfectionism is a process, not just one thing that you do, and it takes time. You can begin the process by reading this book so you can understand perfectionism, how it affects you, and how you can start changing things for the better. Next, you can do the activities in this book, which include talking to the important adults in your life about how you see yourself and how they see you. What's great about these activities is that you can't pass or fail them, and you can't do *well* or *poorly* on them. If you pay attention to the suggestions, and try them, things will begin to change for the better—and that's what's *really* great. Every time you do one of these activities, you are removing another brick from that perfectionism backpack.

Keep a journal to do the written activities. You can use a notebook, do them on a computer, or write on sheets of loose paper. If you use loose paper, put the sheets in a folder so you can keep them together.

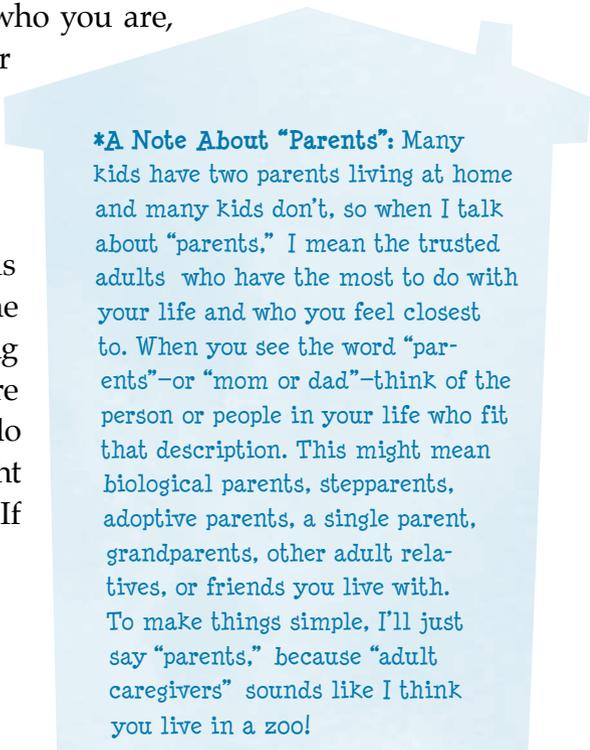
Some of the activities are for you to do by yourself, and some are for you to do with others. You might work with friends, teachers, or relatives



outside your home, but it's probably most helpful to talk with your parents\*. Ask your parents or another adult helper to join you as you work on easing your perfectionism. Ask them to read this book with you, especially the "Note to Grown-ups" at the end (you can read that, too). You will be thinking about yourself a lot, and I hope the adults who support you will think about themselves as well. Talking about these things together will help everyone.

The most important part of this process is that you keep on doing these activities and having these conversations. Over time, you'll lighten the load of perfectionism, brick by brick. You'll learn that you have lots to offer and that it is possible for people to accept you for who you are, rather than just for what you can do. You don't have to be perfect to be acceptable.

Even though this process takes time and involves talking to others, there are things you can do on your own right now to feel better. If

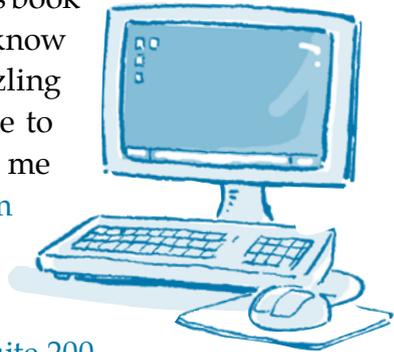


**\*A Note About "Parents":** Many kids have two parents living at home and many kids don't, so when I talk about "parents," I mean the trusted adults who have the most to do with your life and who you feel closest to. When you see the word "parents"—or "mom or dad"—think of the person or people in your life who fit that description. This might mean biological parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, a single parent, grandparents, other adult relatives, or friends you live with. To make things simple, I'll just say "parents," because "adult caregivers" sounds like I think you live in a zoo!

perfectionism has you feeling worried or pressured right now, see “Chapter 3: Load Lighteners.”

If you are reading these words, you’re already starting the process of easing the burden of your perfectionism. The fact that you are interested in learning about this, and that you might be willing to do something about it, means you can succeed. All you have to do now is stick with it. Many kids and adults have overcome their never-good-enough feelings using the ideas in this book, and *you* can, too.

