



# Letting Go of Perfectionism

**Princess Anne Middle  
School**

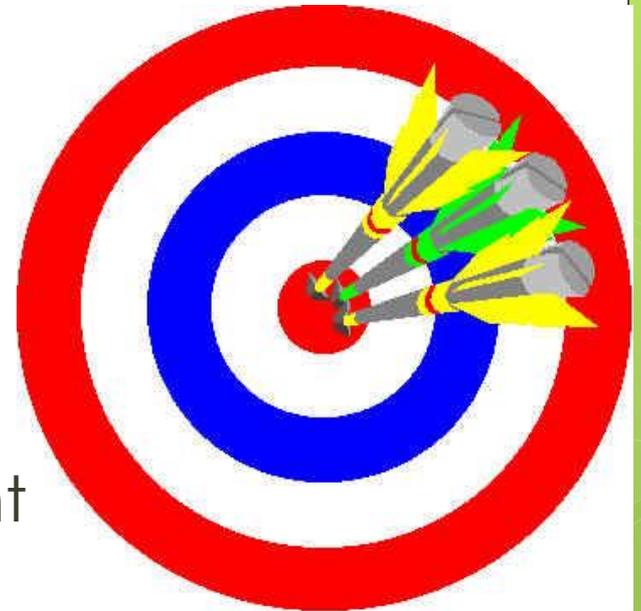
Parent Lunch Bunch  
Workshop

January 2012

Mrs. Cathy Peterson, M.S.Ed.

# Goals for Today's Session

- Understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy perfectionism
- Debunk myths about perfectionism
- Learn about the characteristics of the different types of perfectionists
- Identify possible strategies to use at home over time to help perfectionist children



1. Perfectionism is always bad for children.
2. Only gifted children are perfectionists.
3. No one knows why some children are perfectionists.
4. There are no ways to identify perfectionism.
5. Adults cannot do anything to help young perfectionists.
6. There is only one type of perfectionist.
7. Perfectionism is not really that harmful for children.

**True  
or  
False?**

**Activity:**

- 1) Read through the descriptions of the students provided.
- 2) Underline/highlight any characteristics that you see regularly in your child.
- 3) Mark the “strongly evidenced” characteristics that you see in your child with a plus (+).

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by Mark Parisi



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# Truths About Perfectionism

- No one is a perfectionist in all parts of his or her life at all times.
- Perfectionism can be healthy (**adaptive perfectionism**) or unhealthy (**maladaptive perfectionism**).
- When used in a healthy way, perfectionism can result in a focus on improvement through revision and practice, in goal setting, and in motivation to develop one's potential and abilities.
- Children who use their perfectionism in healthy ways derive a real sense of pleasure from the labors of painstaking effort and they feel free to be less precise as the situation permits.

