

Rising parental expectations linked to perfectionism in college students

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Rising parental expectations and criticism are linked to an increase in perfectionism among college students, which can have damaging mental health consequences, according to new research published by the

American Psychological Association.

Researchers analyzed data from more than 20,000 American, Canadian and British [college students](#). They found that young people's perceptions of their parents' expectations and criticism have increased over the past 32 years and are linked to an increase in their perfectionism.

"Perfectionism contributes to many psychological conditions, including depression, anxiety, [self-harm](#) and eating disorders," said lead researcher Thomas Curran, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychological and [behavioral science](#) at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Study co-author Andrew P. Hill, Ph.D., a professor of sport and exercise psychology at York St John University, added that "the pressure to conform to perfect ideals has never been greater and could be the basis for an impending public health issue."

Perfectionism often becomes a lifelong trait and prior research has shown that perfectionists become more neurotic and less conscientious as they get older. Perfectionism also can perpetuate through generations, with perfectionist parents raising perfectionist children.

Curran and Hill previously found that three types of perfectionism were increasing among young people in the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom. They suspected that one cause might be that parents are becoming more anxious and controlling, so they analyzed the findings of other published studies in two [meta-analyses](#) for this latest piece of research, which published online in the journal *Psychological Bulletin*.

The first meta-analysis included 21 studies with data from more than 7,000 college students. Parental expectations and criticism had moderate associations with self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism and a

large association with socially prescribed perfectionism.

Self-oriented perfectionism involves perfectionist standards about the self. Other-oriented perfectionism is perfectionism turned outward, where someone expects others to be perfectionist. Socially prescribed perfectionism is the perception that other people and society require perfection. The three types of perfectionism overlap and can exacerbate the effects of each other in negative ways.

Parental expectations had a larger impact than parental criticism on self-oriented and other-oriented perfectionism, so parental expectations may be more damaging than parental criticism.

"Parental expectations have a high cost when they're perceived as excessive," Curran said. "Young people internalize those expectations and depend on them for their self-esteem. And when they fail to meet them, as they invariably will, they'll be critical of themselves for not matching up. To compensate, they strive to be perfect."

Self-oriented perfectionism was higher for American college students than Canadian or British students, possibly because of more intense academic competition in the U.S.

"These trends may help explain increasing [mental health issues](#) in young people and suggest this problem will only worsen in the future," Hill said. "It's normal for parents to be anxious about their children, but increasingly this anxiety is being interpreted as pressure to be perfect."

The second meta-analysis included 84 studies conducted between 1989 and 2021 with a total of 23,975 college students. Parental expectations, criticism and their combined parental pressure increased during those 32 years, with parental expectations increasing at the fastest rate by far.

"The rate of increase in young people's perceptions of their parents' expectations is remarkable," up an average 40% compared with 1989, Curran said.

The studies were conducted in the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom, so the findings can't be generalized to other cultures. The research is correlational, so it can't prove that rising parental expectations or criticism caused an increase in [perfectionism](#) among college students, only that there is a link between them. However, the research suggests troublesome changes over time, according to the researchers.

So what are parents supposed to do? "Parents are not to blame because they're reacting anxiously to a hyper-competitive world with ferocious academic pressures, runaway inequality and technological innovations like [social media](#) that propagate unrealistic ideals of how we should appear and perform," Curran said.

"Parents are placing excessive expectations on their children because they think, correctly, that society demands it or their children will fall down the social ladder," Curran added. "It's ultimately not about parents recalibrating their expectations. It's about society—our economy, education system and supposed meritocracy—recognizing that the pressures we're putting on [young people](#) and their families are unnecessarily overwhelming."

Parents can help their children navigate societal pressures in a healthy way by teaching them that failure, or imperfection, is a normal and natural part of life, Curran said. "Focusing on learning and development, not test scores or social media, helps children develop healthy self-esteem, which doesn't depend on others' validation or external metrics," he said.

More information: Young People's Perceptions of Their Parents' Expectations and Criticism Are Increasing Over Time: Implications for Perfectionism, *Psychological Bulletin* (2022).

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