



Cooperation, Competition, and Kids

A learn-at-home series for volunteers, parents, coaches, and anyone who works with youth

Competition and Self-Esteem

Winners and Losers

What are the consequences for youth who compete and lose?

Carole Ames (1984) looked at the results of several studies on losing in competitive experiences. She found serious consequences for children who fail in competitive situations and events. Youth who do not win exhibit more negative behavior towards themselves, lower levels of satisfaction towards themselves, and more feelings of not being worthy. They are also very critical of themselves.

Ames reported that losing in a competitive experience magnifies the negative effect more than winning enhances the positive effect. She found, in addition, that kids who win have a higher level of personal satisfaction and think they are more capable than others.

A national USDA task force (1989) reviewed research on competition and its effect on youth. The task force found that competitors believe it is important to outperform another person not merely to achieve a high level of performance or receive an award. Competitors value winning more than they value performing a task well or learning how to do the task at hand.

Research of athletics indicates that youngsters who focus on winning tend to drop out of sports early, while those who focus on mastering a skill tend to persist (Duda, 1988). The same researcher found that ages 11 to 13 are the more critical years for dropping out.

Sports psychologist Terry Orlich (1988) reports that it is not uncommon to lose 80 to 90 percent of registered sports participants by age 15. Some youth, in anticipation of competitive events or after experiencing failure at an event, may decide not to participate anymore and never develop their talent.

When a child's attention is focused on winning or losing, it becomes increasingly difficult to teach the child social and life skills, which is the goal of many youth-serving organizations.



Effects on Self-Esteem

In most cases, the research shows, only winners feel good about themselves in a competition. Many of the losers (or nonwinners) feel worse about themselves. Since there are fewer winners than nonwinners, most competitions leave a lot of children feeling worse about themselves.

Alfie Kohn (1992) states: "To lose—particularly in a public event—can be psychologically detrimental even for the healthiest among us. At best, some exceptional individuals might emerge without damage to their self-esteem, but it is difficult to see how losing can enhance it."

Carole Ames (1978) studied children in competitive learning situations. She found that competition makes children feel they are not in control of what happens to them. Ames also noted that youth who do not see themselves as having control over their own actions tend to be lower achievers.

In a competitive society, it is easy to assume that competition will build a strong sense of self. David and Roger Johnson (1988) concluded that cooperative learning situations, compared with competitive and individualistic situations, promote higher levels of self-esteem and healthier processes for deriving conclusions about one's self-worth. Johnson and Johnson also indicate that "cooperativeness" is related to emotional maturity, well-adjusted social relations, a strong personal identity, and a basic trust in and optimism about other people.

Sociologist Ruth Rubinstein (1977) used a written test of self-esteem with children between the ages of 10 and 14 who attended either a competitive or a noncompetitive summer camp. Self-esteem levels did not change in the competitive camp, but they increased in the cooperative camp.

The more importance placed on winning, the more hurtful losing can be. Stuart Walker (1980) found that “the greater the investment, the greater will be the grief when we fail. When emphasis is placed not upon what is accomplished but upon what is publicly recognized, not upon the demonstration of competence but upon winning, then the competitor eventually comes to believe that he is defective and deserves to fail.”

Other Effects of Competition

Additional effects of competition on kids have been identified by Margaret Clifford (1989) as follows:

- Competition can be distracting and can reduce concentration—the more complex and unfamiliar an activity is, the more likely it is that a competitive situation will interfere with the mental processes needed for learning and performance.
- Competition can encourage counterproductive activity—for example, not helping a friend with his or her athletic skill because that friend could eventually be a competitor.
- Competition can lead to imbalanced skill development—the measures of success are determined by the competitive event and may often leave other skills undeveloped.
- Competition can lead to false concepts about self—youth who compete and lose often incorrectly judge themselves failures.
- Competition can lead to false judgments about individuals’ abilities—youth who become fearful in competitive situations may perform below their ability level.
- Competition can lead to cheating and unfair practices.

How Young Is Too Young?

As we discuss competition and its positive or negative effects on children, readers may want to know what age is considered too young for competition. This section discusses some of the latest research on younger youth and competition.