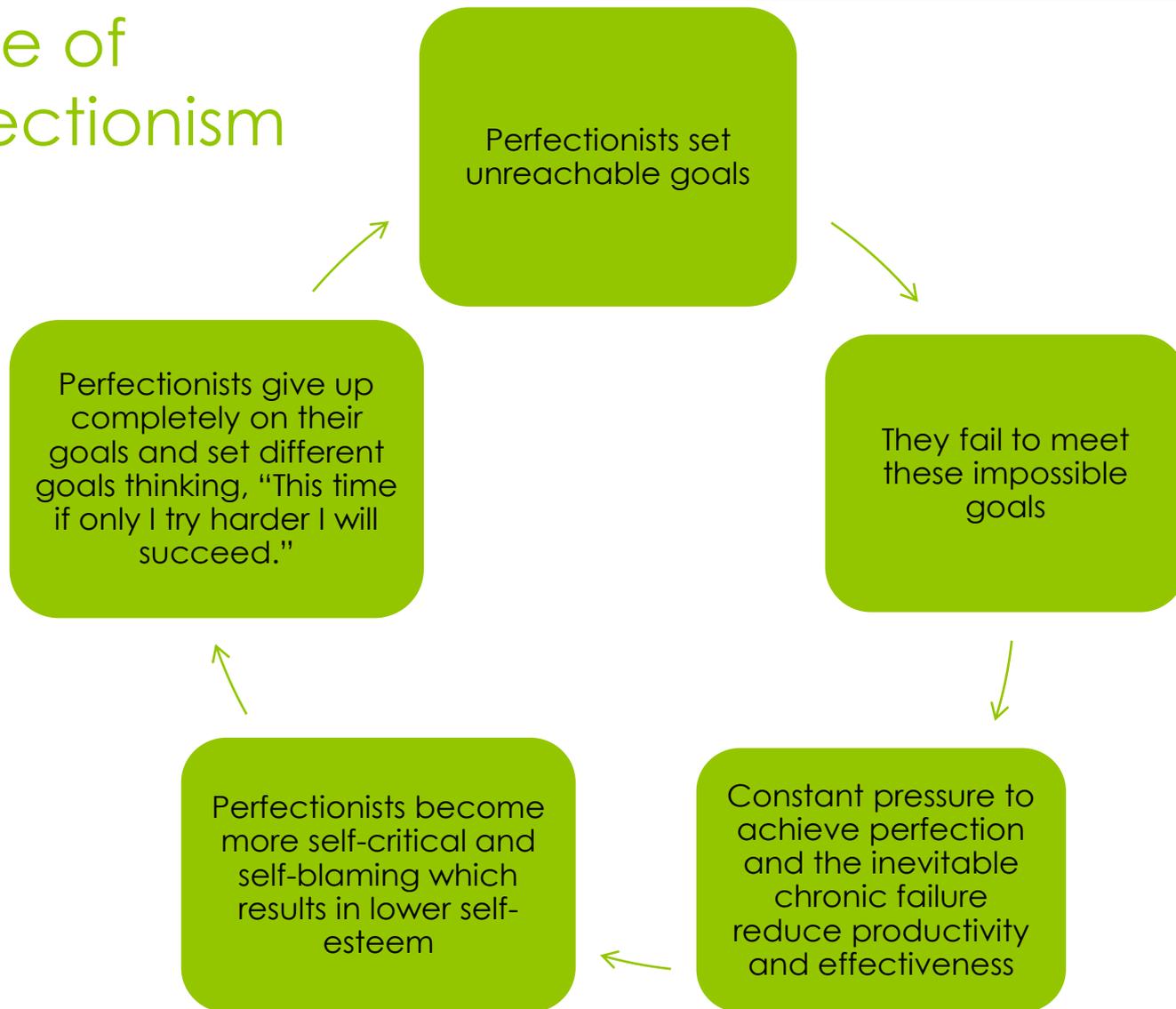
Source: Adelson & Wilson (2009) as stated in Hamachek (1978)

“The goal of teachers and parents of perfectionistic children should be NOT to eliminate having high goals and standards, but to help children take pleasure in the process, appreciate their strengths, see their mistakes as learning experiences, and recognize that they should not expect perfection at all times.”

Source: Adelson & Wilson (2009)



