

**Is Competition Ever  
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## Is Competition Ever Appropriate in a Cooperative Classroom?

By Alfie Kohn

Of the numerous benefits of cooperative learning (CL), the one that first appealed to many of us was its status as an alternative to competition. Some combination of observation, personal experience, and research has made it painfully clear that setting children against one another is destructive. However, a significant proportion of educators who share this belief nevertheless feel compelled to add that, of course, they are not saying all competition is inappropriate; offered in moderation and kept in perspective, there is room for some win/lose activities.

I would contend that such qualifications are based less on any advantage of competition per se than on a general reluctance to take a stand that might be viewed as extreme. A middle-of-the-road position offers clear rhetorical advantages, conferring on the person who holds it an appearance of being reasonable and realistic.

But the simple truth that we sometimes fail to grasp is this: Not everything that is bad when done to excess is harmless when done in moderation. Some things, of course, like eating candy, are indeed benign as long as they are not overdone. But other things are destructive or counterproductive inherently – that is, as a function of their very nature. Eating lead paint chips would seem to fall into this category: There is no level of consumption that can be said to be absolutely safe, much less beneficial. Having thought hard about this issue for more than a decade, I am convinced that mutually exclusive goal attainment – an arrangement in which one person can succeed only if others fail – is conceptually more similar to eating lead than licorice. That doesn't mean it's as dangerous, of course, only that the problem is not just a function of quantity.

For educators who see more harm than good in competition, my challenge is to name any advantage that can be achieved only (or even most easily) by placing children in activities that require them to try to beat one another. This task is made even more difficult if we must weigh against any such advantage the pronounced harms of such an arrangement. I have explored those harms at book length (Kohn, 1992), but a very brief review seems appropriate as a context for answering the question posed at the top of this page.

1. **Competition is to self-esteem as sugar is to teeth.** The more we care about helping children to feel good about themselves – and especially to maintain that core of acceptance even when they fail – the less we would ever want to put them into a situation where they must work at cross purposes with others. Competition makes self-esteem precarious and conditional: One's value is contingent on how many people one has beaten. Winning feels good for awhile, but it never addresses our basic needs for security or competence. Moreover, the more we compete, the more we need to compete; it takes increasingly dramatic victories to reclaim the good feeling brought about by the first one – rather like developing a tolerance to a drug.

No wonder that the comprehensive review of research on the topic conducted by David and Roger Johnson (1989) found that, of studies that compared the effects of competitive and cooperative structures and found a statistically significant difference, exactly one turned up a benefit for competition while the remaining 81 favored cooperation. Anyone who reads social science research knows that numbers like that don't appear every day.

2. **The central message of all competition is that other people are potential obstacles to one's own success.** Competition creates envy for winners, contempt for losers, and hostility and suspicion toward just about everyone. Not only is it irrational to help someone whose success might require your failure, but competition creates a climate in which such help is unlikely to occur in any case. Researchers have found that competitive structures reduce generosity, empathy, sensitivity to others' needs, accuracy of communication, and trust. These results follow naturally and logically from competition itself; the problem does not rest with the individuals involved and the way they approach a contest. Moreover, contests between teams teach that the only reason to work with others is to defeat another group of people who are working together. Cooperation becomes the means; victory is the end.

3. **Not only does excellence not require competition; it usually requires its absence.** Scores of studies by now have shown not only that carefully designed CL is more successful on a range of achievement measures than other classroom structures, but that competition in particular undermines success. This happens for a number of reasons: Competing reduces the probability that cooperation, which does promote learning, will take place; it generates anxiety; it leads children to attribute their victory or loss to factors beyond their control, such as innate ability or luck, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will try harder next time; and it functions as an extrinsic motivator, reducing interest in the task and creative performance just as other artificial inducements have been repeatedly shown to do (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Kohn, 1993; Lepper and Greene, 1978).

