



# PARENTING HAS BECOME A COMPETITIVE SPORT

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**C**ompetitiveness is not a bad thing. It encourages children to achieve their potential. It can foster skills that prepare them for adult life. It becomes a problem when winning is all that counts or when a child is prepared to do anything to achieve that goal and gain parental acceptance. When the joy of the sport is taken away, we need to re-evaluate our approach to childhood sports.

Teaching children to develop a healthy attitude to competition can be taught from an early age. It is important to allow children to experience the full range of emotions, negative and positive, that go with winning, losing and competing. But what are the consequences of being over competitive?

- Friendship problems: Children are forced to compete with and be judged alongside their friends. This is the reality of life but when children experience intense achievement pressure, children focus on winning and outperforming their friends. Arguments and problems within the friendships start to occur and soon this unhealthy competition creates negative peer interactions, such as jealousy, isolation and loneliness.
- Friendship problems can also start between the parents themselves. Parental over-competition can drive wedges between the adults as well as the children. Over-competitive parents may no longer be able to congratulate their friends' or friends children because they won a race while their child did not win. Parents might even downplay other children's achievements. These are all behaviours that their own children observe and will ultimately adopt.

- Loss of balance: Achievement pressure results in children spending many hours on training and working for wins. This leaves them with little downtime or just time to be kids. The balance between achievement and childhood experience becomes unbalanced. The children feel stress, as well as possibly burnout. It may sound ridiculous but children can experience burnout because of the undue pressure placed on them to perform. Many children drop out of sports by high school. The pressure to be the best and always win is too much. Over and above stress and fatigue, injuries start occurring due to early sports specialisation and over training while younger. Sadly the game simply is not fun anymore and the joy of the sport is taken away from the child. Many children today face intense pressure to find what they are good at and succeed at it. Instead of taking the time to figure out who they are and who they want to become, children are forced to perform. We do live in very competitive times, where children may need to get bursaries or scholarships but we need to be watchful that these pursuits do not overshadow the pure enjoyment that sport should result in. Bursaries and scholarships are an added bonus but they are not the ultimate goal of sport participation.
- Fast tracking: When kids are consistently forced to excel, they race through childhood at a fast pace, potentially missing important developmental tasks along the way. They also miss fun social events such as parties or sleep overs.
- Children need time to practice social

skills, to learn how to set and reach goals, to make mistakes and build resilience, and to develop their interests. Sometimes this may mean attending the party instead of going to Saturday training. Again it is about achieving balance.

- While we strive for wins, the reality is that many lessons are best learnt in defeat. The irony of the situation is that children, and adults for that matter, learn better from a defeat. Defeats and mistakes create opportunities for learning and growth which are not present in winning.

With these, and other, negative consequences, why then is sport participation for children encouraged. Sport provides children with the opportunity to develop skills and attributes they need in their lives. Sport, in short, can be seen as a metaphor for life:

- Children learn to be disciplined, focused and dedicated.
- They learn respect for themselves, the coaches, the teachers and their team.
- They learn to work with others, to be teammates. They learn to humble winners. They learn how to handle defeat and to come back from a loss.
- They learn to deal with disappointments, not placing, not making the team, not getting the medal. They learn that after these disappointments, they go back to try again and not to give up on themselves.
- Children learn to make small and big goals, as well as the hard work it takes to achieve them.

As parents, the onus is on us to step back from the trap of over competition in childhood (and adolescence). Here are

some approaches to promote a healthy balance in your home:

- Foster positive behaviours. Children develop at different rates and achieve the developmental milestones at different times. Chances are that the tallest child in the grade will be the fastest swimmer, the early onset puberty boy will be able to throw the shot put far. But this does not mean the child who has not hit puberty or a growth spurts will not achieve this once he reaches his own developmental milestones. Encourage children to understand that everyone has different strengths and weaknesses and that these develop at different times in our lives.
- Do something other than competitive sport. Make time for family, friends and downtime. Strive for balance.
- Resist the urge to fill each afternoon with structured activities. As parents, we pay a lot for school fees and extra murals therefore it is understandable that we would like to maximise what we get out of the school context. But when there is no time where a child can just be, we need to re-evaluate our schedules and perhaps admit to pushing too hard.
- Encourage your child to try a variety of sports instead of specialising in one. Early specialisation does not necessarily produce sports stars. We also need to remember that children develop at different rates. Therefore it may be the case that only after puberty is it possible to get a solid indication of talent or skill. There are some "child stars" that can be identified early but these are few and far between. These so-called child stars will probably not continue passed adolescents as talented sports individuals because of the over competitive context of school sport which includes over competitive



parents, over training at a young age and due to loss of interest and joy in their sport.

- Promote non-competitive activities to balance out competitive ones. Encourage your child to participate in a range of activities. Team sports, solo activities, competitive and non-competitive (choir, music, art, scouts) interests so that the goal is not always winning. Encourage them to participate in these activities even if they are "not good" at them. Foster the idea of "Don't hesitate, participate", try something that you are not automatically good at. How do we know what we are good at if we have not tried many things...
- Teach healthy coping skills. It does not come automatically, children need to be taught how to be humble winners and gracious losers. To experience the sense of fulfilment that comes with trying your best as an individual and the experiences gained of working as a team. Sometimes the joy of the sports event is not to be found in their personal performance, but in being part of something bigger such as the teams achievement.
- Competitiveness does not have to involve other people. Children may be taught to compete against themselves. For example last week I ran 1 km, next week I am aiming for 1.5km. However, this needs to be mindfully done. The goals imposed on the child cannot be excessive or over-the-top. They need to be smaller and achievable goals so that the child can build from there. Parents need to understand, if I use the above example, that it takes time and may take a couple of months of training before the child can run 3km comfortably.
- Focus on the experience by redefining success, failure and mistakes. If a child learns to only associate being "first" and "best" with acceptance and love from their parents, their self-esteem may suffer when they fail to meet these. And, if a child internalises the message that winning is all that matters, they may avoid experiences for fear of failure. On the other hand, a child whose parents do not support or encourage them enough may never fulfil their potential. Furthermore, parents who give up easily, make excuses or blame others when they do not succeed will pass on those habits to their children.
- Avoid participation trophies. Some parents try to protect their children from the negative emotions associated with losing with the idea that everyone is a winner. Some schools also perpetuate this idea with participation trophies for all children. Participation, effort, motivation and trying your best should be rewarded but it is also important to prepare children for the reality of everyday life. Life does not give participation trophies.

There are also parents who intervene when their child does not make the team. These parents orchestrate their child's inclusion. If children do not make the team, we need to trust the process and assume that those included were included based on merit. We then need to go back to our children and assist them in working towards making the team next time. By forcing the coaches hand to include a child when they have not made the team on merit, is doing them a huge disservice. They will not learn to associate effort with success. They do not learn how to work for something they want, and will enter adulthood with skewed expectations. This will not only alienate the child from the coach and team managers, but the fellow teammates as well because children know who belongs on the team and "whose mommy or daddy went to complain". Life is not always fair and it is better for a child to learn this from an early age in the safe, contained environment of home and school.

Parents think they want success for their children, but it many ways they want success for themselves. By focusing on winning, they lose sight of sports as a vehicle of learning. As a parent myself, I am reminded that we need to strive to avoid the rat race of perfection and winning because ironically "the trouble with the rat race is, even if you win, you're still a rat" (Lily Tomlin).



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