

Competition Conundrum

Is it healthy or hurtful for campers?

“We try to emphasize safety and fun at Laney, even in competitive games and sports. Although I’ve read some passionate arguments opposed to any form of competition, campers seem to enjoy our version of winning and losing.

Is ‘healthy competition’ an oxymoron?”

—Rob Hammond, director of Camp Laney in Mentone, Ala.

As a psychologist who works with summer camps across the country, I am often asked whether competition is good or bad. Proponents of competition speak fondly of their athletic victories and about wanting the same thing for campers. Competition, they say, builds character. It’s a competitive world out there, so we had better prepare our children. Critics of competition want every child to always feel like a winner. They don’t want to pit one child

or one group against another, nor do they want external rewards—such as grades or trophies—to motivate participation.

No camp director, teacher, coach or parent wants the type of competition that makes children unduly anxious, that interferes with their performance and creativity, or that makes them uninterested. However, to eliminate competition at the same time erases opportunities to learn humility and grace.

Spoiling The Sport

Unhealthy competition is certainly prevalent. For example, parents living vicariously through their children while simultaneously screaming obscenities at referees and deriding opposing team members sets a poor example. Coaches who lack the skills to teach and encourage their charges turn children’s desire to win into bloodlust. And teachers who tell their students that one person’s success must come at the expense of his or her classmates strike a sour note on the purpose of competition. Alas, research on the negative aspects of unhealthy competition is mostly solid, but using it as a rationale for eliminating competition altogether “may throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Although some believe that “healthy competition” is actually a contradiction, I have a different perspective. The unhealthy competition I’ve witnessed is:

- Ubiquitous
- Focused exclusively on rewards or punishments
- Belligerent
- Rude
- Critical
- Unfair.

A classic example is the child who, after a day at school where grades are the only object, is forced to play in a youth soccer league where parents emphasize trophies, coaches berate kids, spectators scold every mistake, one team has vastly greater talent than the others, and not every child gets to play.

A Cooperative Effort

Life doesn’t have to be that way. What I’ve seen that is healthy I call

Cooperative competition emphasizes teamwork and points out strengths of individual participants, regardless of wins and losses.



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“cooperative competition.” This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but when competition creates only a little anxiety, demands fair play, and emphasizes safety and fun, children’s performances can be enhanced, and they learn to make moral decisions independent of adult caregivers. Cooperative competition emphasizes:

- Praising effort, not outcomes.

Although vapid praise is useless, pointing out incremental accomplishments builds self-esteem. The baseball coach who tells a player, “You swung hard and made contact,” is doing a better job than the coach who simply says, “Nice swing,” and a far better job than the coach who screams, “Come on! Park that thing! You swing like a baby!”

- Focusing on strengths. Instead of comparing a player to his teammates, such as “Why can’t you kick the ball like Robbie?,” focus on strengths. The coach who tells his player, “You’re passing well. Let’s try that corner kick again,” is capitalizing on what’s intrinsically rewarding to a child by focusing on his or her strengths.

