

Perfectionism Can Become a Vicious Cycle in Families

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Roshni Ray Ricchetti was 16 years old when she arrived at MIT with perfect SAT scores and “lots and lots” of AP credits. She said her parents pushed her to make the absolute most of her talents. “I was a very, very high-performing student who, frankly, crashed and burned. I dropped out of MIT. And I’ve ended up okay in spite of that,” the Illinois-based science editor told me. But while she says she doesn’t want to expect too much of her own three children, Ricchetti worries that her daughter might not be “exceptional” at anything. “It drives me nuts that she’s not two full years ahead in Khan Academy, which I make my kids do on the side,” she said. “She’s only about a year ahead of grade level.”

Psychologists have a term for what Ricchetti might be grappling with: other-oriented perfectionism. People with this type of perfectionism direct their unrealistic expectations outward, such as at their partner, their co-workers—and their children. Many other-oriented perfectionists appear to perceive themselves as flawless and others as defective. When life doesn’t go as they think it should, those perceptions turn to recriminations: *If only you had done things right, I would be happier, more successful.* “These are people who tend not to be very contented,” Gordon Flett, a psychology professor and researcher at York University in Canada, told me. Paul Hewitt, who runs the Perfectionism and Psychopathology Lab at the University of British Columbia, summed up the other-oriented perfectionist’s facade as “It’s not me; it’s you.” But beneath other-oriented perfectionism lie insecurity and often [narcissism](#). “It’s deflecting attention away from personal issues so the focus is on other people’s inadequacies,” Flett said.

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