

## SCHOOL ANXIETY IN ADOLESCENTS- PERFECTIONISTS: CORRECTION EXPERIENCE

**Alyona Vavilova**

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University, Ukraine

**Abstract.** *The article is devoted to the study of school anxiety in adolescents-perfectionists and exploring ways of its correction. It was found that high levels of perfectionism in adolescents can increase the probability of impaired emotional well-being and, in particular, excessive levels of anxiety. To determine the level of perfectionism and components of school anxiety in pupils, two psychodiagnostic methods were used: the “Child-Adolescent Perfectionism Scale” by P. Hewitt and G. Flett and the “Multidimensional Anxiety Scale” by K. Malkova. The study of school anxiety was conducted in two stages: before and after correction. The correction involved setting realistic goals and adequate requirements for oneself; formation the ability for justified risk; shifting focus on achievement, not failure. The results of a comparative analysis of anxiety before and after correction in the participants of the experimental group indicated a statistically significant decrease anxiety related to the assessment of others; anxiety in relationships with teachers; anxiety related to school success; anxiety in knowledge testing situations. The results of a comparative analysis of experimental and control groups adolescents-perfectionists confirmed the effectiveness of corrective action aimed at reducing school anxiety due to the presence of destructive perfectionist attitudes.*

**Keywords:** *school anxiety, perfectionism, adolescence, correction program, emotional sphere.*

### Introduction

Modern society is characterized by a large number of stressors because of the high level of informatization and increasing social development. In such circumstances, the issue of mental health of the individual and the prevention of emotional disorders becomes especially relevant. The problem of preventing emotional deviations should be considered in childhood and adolescence, especially during adolescence crisis and personality development.

The main activity for adolescents is studying, and the main institute of socialization is school. Specific factors in school education increase the probability of impaired students' emotional well-being, the most common among them is anxiety. High levels of anxiety in childhood and adolescence may increase the risk of impaired adaptation, decreased learning success, low self-esteem, psychosomatic manifestations, and may be one of the reasons of neuroticism and anxiety disorders in adulthood.

High anxiety most often occurs for adolescents-perfectionists because of the desire to achieve only the best results and to demonstrate excellence in studying. Students with high levels of perfectionism are dependent on the assessments of parents and teachers, and express anxiety because they are afraid of failure. The permanent state of perfectionists with anxiety increases the probability of exhaustion, guilt, inability to enjoy life. Therefore, timely diagnosis and correction of school anxiety are important conditions for the harmonious development of personality in adulthood.

### **Literature review**

Anxiety is an individual psychological trait that manifests in a person's tendency to experience frequent and intense anxiety and has a low threshold of occurrence. According to A.V. Voloshok, anxiety is at the heart of a number of psychological difficulties in childhood, including children's and adolescents disorders of emotions and behaviour (Voloshok, 2012). The most expressive emotional reactions occur in moments of imbalance in the dynamic process of interaction between the child and the environment, in the «critical periods». It is such a period that occurs in adolescence, which is characterized by school anxiety.

The level of school anxiety is related to the individual characteristics of students' adaptation. According to A.M. Tomej, a certain level of anxiety can help students in the successful process of social and psychological adaptation; at the same time, a high level of anxiety makes difficult the adaptation process, it is more resource-intensive and has a negative impact on the recovery of internal resources (Tomej, 2013). A high level of student's anxiety may indicate the child's general negative emotional state that is associated with various forms of its inclusion in school life.

The phenomenon of perfectionism is closely linked to the experience of anxiety. Thus, researchers in the cognitive approach to understanding perfectionism, R. Slain and R. Hill, identified anxiety as an integral component of perfectionism. In R. Slainy's model anxiety is identified in completing tasks as one of the five basic components of perfectionism, together with high personal standards, a desire for order, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and procrastination (Jasnaja, 2011). The researcher says that anxiety always accompanies perfectionists because of the constant fear of making mistakes and deviating from work excellence. Canadian authors P.G. Hewitt and Flett also confirm the presence of a high connection between adolescent's perfectionism and such emotional problems as anxiety and depression (Hewitt, Flett, & Caelian 2002).

