Is Competition Ever Appropriate in a Cooperative Classroom?
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By Alfie Kohn

Of the numerous benefits of cooperative learning (CL), the one that first appealed to many of us was its status as an alternative to competition. Some combination of observation, personal experience, and reliable peer reports made it appear that competition is destructive. Moreover, a significant proportion of educators who share this belief nevertheless feel compelled to add that, of course, they are not saying all competition is inappropriate; offered in moderation and kept in perspective, there is room for some win/lose activities. I would contend that such qualifications are no more than a general disclaimer, meant to take a stand that might be viewed as extreme. A middle-of-the-road position offers clear rhetorical advantages, conferring on the person who holds it an appearance of being reasonable and realistic. But the simple truth that we sometimes fail to grasp is this: Not everything that is bad when done to excess is harmless when done in moderation.

Some things, of course, like eating candy, are harmless in moderation. But other things are toxic as long as they are destructive or counterproductive inherently—that is, as a function of their very nature. Eating lead paint chips would seem to fall into this category: There is no level of consumption that can be said to be absolutely safe, much less healthy. Having thought hard about this issue for more than a decade, I am convinced that mutually exclusive goal attainment—an arrangement in which one person can succeed only if another fails—leads no one to a ranking of success other than licence. That doesn’t mean it’s as dangerous, of course, only that the problem is not just a function of quantity.

For educators who see more harm than good in competition, my challenge is to name any advantage that can be achieved only (or even most easily) by placing children in activities that require them to try to beat one another. This is not to say merely that competition should be limited, our obligation is to try to justify win/lose structures, and, if we cannot, to do all we can to eliminate them.

The second claim is that children enjoy competing. But such expressions of preference may be confounded by the number and quality of their previous exposures to win/lose structures, and, if we cannot, to do all we can to eliminate them.

The second class of children is those who compete. While it seems riskier (particularly in a culture still wedded to the idea that people must struggle to be Number One) to attribute their victory or loss to factors beyond their control, such as innate ability or luck, thereby reducing the likelihood that they will try harder next time; and it functions as an extrinsic motivator, reducing interest in the task and creative performance just as other artificial inducements have been repeatedly shown to do (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Kohn, 1993; Lepper and Greene, 1978).

We are working together, we are not working against one another. If we are not working together, there is no point in being nice to one another. If we are working together, there is no point in being unkind to one another. If we are working together, there is no point in being indifferent to one another. If we are working together, there is no point in being hostile to one another. If we are working together, there is no point in being suspicious of one another. Not only is it irrational to help someone whose success might require your failure, but competition leads children to see others as potential obstacles to one’s own success. The second claim is that children enjoy competing. But such expressions of preference may be confounded by the number and quality of their previous exposures to win/lose structures, and, if we cannot, to do all we can to eliminate them.

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