

# GOODBYE LITTLE MISS PERFECT...

Judith Carlisle explains how a new initiative aims to rid her pupils of the unhealthy pursuit of perfectionism

I'm afraid that my daughter is a bit glum about her GCSE results. She had been projected 10 A\*s. She got nine. This is a comment in a recent letter to me from a parent.

When does aiming high turn into nothing ever being good enough? What is there to be glum about?

I have the good fortune to be the head of a leading independent girls' school, working with interesting and interested students, positive and dynamic staff, and parents committed to providing an excellent education for their daughters. There is also the Oxford factor, working in

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a unique city whose university is renowned as a world leader in education.

With nearly a decade of experience of leading high-achieving girls' schools, I pay considerable attention to creating an environment in which students and staff

have the freedom to be the best they can be, as relieved as possible from the stresses and strains of busy school life. When I arrived nearly four years ago, I was struck by how many potential parents expressed surprise at the relaxed environment, imagining perhaps that the only way the girls could achieve their super results was through what I refer to as the "foie gras" method of education when, in reality, Oxford High girls thrive "free range". There are high hopes and expectations for these young women and when I asked the girls about feeling under pressure, they told me the pressure usually came from within themselves, or from home rather

than school. I wondered how we could offer more help.

Excessive perfectionism, constantly setting standards that are impossible to achieve and then feeling this as personal failure, is really damaging. It is known as "unhelpful perfectionism" and is completely different from the healthy pursuit of excellence. It is often counterproductive, prevents students from doing their best and it erodes self-esteem.

My growing awareness of the damage caused by unrealistic expectations crystallised in a chance remark made by a parent, sitting on the sofa in my study with his daughter. "She's an absolute



ILLUSTRATION: ANDY WARD - FOLIO ART

perfectionist" he said, beaming. Without thinking, I replied: "Don't worry, we'll soon get that out of her!". The look of surprise on his face led us into a conversation about perfectionist thinking crushing creativity, risk-taking and ambition, replacing them with playing safe and loss of self-belief. Examples such as tearing pages out of an exercise book and starting again, rather than simply crossing out the error and carrying on illustrated my point and his daughter smiled in recognition. The inner voice telling us there's no point in trying because we may not win the race, get top marks, be offered the leading role – I hear these thoughts expressed by girls

and parents at times and I wanted it to change. And so the Death of Little Miss Perfect had begun. Our campaign is backed by sound academic research. Following work with Dr Erica McWilliam of Queensland University in Australia, author of *The Creative Workforce: How to Launch Young People into High-Flying Futures* and a respected figure in new, radical thinking in education, we adopted some key phrases about learning: valuing learning from error, experiencing the complex and exploring uncertainty. Junior girls happily adopted the idea: "I can't do it...yet, but soon I'll be able to!". Professor Roz Shafran, co-author of

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*Overcoming Perfectionism*, gave a lecture to girls and parents – *Perfectionism and Self-esteem: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* She described how aiming unrealistically for perfection can lead to avoidance and procrastination or to overworking something, such as one brush-stroke too many ruining a piece of art.

Our younger girls completed an "achievement log" over the course of a week in which they focused on one thing every day that was not a typical, measurable achievement e.g. being happy all day, trying Chinese dumplings, and tidying bedrooms without being asked. They considered what makes a good friend: kindness, a good listener, someone who sees the best in me, honest but not nasty, and compared this with the way in which they view themselves. In Spanish, they played a game in which they learnt that, although they may "not yet" have the perfect vocabulary to communicate a message, being prepared to "have a go" can still be a winning overall result. Sixth Form chemists discussed the time (wasted) that would be spent aiming to achieve a 100% yield in an experiment, and Alan Percy, head of student counselling at Oxford University, talked about how the further one goes in academia, the less likely it is that an answer can be verified as being correct or perfect.

Parents want their daughters to be robust and resilient. They would like them to be prepared to have a go when faced with a challenge. Even the most successful of lives has its share of set-backs and downright failures. That's why from now on, our girls are trying to wave goodbye to poisonous Little Miss Perfect. ♥

*Judith Carlisle is headmistress of Oxford High School for Girls.*