According to S. Fredrick, M. Demaray and L. Jenkins Students who worry about their ability to meet high standards might be more at risk of internalizing

problems. Authors point, that adaptive perfectionists reported significantly higher levels of teacher support than maladaptive perfectionists and nonperfectionists and higher levels of classmate support than nonperfectionists (Fredrick, Demaray, & Jenkins, 2016). Therefore, lack of social support at schools can cause perfectionist`s emotional difficulties.

Cognitive model by R. Hill includes such indicators of perfectionism: striving for excellence, concern over mistakes, high standards for others, need for approval, organization, parental pressure, rumination and planning (Hill & Huelsman, 2004, 94 – 95). According to this model, perfectionist`s school anxiety arises as a constant expectation of failure on the way to unconditional results and high standards, fear of losing affection and sensitivity to criticism, obsessive concern about past or future mistakes, non-ideal results. Therefore, they are not spontaneous and often do not enjoy the results, even if they are very successful.

Perfectionists-adolescents begin to intensify monitoring of their mistakes because of anxiety in a failing situation, focusing on past and possible future failures. When they manage to meet certain standards, they are judged to be insufficiently high and then established even higher standards (Guljas, 2007). S.V. Volikova, exploring children`s and adolescents` perfectionism, indicates the expressed desire of adolescents with perfectionism to meet the expectations of parents and teachers in order to obtain approval for the highest standards (Volikova, 2012).

Destructive children`s and adolescents` manifestations of the desire for excellence are connected with the phenomenon «syndrome of excellence». Testing the perfection striving in the specific situation of evaluating their achievements increases the probability of the students' awareness of their imperfection and causes a variety of neurotic manifestations. Perfectionists with «syndrome of excellence» are characterized by expressed anxiety, the level of which is raised in the situation of evaluation due to the setting of overestimated goals and excessive obsession on mistakes (Куцуба & Курьшкіна, 2016).

The spectrum of emotionally negative feelings of pupils with perfectionism is very diverse and may include intense feelings of dissatisfaction achievements, fear of negative judgment from others and public shame, fear of failure and anxiety before starting activities, anger to others.

Lisa Lee points to a significant connection between traits of perfectionism and impaired emotional well-being in the forms of depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, suicide risk, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Lee, 2007). E.A. Filatova and E.P. Pchelkina emphasize that perfectionism has a destructive effect on the emotional (emotional discomfort), cognitive (destructive attitudes) and behavioral (avoiding behaviour strategies) areas of personality (Filatova & Pchelkina, 2016). Thus, high levels of anxiety in adolescents-perfectionists can negatively affect the emotional well-being of the student,

increases the probability of low adaptation and even cause psychopathological emotional disorders.

### **Methodology**

To study the adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety two psychodiagnostic methods were selected: «Child-Adolescence Perfectionism Scale» by P. Hewitt and G. Flett (adapted in the Ukrainian sample) and «Multidimensional Anxiety Scale» by K. Malkova.

The method «Child-Adolescence Perfectionism Scale» by P. Hewitt and G. Flett allows differentiating the following types of perfectionism: Self-oriented and Socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism is a tendency to expect perfection from oneself and a motivation to achieve high standards. Socially prescribed perfectionism is the perception that others expect from a child to be perfect, and includes the experience of helplessness, a sense of external control, and difficulty in achieving high standards (Vavilova, 2017). The method contains 22 questions that describe two scales above. Also the «Child-Adolescence Perfectionism Scale» allows determining the indicators of general perfectionism at three levels: low, average and high for children and adolescents aged 9-18 years (Flett, Hewitt, & Besser, (2016).

