



Cooperation, Competition, and Kids

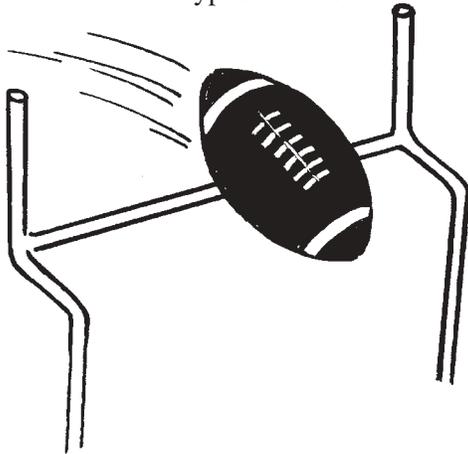
A learn-at-home series for volunteers, parents, coaches, and anyone who works with youth

Learning and Participating—Cooperating and Competing

Reaching Goals

When teachers set the stage for learning in their classrooms, they use one or a combination of three basic goal structures: cooperative, competitive, and individualistic.

Although the concept of “goal structures” is used most often in formal classroom learning, it’s also a viable concept for working with youth in nonformal settings. In nonformal situations, youth may learn life skills and subject matter through a variety of educational activities or experiences (Johnson and Hohnson, 1987). These activities and experiences are the “goal structures.” More detail on each of the three types follows.



Learning Cooperatively

In *Learning Together and Alone* (1987), David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson identify cooperation as the best way to learn in most situations. They emphasize that a youth’s greatest need is to be able to learn in a carefully planned cooperative situation, with competitive and individualized learning added later. *Learning experiences for youth must first be based on cooperation, then competition can be introduced.*

Learning to work together, getting to know others, sharing in successes, and developing collaborative skills are essential for assuring that competition will produce positive results in learners. Johnson and Johnson base these findings on results from 80 of their own research studies, plus data from 150 other studies.

These researchers agree that cooperative, competitive, and individualistic approaches to learning are appropriate, depending on specific goals and objectives. They strongly favor cooperative classrooms, however, stating: “The research clearly demonstrates that cooperation helps youth to become more motivated and achieve more than competition.”

Planning activities in which youth cooperate to achieve a goal helps young people learn many important life skills—cooperation, teamwork, communication, problem-solving, goal-setting, and more.

Five characteristics of cooperative situations have been identified. They are:

1. Goals—all members of the group agree on the same goal.
2. Rewards—when a group cooperates, all members receive equal rewards.
3. All members do their share—to succeed everyone must “pull his or her share of the load.” Cooperative learning is a “sink or swim” situation. Each person is responsible for the other person. Groups should be made up of youth with different skills and abilities to take advantage of each person’s uniqueness and strengths.
4. Activities are coordinated—plans must be made, work assigned and completed.
5. Leadership is shared—someone may act as a leader and coordinate the group’s efforts; however, shared leadership allows each person to have some responsibility for leading the group.

Cooperative Learning—Principles to Use

Johnson and Johnson (1987) emphasize these principles for conducting cooperative learning:

- Each child is different, and each differs in regard to his or her feelings about cooperation and competition. Respect those differences. We must also recognize that children's ability to deal with competition differs with age. Cooperative skills should be taught before competitive skills are emphasized.
- All cooperative learning methods must emphasize the idea that youth work together to learn and that they are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own.
- Cooperative learning should emphasize kindness, service, cooperation with others, and helpfulness.
- To be effective, cooperative learning must include group goals and individual accountability. Groups must be working to achieve some goal or to earn recognition, and the success of the group must depend on the individual learning of every group member, not just the "best" in the group.
- Successful cooperative learning situations can provide optimal conditions for enhancing self-esteem. Life skill development should be a primary goal of cooperative learning.
- Learning experiences should first use cooperative goal structures before competitive and individualistic learning activities are introduced.
- Cooperative learning situations require considerable face-to-face interaction, frequent use of interpersonal and small group skills, and periodic and regular group processing.
- Cooperative learning situations aim to develop a sense of positive interdependence among participants.

