

RESEARCH

FOR THE WORLD

Children inherit perfectionism from their parents, but society is to blame

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Dr Thomas Curran is Assistant Professor at the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at LSE. A British Psychological Society chartered social psychologist, his primary area of expertise is the personality characteristic of perfectionism, how it develops, and how it impacts on mental health.

With a culture that emphasises individualism and competition, and values economic gains above all else, is it any wonder that an increasing number of young people are suffering from perfectionism? **Thomas Curran** has been researching the way young people and their parents are reacting to an increasingly pressured world.

Children have never been more tested, examined or scrutinised than in recent times. Such unprecedented pressure on kids may in part explain rising perfectionism among young people. Excessive parental expectations and harsh criticism play a significant role, though parents are not to blame, says Dr Thomas Curran from LSE's Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science. Rather, he argues, parents are responding to the pressures of existing in a neoliberal – or market focused – culture which emphasises the idea of meritocracy and demands success at all costs.

Following Dr Curran's 2019 paper on the factors driving perfectionism over time, he sought to further investigate one of the proposed claims – that exposure to anxious parental behaviours may correspond with rising perfectionism - and the mental health challenges which arise from this.

"In that first paper we explored how social media, consumer culture and helicopter parenting could explain why young people are reporting more perfectionism over time. That final consideration was our jump off point for this new research – we wanted to see if parents were essentially passing on perfectionism to their children, and if so, why that was the case.

"In two meta-analyses we found that levels of parental expectations and criticism have increased over time, and that these behaviours were significantly correlated with perfectionism in young people."



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High parental expectations can have a mental health cost

When parents set unattainable expectations and overvalue accomplishment, their children tend to internalise the messaging which underpins these rigid standards. They define themselves in relation to their achievements and tie their self-worth to how they perform in school, how they look and how they measure in relation to other socially prescribed benchmarks of success. A child's ability to navigate and master their social environment is also viewed as an extension of their parents' prowess and competence. This shared responsibility intensifies pressure on children.

At face value this may sound adaptable in some ways, as it aligns with the idea of meritocracy – that anyone can be rewarded with wealth, social status and the *good life*, provided they work hard enough. However, the real impact of perfectionism is incredibly debilitating. Perfectionists tend to have difficulty deriving any enduring sense of satisfaction from their pursuits, they judge themselves harshly and often struggle with low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

Though these mental health outcomes are well substantiated and known, parental expectations remain remarkably high in industrialised societies. However, Dr Curran argues that the responsibility for this unprecedented pressure lies not with parents, but instead with the emergence and salience of neoliberalism. Dr Curran's approach shifts blame from parents on to society:

“Really, this isn't about parents at all. This is about a structural trend. Parents are just conduits of the values present in, and requirements set by, society – they are agents responding to what the world demands. The pressure parents place on their children also reflects material outcomes.

“In this culture, if you do not prioritise productivity and growth, you will be left behind. Parents look out into the world and see that prospects for young people are dwindling and competition is at an all-time high, so they internalise this pressure and enact it on their children through strict parental practices.”



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Dr Thomas Curran was speaking to Sophie Charlotte, Media Relations Officer at LSE.

Listen to Dr Thomas Curran on the potential pitfalls of wanting to be perfect in the LSE iQ podcast episode [***Is perfect the enemy of the possible?***](#)

Watch [***Is perfectionism an illness?***](#)
In a competitive culture that values work ethic and merit, is perfectionism a benign trait that helps us succeed or a pernicious illness we need to take more seriously?

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Don't blame parents – they're as trapped by society as their children

In relation to the importance of placing responsibility in the right place, Dr Curran added:

“That is why we undertook this research with a sympathetic and empathetic view of parents and have concluded that the burden of change falls on institutions and policymakers. It is a macro-level problem fuelled by neoliberalism and the cultural obsession with growth. Parents are context-driven social actors – they understand how increasingly competitive job and education markets are, and by setting high expectations, they are simply attempting to prepare their children for the realities of adult life.”

Strict parenting is thus a response to neoliberalism. As it is a structural problem, it cannot be resolved on the individual level. Dr Curran argues that interventions which fail to address these harmful social trends, will ultimately fail. On this point he said: “Sure, we can conduct resilience training and mindset workshops in schools in to alleviate the pressure felt by young people – but none of this changes the fact that these pressures remain and are waiting for children when they leave school and enter society.”

In Dr Curran's view, we currently inhabit a culture which emphasises individualism, competition, and values economic gains above all else, at all costs. This cultural fixation on growth and consumption on the macro level trickles down to the individual. It makes us believe that we are not good enough as we are, and this discontent fuels perfectionism. The solution to this, Dr Curran claims, is not to design micro-level interventions to “fix” modern-day parenting, but instead for us, together, to reach a social consensus that “more” does not necessarily equal “better”, and to encourage a shift to an economy where human wellbeing is prioritised over goods. ■