The «Multidimensional Anxiety Scale» by K. Malkova was used as a clinically tested questionnaire aimed at the structural diagnosis of children`s and adolescents` anxiety disorders (8 - 18 years old) (Malkova, 2009). This technique covers the maximum possible range of situations where anxiety can be actualized. The questionnaire includes the most informative parameters for evaluating the emotional and behavioral disorders of children`s and adolescents` anxiety spectrum, which are relevant to the 10 scales of the method. The following scales were selected to study the characteristics of adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety: anxiety associated with the assessment of others; anxiety in relationships with teachers; anxiety associated with school success; anxiety that arises in situations of knowledge assessment.

Both methods are adequate for adolescents; they allow investigating quantitative and qualitative indicators of studied phenomena: anxiety and perfectionism.

In order to investigate the effectiveness of adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety correction, 25 subjects aged 14 - 17 years old were selected, which were divided into two groups - experimental (participants of the corrective program) and control (not involved in the corrective program) (Table 1). Participants in both groups showed high perfectionism and high levels of school anxiety.

The experimental group included 12 adolescents aged 15 - 17 years old (including 2 boys aged 16, 1 boy aged 15 and 2 boys aged 17; 2 girls aged 15, 2

girls aged 16; 3 girls aged 17 years). The control group included 13 adolescents aged 14 - 17 years old (7 girls and 6 boys).

*Table 1 General characteristics of the study sample*

<i>Samples</i>	Total number	Girls	Boys
Experimental group	12 (15 – 17 years)	7	5
Control group	13 (14 – 17 years)	7	6

The comparative analysis of anxiety indicators in the experimental group before and after the correction effect was conducted; and a comparison of school anxiety mean values in the experimental and control groups of the subjects was made to determine the effectiveness of school anxiety correction of adolescents perfectionists. The differences in mean anxiety values before and after correction program for experimental group were measured by using T-student comparison. The differences in mean values of school anxiety components in the experimental and control groups were measured by using Fisher intergroup comparison (for different groups).

### **Research results and Discussion**

At a first stage of the study, the level of perfectionism in adolescents was diagnosed and a sample of subjects with destructive perfectionism (25 adolescents) was identified. Adolescent perfectionists were divided into two groups - experimental and control - using the random method. In each group were provided the representatives adolescents and indicators of perfectionism (Table 2).

*Table 2 Perfectionism indicators in the experimental and control groups*

Indicators of perfectionism	Experimental group	Control group
Mean	73,2	72,8
Maximum	73	74
Minimum	67	68

At the next stage the level of school anxiety and its components were diagnosed: anxiety associated with the assessment of others; anxiety in relationships with teachers; anxiety associated with school success; anxiety in situations of knowledge assessment. The correction aimed at reducing the level of school anxiety was carried out for 4 sessions of 40 minutes in a group of 12 adolescents. The corrective program included the following directions: a) setting realistic goals and adequate requirements for oneself; b) formation of the ability

for justified risk; c) shifting the focus of attention to achievement from failure (Table 3).

*Table 3 Directions of correction school anxiety*

Directions of correction	Goals
Setting realistic goals and adequate requirements for oneself	Reduction anxiety associated with the assessment of others
	Reduction anxiety in relationships with teachers
Formation the ability for justified risk	Reduction anxiety associated with school success
Shifting focus of attention to analysis of achievements from failure analysis	Reduction anxiety in situations of knowledge assessment

The results of the analysis demonstrate that the participants in the correction program showed less indicators of school anxiety compared to the indicators before corrective influence (Table 4). Statistically significant differences (according to the test T-student) were found in the results of the correction program.