Youth development organizations seek to help children acquire knowledge, develop life skills, and form attitudes that enable them to become self-directing, productive, and contributing members of society. Positive self-esteem plays a major role in the accomplishment of this goal. Children in the five- to eight-year-old age range are at a critical stage in developing a self-concept.

How are competition and self-esteem related? They are both forms of measurement. Self-esteem is a measurement of ourselves—our mirror—our concept of what we are and what we can become. Competition is a measurement of one person against another.

Younger children, who have not yet formed a self-concept, look to others for this measurement. In the early stages of growth, children’s feelings of self-esteem come from the people around them. Young children’s thinking is still very much in the concrete stage. If they cannot see, touch, smell, or feel something, they have trouble understanding it (Hendrick, 1975).



Young children often generalize measures of worth, such as ribbons or trophies, to mean measures of self-worth. Adults are able to tell the difference, but young children have not reached this developmental stage.

Young children are fascinated with the process of accomplishing a task (Hendrick, 1975). They are enthusiastic about learning new skills and want to repeat a skill simply for the joy of learning the process. The end product or result has little meaning for them. It is the process that’s important. Competition places all the emphasis on the end product or result. Too often too little concern is given to the process. Placing too little emphasis on the process is in direct conflict with what is important to children at this developmental stage.

Terry Orlick (1978) states that the absence of competition reduces the importance of the outcome and frees children to simply enjoy the experience of playing and learning. They then have a new freedom to learn from their mistakes.

Competition Throughout Childhood: An Overview

Early childhood (0–8 years)

- Competition is learned
- Cooperative play is more appropriate
- Motor and social skills develop at a rapid rate
- Allow children to be self-directed with your guidance

Middle childhood (8–12 years)

- Children vary greatly in their physical development
- They have a need to belong
- Beginning of trend toward dropping out of unhealthy competitive activities
- Children are eager for recognition and approval
- Fun is the goal of involvement

Junior high (12–14 years)

- Need for rewards and recognition intensifies
- Greater influence of peers
- Fun remains the number one reason to compete

Senior high (14–18 years)

- Perception of self as competent
- Better able to reason and recognize the positive and negative aspects of competition
- Adult role models remain important
- Capable of striking a healthy balance between competition and cooperation

The Blue Ribbon



The county fair was beginning tomorrow. All our 4-H projects were being judged today. I was helping the judges in the foods area, but I was really interested in knowing if my skirt would win a blue ribbon. I had never sewed before, so I really learned a lot from my 4-H leader and my grandmother. My grandmother worked with me every day after school to help me with my skirt. I even plan to wear the skirt to school to show my friends. I think it looks good with my blue and white shirt.

After the judge was finished with the skirts in my class, I went over to find out how I did. She said that there were a lot of really good skirts, and mine was good, but the seams weren't as straight as they could have been and my seam finishes weren't very even. She said that I did a good job, but I didn't win a ribbon this year—maybe next year. I didn't want her to see how disappointed I was, but I tried so hard. I'm not sure I will ever be able to sew good enough to win. I might try another project next year. Maybe I'll have more luck with a foods project.

—4-H member

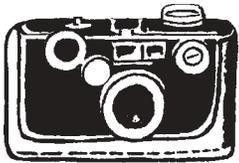
Cooperative Learning in Action

The Assembly Line

Use this approach to learning when leading an activity or teaching a skill that has a series of steps. For example, if you're teaching how to prepare a recipe, divide the group, if it is large, into smaller groups. The group size should never exceed the number of steps in the process. Assign each member of the group one of the steps. This person is then responsible for completing that step.

The entire group prepares the recipe. When they are done, have them talk about what they learned besides how to prepare a recipe. Did the children learn to establish working relationships with each other or management skills for the completion of the recipe? Talk about and reflect on these skills (Hall, 1992).

A Snapshot for Self-Esteem



Taking a child's picture tells them that they are important to you and that you want to be able to look at them even when they're not around. Keep a scrapbook with pictures of the kids you work with. Take pictures frequently and review the album together—it's good for everyone!

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