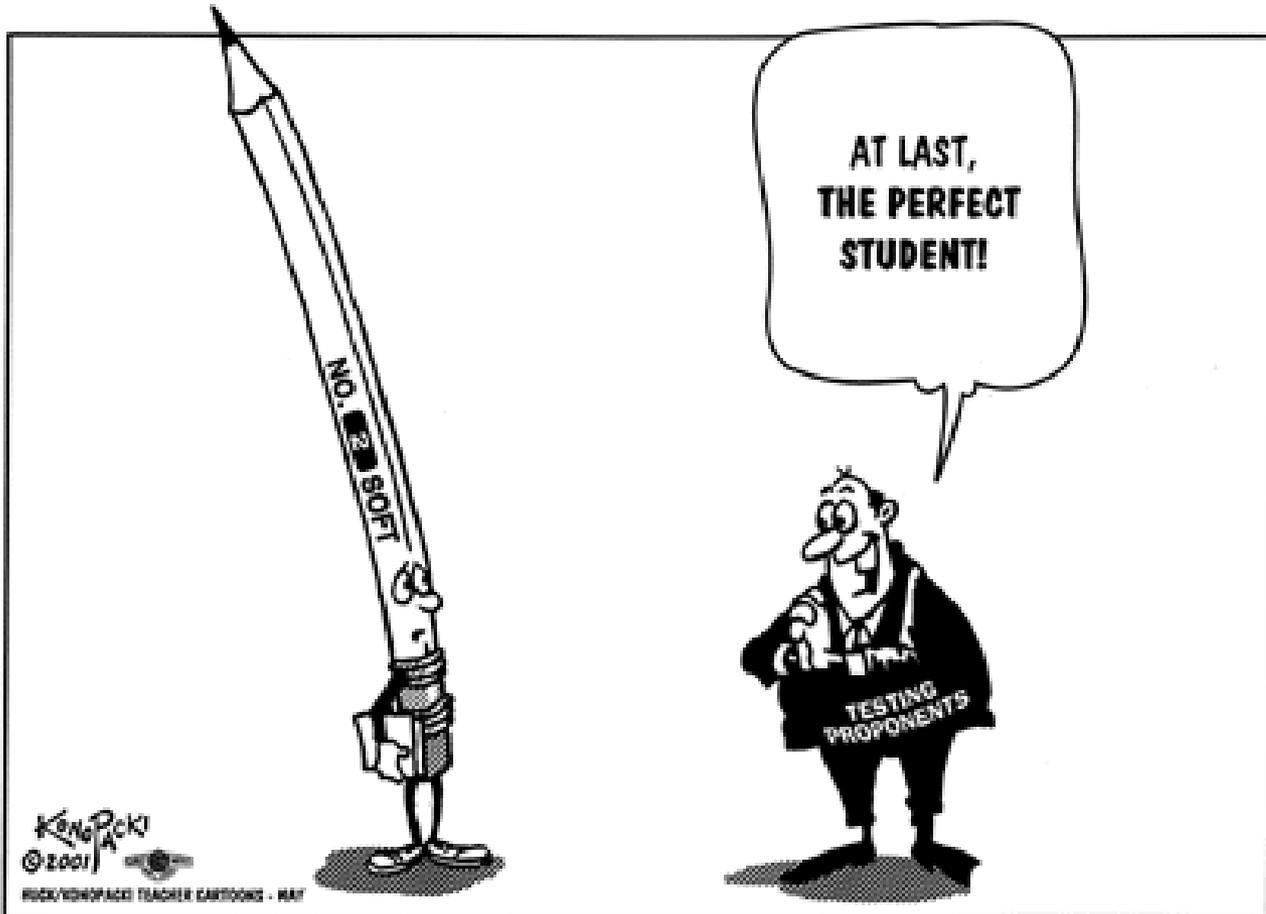
# Cycle of Perfectionism



# Characteristics of Unhealthy Perfectionists from Research

1. Fear of failure
2. Procrastination
3. Dichotomous thinking
4. Low self-esteem
5. Concentration on external rewards
6. Workaholic tendencies
7. Underachievement
8. Focus on mistakes
9. Greater levels of anxiety
10. Minor mistakes generalized to overall low self-esteem

Source: Adelson & Wilson, 2009 based on Adderholdt-Ellison (1989); and Ashby et al. (2004)



# Academic Achievers...

- **...hold unrealistically high expectations for their performance in academic pursuits; focus on the final grade and on mistakes made.**
- Their identity often lies in their academic achievements, and they see a mistake as a sign of failure and flaw in their identity.
- They become very frustrated with themselves if they do not earn the top grade on every formal and informal assessment.
- Putting forth effort in their schoolwork is typically NOT an issue for Academic Achievers.



- For Academic Achievers, mistakes are glaring, and success is defined by perfection.
- Pressure for perfect work is often internal; however, this pressure also can arise from the expectations of family and peers.
- Academic Achievers might believe they are letting these people down and cannot make academic mistakes or admit not knowing something.



# Strategies for the Home

## Academic Achievers

- De-emphasize grades
- Celebrate learning and growth
- Be an example in your own mistakes
- Choose books and movies to illustrate “flawed protagonists”
- Find off-peak times to talk to your child.



ARE YOU COMING TO BED?

