

## **Building Cooperation in the Family**

This evening we'll talk about concepts and strategies that may help build a more cooperative framework in the family. There are a few key steps that can be useful in accomplishing that goal.

1. Understand the differences between cooperation and competition. This can be accomplished through reading, discussion and practice. Some families use family meetings as a platform to teach and discuss the differences. If you as a parent are familiar with these differences, you will most likely be much more effective in the implementation of the new strategies. Some families set up exercises or experiments to teach the differences, where they do an activity in a competitive fashion and then do the same activity in a cooperative style. The family members then discuss how they felt, what the differences were in the experience and what they liked and disliked about each activity.
2. Teach the rationale behind wanting to build cooperation, to help children to understand the "why" of this process. They are more likely to participate if they see logic in what the family is doing and understand the reasoning behind the new direction.
3. Practice building cooperation in structural ways. This can include setting up interactions that require cooperation (doing chores together) as well as playing in cooperative ways. Most children will learn and understand the power of cooperation if they are engaged in experiencing it. This is usually much more impactful than just understanding the concepts.

### **Competition and Cooperation: a Contrast in Styles of Interaction**

Remember that the definition of competition is "**mutually exclusive goal achievement**", or in other words, there can be only one winner. As the football coach Vince Lombardi used to say, "Winning isn't everything, it's the ONLY thing."

#### **Competition**

promotes an external locus control  
encourages dependency  
mutually exclusive goal achievement  
product or goal orientation  
either/or thinking (judging)  
can taint relationships  
promotes anxiety  
promotes ego esteem  
less pro-social (less likely to help)  
overall performance degrades  
may promote aggression

#### **Cooperation**

promotes an internal locus of control  
encourages independence  
room for everyone to reach goals  
process orientation  
preference thinking  
enhances intimacy/relationships  
promotes a sense of safety  
raises self esteem  
pro-social (generous, benevolent)  
overall performance enhanced  
less physical stress

### **Family Meeting Basics**

One of the keys to success in setting up and maintaining family meetings is using structure. That means that you decide on the day of the week, the time the meeting starts, the duration of the meeting, the agenda, who is in charge, etc. Families that use that foundation usually experience more satisfaction in what they get out of the experience.

I would also suggest that you might benefit from using a 3 part agenda with the following:

1) Moan and Groan

During this 20 minute period, family members are encouraged to voice their hurt, anger, frustration, etc. tied to any situation during the past week. This is NOT TO DISCUSS AND RESOLVE the issue, only to declare the feelings. Moan and groan is designed to vent and clarify what individual family members are feelings. Others might acknowledge with words like; "I understand" or "That sounds painful", "You seem frustrated" etc. without a discussion or resolution.

2) Scheduling and Planning

During this 20 minutes the family discusses what activities, appointments and meetings they may each have during the next week. Some families use a dry erase "week at a glance" white board to write all of the information on, and then hang it in a conspicuous place so that all family members can see what's happening for that week. Also long term activities, like vacations or trips can be discussed during this 20 minutes.

3) Encouragement and Validation

In this last 20 minute period family members take turns validating and encouraging each other. For maximum effect the comments should be concrete, specific and detailed. For example for a father to tell his son, "I'm really proud of you" does relatively little in building the relationship. However when a father says "I loved how you helped your younger sister on Thursday night when she was struggling with her math homework and you jumped in and spent that 45 minutes helping her out", the impact is much deeper and longer lasting. This is the type of interaction that most families want to experience more of. We also know that when there is more positive interaction between family members, conflict and problems tend to decrease.

Often times families can benefit from rotating leadership for the meeting, and this can be decided at the end of each meeting for the next week. Also families can bond together through shared activities involving making the "treats" for after the meeting. Cooperation and support for each other can be experienced in something as simple as making Rice Krispies treats, etc. If the family is more organic, natural food oriented then making a vegetable or fruit tray together can accomplish the same goals.

Remember that one of the keys to success with family meetings is consistency and follow through. Most children and youth respond well if you remember to appeal to their self interest. Think of making the meeting important to them, having it be a forum where they can express their needs and be heard.

### **The Case Against Competition**

**By Alfie Kohn**

When it comes to competition, we Americans typically recognize only two legitimate positions: enthusiastic support and qualified support.

The first view holds that the more we immerse our children (and ourselves) in rivalry, the better. Competition builds character and produces excellence. The second stance admits that our society has gotten

carried away with the need to be Number One, that we push our kids too hard and too fast to become winners -- but insists that competition can be healthy and fun if we keep it in perspective.

I used to be in the second camp. But after five years of investigating the topic, looking at research from psychology, sociology, education and other fields. I'm now convinced that neither position is correct. Competition is bad news all right, but it's not just that we overdo it or misapply it. The trouble lies with competition itself. The best amount of competition for our children is none at all, and the very phrase "healthy competition" is actually a contradiction in terms.

That may sound extreme if not downright un-American. But some things aren't just bad because they're done to excess; some things are inherently destructive. Competition, which simply means that one person can succeed only if others fail, is one of those things. It's always unnecessary and inappropriate at school, at play and at home.

