Dear Youth Workers and Parents:

This is the last issue of Cooperation, Competition, and Kids. We hope the series has given you food for thought about competition and its role in your organization. If you would like additional information on youth and competition, please contact the Penn State Cooperative Extension office in your county.

Sincerely,

Blannie E. Bowen
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YPCC

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Kids Just Wanna Have Fun!

In 1988 the Youth Sports Institute surveyed young people ages 10 to 18. It found that about one-third of these kids drop out of sports each year. Most say they left because it was no longer fun! Kids usually rank having fun as the number one reason for participating in sports. Winning was cited much farther down the list—number 12.

The behavior and attitudes of parents, coaches, volunteers, and other adults are very important if youth are going to have fun and learn in a competitive situation. It is believed that competition teaches kids how to win and lose, how to treat others fairly, and how to practice good sportsmanship and cooperation.

But children learn values from adults. How can we help children learn to win and lose and have fun while lessening the negative effects of competition? Read the following scenarios to see if you agree with the message the adult may be sending (Danielson, 1993).

- When Nancy returns home from a basketball game, her mother asks, “Did you win?”
  (What’s important is scoring more points than the opponent.)

- A coach tells his players they will have to work extra hard in practice tomorrow because their defensive skills were poor even though they won today.
  (What’s important is playing the best you can.)

- A coach says to her worst batter: “I’m proud of you. Today you dared to try those batting tips that I’ve been giving you. Yes, you struck out, but your form and swing are so much better. Soon you’ll be hitting that ball!”
  (What’s important is never giving up.)

- Sean’s dad asks: “How did you enjoy your game today? What did you learn?”
  (What’s important is playing your best and having fun!)

As you work with youth, remember to encourage them to enjoy the activity, and to do their best.
Is Competition Fun? What Do Kids Say?

Competition appears to be fun for the winners, but not the losers. In fact, in some cases, even some of the winners did not have fun, because they sacrificed their enjoyment for the sake of winning. There are ways to ease the pressure of a competitive situation or to structure the competition differently to encourage cooperation.

Despite the belief that “competition brings out the best in us,” study after study shows that nothing succeeds like cooperation. As a matter of fact, research has shown that cooperation promotes even higher achievement than competition. In a survey conducted at Montana 4-H Congress, members were asked which learning method they preferred (Astroth et al., 1993). Nearly 70 percent said that cooperation with others is the way they like to learn best.

In the same survey, members were asked which factors were the most important in motivating them to be involved in 4-H. The top two responses were friendships and fun. Awards and recognition actually appeared near the middle of the scale rather than towards the top.

Do Adults Teach Competition or Is It “Instinctive”?

Research shows competition is learned and is not instinctive in children. “People are not born with a motivation to win or to be competitive. We inherit a potential for a degree of activity and we all have the instinct to survive. But the will to win comes through training and the influences of one’s family and environment” (Tutko et al., 1976).

Get Involved—Volunteer for Youth!

Parents cite different reasons for volunteering to help with youth sports teams or other youth organizations. McPherson (1982) identifies five reasons parents get involved in youth sports:

- To support children in their interests and activities;
- To protect their children from practices and values being advocated by those responsible for the program;
- To facilitate the attainment of career aspirations they have for their children;
- To vicariously experience success that has been unavailable to them in their youth;
- To seek gratification and prestige that is not available in their otherwise unexciting lifestyle.

It’s important to examine what motivates parents and other adults who work with youth in competitive situations. Adults who participate in competitive activities to experience success and seek gratification and prestige for themselves may not have their children’s best interests in mind.

Parents play an essential role in many of their children’s activities. They provide ongoing support and guidance. While their support is essential, well-meaning adults who think they are doing the “right thing” may be sending the wrong message. Sometimes the competitive activity becomes more important for parents than for children.

For example, in a Minnesota study of 4-H’ers and their parents, Query (1985) found that 80 percent of the parents said the primary reason they wanted their children to participate in 4-H was to learn something. At the same time, 31 percent (51 percent of the fathers and 25 percent of the mothers) said they pressured their children to win.

Twenty-seven percent of the 4-H’ers felt pressure from their mothers and 23 percent felt pressure from their fathers. As they grew older, they felt less pressure from their mothers and more from their fathers. More males felt pressured than females.

All I Wanted Was to Sing

When I was in first grade, I loved to sing.
When it was my turn, I’d stand up clearly and happily, thoroughly enjoying myself.
My teacher declared me singing champion.
Why did something as innocent and joyful as the music of small children have to be turned into a contest?
The voices should have been source of joy, not pride or shame.
But my first-grade teacher thought that my talent should be brandished in front of my peers.
My joy became a mixture of pride and shame, and as time went on, shame overshadowed pride.
My teacher was the one who wanted a champion;
All I wanted was to sing.

—Mary Wilke (quoted in Danielson, 1993)
In *Joy and Sadness in Children’s Sports* (1978), Rainer Martens outlines what he feels are the responsibilities of all parents whose children are involved in sports:

- Allow youth to decide their own involvement in competitive experiences (parents have a part in the decision, but the ultimate decision must be the young person’s);
- Provide a supportive atmosphere for participation;
- Help youth interpret the competitive experience when they fail as well as when they win;
- Help youth develop the attitude that they are responsible for their actions and that they have control over much of their environment;
- Set limits for youth and discipline them;
- Protect youth from adults who do not have the best interests of the young people in mind.

### Guidelines for Parents of Children in Sports

The following guidelines, which appeared in *The Physician and Sports Medicine*, are reprinted here by permission. They can be applied to all competitive situations:

- Make sure your children know that, win or lose, you love them and are not disappointed with their performance.
- Be realistic about your child’s physical ability.
- Help your child set realistic goals.
- Emphasize improved performance, not winning. Positively reinforce improved skills.
- Don’t relive your own athletic past through your child.
- Provide a safe environment for training and competition. This includes proper training methods and use of equipment.
- Control your own emotions at games and events. Don’t yell at other players, coaches, or officials.
- Be a cheerleader for your child and the other children on the team.
- Respect your child’s coaches. Communicate openly with them. If you disagree with their approaches, discuss it with them.
- Be a positive role model. Enjoy sports yourself. Set your own goals. Live a healthy lifestyle!

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**A Strategic Plan for Change?**

Cooperation, Competition, and Kids raises questions that youth-serving organizations may wish to consider. Examine the programming offered for youth in your organization and think how you would answer the following questions. You may want to answer them along with volunteers who support your organization, or if you’re a parent, to bring them up with the leaders of your organization.

First, make a list of activities and events that your organization offers and divide them into two categories: peer competition and goal competition.

- Star the activities and events that result in recognition of or prestige for youth involved. How do you recognize youth involved in each type of competition? Where are you placing your recognition emphasis?
- What percentage of your programming is spent on competitive activities or events?
- If your program is involved in interpersonal (peer) competition, how do you teach and encourage the practice of skills necessary for healthy competition?
- Who are your partners (volunteers, parents, coaches, judges, etc.) who reinforce these skills, and how do you train them to reinforce these skills?
- How does competition help you build skills in cooperation?
- From these questions, what have you learned about your organization and the elements of competition identified in your programs?
- Based on what you know about your organization, consider what you would like your programs to look like in the future.
- What steps will you need to take to get from where you are to where you’d like to be?

—Adapted from “Design and Redesign Programs to Make a Difference,” *Competition, What We Know about Youth and Competition*, Iowa State University, University Extension.
References


