

What We Know About Youth and Competition

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Competition, as a youth educational experience, concerns school teachers and administrators, youth educators in other public and private agencies, parents, and youth themselves. The Iowa Youth Poll results showed that 31 percent of the youth involved in athletic programs felt too much pressure and competition in sports; 20 percent often experienced this.

Competition with pressure to win occurs not only in sports program, but also may happen in the classroom, music programs, drama events, 4-H and other organized youth groups, and in the home.

Competition is defined by social psychologists and others in many different ways. Competition is "attaining a goal in a social situation in which the remaining individuals are excluded from achieving the goal" (Stockdale, Galejs and Wolins, 1983). Competitiveness is the enjoyment of interpersonal competition and being better than others (Riskind and Wilson, 1982). Although no one definition is universally accepted, a common element of most definitions involves "beating out other persons." We frequently refer to competition between individuals or groups as interpersonal competition.

Interpersonal competition as an educational experience is effective when:

1. performance needs to be increased in simple drill or speed-related tasks if quantity of work is desired and/or well learned materials need reviewing;

2. low-anxiety producing, relatively unimportant activities are used for a fun change of pace and a release of energy;

3. all learners believe they have a reasonable chance to win;

4. clear and specific rules, procedures, and answers are available;

5. learners are aware of their own progress and can monitor the progress of their competitors (Johnson & Johnson, 1987).

Johnson and Johnson go on to describe the basic skills youth need to function in the above situations. The basic skills for interpersonal competition are:

1. learning to play fair, i.e. understand and obey the rules;

2. being a good winner and a good loser i.e. win with humility and modesty, and be gracious when losing;

3. enjoying the competition, win or lose;

4. monitoring the progress of your competitors to compare their standing with yours;

5. not overgeneralizing the results, i.e. winning doesn't make the winner a more worthwhile person or losing doesn't make the loser less worthwhile.

Consequences of Failing at Competition

Work done by Carole Ames (1984) raises serious concerns about our effectiveness in helping youth develop the basic skills

needed to function effectively in interpersonal competitive situations. She identified serious consequences for children who fail in competitive situations. She reported that failure in competitive experiences accentuated self-directed negativism and self-criticism, created significantly lower levels of satisfaction, and elicited feelings of being non-deserving.

What's of Value? Winning or Playing?

Research indicates that interpersonal competitors place more value on winning than on performing a task well or learning how to do the task at hand (Ames). Type of focus is referred to as ends-orientated (focus on winning) vs means-orientated (being happy with the playing itself).

Charon Griffin-Pierson (1988) proposes a multi-dimensional definition of competition. She defines competition as "an achievement motive or component of achievement motivation that involves interpersonal and/or goal striving for excellence." Interpersonal competitiveness is similar to the previous definitions given, the desire to do better than others. On the other hand, goal competitiveness is the desire to excel, the desire to obtain a goal, the desire to be the best one can be. Success is measured by growth instead of the final score or ribbon. Emphasis is placed on the child's or the team's goals and the strides toward accomplishing them. The key to healthy goal competitiveness is that the goal is skill development, not being the champion.

Goal competition may be more appropriate for young people than interpersonal competition. This approach recognizes individual differences and "starts where the person is." It also gives the success to the goal setter, reinforcing the concept that one is responsible for one's behavior. Youth

may need help from adults in setting realistic goals and evaluating their progress.

Cooperative Learning

When groups choose goal competition instead of interpersonal competition, that choice opens the door for cooperative learning. In cooperative situations, there is a positive interdependence among youths' goal attainments; participants perceive that they can reach their learning goals if, and only if, other team members also reach their goals. (Johnson and Johnson 1984)

How To Use What We Know

Guidelines for Adults When Supporting Youth in Competition

Adult support for youth in both interpersonal and goal competitive situations is important. Parents, leaders, teachers, and coaches have a number of responsibilities.

1. Permit youth to decide their own involvement in competitive experiences. Of course, for younger children, some guidance of appropriate activities that reflect the interest of the child is helpful, but it is better if the youth makes the final choice.
2. Help youth develop an attitude that they are responsible for their actions and that they have control over much of their environment.
3. Take a positive approach. Praise youth for the positive aspects of their participation: for just being actively involved in the exciting things that life has to offer.
4. Focus on the youth's developing skills and abilities, not only on the final score or level of achievement.

5. Guide youth as they select activities. Provide a variety of competitive and cooperative choices. Consider each youth's temperament, recognizing that youth's personalities are different, even within the same family.

6. Make expectations realistic. Use competitive situations as a way to teach youth about limits and strengths; goal setting; and the importance of sports, projects, and hobbies as a means to relax and socialize.

7. Play with, participate, support and assist youth in their competitive efforts, but do not compete with them or through them for adult satisfaction. A youth who achieves a level of competence can be proud of that achievement if it is truly his or her own. That feeling of competence is diminished if too much assistance has taken away the "ownership" of the project.

8. Be a positive role model.

Design and Redesign Programs to Make a Difference

Discussion Questions

Think about the youth programming offered by your organization as it is today, and answer the following questions:

List examples of interpersonal competition within your organization.

List examples of goal competition within your organization.

Star the examples in your lists that result in recognition or prestige to youth involved.

How do you recognize youth involved in each type of competition? Where are you placing your recognition emphasis?

What percent of your programming is spent on competitive ventures?

If your program involves interpersonal competition, how do you teach and encourage the practice of skills necessary for healthy competition?

Who are your partners who reinforce these skills, and how do you train partners to reinforce those skills?

How are you building skills in cooperation through competition?

From the above questions, what have you learned about your organization and the competition found in your programs?

Based upon what you know about your organization, consider what you'd like your programs to look like in the future.

What steps will you need to take to get from where you are to where you'd like to be?

What resources do you need to make the changes you'd like?

What is the first step you plan to take?