I CAN'T. THIS  
IS IMPORTANT.

WHAT?

SOMEONE IS WRONG  
ON THE INTERNET.



# Aggravated Accuracy Assessors...

- ...may choose to redo the same work over and over to try to make it more like their mind's ideal; may look frantically for ways to “fix” their work or find the necessary materials; may become disappointed and give up trying
- They are overly focused on precision and on a flawless final product, not enjoying or taking pride in the process



- Aggravated Accuracy Assessors often have difficulty with goal setting, as the only goal worthwhile in their mind is perfection.
- AAAs are one type of unhealthy perfectionist that can result from asynchronous development which is a hardship faced by many perfectionists who are gifted and talented.
- They may hide their works-in-progress, not wanting others to see their imperfect work or to offer critique. AAAs often become disappointed in their work and give up entirely.

# Strategies for the Home

## Aggravated Accuracy Assessors

- Help children set goals in multiple areas of life.
- Distinguish between realistic and unrealistic goals.
- Distinguish between short-, medium-, and long-term goals.
- Model mistakes
- Encourage children to realize their own limitations
- Discuss problems of asynchrony.
- Help children prioritize



*"Saying the chalk is defective just doesn't work anymore, Lisa!"*



# Risk Evaders...

- ...fear failure to achieve their standards and ideals due to asynchronous development or physical limitations; choose not to attempt the task.
- Risk Evaders are afraid to take chances that might expose the fact that they are not perfect.
- They do not want others or themselves to see their weaknesses or to know they are not flawless.



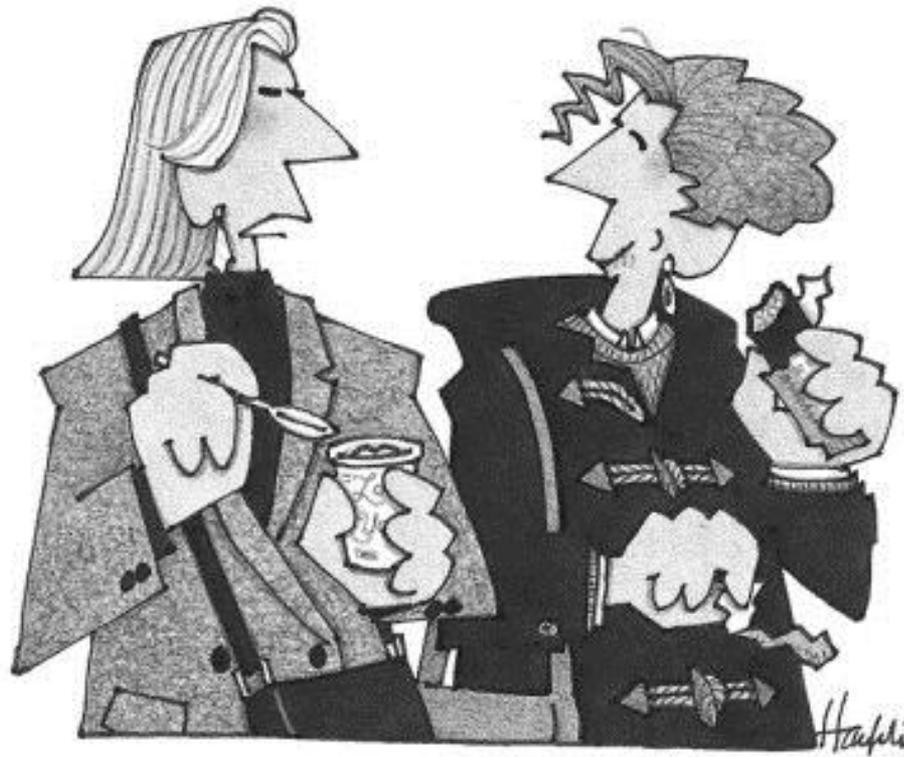
- Risk Evaders expect to be perfect the first time they try and every subsequent time.
- The primary characteristic of Risk Evaders is that they fear failure to achieve their standards and ideals so they decide not to attempt the task.
- REs do not delight in the process or in their attempts because they are overly focused on the outcome and the possibility that it will not be perfect. Therefore, they choose not to try.