*Table 4 Mean values of adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety components (before and after correction)*

Correction	Indicators of school anxiety			
	Anxiety associated with the assessment of others	Anxiety in relationships with teachers	Anxiety associated with school success	Anxiety in situations of knowledge assessment
Before	7,4*	7,0*	8,2*	8,9*
After	5,2*	5,4*	7,7*	6,2*

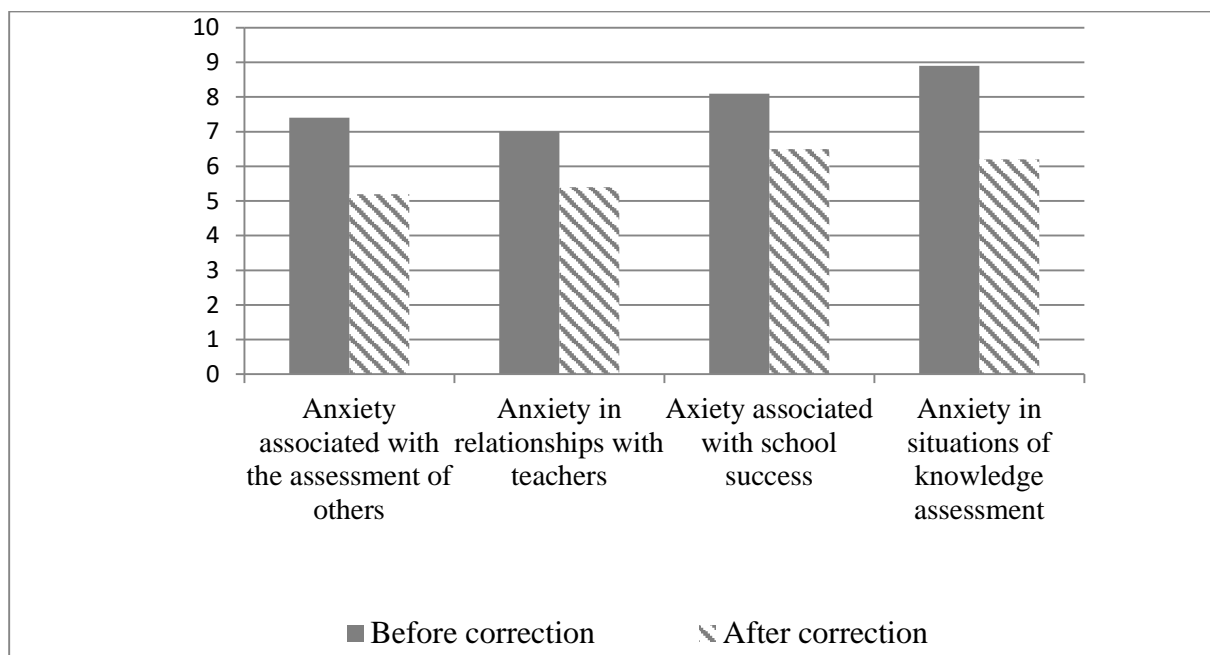
*Note: Differences in mean values (T-student comparison) at significant level  $p \leq 0.05$  \*,  $p \leq 0.01$  \*\**

There was a significant decrease in anxiety associated with the assessment of others ( $\bar{x} = 7,4$  before and  $\bar{x} = 5,4$  after correction), which indicates about decrease the role of others in the assessment adolescent's achievement and performance. This was facilitated by thematic blocks of the correction program aimed at the ability to set realistic goals and adequate requirements for themselves. Perfectionists-adolescents became more realistic about their own potential, based on internal evaluations and beliefs, and became a lesser pay attention to social evaluations. Such changes came about working on setting unrealistically high goals and meet only the highest standards delegated by others.

In this regard, the hypertrophied need for acceptance and approval by others was eliminated.

The anxiety scale in relationships with teachers is closely linked to the anxiety scale associated with the assessment of others; the teachers are significant people who evaluate the achievements and failures of adolescents. Therefore, decreasing anxiety in relationships with teachers ( $\bar{x} = 7,0$  before and  $\bar{x} = 5,7$  after corrective action) can be explained by reducing dependence on the teacher's opinion and fear of disappointing their expectations. Adolescents became more loyal to criticism through correction, developed the ability to differentiate critical remarks into specific actions from criticism to the personality of adolescent.

Reduced anxiety associated with school success ( $\bar{x} = 8,1$  before and  $\bar{x} = 6,5$  after correction) is connected with a reduction the concerns about pursuing achievement. Such thematic block of the correction program, as the formation of adequate requirements for themselves, allows the perfectionists to evaluate their own desires properly, opportunities and requirements of others; facilitate solving of internal conflicts related to achievements.



