The Case Against Competition
When it comes to competition, we Americans typically recognize only two legitimate positions: enthusiastic support and qualified opposition.

The first view holds that the more we immerse our child (and ourselves) in the culture of competition — the better. Competition builds character and produces excellence. The second stance admits that our society has gotten carried away with the need to be Number One, that we push our kids too hard and too fast to become winners — but insists that competition can be healthy and that it is possible to find it in perspectives other than the most destructive.

I used to be in the second camp. But after investigating the topic for several years, looking at research from psychology, sociology, biology, education, and other fields, I’m now convinced that neither position is correct. Competition is bad news all right, but it’s not just that we overdo it or misapply it. The trouble lies with competition itself. The best amount of competition for our children’s intellectual development, we need to realize that turning learning into a race simply doesn’t work.

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 become lazy, and mediocre. It’s a belief that our society takes on faith. It’s also false.

This 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 revealed a benefit from competition, 61 showed the reverse, and two were inconclusive. Johnson wrote, “The difference is not that competition is always destructive, the worse children in a competitive environment fare. Brandes University psychologist Teresa Amabile was interested in creativity. In a study, she asked children to make “fully collages.” Some competed for prizes and some didn’t. Seven artists then independently judged the works; they were trying to choose the most creative. They were much less creative — less spontaneous, complex and varied — than the others.

One after another, researchers across the country have concluded that children do 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 one another. Finally, trying to be Number One distracts them from what they’re supposed to be learning. It may seem paradoxical, but when competition interferes with real learning, we need to realize that turning learning into a race simply doesn’t work.

Competition is a recipe for hostility. By definition, not everyone can win a contest. If one child wins, another cannot. This means that each child comes to regard others as obstacles to his or her own success. Forget fractions or home runs; this is the real lesson our children learn in a competitive environment. Competition interferes with these goals and often results in negative social behavior. The children learn to view each other as something to be conquered. They learn to identify each other as enemies. What’s more, in a competitive environment, kids learn to understand each other as obstacles to their own success. They learn to see each other as enemies. Children who compete, they are less able to take the perspective of others — that is, to see the world from someone else’s point of view.

Studies also show, incidentally, that competition among groups isn’t any better than competition among individuals. Kids don’t have 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.

Hats off to those who gain from your failure. At best, competition leads one to look at others through narrowed eyes; at worst, it invites outright aggression. Existing relationships are strained to the breaking point, but while new friendships are often nipped in the bud.

Competition is destructive to children’s self-esteem, it interferes with learning, sabotages 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.

When I decided to participate in a talk show on national television, my objections were waved aside by the parents of a seven-year-old tennis champ named Kyle, who appeared on the program with me. Kyle had been used to winning ever since a tennis racket was put in his hands at the age of two. But at the very end of the show, someone in the audience asked him how he felt when he lost. Kyle lowered his head and in a small voice replied, “Ashamed.”

There is good evidence that feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources of evaluation as a result of competition. Your value is defined in terms of how you do in comparison to the number of people you’ve beaten. In a competitive culture, a child is told that it’s not enough to be good — he must triumph over others. Success comes to be defined as victory, even though these are really two very different things. Even when the child manages to win, the whole affair, psychologically speaking, becomes a vicious circle: The more he competes, the more he needs to compete to feel good about himself.

Another, and perhaps more dismaying, result of competition: Your value is defined by what you’ve done. Worse — you’re a good person in proportion to the number of people you’ve beaten. There is good evidence that productivity in the workplace suffers as a result of competition. The research is even more compelling in classroom settings. DJohnson, 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 revealed a benefit from competition, 61 showed the reverse, and two were inconclusive. Johnson wrote, “The difference is not that competition is always destructive, the worse children in a competitive environment fare. Brandes University psychologist Teresa Amabile was interested in creativity. In a study, she asked children to make “fully collages.” Some competed for prizes and some didn’t. Seven artists then independently judged the works; they were trying to choose the most creative. They were much less creative — less spontaneous, complex and varied — than the others.

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Having fun doesn’t mean turning playing fields into battlefields. It’s remarkable, when you stop to think about it, that the way we teach our kids to have a good time is to play high-stakes games in which one individual or team must defeat another. Consider one of the first games our children learn to play: musical chairs. Take away one chair and one child in each round until one smug winner is seated and everyone else has been excluded from play. You know that sour birthday party scene; the needle is lifted from the record and someone else is transformed into a loser, forced to sit out the rest of the game with the other unhappy kids on the side. That’s how children learn to compete: victory or defeat. Terry Orlick, a Canadian expert on games, suggests changing the goal of musical chairs so children are asked to fit on a diminishing number of seats. At the end, seven players are happy; eight kids are happy to share a single chair. Everyone has fun and there are no winners or losers. What’s true of musical chairs is true of all recreation; with a little ingenuity, we can devise games in which the obstacle is something intrinsic to the task itself, rather than another person or team.

In fact, not one of the benefits attributed to sports or other competitive games actually requires competition. Children can get plenty of exercise without struggling against each other. Teamwork? Cooperative games allow everyone to work together, without creating enemies. Improving skills and setting challenges? Again, an objective standard or one’s own earlier performance will do.

When Orlick taught a group of children noncompetitive games, two thirds of the boys and all of the girls preferred the games that require opponents. If our culture’s children’s sense of a good time is competition, it may just be because we haven’t tried the alternative.

How can parents raise a noncompetitive child in a competitive world? Competition is destructive to children’s self-esteem, it interferes with learning, sabotages relationships, and isn’t necessary to have a good time. But how do you raise a child in a culture that hasn’t yet caught on to all this? There are no easy answers here. But there is one clear, unsatisfactory answer: Make your son or daughter cooperative in order to fit into the “real world.” That isn’t desirable for the child — for all the reasons given here — and it perpetuates the poison of competition in another generation.

Children can be taught about competition, prepared for the destructive forces they’ll encounter, without being grounded to take part in it uncritically. They can be exposed to the game — in a drug store or bus station or on television — but they can be prepared to respond to the game. They won’t be myopic or drug-addicted drivers. 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 based on informed consent.

Be aware of your power as a model. If you need to beat others, your child will learn that from you regardless of what you say. The lesson will be even stronger if you use your child to provide you with vicarious victories.

Raising healthy, happy, productive children goes hand in hand with creative parenting. The first step in achieving both is recognizing that our belief in the value of competition is built on myths. There are better ways for our children — and for us — to work and play and live.

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