# Strategies for the Home

## Risk Evaders

- Adopt activities that are fun but not an area of strength
- Emphasize enjoyment over perfection
- Upon completion of projects, notice areas of strength and improvement
- Share joy upon completion of projects
- Encourage intellectual risk-taking





**"I do not want to be perfect.  
I want to appear to be perfect."**

# Controlling Image Managers...

- ...want others to regard them as perfect; if they are afraid they are unable to meet expectations in competitive situations, choose to eliminate themselves intentionally and say they *could have been perfect if they wanted to compete*
- They often avoid risks while managing their image.
- They may attempt a task but set themselves up with an explanation in the event that they do not meet expectations. Some will avoid the task while giving an explanation that preserves their image.



- Controlling Image Managers often exhibit other types of perfectionism as well.
- Often face the problem of peers becoming frustrated with them because they always must win or they “give up”.
- CIMs focus excessively on winning and on being the best. They expect to be perfect—including being better than their classmates and friends.
- Perfection is a strong part of their identity, and they are afraid to have others see any flaws in them.

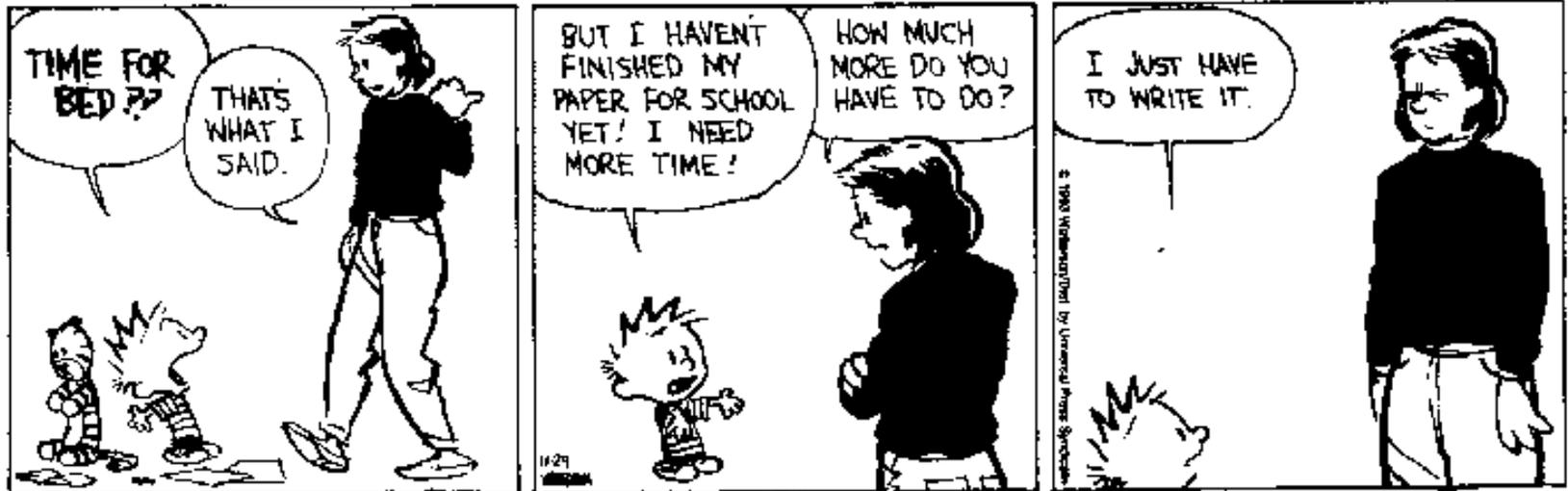
# Strategies for the Home

## Controlling Image Managers

- Hold discussions during noncompetitive times
- Role-play competitive situations
- Play semi-competitive games at home
- Carefully monitor competitive situations with peers or siblings and provide support
- Find examples of competitions in media and discuss them
- Help your child set personal goals rather than comparative goals