I’d like to know how this book helps you. I’d also like to know if something here is puzzling to you or if you would like to know more. You can email me at [help4kids@freespirit.com](mailto:help4kids@freespirit.com) or send me a letter at:



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Be sure to send me your address, so I can write back to you. Best of luck on your journey!

**Dr. Tom Greenspon**

# Part 1

## Getting to Know Your Never-Good- Enough Feelings

## Chapter 1

# What It's Like When Good Enough Isn't Good Enough

As it gets close to bedtime, ten-year-old **Jason** is putting everything he needs for school the next day in a particular order on his bedroom floor: books, pencil case, pack of tissues, and so on. That way he can load up his backpack and his pockets in the right order in the morning, and he'll be absolutely sure he hasn't forgotten something. Jason worries a lot about whether he will remember everything. He likes to do things in a certain way every time. It feels comfortable to him, and it means he can always be sure that whatever he is doing will turn out just right. But tonight, while Jason runs downstairs to get a notebook he needs, his brother comes into the bedroom and moves some things aside so he can play a card game in that spot. He moves everything neatly, but to Jason that doesn't matter. When he comes back he is furious at his brother for touching his stuff and screams at him.



Eleven-year-old **Kristin** is feeling stuck as she stares at the computer screen. She has a history report to write and it seems like she has started

it a hundred times. She has a stack of note cards on her desk. She has read everything she can think of to read about the Stamp Act of 1765, but she worries that she still doesn't know all she could. She writes a paragraph and reads it. It doesn't seem quite right, but she can't figure out exactly why, so she deletes it and thinks some more about how it should start. She writes a couple sentences, but these don't look right either. She worries that her report will never be good enough.

Do either of these stories sound familiar? Do you worry a lot about getting things right? Does it seem like things you do are not quite good enough a lot of the time?

For some kids, like Jason and Kristin, it feels like nothing can be right unless it's perfect. It feels like getting things to be perfect is the only way to be satisfied. But very few things in life actually *can* be perfect, so these kids are unsatisfied—and unhappy—most of the time.

## Perfectionism and Fear

Perfectionism is wanting to be perfect, especially at things you do. If you feel that “good enough” isn't good enough, that nothing less than totally perfect will do, then you're probably a **perfectionist**.

There's more to it than that, though. Perfectionism is not just wanting to do things perfectly. Perfectionists also feel fear about NOT being perfect. Most people like to do things well—even perfectly. But as you know, people are human, and that means they can't always do things well! Most of the time, "perfect" is impossible. People make mistakes, and they fall short of perfect, because they're human.

For many people, being imperfect is not a big deal. They can say, "Oh well, I'll try to do better next time." But perfectionists have trouble with that "oh well" part. Perfectionists think making a mistake means there's something wrong with them. They're afraid people won't like them or accept them if something is wrong with them. So being less-than-perfect is scary to think about. Everyone wants to be liked and accepted.

For a perfectionist, the fear of not being accepted is almost always there. That's what creates the burden you read about in the "Introduction." It can feel like carrying around a backpack full of bricks all the time.



## How Perfectionism Affects You

In this chapter you'll learn what perfectionism is like. Then you'll start to learn how much of a problem perfectionism is for you and how exactly it affects your life. As you do this, you're already starting the process of changing things for the better.

The next few pages tell about the ways many perfectionists **act**, **think**, and **feel**. Some of the things may be true for you, too. As you read about them, you can start your own lists of actions, thoughts, and feelings—lists that describe what perfectionism is like for *you*.

## How Perfectionists Act

Here are some of the ways perfectionists act. Do you do any of these things?

Agree to do way too many things at the same time

### Always have to win

Rarely let others help with a project

Arrive late to school, parties, or events because one more thing had to be done

Say things like, "How could I be so stupid?" or "That was really dumb" when they do something imperfectly

Have a hard time making choices

## Frequently criticize others

Always compare  
their work to the  
work of others

Wait to do  
things until  
the last minute  
(this is called  
**procrastination**)

Always have to be in control

## Get carried away with the details

Always do last-  
minute cramming  
to get things done

Pay more attention  
to negative than  
positive comments

Never seem satisfied  
with their work

## Keep constantly busy

What does this list tell you about perfectionists?  
Lots of things. Here are three of the big ones:

### They're Overloaded

If you have to do everything, and you have to do it all yourself, then you have an awful lot to do—especially if you have to do it all perfectly. Even when perfectionists let someone help them, they have to go back and check the person's work to make sure it's



perfect. And it always seems like there is at least one more thing to do before something feels finished.

