



Kids and Competition

Competition is a big part of life. At school we compete for grades and we compete in sports. We even compete for the affection of boyfriends or girlfriends. Competition is a big part of our lives. Competition can be useful; it is a way of getting information about how well we are doing and what is possible. It can challenge us to try harder and to learn from our own experience and the experiences of others.

Competition can also be damaging; It can make people feel hopeless and it can distract from the inner satisfactions of work and learning. It can make people give up. There are several things we can do to keep competition in balance. **Avoid evaluating the child.** We have always known that we should not label children negatively. Researchers have made a surprising discovery: Even when we label children positively, it can make them nervous and less likely to try in the future. For instance, when we tell a child that he is a great artist, he may not want to create again lest he disappoint you. Or when you tell a child that she is an excellent athlete, she may know that can do much better; She may conclude that you are not honest or not very discerning.

We all know that empty praise is counterproductive. But even sincere and positive labeling can be unhelpful. Research shows that children who are labeled as smart, fast, or artistic sometimes choose easy tasks in the future so they will not disappoint us. There is a better way to encourage children.

Regularly and positively acknowledge effort. Rather than judge a boy to be a great artist, we can comment on the strong lines or vibrant colors he uses. Rather than label a girl as an excellent athlete, we can observe that she seems to love sports or that she seems to have lots of energy. It is good to be upbeat and positive with children. But we do well to appreciate their efforts rather than hang a label and expectation on them that can become burdensome to them.

Emphasize the inner satisfactions of work. Sometimes we place emphasis on rewards, recognitions, and trophies. All of those have their place but may not be very good lifelong motivators. The most reliable reward for our work is the feeling of accomplishment that comes from completing a task. We can strengthen that motivation by helping family members notice it: "How did it feel when you completed the job and saw your finished work?"

Home is a good place to emphasize cooperation rather than competition. A competitive way to motivate young children to get ready for bed is to offer a quarter to one who gets ready first. There are problems with the approach. The older or faster child has an unfair advantage. Also, it causes children to think of other family members as competitors or enemies.

A different way to encourage getting ready for bed is to suggest that you will have story time as soon as they are all in bedclothes and have their teeth brushed. This approach encourages them to help each other.

Don't compare children. Comparing children makes family life into a contest. It suggests that there is only so much praise or love to go around and only the best get any. Rather than compare children, it is better to enjoy each child for his or her talents. Even when a child makes a comparison "I'm not as smart as Susie." we can remove the comparison. "Susie does very well in school. Do you know what I enjoy about you? I enjoy your kindness. You are very thoughtful of other people." We can find good in each child.

Help children deal with disappointment. When children do not do well at a task---making a mistake in a piano recital or doing poorly on a test - we may not know how to help them. There is a response that usually helps: We can offer compassionate understanding: "You are really disappointed." (See the unit "Empathy and Understanding Strengthen Children" for more information on understanding.)

When our children know that working and learning are more important to us than winning, they are likely to be ready to learn more and worry less. As they discover the satisfactions of overcoming difficulties and enjoying progress, they are likely to become productive adults.

Applications

Each child responds differently to competition. One child may thrive on the challenge. Another may be burdened by it. Help each of your children find the way that best helps her or him learn.

Notice your reaction to your children. Do you label them or encourage them? Try to use more encouraging and less labeling.

Labels:

You're such a good boy.
You are so tidy.
You are so smart.
You are the best girl in the world

Encouragement:

Thank you for helping me around the house.
It seems that you have found a place for everything.
You really work at learning
I love being with you

Is there a child in your family who always seems to be losing? How can you change your family system to encourage more cooperation and less competition? For example, can the child who often seems to "lose" be given special tasks that he or she enjoys and in which his or her performance does not get compared to that of others in the family?

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