



# COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

*Bringing the University to You*

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*Fact Sheet #93-86*

## **Competition and Cooperation: Helping Youth Strike a Balance**

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### **Positive Approaches to Competition**

Parents, teachers, coaches, youth directors and other adults play an integral role in directing the activities of youth. Adults can help to channel the energies of youth so that they encounter a wide variety of experiences. Adults can play an important role in helping youth balance competition and cooperation.

Competition takes place in many settings, such as the classroom, 4-H, other youth groups and even in the home. Sports often come to mind when we think about competition. Youth, however, rarely cite winning as a reason for participating. They more often list learning new skills or physical competence, being with friends in a group, fun and excitement, or staying in shape as reasons for their involvement.

Competition in itself is not a bad thing. Competition will be experienced at many points in life. As adults, we can choose to structure events and contests so that competition is a learning experience. Competition becomes negative when winning becomes the overriding goal. In these instances, only a few people are able to achieve their goal. The majority of individuals will feel beaten and defeated. Adults can help guide youth to focus on the **means** (learning, obtaining goals, social contact or simply being happy by being involved) instead of the end (winning).

Striving to achieve a goal is a productive form of competition where success is measured in growth and not by a ribbon or trophy. Youth strive to be their best and measure success against a standard. Individual differences are allowed for and individuals can build on their personal abilities, knowledge and skills. The goal is personal development, rather than being champion or beating others.

### **Cooperation Benefits Youth**

Cooperative activity is an extremely positive method of learning. By working as a team:

- participants feel that they can reach their goals if other team members also reach their goals.
- youth feel better about each other.
- youth learn more, like each other better, have higher self-esteem, enjoy themselves more and learn more effective social skills.
- positive interpersonal relations develop while motivating individuals to learn.

### **Avoiding the negative side of competition**

Studies have shown that results of competition are negative when they focus only on the outcome or winning. Children who do not win may feel that they have failed and have negative feelings about themselves. They experience lower levels of satisfaction in participating, feel undeserving and experience more anxiety.

Interest in the task is de-emphasized and motivation is for the wrong reason, the extrinsic motivator or reward.

Children are extremely sensitive to adult attitudes about winning and losing. When positive responses follow only winning, and negative reactions following losing, youth may learn to fear failure. Their desire and motivation may be dampened in a way that limits their creativity and their desire to take chances and experience new things. Enthusiasm for learning and enjoyment in the activity may be discouraged. Children are not miniature adults - winning is not as important as fun and learning!

**Competition becomes more effective when,**

- winning is not stressed.
- anxiety levels are low and the competition is used as an energy release or just for fun!
- it is used to increase performance or retention in simple drills or speed-related tasks for personal improvement.
- all participants believe they have a reasonable chance to win.
- clear, specific rules are given and answers are available.
- participants can monitor their own progress and grow through the experience.
- guided by caring, sensitive and informed adults.
- results are not over-generalized. Winning or losing does not make you a better or worse person.

**How can adults support and guide youth to strike a balance between competitive and cooperative activities? Here are a few suggestions:**

- Let youth determine their own participation. Guide younger children toward appropriate activities, but encourage them to consider a wide range of choices, including competition and cooperation.

- Help youth develop an attitude of responsibility for their actions and control over their environment.
- Praise youth for positive aspects of involvement, for being involved in general and for engaging in team-oriented activities. Give encouragement and specific feedback in ways to improve, but avoid making comparisons with other children.
- Focus on the development of skills and abilities, not winning. Process, mastery and growth should be the emphasis in youth activities.
- Be sensitive to individual personalities and temperaments.
- Make expectations realistic. Be interested, but not overly concerned with their inability to produce correct outcomes.
- Help youth set goals that are appropriate and realistic.
- Focus on mastery for maximizing the development of physical, social and psychological skills.
- Support youth, but do not compete with or through them for adult satisfaction. Let youth achieve competence and do not overly assist in a way that takes their personal ownership away.
- Be a positive role model.
- Structure events to include all youth.
- Encourage effort and improvement more than points or ribbons.
- Emphasize the importance of effort, persistence and learning. Mistakes are part of the process and are learning opportunities. Respond to an error with encouragement and positive reinforcement about what was done right.
- End on a positive, optimistic note.

As adults, we can help youth by making activities positive and fulfilling. By striking a balance between competition and cooperation, youth will feel better about themselves, have higher self-esteem and have a greater desire to participate in future activities and experiences.