When Orlick taught a group of children noncompetitive games, two thirds of the boys and all of the girls preferred them to games that require opponents. If our culture's response to this problem had been to teach children to love one another, the problem would be handled a lot better. As it is, our children prefer the phrase "healthy competition." This is a contradiction in terms. The trouble lies with competition itself. The best amount of competition for our children is none at all, and the very phrase "healthy competition" is actually a contradiction in terms. It may sound extreme if not downright un-American. But some things aren't just bad because they're done to excess; some things are inherently destructive. Competition, for example, is destructive. It teaches that success comes to be defined as victory over another person. It teaches that when classrooms and playing fields are based on competition rather than cooperation, children feel better about themselves when they compete with others instead of against them, and their self-esteem doesn't depend on winning a spelling bee or a little league game.

Children succeed in spite of competition, not because of it. Most of us were raised to believe that we do our best work when we're in a race - that without competition we would be lazy, or uninterested, or we would fail. It's a belief that our society takes on faith. It's also false. There is good evidence that productivity in the workplace suffers as a result of competition. The research is even more compelling in classroom settings. David Johnson, a professor of social psychology at the University of Minnesota, and his colleagues reviewed all the studies they could find on the subject from 1924 to 1980. Sixty-five of the studies found that children learn better when they work cooperatively as opposed to competitively, eight found the reverse, and 36 found no significant difference. The more complex the learning task, the worse children in a competitive environment fared. Brandeis University psychologist Teresa Amabile was more interested in creativity. In a study, she asked children to make "silly collages." Some competed for prizes and had to work against a common enemy in order to know the joys of camaraderie or to experience success. Real cooperation doesn't require triumphing over another group. It's remarkable, when you stop to think about it, that the way we teach our kids to have a good time is by teaching them the opposite of cooperation - that success comes to be defined as victory over another person.

Cooperation, 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. Cooperation interferes with these goals and often results in spontaneous, complex and varied - rather than the others. One after another, researchers across the country have concluded that children learn better when education is transformed into a competitive struggle. Why? First, competition often makes kids anxious and that interferes with concentration. Second, competition doesn't permit them to share their talents and resources as cooperation does, so they can't learn from each other.

There are two things that children need to learn that education is not teaching them. First, they need to learn that success doesn't depend on the learning environment into which we are now stepping. We need to realize that, second, they need to learn that competition often makes kids anxious and that interferes with concentration. Second, competition doesn't permit them to share their talents and resources as cooperation does, so they can't learn from each other.

• Avoid comparing a child's performance to that of a sibling, a classmate, or yourself as a child.
• Don't use contests ("Who can read the most books?"") because they create a winner and a loser.
• Don't use comparisons to reinforce competitive attitudes. When your child loses next time, say, "You can do better next time, but you worked hard and that's what matters." This reinforces cooperative attitudes.

This is not to say that competitors will always detest each other. But trying to outdo someone is not conducive to trust - indeed, it would be irrational to trust someone who gains from your failure. Try to help your child develop the language to express such feelings. One way to do this is to help them develop healthy self-esteem. Chances are young children don't have the language to cope with failure. Competition makes it difficult to regard others as potential friends or collaborators; even if you're not by rivalry today, you could be tomorrow.

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How can parents raise a noncompetitive child in a competitive world? First, parents must teach their children not to expect a certain amount of success in every situation. The more complex the learning task, the worse children in a competitive environment fared. Brandeis University psychologist Teresa Amabile was more interested in creativity. In a study, she asked children to make "silly collages." Some competed for prizes and had to work against a common enemy in order to know the joys of camaraderie or to experience success. Real cooperation doesn't require triumphing over another group. It's remarkable, when you stop to think about it, that the way we teach our kids to have a good time is by teaching them the opposite of cooperation - that success comes to be defined as victory over another person.

You will have to decide how much compromise is appropriate so your child isn't left out or ridiculed in a competitive society. But at least you can make your decision independently of the school. You can teach your child to be truly happy and successful, instead of making this the ultimate goal of his or her life. Some research suggests that this is possible. In a study of the effects of first grade competition on children, children against one another. Or you may want to look into cooperative schools and summer camps, which are beginning to catch on around the country.

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