If we are questioning whether competition is appropriate, then, our point of departure must be the overwhelming evidence that it is counterproductive and destructive. In light of the detrimental effects on how children feel about themselves, treat one another, and learn, it is reasonable to ask why we would ever want to set up competitive structures. While it seems less risky (particularly in a culture still wedded to the idea that people must struggle to be Number One) to say merely that competition should be limited, our obligation is to try to justify any win/lose structures, and, if we cannot, to do all we can to eliminate them. These structures include versions of CL in which tournaments are set up requiring groups of students to try to defeat each other – a virtual recipe for destroying any sense of community in the class as a whole – as well as competitive activities that take place outside of CL. The latter, in turn, includes programs where the imperative to beat one's peers is about as subtle as a slap in the face: spelling bees, grading on a curve, posted charts of the relative performance of all students, and awards assemblies (which might be defined as events held in an auditorium that instantly transform most people present into losers). Then there are the subtler examples of competition whose effects may not be immediately apparent to teachers: whole-class "Who can tell me.?" sessions in which students must race to be first with the answer, and classroom management strategies in which the teacher makes an example of one child by praising his or her behavior in front of everyone else.

It is not just the losers who suffer from these practices. Even those who emerge triumphant come to see themselves as valuable in relation to their win/loss record, learn to view others as rivals rather than collaborators, and are handicapped in terms of learning. Why, then, are so many educators reluctant to see their intuitions (and, in some cases, their data) through to their logical conclusion, which is the abolition of competitive activities?

The justifications for retaining some competition tend to be variations of only three contentions. The first is that a little competition isn't so bad. My point, of course, has been that, while a little is not as bad as a lot, evidence and logic suggest that none would be better still.

The second claim is that children enjoy competing. But such expressions of preference may be confounded by the number and quality of their previous exposures to cooperation. While individual differences naturally play a part, it may be that those who say they enjoy competitive games, for example, have never had an opportunity to sample cooperative sorts of recreation. A student who seems glad for the chance to play a competitive game in the classroom, moreover, actually may be responding to its status as a game (and the break from ordinary studies this represents) more than to its competitive nature. In my experience, teachers who play games that do not create winners and losers find no less, and often a good deal more, enthusiasm for these activities.

For students who really seem to enjoy competitive experiences, it might behoove the teacher to ask what aspects of those contests they enjoy – and then to explore whether those features might not be attainable in noncompetitive activities. If some students – typically, those who win frequently – continue to insist that it is the irreducible pleasure of trying to beat other people that they seek, the teacher must attend to the consequences that these experiences have on the rest of the participants before deciding whether to retain them.

Finally, some educators acknowledge the destructiveness of competition but insist that they are doing children a favor by having them compete since this will prepare them for the rivalry they will encounter when they leave school. To this we can respond as follows:

(1) Students in our society already are very well acquainted with competition. Even if some experience with it were useful, children have more than they could ever need outside of the classroom. Our challenge is not to offer them more of the same but to provide alternative arrangements to help them achieve a sense of perspective about the competition that proliferates in our culture.

(2) While a case can be made that students would benefit from a curricular unit in which they explicitly consider the effects of competition, talking about it is quite different from immersing them in it. By way of analogy, consider the distinction between teaching children about religion and indoctrinating them to be religious. The justification of competition casts it in terms of the former, but the actual practice looks more like the latter.

(3) The notion that we best prepare children for unpleasant experiences by providing them with unpleasant experiences at a tender age is exactly as sensible as the proposition that because the environment is teeming with carcinogens, children ought to be exposed to as many cancer-causing agents as possible while they are young. In fact, the psychological benefits of failure are overrated; it is an experience that quickly becomes redundant and gratuitously punishing. Making children compete in order to teach them to cope calls to mind an ironic notice I once saw tacked to a wall in a sixth-grade classroom: The Beatings will continue until morale improves.

(4) Even to the extent that some experience with failure is useful, let us remember that failure does not require losing any more than success requires winning. As far as I am aware, no evidence exists to suggest that the particularly toxic form of failure that comes from being defeated by someone else provides any psychological benefit beyond what could be derived from failing with reference to absolute standards or one's own expectations.

(5) Finally, while we want to cushion children from the effects of the adversarial experiences to which they will be subjected once they have left school, we also want to prepare them to evaluate and, if necessary, change the systems that create those experiences. Our choices about classroom structures should not depend primarily on how well they match our society's institutions. Rather, our institutions should stand or fall depending on how well they serve the sort of values represented by cooperative learning.

In short, I believe there are no compelling reasons to have students try to beat one another, even for a small fraction of their total educational experience. Of course, I want to make common cause with those who would greatly reduce but not eliminate the use of competition at school; our perspectives are more similar than different, particularly from the point of view of mainstream American thinking. But I also want to invite such people within the CL movement to question why children should ever be encouraged to view their peers as obstacles to their own success.

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