*Figure 1 Mean values of adolescents-perfectionists' school anxiety in (before and after correction)*

Anxiety indicators in the knowledge assessment situation were also reduced in adolescents after corrective influence ( $\bar{x} = 8,9$  before and  $\bar{x} = 6,2$  after correction). This means that the level of adolescent's anxiety in situations of testing knowledge, achievements and opportunities was decreased. This reduction could be facilitated by correction program techniques aimed at forming the

capacity for relaxation, the ability to adequately perception criticism, and accepting mistakes and failures without exaggeration and catastrophizing them. Perfectionists during the correctional program worked out a reassessment of the significance of achievement situation. In general, during the training, adolescents noted that most of their destructive thoughts are mainly related to anxiety for the future, experiencing possible mistakes and failures. However, when the level of situational anxiety was reduced, the frequency of such thoughts in the subjects was decreased. Also, the psychological techniques from the correction program`s unit of shifting the attention from error analysis to achievement analysis facilitated the reorientation of ideas and thoughts to prediction achieved goals, instead of constant thoughts about mistakes and activity frustrations.

To determine the effectiveness of correction aimed at reducing school anxiety in adolescents-perfectionists, a comparative analysis of the participant`s results in the experimental and control groups was made.

*Table 5 Mean values of school anxiety in the experimental and control groups*

Group	Components of school anxiety			
	Anxiety associated with the assessment of others	Anxiety in relationships with teachers	Axiety associated with school success	Anxiety in situations of knowledge assessment
Experimental	7,5*	6,9*	8,3*	8,5*
Control	5,2*	5,4*	7,7*	6,2*

*Note: Differences in mean values (Fisher intergroup comparison) at significant level  $p \leq 0.05$  \*,  $p \leq 0.01$  \*\**

Perfectionists-adolescents have a general tendency to decrease the level of school anxiety after their participation in the correction program, compared with similar indicators of participants in the control group (indicators at a significant level  $\text{sig} < 0,01$ ).

The levels of anxiety associated with the assessment of others were lower ( $\bar{x} = 7,5$  points in the control group and  $\bar{x} = 5,2$  points in the experimental groups); anxiety levels associated with school success ( $\bar{x} = 8,3$  та  $\bar{x} = 6,5$  accordingly) and anxiety levels in situations of knowledge assessment ( $\bar{x} = 7,6$  та  $\bar{x} = 5,7$  accordingly). The level of catastrophic and hypertrophic perception of the achievement situation (for example, the academic exam situation) as having only negative consequences was decreased. There was a reorientation towards the striving to set goals adequate situations and internal opportunities; the frequency of fixations on possible failures was decreased.



## Conclusion

The school is an important institution of socialization, which can not only contribute to the personal development of adolescent, but also cause emotional problems, among which a great place is occupied by high anxiety. School anxiety is a characteristic of adolescents with perfectionism in connection with the desire to achieve only highest results, fear of failure and desire to follow the higher expectations of others. High perfectionist`s anxiety is closely connected with the phenomenon of «excellent syndrome» and increases probability to complex disorders of emotional well-being in the forms of depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, suicide risk and difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

In order to correct high levels of adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety, the corrective group program was developed and tested, which aims at setting real goals and requirements for oneself; formation abilities for justified risk; shifting focus on achievement from failure.

To determine the effectiveness of adolescents-perfectionists` school anxiety correction, a comparative analysis of anxiety indicators in the experimental group before and after correction was done, as well as a comparative analysis of school anxiety mean values in the experimental and control groups. A statistically significant decrease of anxiety was found in relation to the assessment of others; anxiety in relationships with teachers; anxiety related to school success; anxiety in knowledge testing situations.

Thus, psychological work with destructive perfection tendencies in school students can help to reduce school anxiety and increase the emotional well-being of personality. Further research could be done to research the relations between school anxiety and self-esteem.

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