



DEBATE: IS COMPETITION GOOD FOR KIDS?

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2013

Is competition a good, or a bad, thing for children? It's a subject that has divided opinion for years. Some argue that it encourages a child to excel in today's fiercely competitive world where we compete for everything be it a job, a partner or a house. Others say it can destroy self-esteem and lead to resentment. Whatever your view, the jury's still out. We sought a few words of wisdom from those who have had something to say on the subject ...

Bad:

1. Most of us were raised to believe that without competition we would all become fat, lazy, and mediocre. And I used to think that competition could be healthy and fun if we kept it in perspective. But there is no such thing as **'healthy'** competition. In a competitive culture, a child is told that it isn't enough to be good. He must triumph over others. But the more he competes, the more he needs to compete to feel good about himself. But winning doesn't build character; it just lets a child gloat temporarily. By definition, not everyone can win a contest. If one child wins, another cannot. Competition leads children to envy winners, to dismiss losers. Co-operation, on the other hand, is marvelously successful at helping children to communicate effectively, to trust in others and to accept those who are different from themselves. Children feel better about themselves when they work with others instead of against them, and their self-esteem doesn't depend on winning a spelling test or a Little League game.
American Alfie Kohn, author of No Contest: The Case Against Competition
2. Sports' competitions are bad for children if those taking part are expected to

achieve more than they are capable of. We realised this and, as such, have changed the emphasis in club athletics nationally. New disciplines in the field of kids' athletics have been designed that are especially adapted for children aged between 6 and 11. Priority is given to team competition with children taking part in a great variety of disciplines. All the children wishing to take part are allowed to do so and they all proudly go home after a formal ceremony equipped with a written document attesting their participation. Athletics competitions have always been popular with children. Children feel the need to compare their strength and skills to others. Since the beginning of this year we have strengthened that innate motivation by offering children new forms of competitions and disciplines that are even more attractive now, more challenging and thrilling.

David Deister, project manager, German Athletics Federation

3. Competition has been shown to be useful up to a certain point and no further, but co-operation, which is the thing we must strive for today, begins where competition leaves off.

The late Franklin D. Roosevelt, former President of the United States

4. There are enough opportunities in life for children to have a disappointment and to learn to handle that. At our school we are helping them to get ready for all stages of life. We don't need them to be losing while they're children in our school.

Elizabeth Morley, Principal of the Institute of Child Study **Laboratory School, Toronto, Canada**

Good:

1. Healthy competition inspires kids to do their best – not just good enough. When students compete they will become more inquisitive, research independently,

and learn to work with others. They will strive to do more than is required. These abilities prepare children for future situations of all kinds. Whether it's applying to college, seeking a promotion, or finding a cure for cancer, the ability to be competitive will give them an important edge.

Jennifer Veale, founder and executive director of TrueCompetition.org

2. Competition can be a double-edged sword for kids, promoting positive values under the right conditions but creating negative environments that are demotivating under the wrong ones. Competition can be healthy when it provides feedback to kids about their performance and improvement, when winning is not the sole or primary objective, and when kids get to learn about themselves under challenging situations. Under these circumstances, competition can teach invaluable lessons our children do not typically learn in the classroom. Unfortunately, the frequent win-at-all costs mentality associated with many competitive endeavors can undermine children's motivation and lead them to avoid or even disengage from activities they may otherwise enjoy. It is critical that coaches, educators, and parents work to teach kids these valuable lessons from competition. That way, win or lose, our children will learn, grow, and be better prepared for life, which (like competition) provides highlights, adversity, and continual opportunities to play well with others and treat opponents with dignity and respect.

John Tauer, Men's Head Basketball Coach, Professor of Psychology, University of St Thomas, Minnesota

3. Competition is good for children. It is quite normal for people to judge themselves against others, thus in that respect competition is quite healthy. In a supportive environment it can teach a child to accept failure without losing self-esteem. However, it becomes unhealthy when the competitor is forced to compete or feels that they have to compete in order to gain love or status within the family.

Lyn Kendall, Gifted Child Consultant for British Mensa

4. Our national preoccupation with **'safety first'** and prevailing climate of risk aversion is creating a generation of children who are ill prepared for a world that requires risk taking on a daily basis. Competition teaches critical thinking, decision-making and problem solving. Without those skills countries can't compete in a global economy. Other proponents of competition in North America claim that competition enhances learning, physical fitness and deters juvenile delinquency.

Sir Digby Jones, former UK Government Minister of State for UK Trade & Investment

5. We need to end the 'all must have prizes' culture and get children playing and enjoying competitive sports from a young age, linking them up with sports clubs so they can pursue their dreams. That's why the new UK national curriculum now includes a requirement for primary schools to provide competitive sport.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron

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PRODUCTION

Editor: Richard Longden, INEOS

Publisher: INEOS AG

Editorial address: INCH, INEOS AG, Avenue des Uttins 3, 1180 Rolle, Switzerland

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Photography: INEOS AG ©

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