

Trophy Fury: What's Behind Claims that Kids Are Coddled and Overcelebrated?

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What's Behind Claims that Kids Are Coddled and Overcelebrated?

By Alfie Kohn

[This is an expanded version of the published article, which was titled "Do Our Kids Get Off Too Easy?" and adapted from The Myth of the Spoiled Child.]

The last time I checked, a web search for the phrases "everyone gets a trophy" and "trophies just for showing up" produced more than 700,000 hits. The links mostly point to expressions of outrage that a thanks-for-playing token might be given to all the kids on the field – in contrast to the good old days, when recognition was permitted only for the conquering heroes.

That's a lot of hating to be directed at loving cups. But of course the animosity is actually prompted by a broader conviction that children are indulged and overcelebrated in various ways, spared from having to confront the full impact of their inadequacy. The conventional wisdom these days is that kids come by everything too easily – stickers, praise, A's, trophies – and that they suffer from inflated self-esteem. Thus, even modest efforts to sand down the rough edges of competitive encounters, or scale back punitive practices, is met with sneers about "precious snowflakes" and kids' "tender feelings" – along with ringing declarations of the salutary effects of frustration and the need for grit.

The articles, books, and blog posts that sound these themes are so similar that you may find yourself wondering if all of them were written by the same person. Yet the authors often adopt a self-congratulatory tone, as if it took extraordinary gumption to say pretty much what everyone else is saying. Moreover – and this is the curious fact that persuaded me to write a book about the topic – a fundamentally conservative stance on children and parenting has been adopted even by people who are liberal on other issues.

I think we can be reasonably sure that no child who received a trinket after losing a contest walked away believing that he (or his team) won – or that failing is just as good as succeeding. Giving trophies to all the kids – which, incidentally, has a long history – is a well-meaning and mostly innocuous attempt to celebrate everyone's effort. Even so, I'm not really making a case for them. Increasing the number of trophies distracts us from the problems inherent to competition itself and its message that people can succeed only by making others fail. Rather, what concerns me is that attacks on participation trophies, like excoriations of helicopter parents and coddled kids, rest on a cluster of mostly undefended beliefs about what life is like (awful), what teaches resilience (experiences with failure), what motivates people to excel (rewards), and what produces excellence (competition).

Most of all, it's assumed that the best way to prepare children for the miserable "real world" that awaits them is to make sure they have plenty of miserable experiences while they're young. Conversely, if they're *spared* any unhappiness, they'll be ill-prepared. In life, we're frequently reminded, Everyone Doesn't Get a Trophy.

This, of course, was precisely the logic employed not so long ago to frame bullying as a rite of passage that kids were expected to deal with on their own, without assistance from "overprotective" adults. In any case, no one ever explains the mechanism by which the silence of a long drive home without a trophy is supposed to teach resilience. Nor are we told whether there's any support for this theory of inoculation by immersion. Have social scientists shown that those who are spared, say, the rigors of dodge ball (in which children are turned into human targets) or class rank (which pits students against one another) will wind up unprepared for adulthood?

Not that I can find. In fact, long-term follow-ups of those who attended the sort of nontraditional schools that afford an unusual amount of autonomy and/or nurturing suggest that the great majority turned out well and seemed capable of navigating the transition to traditional colleges and workplaces.

But when you point out the absence of logic or evidence, those who offer such assertions just pivot and declare that losers *shouldn't* get trophies. For Pete's sake, they *lost*. They're *supposed* to go home empty-handed! That's when you realize these folks weren't really offering hypotheses about what *will* happen to children later; they're just telling us what they think children *ought* to be subjected to now, regardless of the outcome. This is an exercise in prescription, not prediction, and it's fueled by a white-hot anger over the possibility that kids will get off too easy or feel too satisfied with themselves.

The rage, I think, rests on three underlying values. The first is *deprivation*: Kids shouldn't be spared struggle and sacrifice. This view is often expressed by phrases such as "It's time they learned that..." – the implication being that children should be introduced to frustration and unhappiness without delay. Self-denial – whose adherents generally presume to prescribe denial for others as well – is closely connected to fear of pleasure, redemption through suffering, and contempt for anyone regarded as too indulgent.

The second value is *scarcity*: the belief that excellence, by definition, is something that everyone can't attain. No matter how well a group of students performs, only a few should get A's. Otherwise we're sanctioning "grade inflation" and mediocrity. To have high standards, there must always be losers.

But it's the third conviction that really ties everything together: an endorsement of *conditionality*. Children ought never to receive something desirable – a sum of money, a trophy, a commendation – unless they've done enough to deserve it. It's outrageous, we're told (in this case, by *Newsweek*), that some children get "awards, gold stars, and happy-face stickers for the most routine accomplishments of childhood." On this view, we have a moral obligation to reward those who are deserving and, equally important, to make sure the undeserving go conspicuously unrewarded. Hence the fury when children who didn't defeat their peers are given a trophy anyway. Even though everyone knows full well who won, the losers must not receive anything that even looks like a reward.

And it's not just treats or trophies that are supposed to come with strings attached. Children shouldn't be allowed to feel good about themselves without being able to point to tangible accomplishments. This belief lives at the intersection of economics and theology. It's where lectures about the law of the marketplace meet sermons about what we must do to earn our way into heaven. Here, almost every human interaction, even among family members, is regarded as a kind of transaction.

Interestingly, no research has ever shown that unconditionality is harmful in terms of future achievement, psychological health, or anything else. In fact, studies generally show exactly the opposite. One of the most destructive ways to raise a child is with "conditional regard." Over the last decade or so, two Israeli researchers, Avi Assor and Guy Roth, and their colleagues in the U.S. and Belgium, have conducted a series of experiments whose consistent finding is that when children feel their parents' affection varies depending on the extent to which they are well-behaved, self-controlled, or impressive at school or sports, this promotes "the development of a fragile, contingent...and unstable sense of self." Other researchers, meanwhile, have shown that while high self-esteem is associated with psychological health, what's even more crucial is *unconditional* self-esteem: a solid core of belief in yourself, an abiding sense that you're competent and worthwhile – even when you screw up or fall short.

In other words, the very unconditionality that is so commonly ridiculed – indeed, that seems to animate attacks not only on participation trophies but on the whole "self-esteem movement" – turns out to be a defining feature of psychological health. It's precisely what we should be helping our children to acquire.

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