

HEALTHY COMPETITION IS GOOD FOR CHILDREN

Protecting children from competition has damaging consequences writes **Hannah Pandel.**



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It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, only that you tried and did your best.'

This is often said to help children come to terms with suffering a defeat of some sort. In fact, this valuable lesson only applies where competition exists. Competition breeds excellence and cultivates cooperation, but today there is no top of the class. Scores are no longer tallied. There are no winners or losers. Everyone gets a prize and everyone wins. By suppressing competition, we are failing to prepare the next generation for the realities of the world. The result may well be that we're creating a childhood culture of mediocrity and risk aversion—a somewhat inadequate preparation for our competitive world.

American author Alfie Kohn is a vocal opponent to competition. 'By definition, not everyone can win a contest. If one child wins, another cannot. This means that each child comes to regard others as obstacles to his or her own success.' However, education professors Thomas Good and Jere Brophy argue that children can learn powerful lessons in an environment that promotes competition. Competition encourages engagement, mastery of a task, and a desire to achieve your best. It teaches critical thinking and teamwork.

If competition is so important, then why should we shelter children from it?

The latest to rise to the defence of children against the evils of competition is the AFL. In March 2014, they unveiled changes to the rules of junior football games across Australia. They will no longer have a scoreboard, ladders, or

match results. All these changes are designed to promote participation rather than competition. AFL National Development manager Josh Vanderloo said the changes were designed to give children 'an enjoyment philosophy rather than a winning philosophy'.

But of course there is enjoyment in winning and there's the challenge of improving your performance which follows a defeat. The idea that Hawthorn and Sydney would have competed in the 2014 grand final under rules that forbade them from keeping score is absurd. Why should we expect our children to do so?

The AFL's argument, and that of many other do-gooders, is that by suppressing competition and removing the existence of winners and losers they can create a fun and safe environment for children to build their self-efficacy. The false assumption here is that this safe environment requires the elimination of competition.

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On the contrary, in their 2011 paper 'Teach to Compete', American educational psychologist Dr David Shields and education Superintendent Christopher Funk argued that healthy competition should 'promote excellence, ethics and enjoyment'. Competition encourages excellence in children in the same way it does

in general society. As Shields and Funk argue, competition pits people's immediate interests against each other—but it does so to serve a larger mutually-beneficial purpose. Our open competitive market leads to lower costs and prices for goods and services, more innovation, and greater efficiency and productivity. In our political system, competition delivers a stronger democracy through greater accountability and public debate. Ultimately, our wellbeing as a society is dependent upon competition and the whole of society benefits from this interaction.

In a supportive environment, competition is good for children. In her 2011 book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades, And What You Can Do About It*, psychologist Dr Sylvia Rimm argues that competition is central to schooling because it teaches children the lifelong lesson that failure can occur, and when it does, they learn to 'identify the problems, remedy the deficiencies, reset their goals, and grow from their experiences.' People are naturally fearful of falling down and making mistakes. A high tolerance for failure is, therefore, important for the development of a resilient and confident individual. A teacher or parent should accept that failure and error-making are a necessary, intrinsic, and welcomed part of the learning process. Healthy competition in childhood encourages risk-taking and persistence—qualities that are vital for success in the real world.

Another key advantage of competition is that it gives children a reason to motivate themselves. In their 1999 paper 'Winning isn't Everything: Competition, Achievement Orientation, and Intrinsic Motivation' published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, John M. Tauer and Judith M. Harackiewicz found that children in a competitive environment



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play longer than those in a non-competitive environment and have a greater sense of competence. In this context, competition fosters intrinsic motivation in an individual—the inherent desire to engage one’s interests and to develop one’s capacities. Academics Edward Deci and Richard Ryan found that when students are intrinsically motivated, they exhibit more positive behaviours, such as creativity and persistence, and develop higher levels of self-esteem.

When they can’t see the value of a lesson, children experience motivational problems. A 1983

research paper published by Jacquelynne Eccles, ‘Expectations, Values and Academic Behaviours’, found that an individual’s assessment of a task’s value reflects how useful they believe it to be.

In the absence of a rationale, a child exhibits greater signs of disengagement and a lack of motivation. Can we really expect a child to work hard and give their all if there is no recognition or reward for their effort? Why should they dive to save a goal in a soccer game if the score doesn’t matter? Why should they even try to score a goal?

In this sense, competition also makes an activity relevant to children and motivates them to give more than they otherwise would. It drives them to constantly try to improve and advance.

Deci and Ryan argue that gaining mastery over challenges and taking in new experiences are essential for developing a cohesive sense of self. Competition gives individuals this opportunity to strive for success, and can inspire them to want more success in the future.

There are social benefits that come from competition, as it often



job, buying a house, and applying for university. Even our political system is built upon the principles of competition. In such a competitive world, how are you supposed to come to terms with losing as an adult if you have been sheltered from it as a child? How are you supposed to learn to be gracious in victory or defeat if you have never experienced either? A childhood devoid of competition is damaging because it instils a sense of entitlement—that a ‘win’ is deserved merely for participating, and not for the quality of the performance.

Losing or defeat—both often mistaken for failure—is an important life lesson. Psychologist Kenneth Barish argues that for children, ‘the ability to accept defeat gracefully is not learned from instruction—it is learned through practice and the emulation of admired adults.’ A fear of losing can be crippling. It can create individuals who avoid taking risks or embracing new and challenging situations. This behaviour is unhealthy in adults and is especially dangerous in a society like ours, which is founded on risk-taking and competition.

Competition, with its model of victors and losers, exposes children to the simple truth that they can’t always win. It ensures that they are able to put any fear of losing into perspective. Importantly, competition teaches a child that risks are sometimes worth taking. It is much easier to help a child learn these lessons when the stakes are smaller—for example, in an under-eight sports tournament—than it is to change an adult’s life-long habit of avoiding risks for fear of losing.

Michael Jordan summed it up perfectly in his Nike advertisement: ‘I have failed over and over and over again in my life—and that is why I succeed.’ Competition taught him persistence, perseverance, and resilience. By denying our children the benefits of competition, we are denying them this same opportunity. **R**

requires that children work in teams. In a team, people are required to work with individuals of unique knowledge and ability to help achieve a common goal. Professors David Johnson and Roger Johnson and educator Edye Johnson Halubec describe this as ‘positive interdependence’—a phenomenon that exists when all members of the team recognise that they cannot succeed individually unless everyone succeeds.

As adults, we are required to work with all sorts of people in the workplace and our ability to do so is assumed. Engaging in competition

and working in teams nurtures this behaviour.

Children who can work cooperatively with their peers show better subsequent performance and greater problem-solving skills than those who work alone. Collaboration improves communication and social skills and the overall ability to work with others. Competition teaches children teamwork, and equips them with the tools they need to develop relationships, form partnerships and work together to solve problems.

We live in a competitive world. There is competition in finding a