



PRESSURE & PERFECTIONISM IN 21ST CENTURY CHILDREN

PRESSURE: GOOD and BAD

Pressure to strive and excel, particularly when it comes from within, can help motivate students and instil autonomy and confidence.

Too much pressure, however, is linked to a wide variety of mental and physical challenges, including anxiety, depression, suicidal thinking and eating disorders.

Anxiety and depression comprise **43%** of mental health disorders in adolescents aged 10-19

1 in 4 adolescents **criticise themselves** when they fail to meet their own standards

Social media add new weight to old pressures – but they can also support children and youth's **friendships, creativity** and **inspiration**

Schools, families and education play a pivotal role in helping children and youth manage pressure by developing resilience, healthy self-esteem and relationships, and critical media literacy.

TYPES OF PERFECTIONISM

Perfectionism is a complex, multidimensional concept and people with perfectionistic tendencies are a diverse group. Perfectionism can come from internal or external forces:

Self-oriented perfectionism	Socially prescribed perfectionism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internally motivated beliefs that perfection is important and possible in itself • High personal standards • Highly critical of own failure to meet standards • “Ambivalent” form associated with both positive and negative outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Externally motivated beliefs that perfection is important to others • Others expect perfection • Others will be critical of failure; acceptance is conditional on achievement • Maladaptive form associated with negative outcomes

Both types of perfectionism have been linked to anxiety and depression and often reflect unmet needs for safety and acceptance. For students, relationships and (perceived) expectations at home, school, from friends and society can either exacerbate or mitigate perfectionistic tendencies.



Perfectionism is not the “pursuit of excellence.” While intrinsic motivation to achieve is healthy, perfectionism relies on unrealistic standards, fear of failure and often sees perfection as a prerequisite for approval and acceptance.

PRESSURE FOR THE PERFECT BODY

Pressures associated with body image can affect even very young children. These pressures become stronger in adolescence.

- **Positive body image** involves a compassionate, accepting appreciation of one’s body and all its abilities without tying appearance to self-worth.
- **Negative body image** comprises a destructive, evaluative attitude that focuses on appearance, sets high standards and makes looks central to identity and self-worth.

Key research findings:

- children as **young as three or four** are aware of **body stereotypes**
- **six-year-olds** express **body dissatisfaction**, with 50% of girls in one study seeking to be thinner and 33% of boys more muscular
- in children’s **videos and toys**, attractiveness is consistently associated with positive traits like sociability, kindness and success
- **girls experience** more constraining appearance ideals from an earlier age and, in a study in 13 countries, teenage girls cited body image as a consistent negative pressure in their lives.



Social media, especially the use of filters and appearance-focused platforms, are linked to body dissatisfaction in girls and boys. Media literacy and the ability to critically appraise the accuracy of media content can help protect and maintain positive body image.

PRESSURE FOR THE PERFECT MIND

A rise in intensive parenting and competitive mindsets, particularly among middle class families, has led to increased pressure to improve children's cognitive performance. Students increasingly report feeling overwhelmed and stressed at school.

This goes beyond hiring tutors and pushing students to excel. Students and their families may increasingly feel pressured to use **pharmaceutical cognitive enhancement (PCE)**.



PCE refers to using prescription drugs to enhance cognitive performance in the absence of medical need. Examples include Ritalin, used for treating attention-deficit hyperactivity-disorder, and Modafinil, which can improve wakefulness. While attitudes differ widely by country, scholars believe their use is increasing.

- 62% of surveyed physicians in a national study in the United States reported monthly requests to prescribe PCE. 37% complied.
- 10% of university students in the UK and Ireland are estimated to use PCEs, although these levels may be understated.
- 4.3% of upper secondary school students surveyed in a study in Switzerland reported using PCE.



The effectiveness of PCE is often low to moderate. Growing pressure to succeed, combined with increased inequality and rising returns to education, may reinforce this behaviour.



Schools, families and communities need to work together to reduce stress and pressure, adapt performance expectations and provide access to supports.

PRESSURE FOR PERFECT RELATIONSHIPS

Healthy, reliable relationships insulate us against life's stressors. However, unhealthy relationships – with family or friends - can increase stress and pressure.



Pressuring, intrusive and manipulative parenting is associated with negative impacts on child **emotional development and well-being**.

Social comparison increases in adolescence. While part of the natural shift to peer-centred relationships, it can exacerbate stress, especially in youth with mental health challenges.



“Fear of missing out” (FoMo) refers to anxiety that one is missing out on rewarding experiences that others are enjoying. FoMo in adolescents is linked to lower mood and life satisfaction and to higher social media use.

Social media can support young people to make friends, share interests and relieve stress and pressure. A study in the United States found that 55% of 15-21-year-olds felt supported by social media.



Children aren't all “digital natives.” They need support to develop critical awareness of media messaging, including their own and friends' social media.

RELEASING PRESSURE: SOLUTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Parents & Caregivers

- Promote nurturing connections and acceptance
- Help caregivers understand and support their child's health and well-being, especially regarding stress and perfectionism
- Look inward: strong adult mental health is key.



Teachers & Schools

- Invest in whole-school approaches to well-being
- Strengthen teachers' social-emotional learning (SEL) knowledge and competencies
- Incorporate critical media literacy into curriculum
- Adapt performance measures to reduce stakes and pressure.

Communities & Systems

- Integrate mental health services into social protection and community care systems
- Support schools in addressing digital skills, digital inequality and well-being

RESEARCH GAPS

Much research has been conducted on pressure and stress, but gaps remain. Important research priorities include:

- More **nuanced research** into the impact of perfectionism on development and well-being for particular groups and possible inequalities.
- Using **higher-quality data** to understand causal impact of digital technologies on health, well-being and achievement (e.g. from experimental and longitudinal studies and for particular technologies).
- The **prevalence and risks of PCE** in healthy individuals and the **attitudes and decision-making processes** of youth and families regarding cognitive enhancement strategies.
- Examining **multiple outcomes and indicators** (i.e. combined effects of stress, anxiety and depression) to better understand what works, when and in which contexts.

Find out more:

APA (2018), *Stress in America: Generation Z*, American Psychological Association, Washington DC. [pa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf](https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf)

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Leone, E.M., Wade, T.D. (2018), Measuring perfectionism in children: a systematic review of the mental health literature. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 27, 553–567, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-017-1078-8>.

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