Learning Competitively

In competitive goal structures, youth work against one another to achieve a goal. Some youth achieve their goals only if others do not. The three most commonly used competitive goal structures are: (1) interpersonal competition—competition against all others; (2) intergroup competition—competing as a team against other groups; and (3) goal competition—the desire to obtain a goal, to be the best one can be.

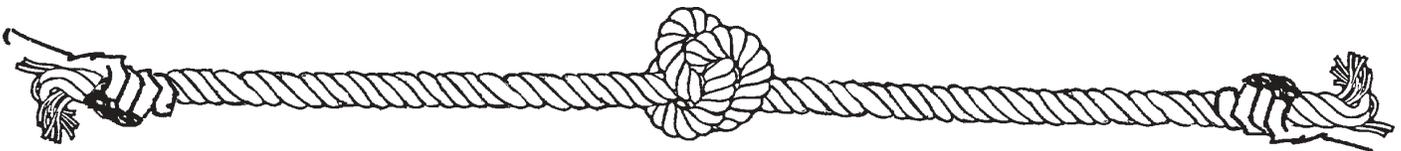
Interpersonal Competition or Peer Competition

Interpersonal competition is most effective when:

- Youth are performing simple drill or speed-related tasks where quantity is important
- Youth are reviewing material that is well known
- A change of pace or a release of energy is desired and the activities are relatively unimportant and produce low anxiety
- All youth believe they have a reasonable chance of winning
- Clear and specific rules, procedures, and answers are available

When youth compete against one another instead of working cooperatively, fewer skills are essential because less coordination of behavior is needed. However, some skills are essential for youth to learn if they are going to compete against their peers. These are:

1. Learning to play fair—understand and obey the rules.
2. Being a good winner and a good loser—win with humility, pleasure, and modesty, and be gracious when you lose.
3. Enjoying the competition, win or lose.
4. Learning to monitor the progress of competitors to see how youth stand.
5. Not overgeneralizing the results—winning doesn't make you a more worthwhile person and losing doesn't make you less worthwhile.



Competing as a Group or Team

Competing as a group appears to be more effective than interpersonal competition. Evidence shows that competing as a group can be beneficial, but that all negative aspects associated with interpersonal competition are also true for intergroup competition. Johnson and Johnson (1987) state: “Association with a group cushions the normal effects of failure . . . because . . . when the group loses, the loss may be taken less personally by each of the group members.”

There are several things to remember in working with youth who are competing as a group:

- Make sure groups are composed of youth with equal abilities, so that the competition isn’t lopsided.
- Make sure any awards and recognition go to all members of the best group.
- Outcomes or rewards should be based on the group’s average, so that the entire group is affected by high-low achievement.
- Make sure the competitive activity doesn’t become so strong that it destroys intragroup cooperation.

Goal Competition—Competing Against Yourself

Some definitions of competition include competing against a preset standard of excellence. This type of competition involves a personal desire to excel, to achieve a goal, and to be the best one can be. Emphasis is on the process, learning, and growth, not on the end result. Efforts are rewarded, and progress toward goals is viewed as an accomplishment. Youth need adults to help them set realistic goals and to measure their progress.

Remember: Avoid overgeneralizing outcomes of competition to individual young people. This makes youth see themselves as poor losers or overqualified winners.

Individualistic Learning—Learning Alone

Individualistic learning takes place when youth are learning by themselves and their achievements are not related to those of other students. This learning situation is most appropriate when you are trying to teach specific facts or simple skills. Individualistic learning goes well with cooperative learning. Youth learn skills individually and can then use them in cooperative learning situations.



Cooperative Learning in Action

Here is a way to divide a group into cooperative small groups to learn and practice: Ask young people to name three others with whom they would like to work. Identify the students who are not chosen. Build a group of more skilled and supportive students around the isolated child(ren).

References

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Johnson, David W., and Roger T. Johnson. *Learning Together and Alone: Cooperation, Competition, and Individualistic Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1987.

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