

Healthy Competition, an Oxymoron?

Finding a Balance

By Deb Landry

Has our society gone over board with competition? Is the prize worth more than the experience? Are we a failure if we do not take home the trophy? Are we teaching our children to compete fairly?

There are many schools of thought on this issue and both have legitimate arguing points. After studying all the research and listening to the pros and cons, I have to say that I have confirmed my opinion of being a non-supporter of competition.

Think about the goals we have for our children's future. We all want them to be happy, safe, in good physical health, and have a healthy self-esteem. We also want them to be successful, achieve excellence and have strong, long lasting, loving relationships. We want to protect them from pain, sickness, and fear.

Then how does completion figure into these goals? It now becomes a challenge and struggle for the reason that "what we want and what we say are two different things".

Competition that is healthy should focus on being the best you can be as an individual, competing against yourself not beating or being someone else. Healthy competition is having fun and learning as in a team sport or group participation project, reaching for a common goal and a win-win for everyone involved. Without the stress, rivalry of winning children will improve and advance their skill or self.

Focusing on winning will only enhance unhealthy competition. When we focus on winning, we lose our edge off personal improvement and replace it with stress, self-doubt, pressure and disappointment. Losing may leave children to feel depressed and feeling like a loser.

Here are four points to teach healthy competition:

- 1. *Be a positive role model:*** Encourage don't discourage. Unhealthy competition cultivates selfishness, jealousy, and poor sportsmanship. Be sure to set a good example for your child by living and breathing tolerance and a balance in life. Be positive when they (or you) do not "win". Don't be that person who yells and insults coaches and other teams during a game. There are better ways for our children (and us) to work, play and co-exist. Raising healthy and happy children will emulate a better society. You hold all the power as a parent. If your goals are set to beat or win, your child will learn to mirror your behavior regardless of what you say.
- 2. *Don't use contests and competitions at home.*** For instance, whoever can get the "job" done first is the winner. The strongest, fastest, possibly oldest child will always win. Don't confuse competition with survival or cooperation. After dinner we all clear the table together and do the dishes. Someone take out the trash and recyclables. Rock, Paper, Scissors is the choice of decision making for my boys. The

other chore, feeding the dogs, was a decision they made as young children, I'll do it in the morning and you at night. Results: choices, decisions, cooperation, compromise without the interference of a parent.

3. Always bestow unconditional love and acceptance. Nothing is more damaging psychologically than approval based on victory.
4. All comparisons between children promotes unhealthy competition. Negative comparisons, like "Why can't you be more like your brother" make children feel second rate, diminishes their self esteem and increases rivalry.

Your children will succeed in spite of the power given to competition, not because of it. Unfortunately our society teaches that we are in a lifetime competition, a vicious cycle that we can't step out of. Like a rat on a wheel, more, more, more, they will never be satisfied.

Research shows that children do not learn better when education is competitive. The reasons being that competition often makes kids anxious which interferes with their ability to concentration and learn. Competition excludes a venue to share their talents and they can't learn. This results in a decline in performance. When children compete, they are less able to take the perspective of others to learn or to see someone else's point of view not to mention that a competitor's personality shows signs of being less empathetic, antisocial, less cooperative and lacks in generosity.

There is no easy answer to raising noncompetitive children in our competitive world. We must teach children about competition and prepare them for their future encounters. Whether you disagree or agree with my opinion, make your decision based on knowledge and research of competition is today's world.

Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.