### They Worry

In addition to the weight of everything perfectionists think they have to do, perfectionists worry that none of it will get done the way it should. Even if they do a great job on something, they can't enjoy it. They might have 20 people compliment them on their work, but they'll be awake in the middle of the night worrying about the *one* person who said, "It's okay, I guess"—and ignoring the 20 compliments!

Many perfectionists worry a lot about details. When that happens, the load gets heavier still because there can be *lots* of details, including ones that probably don't matter. The report is done and you finally like what it says—or at least you're okay with it—but which

Not every overloaded perfectionist *looks* overloaded. For some, it's important to do everything, to do it all perfectly, and to look like they have everything totally under control with no worries or stress. The perfect image!

font should you use to print it out? Should the page number be at the top or at the bottom? Two spaces between the title and your name, or three? Or five?

**Shari**, who is ten, sits down to make a poster that will go with her science project for school. She gets out all of her colored markers and puts them in place, and then she thinks for a while. She gets an idea, takes three of the markers and carefully draws a picture of a sun to go with some paragraphs about the solar system she has printed out. The picture isn't quite right, though. It needs a little more red, and should be slightly more to the left. So she throws it on the floor and starts over, on another sheet of poster board. But it's a little too big this time, and she throws it away again and starts over. This happens several times. To her mom, it looks like Shari is driving herself crazy.

Have you ever done what Shari is doing? You start something—like a project for school—and after a while you decide it just isn't right, so you throw it away and start over. And then the same thing happens again. And then it happens again. You can't stop worrying that there is something wrong each time you try.

## They Run Out of Time

Perfectionists often run out of time to do things, sometimes rushing at the last minute. That's because making sure everything is perfect is not only exhausting and stressful, it takes a lot of time as well.

**Gerald** is eleven. He is a whiz at math, but he has big problems taking tests that have a time limit—as most tests do. When he gets a test, Gerald starts at the beginning and digs into the first problem. He thinks about it and does the work he needs to do. Then he wonders, “Is this right?” Even though he's great at math, he just can't be sure. So he erases some of his work and figures it out again.



Then he thinks about it and changes it again. When he finally is satisfied with the answer, he moves on to the second problem. He carefully calculates the answer, but then he does the same thing he did with the first problem: he second-guesses himself. He erases part of his work and does it over a couple times. Finally it's on to the third problem. Same thing. Soon time is up. Most of the kids in class have completed the test, but Gerald has done only half of the problems.

Another reason perfectionists run out of time is because they **procrastinate**. Procrastination is when you put things off until later . . . and later, and later.

**Charlie**, age thirteen, is always feeling pressured by deadlines. He gets an assignment in school or volunteers for a project in his church youth group, and at first he's very excited about these things . . . but then days go by when he doesn't do anything about them. He can't seem to get started. As the deadlines near, he starts to worry. The dates get closer and closer, and he gets more and more upset and overwhelmed. He just can't make himself settle down to do the assignment, and he keeps thinking about how he won't have enough time to do it in a way that will satisfy him—perfectly. Of course, that makes it harder to get started. Eventually, he ends up turning in sloppy work that he did at the last minute, and he feels terrible.

It may seem like a perfectionist wouldn't put things off, since getting everything done right is so important. So why do some perfectionists procrastinate? Because perfectionists are afraid of having their work judged. If there's a chance that maybe, just maybe, someone might judge their work as not quite perfect, it can be hard to start that work. As long as they don't do it, the possibility of perfection is out there. It almost seems better to skip their school

project and get a zero on it than hand it in and risk getting a B. Or even an A minus.

You don't deserve that kind of punishment. If you notice that you're putting pressure on yourself the way Charlie, Gerald, or Shari do, try to give yourself a break. For example:

- Check your work just once, and move on.
- Break down big projects into parts and plan when you'll do each part. That way you'll feel less overwhelmed.
- Reward yourself when you turn in something on time—get a milkshake with friends or watch a movie.
- The next time people offer to help, let them!

To learn more ways to give yourself a break, check out Chapter 3: Load Lighteners, on pages 40–47.

## How Do You Act? Make a List of Your Own

Take out your journal and write this title at the top of the page: "Perfectionistic Ways I Act."

Under the title, start a list of perfectionistic things you do by looking at pages 12–13 and copying any of the items that apply to you. Then add any new items you can think of. Maybe something on that list got your attention, but it wasn't exactly

