

Drive to be 'perfect' parent isn't healthy, survey finds

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Parents striving to be "perfect" will never attain that goal, and the aim isn't even healthy for their families, a new study says.

The risks of striving for perfection are such that researchers have now created a scale to help parents track their burnout and, if necessary, counter it.

The first-of-its-kind, [Working Parent Burnout Scale](#) is a 10-point survey that helps parents measure their stress and fatigue in real time, researchers say.

"If maybe you're prioritizing making sure your house is spotless all the time, but then you don't feel like you have time to go for a walk every night with your [children](#), maybe you need to reorganize or find a way to make both of those things work," lead researcher Kate Gawlik, an associate clinical professor at the Ohio State College of Nursing, said in a news release.

About 57% of parents who took part in a new survey said they're burned out.

Burnout can happen when a parent sets [unrealistic expectations](#) for themselves, as part of a "culture of achievement" that's been spurred in part by social media.

"You can look at people on Instagram or you can even just see people walking around, and I always think, "How do they do that? How do they seem to always have it all together when I don't?" " Gawlik said.

"We have high expectations for ourselves as parents; we have high expectations for what our kids should be doing," she continued. "Then on the flipside, you're comparing yourself to other people, other families, and there's a lot of judgment that goes on. And whether it's intended or not, it's still there."

Further, the mental health of a parent strongly impacts the mental health

of their children.

Parents who are burning out are more likely to lash out at their children. If the kids develop a mental health problem as a result, that makes the parents even more burned out and abusive, creating a vicious circle.

"When parents are burned out, they have more depression, anxiety and stress, but their children also do behaviorally and emotionally worse," researcher Bernadette Melnyk, vice president for [health promotion](#) and chief wellness officer at Ohio State University, said in a news release. "So it's super important to face your true story if you're burning out as a parent and do something about it for better self-care."

The new burnout scale comes along with new guidance on positive strategies to help parents form deeper connections with their kids, researchers said.

The strategies include:

- Connection and active listening
- Replacing negative thoughts with positive ones
- Setting reasonable expectations for both parent and child
- Reflecting and acting on priorities

These sort of strategies can help counter what Melnyk calls a "public health epidemic" of parental burnout.

"Parents do a great job caring for their children and everybody else, but they often don't prioritize their own self-care," she said. "As parents, we can't keep pouring from an empty cup. If children see their parents taking good self-care, the chances are they're going to grow up with that value as well. It has a ripple effect to the children and to the entire family."

"As one parent told me," Gawlik added, "I would much rather have a happy kid than a perfect kid."

The updated report, *The Power of Positive Parenting: Evidence to Help Parents and Their Children Thrive*, includes [survey results](#) from more than 700 parents polled in June and July 2023.

More information: The University of California-Davis has more on [positive parenting](#).

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