

# What is Perfect?

Debunking *The Myth of the Perfect Girl* with San Francisco author and educator Ana Homayoun.

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By Jennifer Massoni Pardini

Reading Ana Homayoun's book, *The Myth of the Perfect Girl: Helping Our Daughters Find Authentic Success and Happiness in School and Life*, I couldn't help but be reminded of the academic and social pressures that characterized my own academic years. But Homayoun's decade of experience as the founder of Green Ivy Educational Consulting in Los Altos and as an educational speaker on campuses around the country and abroad has shown that while the landscape of learning may be reminiscent of days gone by, it has changed—both on and off campus.

Today's girls and boys are learning and maturing within school systems heavily focused on achievement. Technological distractions are vying for their limited free time, they have increasingly competitive college admissions standards to surmount, and an ever-savvy social network and media-driven culture to navigate. Schools and students alike turn to Homayoun for help in understanding this ever-changing intersection of technology, learning, motivation, and socialization, as she defines it.

Also the author of *That Crumpled Paper Was Due Last Week: Helping Disorganized and Distracted Boys Succeed in School and Life*, Homayoun decided to focus on issues facing girls in order to address a number of questions she had about the school-age girls and young career women who work with her. "Why do we have so many girls who did everything right and feel they are still not good enough? Why are there higher rates of

mental issues among girls? Why is meanness more out of control than ever before?" She found answers with an investigation into the way technology, culture, and expectations are affecting modes of learning as messages from the media, parents, peers, and school compete for what a young girl should focus on, be, and do in order to fill a so-called "perfect" mold. Meanwhile, the culture's relentless expectation of achievement seems steeper than ever. "It's important to emphasize how new this culture of achievement is," Homayoun writes in the book, out this month from Perigree, a division of Penguin Books. "People have always striven for the best, of course, but the single-minded focus with which this end-results perspective attacks and upends the system of education and its breadth across the culture are new, and girls, who are more prone to buying into its temporary rewards, are especially at risk."

If you're wondering how different things really are from when you or I grew up, consider that academics are moving at the speed of technology. Take the student who comes to Homayoun's office because her homework takes five hours, but discovers through simple time-management exercises that two hours of texting and social networking are happening simultaneously? Much of it has to do with age and maturity. "Many teen-agers have a tough time self-regulating and can react a lot more to the quick fixes rather than understanding what they should focus on," Homayoun explains. "Ten or 20 years ago, if someone was calling

us, they were calling our house phone. Now, kids have cell phones and are getting text messages in between homework and in the middle of the night—and they're responding." Girls, especially, who are so relational, may recognize that such disruptions are affecting their sleep and productivity, but still engage because it's important to feel available to their friends 24/7.

This online style of communication also magnifies bullying, which can be a debilitating distraction. "Before, they rolled their eyes at someone at school," says Homayoun. "Now, they can go online and the meanness follows a student home and has a digital footprint. The issues are similar, but now they're pervasive." Technology isn't going anywhere, and Homayoun is well aware that the answer is not telling our kids to stay away from it, but for both parents and students to understand its affects. Homayoun asks each student: "What is it you really want and what do you need to focus on to get there?" Much of the time, the answer is to have more free time or develop an interest to pursue "just for fun," so she works with the student to manage her time to meet that goal.

This focus on the student's wants pervades Homayoun's approach in the book, at her Green Ivy office in Los Altos, and in her spoken message as a full-school consultant, leading faculty in-services, parent education nights, and student presentations. By helping educators, parents, and students understand the challenges facing both girls and boys today, "it gets everyone on the same

page about having an engaged learning environment and helps give students an intrinsic motivation to see what they want out of their school experience. I ask students how they can be the builder of their own world, and a lot of these students have never actively considered that question.”

Homayoun’s book’s overall goal is to provide the appropriate tools and strategies to both understand and break down these boxes so young girls can build up a sense of their own unique purpose without being motivated purely by external validation. For instance, by being motivated by their own empathy for others, our daughters can do community service because they want to help rather than to primarily appeal to college admissions directors. “Teenagers can mistakenly think something is not important because it’s not on a résumé, but those things build a life,” she says. And it’s on us to lead by example. “You are a great everyday role model,” she says to parents, which often means encouraging creativity and exploration outside of school as much as in. “Kids look at what you do all the time. If you don’t have an intrinsic sense of purpose yourself, it’s really hard for them to buy into that message.”

Without this self-awareness, the self-defeating irony is that focusing on filling the box can make one feel like the box is, in fact, empty. Homayoun suspects this is why the young women she meets on her college visits as well as the early career women she counsels are also feeling unfulfilled by their achievements or burned out altogether. “It’s as if they’ve been told by this post-feminist world that not only can you have it all, but you should have it all, and if you don’t, something’s wrong with you—and you should look awesome while doing it.”

So, how do we go about this profound shift in thinking and acting? The answer is with small, manageable shifts. Homayoun’s book offers tangible tools and interactive exercises designed to bring parents and daughters together so everyone can think outside the box. The exercises range from the whimsical (asking your daughter to design her dream business) to the practical



(working on time sheets together so you can both gain a better perspective on how much time your daughter’s schooling, sports, and extracurricular activities really take). “The exercises are conversation starters, so you can approach things in a way that’s not judgmental,” she says. And this is a conversation we should start early on with our daughters.

With this spirit of inquiry, Homayoun’s philosophy isn’t about focusing on the prob-

lem, but rather on what the individual—whether it’s the student, the parent, or the educator—can do to surmount it. I dare say all will learn from taking on and debunking today’s myth of the perfect girl. ♦

You can contact Ana Homayoun about her educational consulting, career coaching, and speaking engagements by visiting [www.greenivied.com](http://www.greenivied.com) or [www.anahomayoun.com](http://www.anahomayoun.com).