The Case Against Competition
Competition is to self-esteem as sugar is to teeth. Most people lose in most competitive encounters, and it’s obvious why that causes self-doubt. But even winning doesn’t build character; it just lets a child gloat temporarily. Studies have shown that feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources of evaluation as a result of competition. Your value is defined by what you’ve done to the number of people you’ve beaten.

Competition is destructive to children’s self-esteem, it interferes with learning, sabotages relationships, and isn’t necessary to have a good time. But how do you raise a child in a culture that hasn’t yet caught on to all this?

You will have to decide how much compromise is appropriate so your child isn’t left out or ridiculed in a competitive society. But at least you can make your decision based on what you believe is best for your children — for all the reasons given here — and it perpetuates the poison of competition in another generation.

Children succeed in spite of competition, not because of it. Most of us were raised to believe that we do our best work when we’re in a race — that without competition we would become fat, lazy, and mediocre. It’s a belief that our society takes on faith. It’s also false.

Children can be taught about the goals you have for your children. Chances are you want them to develop healthy self-esteem, to accept themselves as basically good people, and to have a good time.


to play highly structured games in which one individual or team must defeat another.

When it comes to competition, we Americans typically recognize only two legitimate positions: enthusiastic support and qualified support. The first view holds that the more we immerse our children (and ourselves) in the competitive jungle, the better. Competition builds character and produces excellence. The second stance admits that our society has gotten carried away with the need to be Number One, that we push our kids too hard and too fast to become winners — but insists that our belief in the result of competition can be held harmless if it is perceived as basically good news.

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