

15 Reason Competitive Sports Are Great For Kids (That Have Nothing to Do With Winning)

To compete or not to compete? That really is a question when it comes to youth sports.

Why should kids compete? Is competition good for them? Is it necessary to get them prepared for their grown-up lives?

I don't think that competition is either good or bad. It just is. Rather it is how we think about it and cope with it makes it good or bad. How much we stress the importance of competition that gives it a larger space in our lives than it deserves. And, when we place winning as the most important objective of youth sports, then competition is toxic.

I also don't ascribe to the belief that competition sets kids up to experience the "real world." It's been my experience that competition is not as prevalent in the "real" world as people deem it to be. Success is not a zero-sum game. There is plenty of room for more than one person, product or company to be considered successful and the truth is the "best" is often more subjective than objective. Besides, the most useful kind of competition that I've experienced in my life is the competition I have within myself to be the best version of myself that I can be. No one else needs to keep score for me to measure my progress.

All of that said, I whole-heartedly believe that there is a place for competition in the lives of kids, one that can teach them tremendous life lessons. So here are my 15 reasons why experiencing competition is good for kids:

- 1. Competition drives us to learn at a faster rate and perform at a higher level.** When the meet is on the horizon, we work harder and faster. When we are playing a game push a little harder. In doing so we surprise ourselves of what we are capable of accomplishing.
- 2. Competition teaches us to bring our best effort.** Keeping score gives us extra motivation to do our best. We pursue excellence when we compete.
- 3. Competition teaches us to manage our nerves.** When something is out of our comfort zone or pushes us to perform, it's normal to feel fluttery within. Competition brings those butterflies out, so we can work on managing them. A trait that we can carry with us in taking exams, interviewing for jobs and giving presentations.
- 4. Competition does not have to be feared.** Often kids fear competition, making it into something scarier or more important than it needs to be. When they compete, they realize that it wasn't so scary after all.
- 5. Competition teaches us to take risks.** Once we realize that competition is not a terrifying thing, we can take risks. We can develop our confidence to do things that are hard or uncomfortable.
- 6. Competition teaches us to cope when things do not go our way.** Sometimes you work hard, and you still lose. Sometimes you win but still didn't perform as you wanted to. We learn resilience and grit in these moments. Resilience and grit are two traits that most certainly are essential in adulthood.
- 7. Competition helps us with goal setting.** While setting goals and making a plan to reach them can be done outside of competition, competition helps provide deadlines and progress checks on our goals.
- 8. Competition teaches us to play by rules.** Learning to operate within rules and developing strategies to use those rules to our advantage are great things competition teaches.

9. Competition helps us to learn to win and lose with grace. Nobody likes a boastful person, and nobody likes a pouter. Competition gives us the opportunities to cope with feelings of pride and disappointment and to learn to process them in healthy ways.

10. Competition is fun. Most people enjoy games. They have fun playing them. Being a part of team makes us feel like we belong. Taken correctly competition is fun for kids.

11. Competition can build self-esteem. Self-esteem cannot be handed to kids; they have to earn it. Competition is one way kids earn self-esteem. When you develop a talent and work hard for a result, it feels great. When you fail and learn that can bounce back, you feel more confident in yourself because you understand that you have resilience.

12. Competition teaches commitment. There is a saying that says “Successful people do the things that unsuccessful people don’t want to do. That is why they are successful.” Building the habit of commitment is a wonderful by-product of being involved in competitive sports.

13. Competition gives us another community. When you are part of a team, you are in a network of peers and adults who have interests and values similar to yours. It is always great to have another village in your life or that of your child’s.

14. Competition presents opportunities to travel. Maybe it’s just within your state, or maybe it’s national or even international. But being part of a competitive team often gives us an opportunity to visit places and interact with people that might not otherwise meet.

15. Competition causes kids to perform better in school. Data shows that high school students who play sport are less likely to drop out. Furthermore, participation in sports also has been associated with completing more years of education and consistently higher grades in school. Not surprising that the discipline and goal setting that is learned in competitive sports helps in school.

Of course, many of these 15 benefits can also be achieved through other means, including non-competitive sports, the arts or faith-based activities. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in my mind that when done purposeful and developmentally appropriate manner that places the needs of the children well ahead of winning, competitive sports can and should be a great experience for kids.

Greater focus on the process and less concern over the result allows competitive sports to be a character developing and happy part of childhood.