



# Cooperation, Competition, and Kids

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

## Striking a Balance

*Dear Youth Workers and Parents:*

*Among the current issues in youth program development, one that continually resurfaces is the role of competition in youth activities. If you ask a group of people whether competition is good or bad for kids, whether there is too little or too much competition in business, or whether competition strengthens our country and culture, you are certain to get a variety of answers.*

*This learn-at-home series is designed to help you think about competition and how it affects the youth with whom you live and work. Each issue presents the latest research-based information on competition. The information may cause you to rethink some long-held ideas about competition, or it may reinforce what you already know. In any case, we hope this series will aid you in the “real world” of working with youth.*

*Good luck as you work to provide youth with the best environment for growing and learning.*

*Sincerely,*

*Blannie E. Bowen*

*Blannie E. Bowen, Chair  
YPCC*

## Popular Views on Competition— What Do You Think?

“Competition . . . It’s the American way”

“The lifeblood of our economy”

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing”

“Competition—inspiring youth to do their best”

“It’s what makes America great”

“Humans are competitive beings”

“A blessing in disguise”

“Competition—a true test of character”

## Or?

“I swim, you sink; I sink, you swim”

“If I can win only if you lose, it’s damaging to both of us”

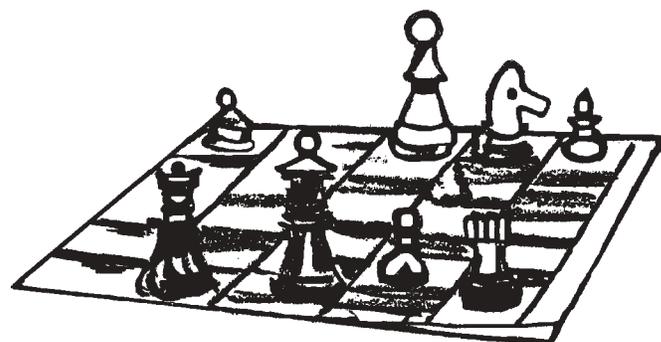
“There is no necessary relationship between competitiveness and achievement”

“Pioneers were cooperative—not competitive”

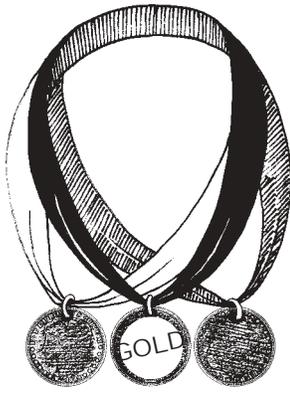
“Doing your best means beating your friends”

“Competition is learned”

“Survival requires that individuals work with rather than against each other”



## What Is Competition?



Competition has been defined as “a process through which an individual or group wins at the expense of others.” It has also been defined as “a process through which individuals attempt to win a prize, award or honor” (Clifford, 1989).

The two definitions are very different. The way we define competition influences

our thinking, attitudes, and judgments about many of the events that we observe and experience as we work with youth. In discussions about competition, it is important to think about the different types. Competition may be against one’s “personal best,” against a previously set standard of excellence, or against other people (peers).

Alfie Kohn in *No Contest—The Case Against Competition* (1992) distinguishes between what he calls structural competition and intentional competition. Structural competition has to do with the win-lose situation, which is external. Intentional competition is internal and concerns an individual’s desire to be number one.

Structural competition (win-lose) is characterized by what Kohn calls MEGA—mutually exclusive goal attainment. Simply stated, this means that one person’s success requires another person’s failure. In any MEGA situation, two or more individuals are trying to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved by all of them. This is the essence of competition as set forth in the first definition above.

## Competition—Some Positives for Kids

Margaret Clifford (1989) states: “As consumers, we can all attest to the fact that competition has a positive side. Products and services are generally improved by the competitive process. Entertainment is also heavily dependent upon competition. It is difficult to imagine noncompetitive sports.”

Clifford also outlines ways to increase competition’s value while lessening its negative effects:

- Make competition instructional. Competitors can learn from each other; and competing can provide for a display of the best talent. However, adults must make a concerted effort to focus the attention on learning from others and to identify the strengths of each competitor. This is the best way to increase skill development in a competitive situation.



- Competition reduces the monotony of practice activities. When the skill or activity is one that must be practiced over and over, a competitive activity often increases motivation for this necessary but potentially boring activity.
- Competition may elicit maximum effort. A competitive situation may motivate some youth to increase their efforts.
- Competition may foster self-awareness. Youth may compare themselves with others as a way of getting information about their own skills. We all do this informally.
- Competitive events provide a formal way to receive information about our skills. This information can also be provided in a cooperative learning situation.
- Competition may increase goal awareness. Youth in a competitive situation know the criteria for success and may also identify personal goals.

