Helping Your Gifted Student Manage Perfectionism
By: Julie Esparza

Perfectionism, an inner drive to reach expectations without making mistakes or errors, hinders many gifted students. Perfectionism sometimes causes crippling anxiety that keeps the student from participating in the learning process. Here are techniques and ideas that can help the student overcome this maladaptive tendency:

**Identify Feelings** First, help your child understand what perfectionism is and the feelings that come with it. Once feelings of worry, fear, and anxiety have been acknowledged, it can be helpful to explore the origin of those feelings. Why must schoolwork be done perfectly? Where does that message come from? What would happen if the standard was their best rather than perfection? It is important for the student to let go of thinking that there is only perfect and nothing else.

**Just Get Started** When perfectionism shows up as procrastination or the inability to begin, urge your child to just get started. Once they begin, their fears may be pushed aside as they focus on the task. A kitchen timer might help. Working for a certain amount of time, may just allow your child to work without fixating on completing the assignment perfectly. It is always possible to revise later. This may not work for all students as it may cause further anxiety for some.

**Change Goals** Help your child find an acceptable alternative to perfection. It may be helpful to teach your child that intelligence and ability are changeable. Just like athletes practice to improve their skills, the human mind is like a muscle that can improve and learn with practice. Focus on each activity as practice to improve their mind, not to perform each task perfectly or else. So a replacement goal can be improvement or progress. Help define what improvement might be? 8 or 9 words spelled correctly out of 10 on the end-of-week post-test is an improvement over 7.

**Focus on the Positive** It helps to talk about the difference between optimism and pessimism. There are two ways to approach or reflect on any situation. Teach your child the difference by practicing looking at things both ways. The student needs to know that he has a choice in the way he approaches every situation. If s/he chooses to look at the bright side, this may alleviate some of the anxiety that accompanies school assignments.

If these strategies do not help your child overcome the anxiety that accompanies maladaptive perfectionism, it is important to seek professional help. Your child can have a more pleasant experience in school.