Healthy Competition
How Sportsmanship and a Growth Mindset Shape Positive Outcomes

As a psychologist who works with schools and camps around the world, I am often asked whether competition is good or bad. Proponents of competition speak fondly of their athletic victories and about wanting the same thing for the young people they serve. Competition, they say, builds character. It’s a competitive world out there, so we had better prepare our children. True or false? Maybe we’re framing the issue the wrong way.

Critics of Competition
Some critics of competition want every child to feel like a winner, always. Or, they want no child to feel like a loser, ever. As the Do-Do Bird in Lewis Carol’s Alice in Wonderland remarked, “Everyone has won and all must have prizes!” Other critics don’t want to pit one child or one group against another because they feel it breeds aggression. Still other critics object to external rewards, such as grades or trophies or money, to motivate participation.

There is, in fact, some fascinating research pointing to the dangers of linking a desired behavior to an extrinsic reward. When the reward is removed, the behavior often disappears. It is true that intrinsic motivation is more durable and authentic. Fortunately, not all competition occurs in a radically behaviorist framework, where rewards and punishments shape all behaviors. In fact, research on happiness suggests that a focus on effort, the journey toward achievement, and sharing one’s expertise with others brings more lasting joy than winning a particular competition.

No camp director, teacher, coach, youth leader or parent I know wants the kind of competition that makes young people unduly anxious, that interferes with their performance and creativity, that treats them like trained puppies or that makes them inherently uninterested. However, to eliminate competition altogether—as some critics argue—simultaneously eliminates opportunities to learn humility and grace.

Research on the negative aspects of unhealthy competition is mostly solid, but using it as a rationale for eliminating competition altogether may throw the baby out with the bathwater. Although some believe that “healthy competition” is a self-
contradictory phrase, here is a different perspective.

**An Emphasis on Community**
The unhealthy competition I’ve witnessed is ubiquitous, focused exclusively on rewards or punishments, belligerent, rude, critical, and unfair. A classic example is the child who, after a day at school where grades are the only object, is forced to play in a youth soccer league where parents emphasize trophies, coaches berate kids, spectators scold the referees, one team has vastly greater talent than the others and not every child gets to play. Life doesn’t have to be that way.

A healthy alternative to cutthroat competition is “cooperative competition.” This may also seem like a contradiction in terms, but when competition creates just a little anxiety, demands fair play, emphasizes fun and adopts a growth mindset, then young people’s performance can be enhanced and they learn to make moral decisions independent of adult caregivers.

Cooperative competition emphasizes the following:

- **Praising effort, not outcomes.** Whereas vapid praise is useless, pointing out specific, incremental accomplishments builds self-esteem. The baseball coach who tells her player, “You stepped into it, swung level and made contact” is doing a better job than the coach who simply says, “Nice cut;” and a far better job than the coach who screams, “Come on! Park that thing! You swing like a baby!”

- **Focusing on strengths.** Instead of comparing a player to his teammates, such as “Why can’t you kick the ball with the side of your foot like Robbie?” focus on strengths. The coach who tells his player “You’re passing well. Let’s try that corner kick again.” is capitalizing on what’s intrinsically rewarding to a child by focusing on her strengths.

- **Having fun, but not at the expense of others.** The joy of any game should not be in the winning or losing, and certainly not in the harming of others, but in the playing of the game and the cultivation of connections. To that end, cooperative competition emphasizes cheers, not jeers, and handshakes, not prizes. The coach who insists on giving the opposing team a cheer and a handshake, regardless of the outcome, understands cooperative competition.

- **Engaging children in discussions about their own behavior.** Instead of criticizing or praising a particular action, teammates and adult supervisors can ask questions such as, “Tell me about your decision to pass the ball to Jessie” or “What’s the boo- ing about for you?” or “I see you sitting on the bench texting while your teammates are out there.” Simple questions and process comments prompt sportsmanship and collaboration.