## Helping Youth Learn in Competitive Situations

Realizing that we are not going to rid ourselves of competition and its potentially negative effects on kids, how can we make it least harmful and most instructional for children? Clifford (1989) suggests the following for competitive situations:

- Accentuate the skill component—skill development should be a major purpose for any competitive activity.
- Emphasize the strategy component—when you focus on the strategy involved in a competitive event—instead of on ability, luck, rewards, or winning—skill improvement is greater.
- Minimize the reward component—relate the reward to the activity or provide symbolic rewards that emphasize the development of a skill.
- Maximize the self-directed component—whenever possible, let kids choose the numbers and types of activities in which to compete.
- Ensure moderation and balance—make sure some activities are done cooperatively.
- Minimize competition during learning—competition can be distracting for kids while learning a new skill. Beginners may give up in frustration. Competitive events tend to be more useful when they are associated with the practice and improvement of established skills.
- Allow for individual differences—some kids are immobilized by competition and others thrive on it. Never force individuals to compete.
- Strive for clarity and fairness—make sure that everyone knows the nature of the activity and that everyone generally agrees the rules or guidelines are fair.

## Does Competition Always Help Children Strive to Do Their Best?

Research shows overwhelmingly that kids learn more when they are working together than when they are competing. Superior performance does not require competition—in fact, it usually seems to require the absence of competition. Most of us have been “trained” to believe that a competitive situation produces better performances.

In 1981 David and Roger Johnson and their colleagues published an ambitious review of others’ findings (122 studies) on this topic. Their results: 65 studies found that cooperation promotes higher achievement than competition, 8 found the reverse, and 36 found no statistically significant difference. Cooperation promoted higher achievement than independent work in 108

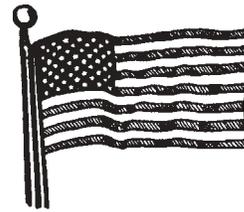
studies, while 6 did not, and 42 found no difference. The superiority of cooperation held for all subject areas and all age groups.

The researchers found that sometimes conflicts, rivalries, and small cliques formed as a result of competition. These conflicts arose among participants, parents, and even spectators.

## Is Competition Healthy for All Youth?

People tend to take one of two positions on the subject of healthy competition: enthusiastic support and qualified support. People who give qualified support often say excessive competition is to be avoided, and they do not agree with a culture that supports winning at all costs. Some argue it is the way we compete or the extent of our competitiveness that is important. Still others argue that “healthy competition” is a contradiction in terms.

## Is the American Way the Best Way?



Competition is the American way. Although it seems to play a large role in our lifestyles, it is “learned” behavior, as noted above, and many societies function without competition at all. However, the United States is a highly competitive society. Americans seem to turn almost everything into a contest. Social psychologist Elliot Aronson (1976) made this observation:

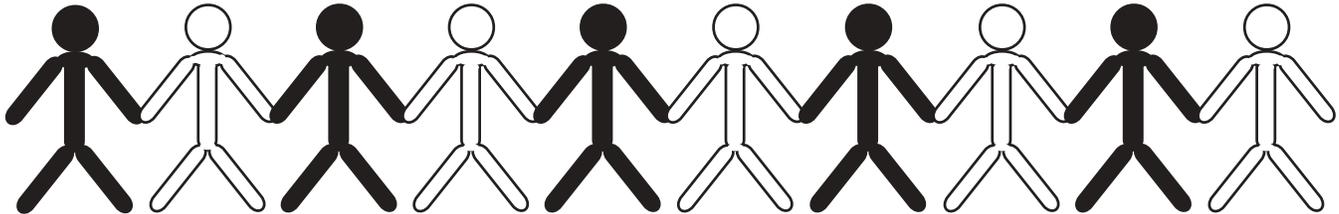
*From the Little League ball player who bursts into tears after his team loses, to the college students in the football stadium chanting ‘We’re number one!’; from Lyndon Johnson, whose judgment was almost certainly distorted by his oft-stated desire not to be the first American President to lose a war to the third grader who despises his classmate for a superior performance on an arithmetic test; we manifest a staggering cultural obsession with victory.*

## Must We Always Keep Score?

*At the elementary school fifth- and sixth-graders gave a square-dance program, with parents and children of other grades as audience. The youngsters wore colorful costumes of Western flair and flavor, and it was as charming and delightful a performance as you're likely to see in a school anywhere. They danced with all the exuberance of healthy childhood, and, obviously, they were having a wonderful time. The audience had fun, too. It was young America, in the best tradition, but at the end, a committee of judges announced the winners. One group of fifth-graders and one of the sixth-graders were pronounced 'best,' and the other dancers went away forgetting the fun they'd had, remembering only they lost. (Kohn, 1992)*

## Cooperative Learning in Action

Competition is learned; so is cooperation. Parents and professionals who work with youth have a unique opportunity to teach children how to work cooperatively rather than competitively.



Noncompetitive games do have rules and can be just as challenging as competitive ones. Terry Orlick, in *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book* (1978) and *The Second Cooperative Sports and Games Book* (1982), details hundreds of noncompetitive games. Try this version of musical chairs next time you're working with a group of children:

*When a chair is removed after the music stops at the end of each round, instead of eliminating the child who did not find a chair, the children try to fit on the chairs that remain—a task that becomes harder and more fun as the game goes on. The result is a group of giggling children trying to fit on one chair!*

Another source of cooperative games for club meetings or family events comes from a business called Family Pastimes. They make about 50 indoor games for adults and children, including cooperative versions of chess, backgammon, Go, Scrabble, and Monopoly. (Family Pastimes Catalogue, R.R. 4, Perth, Ontario, Canada K7H3CR)

## References

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