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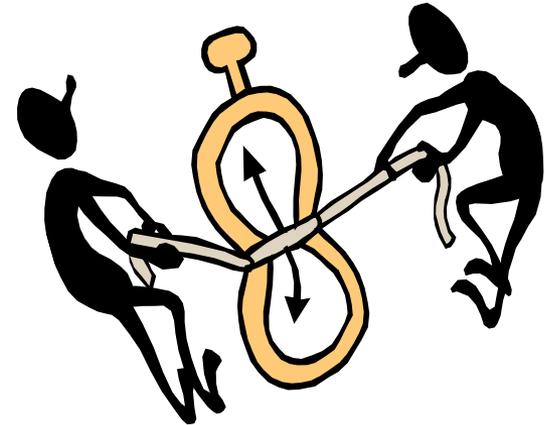
**CALVIN AND HOBBS**

# Procrastinating Perfectionists

- **Plan an extensive project but fail to start it for fear of their inability to achieve their perfect vision**
- Procrastinating Perfectionists have a perfect vision in their mind, have a perfect outcome that they expect to reach, and have very high standards for themselves and their products, but they fear that they are not able to achieve that vision.



- When assigned a substantial project, some children, particularly gifted children, will plan elaborate and creative projects. They can see the details in their mind and become extremely enthusiastic about the project.
- They will continue to think about what they envision the final product to be like, they fear that it will not turn out the way they imagined it or are intimidated by the formidable tasks.
- The anxiety of not achieving their “perfect image” leads to procrastination. This allows them to preserve their egos by giving them an “excuse” for not being perfect or achieving their standards.



# Strategies for the Home

## Procrastinating Perfectionists

- Help your child find ways to relax his or her standards during crunch time
- Help your child make a plan for finishing long-term assignments
- Check in regularly with your child to help maintain good work habits
- Find non-stressful times to discuss time management with your child.
- Communicate regularly with your child's teachers
- Use family projects as a way to model positive behaviors



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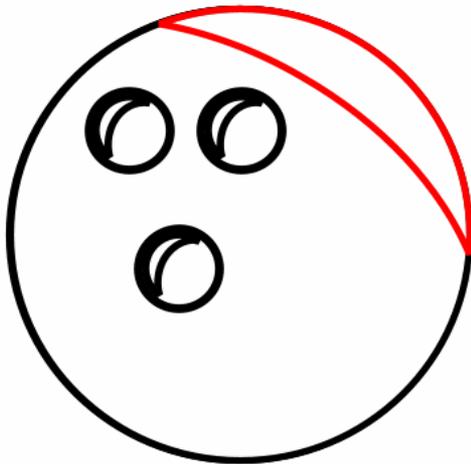
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**"The way I see it, nobody's perfect."**

# Resources

- [http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page\\_id=113](http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page_id=113)
- Adelson, J.L. & Wilson, H. E. *Letting go of perfect: Overcoming perfectionism in Kids.*
- Adderholdt, M. & Goldberg, J. *Perfectionism: What's bad about being too good.*
- Greenspon, T. *What to do when good enough isn't good enough: The real deal on perfectionism*

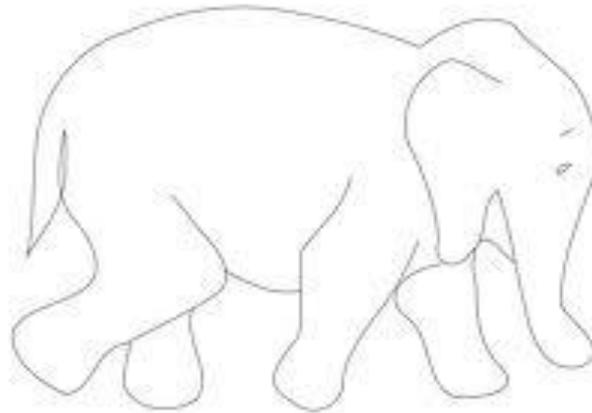
PAMS Parent Lunch Bunch  
January 2012  
Perfectionism  
Name \_\_\_\_\_



This is something  
that keeps rolling  
around in my  
head that I want  
to think about  
some more later.



This is something  
that changed  
my thinking...



This is  
something that  
I want to  
remember...