

COMPETITION: IS IT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN?

Marilyn Lopes
Extension Specialist, Family Life Education
Cape Cod Cooperative Extension
University of Massachusetts

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Common knowledge suggests that competition is generally good for children, but research findings from as far back as the 1930's suggest otherwise. It is commonly believed that children are instinctively competitive and always feel good about competing and that competition creates conditions in which children and adults will do their best. These common beliefs are more myth than fact.

Competition is a learned behavior. Humans are not born competitive. What we are born with is an instinct to survive, but the desire to win and competitiveness are learned through social interactions.

Competitions are not always fun. Competition is nearly always set up as a win-lose situation and is more likely to be fun for those who win, not those who lose. Sometimes even those who win do not have fun because they focus on the goal of winning, not the joy of the process. Sports are designed for pastime fun and development of physical skills. Team sports are designed for learning teamwork in which all members have something of worth to contribute. However, sitting on a bench and experiencing intense pressure, high degrees of anxiety, or fear of failure are not fun. When competitors place the greatest value on winning and the least value on performing or learning a task well, the educational purpose of competition is lost.

Competition may or may not make us do our best. Competition may set up conditions that favor reliance on external rewards rather than a balance of external and internal rewards. Relying on external rewards for self-esteem, i.e. rewards that come from outside rather than inside individuals, may become problematic in adult life when "winning" in sports, clubs, and classrooms is no longer a part of daily life.

Competition can also be positive. Competitions can offer ways to gain insights about one's capacity to develop physical and intellectual skills. When rewards are minimized, competitions can be fun. They can accentuate skill-building and strategy-building, teach teamwork, teach ways to identify personal goals, and provide ways to develop criteria for success. Competitions can easily call for maximum effort and may motivate some individuals to increase efforts toward completion of some tasks.

Competitions can provide changes of pace and releases for energy and are

thought to be most positive when all participants believe from the start they have equal chances of winning.

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Gretchen May
Tillson House
University of Massachusetts
Box 37605
Amherst, MA 01003-7605
PHONE:: (413) 549-8800
FAX:: (413) 549-6337
E-MAIL:: gmay@coopext.umass.edu

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