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 children (and ourselves) in the competitive mainstream, 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 only if it is perceived as a means to an end. 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 child. Do you want him or her to develop healthy self-esteem, to learn the importance of cooperation, to become a creative individual? Or do you want him or her to be a focus of attention, to be a source of pride, to please you? Your answer to that question may be as basic as good sense.

You want him to be successful, to achieve the excellence of which you're capable. You want him to have loving and supportive relationships. And you want him to enjoy himself.

These are fine goals. But competition not only interferes with reaching 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 rather than by yourself or your friends. For our children, the phrase "healthy competition" 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 child. Do you want him or her to develop healthy self-esteem, to learn the importance of cooperation, to become a creative individual? Or do you want him or her to be a focus of attention, to be a source of pride, to please you? Your answer to that question may be as basic as good sense.

**Competition is a recipe for hostility.** By definition, no one 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 competitive behavior. The children who are seen as winners (there's no mistaking who they are) are seen by our language and their peers as having value only if they win. We promise our children who lose that they'll be less competent, less popular, less secure. We handle this by assigning blame to the child who loses. The child who loses is made to feel as if he or she is less competent, less good, less useful. The research — which I review in my book *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* — helps explain the destructive effect of win/lose arrangements. When children compete, they are less likely 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 others and to accept those who are different from themselves. Cooperation interferes with these goals and often results in cooperative behavior. The children who are seen as winners (there's no mistaking who they are) are seen as having value only if they work together. They're not seen as having value while they lose. They're more valuable as a team than as individuals. They're more valuable when they're helping one another than when they're fighting each other. And when they're helping one another, they're learning that cooperation leads to success.

**Virtuous loop.** 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 — something children need to do in order to succeed. Take musical chairs. In the original version, the object is to remain seated until the music stops. In the version I devised, the object is to stay seated until the music changes key. A variation might be: be seated while the music measures slow, stand while the music measures fast. The point of the game is that to succeed, you have to be flexible, to be able to respond quickly to a change when you least expect it. The best way to teach one child to succeed is to teach him or her to cooperate.

**Competition leads children to envy winners, to dismiss losers (there's no nastier epithet in our language than "loser"), and to be suspicious of just about everyone.** Competition makes it difficult to regard others as potential friends or collaborators; even if you're not my rival today, you could be tomorrow. This is not to say that children will always be competitive; but trying to outdo someone is not conducive to trust — indeed, it would be irrational to trust someone who gains from your failure. When children feel that they're competing against one another, they're likely to withdraw, to cheat, turn violent, or withdraw, or we can face the fact that competition itself is responsible for such ugliness.

**Competition is destructive to children's self-esteem.** Teachers tell me that the child who wins a spelling bee or a Little League game produces collages that are much less creative — less imaginative, less original. 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 some didn't. Seven artists then independently rated the kids' work. It turned out that those who were trying to win produced collages that were much less creative — less imaginative, less original. 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 percent of these studies had found that competition reduces creativity. Johnson wrote: "Comparison among students has been found to produce significant detrimental effects on the creativity of students. The effect of competition in reducing creativity is so pronounced that there is hardly any difference between a group of students taught by the traditional method and a group of students taught under an entirely competitive system." How could that happen? How could anything as benign as "fun and games" produce such a destructive effect? The answer is: through comparison. The competitive system sets up a virtuous loop — a cycle in which the obstacle is something you need to do in order to succeed:

- **Do not use contests** ("Who can dry the dishes fastest?") around the house. Watch your use of language ("Who's the best little girl in the whole wide world?") that reinforces competitive attitudes.
- **Approach a child's intellectual development** with an affirmative attitude. The child who wins a spelling bee or a Little League game produces collages that are much less creative — less imaginative, less original. 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 percent of these studies had found that competition reduces creativity. Johnson wrote: "Comparison among students has been found to produce significant detrimental effects on the creativity of students. The effect of competition in reducing creativity is so pronounced that there is hardly any difference between a group of students taught by the traditional method and a group of students taught under an entirely competitive system." How could that happen? How could anything as benign as "fun and games" produce such a destructive effect? The answer is: through comparison. The competitive system sets up a virtuous loop — a cycle in which the obstacle is something you need to do in order to succeed:

- **Don't use contests** ("Who can dry the dishes fastest?") around the house. Watch your use of language ("Who's the best little girl in the whole wide world?") that reinforces competitive attitudes.
- **Never give your love or acceptance conditional on a child's performance.** It's not enough to say, "As long as you did your best, honey." If the child learns that Money's the student's teacher and we're the parents, then he or she is quite likely to spend more time arguing about how he or she is doing rather than focusing on how to improve.
- **Be aware of your power as a model.** If you need to beat other children, 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 and cooperative society.** 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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