

Children & Competition

Many parents are concerned about competition and its effect on children. Others feel that competition is nothing to worry about. In fact, moderate competition is good for children, but extreme competition can devastate a child. Research tells us that temperament, culture, talent and the age of the child affect how a child handles competition. Children are not born with a competitive urge. They learn it. They don't begin to compete with and compare their skills to others until they're about 5 years old. Most children can't work well as a member of a team until they're 10 or 11. They also have to be 10 or 11 before they can handle defeat gracefully.

Children differ in temperament. Some thrive on competition. Others become nervous wrecks when they are compared to others or asked to perform before two or three people. Adults need to treat children as the individuals that they are. There is no need to push an already competitive child to compete, but it may be appropriate to encourage a more reluctant child who shows potential.

Adults need to remember that competition is tough. Whatever side you take, competition is about winning and losing. If someone wins, then one or more children lose. Losing is serious business, especially for a child who wants to win!

Being competitive involves quick decision-making, self-control, discipline and maturity. An overly competitive child often is less concerned about safety.

What is the value of competition for your young child? What are the benefits and the disadvantages?

Advantages and Disadvantages of Competition

Competition can be good for children. It can help children develop healthy attitudes about winning and losing. Children become competitive as they refine and practice skills and develop coordination and cognitive abilities. Competition can encourage growth and push a child to excel. Children also benefit as they:

- learn about their abilities and limitations.
- set goals.
- handle loss.
- develop skills.
- enhance their popularity.
- develop competence in an area.
- develop problem-solving skills.
- try out different roles.
- learn rules of the game.
- learn to perform before a group.
- learn to work with others.

Although competition can be a very strong motivator, problems arise

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when too much emphasis is put on being the best. If a child can't enjoy each achievement on its own merit, winning may not be a goal worth reaching. Competition can harm a child if it:

- causes physical or emotional injury, or both.
- shatters the loser.
- winning at any cost is stressed.
- undermines self-confidence.
- humiliates.
- lowers the need to take care of others.
- insults self-worth.
- diminishes performance.
- causes hostility, aggression, or makes a child unpopular.
- is done just for parents' benefit.

6- to 8-Year-Olds

Children between the ages of 6-8 reason differently than adults. They operate in the concrete. To experience an object, they must see it, hear it, feel it, touch it or taste it. They are self-centered and poorly coordinated. What else do we know about six to eight year olds? They:

- enjoy being right and the center of attention.
- are eager to learn and want to do activities for themselves.
- have short attention spans (about 15-20 minutes).
- are sympathizers.
- enjoy simple games with few rules (3-4 rules).
- are play oriented, play for fun or for play's sake.
- see only one way to solve problems.
- stretch the truth to avoid punishment.
- want to be winners, to be first, to lead.
- need to have lots of physical attention.
- need supervised play and activities.

This age group does not do well in competitive activities. Everyone needs and wants to win, to succeed. They need to be in group activities and participatory activities. They work best in a cooperative group.

9- to 12-Year-Olds

Children between the ages of 9-12 try hard to be good and to please others. They do their duty, show respect for authority and follow fixed rules. They try to maintain order. They are in the industry stage of development—they are work and achievement oriented. Peer influence has a major impact on relationships. They are more rational and logical and can see more than one side to an issue. Children 9- to 12-years-old:

- believe in fairness, following the rules.
- are beginning to reason and think abstractly.
- demand to know all the rules.
- participate mostly in either all-boy or all-girl activities.
- become frustrated with complicated tasks.
- join clubs; gang behavior is common.
- behave antisocially.
- argue and disagree a lot.
- fear embarrassing situations, fighting between parents, not having friends, and failing in school.
- can project into the future.
- are developing a moral conscience.

When Does Competition Become Appropriate?

Six- to 8-year-olds compete for fun; winning does not have the same meaning for them as for 9- to 12-year-olds.

Winning, losing, or playing against others has little or no meaning for children under 7. They are more concerned about the rules of games and how games are played than on winning. They break the rules when they can't remember. Games and play allow children to do what they want to do and to learn to do it.

By age 8, children can follow rules and understand what it means to win. Sixes are beginning to seek social approval. They want to be in a group. Six- to 8-year-olds suffer lowered self-esteem when they lose, especially if parents stress winning.

Research says that activities for young children should be noncompetitive but should pro-

mote the practice of a limited set of skills. Children this age group need to win often. Their short attention spans keep them from understanding complex rules. They lack the competitive rivalry skills to compete. They cannot develop strategies to defeat another. They aren't ready for physical competition and have difficulties functioning in team situations.

Nine- to 12-year-olds understand competitive play. They have better understanding of their personal capabilities and enjoy competitive games and activities where one wins and one is defeated. Games offer the experience of competence. Twelve-year-olds are candidates for competition. Children 13 and older fare better in competitive activities.

What sort of older child is not ready and may have problems or participating in winning or losing activities? Who should have limited competitive exposure? What children make competitive activities a hassle for adults?

Children who are not ready for competitive activities are usually insecure, immature, selfish, spoiled or irresponsible. They are behavior problems, are pressured too much from their parents, are not team players or can't handle losing. They have not developed patience or tolerance and often throw tantrums. They are overwhelmed by competition, competitive tasks and comparison to other children. Parents must have a keen sense of judgment and understanding of their children when making decisions about competition.

You can usually tell when children are in activities for which they're not ready. They have trouble sleeping or suffer from headaches or nausea. They create ailments and excuses and try to avoid activities of this nature. They may become depressed, lack energy, feel sad and lose interest in competitive activities.

Helping Children Succeed

How can we help children succeed in competitive situations?

One way is to take the time to play with

children. Encouraging them to flex their competitive muscles in a secure environment helps them learn they can lose a game without losing self-confidence. Activities and experiences should promote physical and intellectual development, cooperation and a healthy view of competition. Stress the basics of fair play, good sportsmanship, putting forth good effort and winning or losing gracefully.

What are good activities for 6- to 12-year-olds? To help your children succeed, try some of the following:

1. Provide opportunities for games of chance and games of strategy (old maid, go fish, bingo, chess, backgammon).
2. Plan both cooperative and competitive activities (potato relays, cheerleading, softball).
3. Teach children how to be team players and how to cope with defeat and disappointment by playing beat the clock activities.
4. Introduce activities for younger children as fun activities and games. Ask "How many dribbles can you do in 60 seconds? Can you throw the basketball into a basket?"
5. Make a joke of some situations—not the child. (That ball didn't have enough air in it anyway.)
6. Follow the rules. Don't bend the rules to get a winner. Don't show favoritism.
7. Play close attention to the ethics of competing: right and wrong, losing and winning.
8. Offer coaching and encouragement but don't push too hard. Use positive statements like "Try again," "Aim higher," and "You are a sharp shooter."
9. Be a good role model.

Rewarding Competitive Behavior

Here are a few tips about rewarding and nurturing children.

- Make the reward suit the behavior or activity.
- Be sure that all children are winners. Find special ways to reward children.
- Encourage and reward small steps toward completion of tasks.
- Stress skill development over winning.
- Emphasize the importance of doing one's best.
- Help your child set realistic goals.
- Enforce rules and promote discussions of "fairness."
- Encourage your child to try a variety of activities before getting involved in competitive activities.
- Don't relive your life through your child. Avoid over-involvement.

Parents influence the competitive nature of their children. So do other adults, brothers and sisters, and friends. Try to keep a healthy attitude toward competition.

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