

**Taking Time**

by  
Lehigh Co.  
Extension Agent

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**Friendship First, Competition Second**

"Friendship first, competition second." That's the chant I taught campers prior to the weekly water carnival when I was a counselor at summer camp. Across the state, softball and baseball teams are beginning a spring schedule. This annual event reminds me to pause and think through some assumptions that I hold about competition.

Competition is all around us! We vie with other businesses for a significant market niche, compete with our siblings for attention, challenge classmates for academic or athletic superiority, and dare other organizations to match our contributions to community fund drives. Everyone competes. It's a

way of life in our society.

But how much is enough? Are there other ways to succeed? What are the costs and benefits of competition to children, especially young children?

Competition comes in several forms—the I win—you lose situations (external) and the internal striving to be the best he can be. I'm sure you have an opinion about the merits of each kind. Surprisingly, David and Roger Johnson and their colleagues have done substantial research and found that an environment of cooperation rather than external competition is the one that produces the superior performance. Children in these situations also recorded increased self-esteem as a result of the exper-

ience. Parents should be reminded that children ages five to eight are at a critical stage in developing their own self-concept. Carole Ames, another researcher, reports that losing in a competitive experience magnifies the negative effect on self-esteem more than winning enhances the positive effect. Kohn agrees, "To lose—particularly in a public event—can be psychologically detrimental even for the healthiest among us."

Competition may break monotony but cooperation brings out the highest levels of excellence. Many authors have collected games and learning activities that are based on cooperation. These games are challenging and require strategizing and energy, and yet they teach the valuable concept of teamwork, too. And they're fun!

Children sometimes reject competitive events because they aren't enjoyable. In 1988, the Youth Sports Institute surveyed young people ages 10 to 18. It found that about one-third of these kids drop out of sports each year. Most say they left because it was no longer fun. As children mature to senior high school, they are mentally more prepared to balance a mix of cooperative and competitive situations. They can then make adjustments in the kinds of activities they

are involved in. These choices will differ from person to person.

An adult's actions can make a difference. If you know young people who are involved in competitive activities, you can help balance the negative effects of competition.

• Try asking, "How did you enjoy your game today? What did you learn?" rather than "Did you win?"

• Allow youth to pick which activities and how many they will participate in. Don't push a child into competitive activities because, "you think it would do them good."

• Protect children from other adults who may not have the kids' best interests in mind.

• Be realistic about a child's individual abilities. Make sure each girl or boy knows that you love them and are NOT disappointed in them, win or lose. Emphasize improved performance, not winning.

• Control your own emotions and behavior. Don't relive your competitive past glories or disappointments through others.

• Encourage recognition of all participants for their growth and unique contributions to an event.

An excellent way for adults to say, "You're important to me. I'm proud of you!" to a child is to take her picture. Keep your camera

loaded with film and ready to record their accomplishments, moments of joy, the painstaking stages of a project. Then review old "celebration" pictures on a regular basis.

Competition, when taken to an extreme, can lead to cheating and unfair practices. It may push a child NOT to help a friend perfect a skill because in the future that friend may be a competitor.

As you make your choices about competition for yourself and as you guide other family members, consider this scene described by researcher Alfie Kohn: "At the elementary school, fifth and sixth-graders gave a square-dance program with parents and children of other grades as the audience. The youngsters wore colorful costumes of Western flair and flavor, and it was as charming and delightful a performance as you're likely to see in a school anywhere. They danced with all the exuberance of healthy childhood, and, obviously, they were having a wonderful time. The audience had fun, too. It was young American, in the best tradition, but at the end, a committee of judges announced the winners. One group of fifth-graders and one of the sixth-graders were pronounced 'best,' and the other dancers went away forgetting the fun they'd had, remembering only 'they lost.'"

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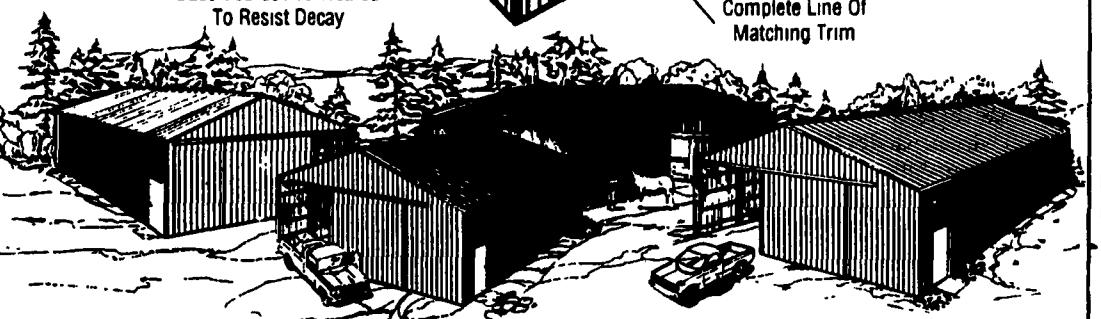
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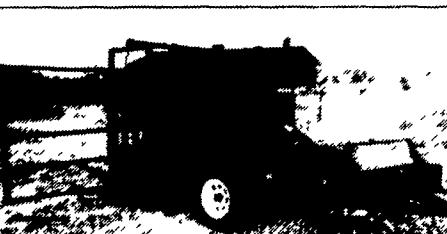
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