

# Healthy Competition

## Is Not an Oxymoron

Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D.

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 their 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 feel like a winner always. 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 I know wants the kind of competition that makes children unduly anxious, that interferes with their performance and creativity, or that makes them uninterested. However, to eliminate competition simultaneously eliminates opportunities to learn humility and grace. 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 in terms, I have a different perspective. The unhealthy competition I've witnessed is ubiquitous, focused exclusively on rewards or punishments, belligerent, rude, critical, and 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.

Life doesn't have to be that way. What I've seen that is healthy is what I'd call "cooperative competition." This may also seem like a contradiction in terms, but when competition creates just a little anxiety, demands fair play, and emphasizes fun, children's performance can be enhanced, and they learn to make moral decisions independent of adult caregivers. Cooperative competition emphasizes the following:

- Praising effort, not outcomes. Although vapid praise is useless, pointing out incremental accomplishments builds self-esteem. The baseball coach that tells her 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 that 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 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 the harming of others, but in the playing of the game and the cultivation of relationships. To that end, cooperative competition emphasizes cheers, not jeers, and handshakes, not prizes.



## The healthy approach — “Cooperative Competition”



- Engaging children in discussions about their own behavior. Instead of criticizing or praising a particular action, teammates and adult supervisors can ask questions like, “Tell me about your decision to pass the ball to Jessie” or “What’s the boo-ing about for you?”
- Emphasizing teamwork. Every individual behavior affects others. Pointing that out to children as it’s happening builds strong teams and communities.

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 or unfriendly 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 try to sit on fewer and fewer chairs. That way, no one is ever out and, some would argue, there is no risk that anyone would feel like a loser.

I’ve played this game at camp with kids and discovered several things. First of all, it results in more injuries than regular musical chairs. Trying to get eight or nine kids to sit or somehow balance on a single chair has the potential to be an excellent cooperative game. However, there tend to be lots of stubbed toes and pinched fingers. Second, there tends to be more peer criticism than 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 be cultivated, ethical decisions to be made, and successes to be experienced.

What builds character is not keeping a stiff upper lip when your team loses or when 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 success 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 kind of leadership I ever 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 in the air 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 successive child who got 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 get out. No one felt like a loser. Everyone just laughed and asked to play again.

It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how adults frame the game.

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