

# How to Make Competition Work for Your Child

By Kathryn Kvols

We live in a highly competitive society. Competition has some virtues and some pitfalls. The virtues are that competition helps us to strive to be better, to do more than we thought we were capable of doing. Competition helps us not to be complacent with where we already are.

The pitfalls parents should be aware of when they allow their child to participate in competitive events are:

- Competition often breeds conflict. Hurt feelings, jealousy, arguments and alienation among peers are often the result of competition.
- Your child may compare himself to others. The need to be better than others can put distance in peer relationships. If he comes up short in the comparison, he may feel like quitting.
- In an effort to be #1, children often withhold knowledge, assistance and encouragement from their classmates. As a result, the larger group loses out on valuable contributions.
- Who wins and who loses is often the major emphasis in competition. It feels great to win but there is always a loser and there will always be someone better than your child.
- Needing to be the best or needing to win can put unnecessary pressure on your child.

How do we protect our children from falling prey to the trappings and pitfalls of competition yet be able to function effectively in the midst of it? We may not be able to spare our children from the negative consequences of competition but we can help minimize their effects by giving our children a different perspective on competition. Here are some questions you may want to ask your child after competing:

“Did you give it your best?” This puts the emphasis on personal growth rather than defeating the opponent.

“What skill did you implement from your practice?”

“Who did you help?” or “How did you help the team?” Sometimes children feel like they have to win or be the best in order to be important or valuable. This question helps them recognize that they can be valuable and contribute in many different ways.

“What did you learn?” This puts the emphasis on the process rather than on the result. All too often we concentrate on the results and make ourselves miserable during the process.

“Did you have fun?” instead of “Did you win?” This question will help your child focus on the “joy of doing” instead of the “joy of outdoing.”

My husband has an academy where he teaches fencing. He encourages his students to practice the following before going into a match. Tell your opponent “good luck”. Say to yourself, “I wish you (the opponent) your best performance, so that I can have the best possible challenge. May we both get stronger from the result of this match.”

Ask your child questions that cause self-reflection. This causes your child to look internally. As a result, he will begin to know himself and become driven from within instead of being driven by striving to be the best or by needing to win.

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