- **Emphasizing teamwork.** Every individual behavior affects others. Pointing that out to children as it’s happening builds strong teams and communities. Rather than say, “Stop hogging the ball,” you could say, “Look to see who is open. Work together.” Win or lose, the post-game debrief is another opportunity to emphasize teamwork. To wit: “Our performance was best when players stayed in their zone” or “I liked how the bench encouraged the players on the field” or “We fought hard. What do we need to work on, as a team, during the next practice?”

The cornerstone of cooperative competition is how the adults in charge frame the game or activity. Just about any game can be set up in a friendly or unfriendly way, just as any activity can be explained in a way that promotes anxiety and hurts performance and self-esteem.

**Is Winnerless Worthless?**
Inadvertently inane—both physically and psychologically—are competitions without any winner at all. Naturally, not every activity should be or can be competitive. When I mow my lawn while listening to 80’s
tunes on my noise cancelling headphones, nobody wins. I enjoy it, especially if it’s a sunny day. It’s decent exercise and I get a Zen-like pleasure looking at the finished pattern. My stepfather, on the other hand, refers to all yard work as “pure psychic pain.” He’d rather be fly fishing. According to him, standing thigh-deep in rushing water swinging a hand-tied bundle of bird feathers at the spot where you think there might be a fish is fun. Together we prove that noncompetitive activities have an inherent fun quotient and that that value varies markedly from one person to the next.

The controversy lies not with our varying experiences of inherently noncompetitive activities, however. It likes more with eliminating competition altogether or amplifying it to absurd levels. On the latter point, much has been written. Rabid soccer moms and hockey dads be warned. On the former point, let’s pause to assess the outcome and our motives. Sometimes, in a misguided attempt to protect youngsters from a kind of moderate competition that is healthy and fun, we dial the knob down so low that we create new dangers.

Consider this example from a games “expert” who suggested an interesting variation on musical chairs. Instead of having the last player standing sit out on each successive round, have the entire group try to sit on fewer and fewer chairs. That way, no one is ever out and, some would argue, there is no risk that anyone would feel like a loser. (Is anyone ever traumatized by getting out in musical chairs? Alas.)

I’ve played this game at camp with kids and discovered several things. First of all, it results in more injuries than regular musical chairs. Trying to get eight or nine kids to sit or somehow balance on a single chair has the potential to be an excellent cooperative game. However, there tend to be lots of stubbed toes and pinched fingers. Second, there tends to be more peer criticism than regular musical chairs. I heard kids say, “You’re too fat to hang on" and "My sister’s more coordinated than you.”

What I learned was that no game or activity is inherently healthy. The wacky version of musical chairs cannot guarantee that some kids won’t feel like losers when it’s all over. It is entirely possible that the more coordinated children will feel good about how they were able to scramble together and balance on the chair, and the less coordinated will feel as if they’ve let the group down, or worse.

Of course, it’s also possible that if someone ran that activity better than I did on my first try, the entire group would have fun and leave feeling good about themselves. That is precisely my point. Skilled teachers, coaches, camp staff and parents can supervise baseball, musical chairs or basket weaving and make it either a constructive or destructive experience for children. There are rules to follow, skills to learn and strengths to capitalize on. There are friendships to be cultivated, ethical decisions to be made and successes to be experienced.
**Winning with Humility; Losing with Grace**

What builds character is not keeping a stiff upper lip when your team loses or when your painting of a horse looks like a cow. What builds character is having others like you for who you are, not how you perform. What builds character is having adults who provide success experiences and set good examples for children. What builds character is being supported in achieving a challenging goal. And what builds character is the self-discipline to persevere—to reattempt—after failure.

One of the best examples of this kind of leadership I ever witnessed was, coincidentally, in a game of traditional musical chairs at camp. The first person out was actually one of the cabin leaders. He threw his arms up in the air and shouted, “Now here’s how you get out in style!” He then boogied out of the circle by combining some break-dancing moves with a beat-boxing he made up on the spot.

You can imagine what followed. Each successive child who got out made up his own hip-hop song-and-dance routine. There was no arguing, of course, because the campers saw that it was as much fun to stay in as it was to get out. No one felt like a loser, at least not for long. Everyone just laughed and asked to play again.

It's not whether you win or lose, it's how adults frame the game.

---

**Notes:**