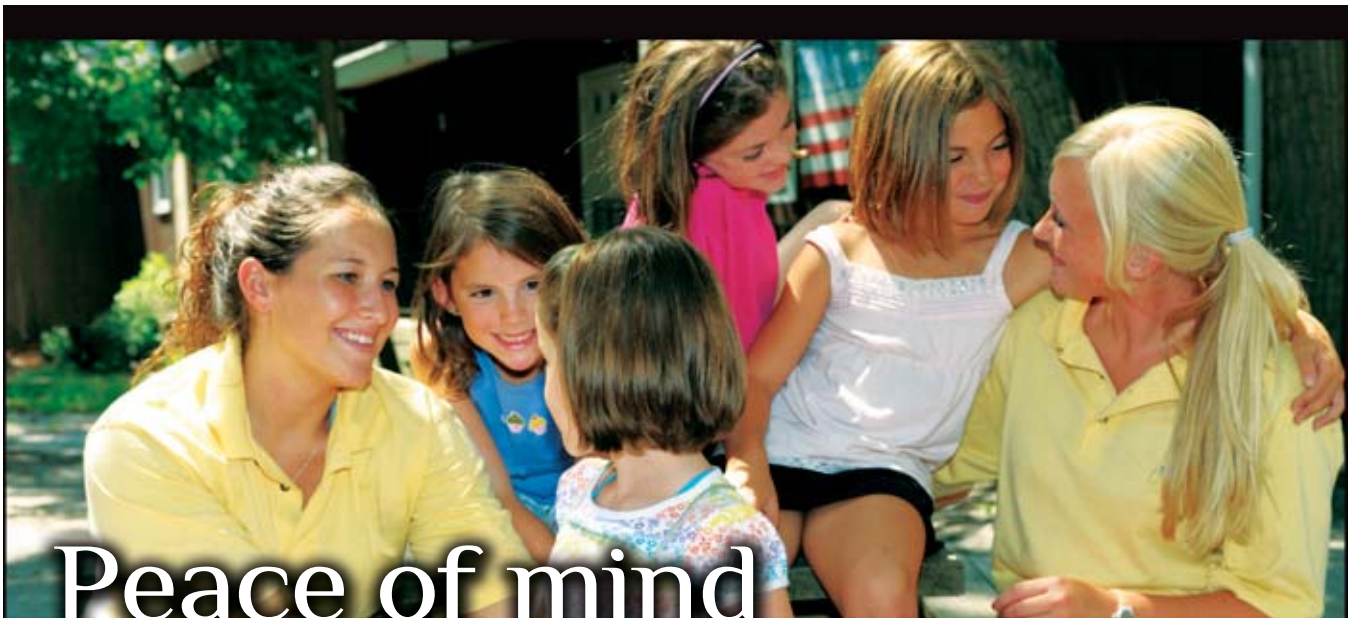


- Having fun, but not at the expense of others. The joy of any game should not be in the winning or losing, and certainly not in harming others, but in playing the game and cultivating relationships. Cooperative competition emphasizes cheers, not jeers—and handshakes, not prizes.

- Engaging children in discussions about their own behavior. Instead of criticizing or praising a particular action,

teammates and adult supervisors can say, “Tell me about your decision to pass the ball to Jessie.”

- Emphasizing teamwork. Every individual behavior affects others. Pointing that out to children as the play is happening builds strong teams and communities. The camper who passes the ball to an open teammate should be praised more than the show-off who runs the length of the field and tries to score.



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• Celebrating play. It's tempting to celebrate wins, but when opposing teams first take a moment to give each other cheers after a game full of effort and encouragement, every player and spectator appreciates competition for the sake of play rather than victory.

It's All Relative

The cornerstone of cooperative competition is how the adults in charge frame the game or activity. Just about any game can be set up in a friendly way, just as any activity can be explained in a way that promotes anxiety and hurts performance and self-esteem.

Consider this example from an expert on games who suggested an interesting variation on musical chairs. Instead of having the last player standing sit out on each successive round, have the entire group sit on fewer and fewer chairs. That way, no one is ever out and—some would argue—there is no risk that anyone will feel like a loser.

I've played this game at camp with kids and discovered several things. First, trying to get eight or nine kids to sit or

What builds character is having adults who provide successful experiences and set good examples for children. What builds character is being supported in achieving a challenging goal.

somehow balance on a single chair has the potential to be an excellent cooperative game, but there tend to be lots of stubbed toes and pinched fingers. Second, there tends to be more peer criticism than with regular musical chairs. I heard kids say, "You're too fat to hang on" and "My sister's more coordinated than you."

What I learned was that no game or activity is inherently healthy. The wacky version of musical chairs cannot guarantee that some kids won't feel like losers when it's all over. It is entirely possible that the more-coordinated children will feel good about how they were able to scramble together and balance on the chair, and the less-coordinated will feel as if they've let the group down, or worse. Of course, it's also possible that if someone ran that activity better than I did on my


first try, the entire group would have fun and leave feeling good about themselves.

That is precisely my point. Skilled teachers, coaches, camp staff and parents can supervise baseball, musical chairs or painting and make it either a constructive or destructive experience for children. There are rules to follow, skills to learn and strengths to capitalize on. There are friendships to cultivate, ethical decisions to make and successes to experience.

Character With Class

What builds character is not keeping a stiff upper lip when your team loses or your painting of a horse looks like a cow. What builds character is having others like you for who you are, not how you perform. What builds character is having adults who provide successful experiences and set good examples for children. What builds character is being supported in achieving a challenging goal.

One of the best examples of this type of leadership I witnessed was, coincidentally, in a game of musical chairs at camp. The first person out was actually one of the cabin leaders. He threw his arms up and shouted, "Now here's how you leave the game!" He then boogied out of the circle by combining some break-dancing moves with a little song he made up on the spot. You can imagine what followed—each child who was out made up his own hip-hop, song-and-dance routine. There was no arguing, of course, because the campers saw that it was as much fun to stay in as it was to go out. No one felt like a loser. Everyone laughed and asked to play again.

So it's not whether you win or lose—it's how adults frame the game. 

Dr. Christopher Thurber is a board-certified clinical psychologist and the creator of Leadership Essentials, an online library of video training modules for camp staff. Learn more by visiting Chris's Web sites, CampSpirit.com and ExpertOnlineTraining.com.



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