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 786,000 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 hatin’ 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 snears 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 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 undefined 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, is 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 deprivation...