The Case Against Competition
When it comes to competition, we Americans typically recognize only two legitimate positions: enthusiastic support and qualified support. The first view holds that the more we immerse our children (and ourselves) in it, 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 not only is not necessary but actually undermines the very goals we claim to care about.

What can parents do? They must decide whether the case for competition is more persuasive to their own children than to their kids. They must decide how much competition is appropriate so their child isn’t left out or ridiculed in a competitive society. But at least they can make their decision based on a careful assessment of reality. 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 argument for competition is the phrase “healthy competition,” which is actually a contradiction in terms. That 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, which simply means that one person can succeed only if others fail, is one of those things. It’s always unnecessary and inappropriate at school, at play, and at home. Think for a moment about the goals you have for your children. Do you want them to develop healthy self-esteem? Achieve their potential? Be cooperative rather than competitive? As basically good human beings? You want them to become successful, to achieve the excellence of which they’re capable. You want them to have loving and supportive relationships. And you want them to enjoy themselves.

These are fine goals. But competition not only makes it harder to reach them — it actually undermines them.

**Competition is to self-esteem as sugar is to teeth.** Most people lose in most competitive encounters, and it’s obvious why that causes self-doubt. But even winning doesn’t build character; it just lets a child gloat temporarily. Studies have shown that feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources of evaluation as a result of competition. Your value is defined by others. Your self-worth is built on the idea that you’ve done better than others. Yet as soon as you’ve beaten another, you’re looking for someone else to beat. 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.

When I made my point on a talk show on national television, my objections were waved aside by the parents of a seven-year-old tennis champion 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.”

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 children compete, they are less able to take the perspective of others — that is, to see the world from someone else’s point of view. One study demonstrated conclusively that competitive children were less empathetic than others; another study showed that competitive children were less generous.

Cooperation, on the other hand, is marvelously successful at helping children communicate effectively, to trust in others and to accept those who are different from themselves. Cooperation interferes with these goals and often results in cooperation behavior. The choices are ours. We can blame the individual child who’s selfish, turn violent, or betray us, or we can face the fact that competition itself is responsible for such ugliness.

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 learn about competition. Studies have shown that feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources of evaluation as a result of competition. Your value is defined by others. Your self-worth is built on the idea that you’ve done better than others. Yet as soon as you’ve beaten another, you’re looking for someone else to beat. 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.

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