Think for a moment about the goals you have for your children. Chances are you want them to develop healthy self-esteem, to accept themselves as basically good people. You want them to become successful, to achieve the excellence of which they're capable. You want them to have loving and supportive relationships. And you want them to enjoy themselves.

These are fine goals. But competition not only isn't necessary for reaching them -- it actually undermines them.

**Competition is to self-esteem as sugar is to teeth.** Most people lose in most competitive encounters, and it's obvious why that causes self-doubt. But even winning doesn't build character; it just lets a child gloat temporarily. Studies have shown that feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources of evaluation as a result of competition: Your value is defined by what you've done. Worse -- you're a good person in proportion to the number of people you've beaten.

In a competitive culture, a child is told that it isn't enough to be good -- he must triumph over others. Success comes to be defined as victory, even though these are really two very different things. Even when the child manages to win, the whole affair, psychologically speaking, becomes a vicious circle: The more he competes, the more he needs to compete to feel good about himself.

When I made this point on the Phil Donahue Show, my objections were waved aside by the parents of a seven-year-old tennis champion named Kyle, who appeared on the program with me. Kyle had been used to winning ever since a tennis racket was put in his hands at the age of two. But at the very end of the show, someone in the audience asked him how he felt when he lost. Kyle lowered his head and in a small voice replied, "Ashamed."

This is not to say that children shouldn't learn discipline and tenacity, that they shouldn't be encouraged to succeed or even have a nodding acquaintance with failure. But none of these requires winning and losing -- that is, having to beat other children and worry about being beaten. When classrooms and playing fields are based on cooperation rather than competition, children feel better about themselves. They work with others instead of against them, and their self-esteem doesn't depend on winning a spelling bee or a Little League game.

**Children succeed in spite of competition, not because of it.** Most of us were raised to believe that we do our best work when we're in a race -- that without competition we would all become fat, lazy and mediocre. It's a belief that our society takes on faith. It's also false.

There is good evidence that productivity in the workplace suffers as a result of competition. The research is even more compelling in classroom settings. David Johnson, a professor of social psychology at the University of Minnesota, and his colleagues reviewed all the studies they could find on the subject from 1924 to 1980. Sixty-five of the studies found that children learn better when they work cooperatively as opposed to competitively, eight found the reverse, and 36 found no significant difference. The more complex the learning task, the worse children in a competitive environment fared.

Brandeis University psychologist Teresa Amabile was more interested in creativity. She asked 22 girls, ages seven to 11, to make "silly collages." Some competed for prizes and some didn't. Seven artists then independently rated the girls' work. It turned out that the children who were trying to win produced collages that were much less creative -- less spontaneous, complex and varied -- than the others.

One after another, researchers across the country have concluded that children do not learn better when education is transformed into a competitive struggle. Why? First, competition often makes kids anxious and that interferes with concentration. Second, competition doesn't permit them to share their talents and resources as cooperation does, so they can't learn from one another. Finally, trying to be Number One

distracts them from what they're supposed to be learning. It may seem paradoxical, but when a student concentrates on the reward (an A or a gold star or a trophy), she becomes less interested in what she's doing. The result: Performance declines.

Just because forcing children to try to outdo one another is counterproductive doesn't mean they can't keep track of how they're doing. **There's no problem with comparing their achievements to an objective standard (how fast they ran, how many questions they got right) or to how they did yesterday or last year.** But any mother who values intellectual development for her child should realize that turning learning into a race simply doesn't work.

**Competition is a recipe for hostility.** By definition, not everyone can win a contest. If one child wins, another cannot. This means that each child inevitably comes to regard others as obstacles to his or her own success. Forget fractions or home runs; this is the real lesson our children learn in a competitive environment.

Competition leads children to envy winners, to dismiss losers (there's no nastier epithet in our language than "Loser!") and to be suspicious of just about everyone. Competition makes it difficult to regard others as potential friends or collaborators; even if you're not my rival today, you could be tomorrow.

This is not to say that competitors will always detest each other. But trying to outdo someone is not conducive to trust -- indeed, it would be irrational to trust someone who gains from your failure. At best, competition leads one to look at others through narrowed eyes; at worst, it invites outright aggression. Existing relationships are strained to the breaking point, while new friendships are often nipped in the bud.

Again, the research helps to explain the destructive effect of win/lose arrangements. When children compete, they are less able to take the perspective of others -- that is, to see the world from someone else's point of view. One study demonstrated conclusively that competitive children were less empathetic than others; another study showed that competitive children were less generous.

Cooperation, on the other hand, is marvelously successful at helping children to communicate effectively, to trust in others and to accept those who are different from themselves. Competition interferes with these goals and often results in outright antisocial behavior. The choice is ours: We can blame the individual children who cheat, turn violent or withdraw, or we can face the fact that competition itself is responsible for such ugliness.

Studies also show, incidentally, that competition among groups isn't any better than competition among individuals. Kids don't have to work against a common enemy in order to know the joys of camaraderie or to experience success. Real cooperation doesn't require triumphing over another group.

**Having fun doesn't mean turning playing fields into battlefields.** It's remarkable, when you stop to think about it, that the way we teach our kids to have a good time is to play highly structured games in which one individual or team must defeat another.

Consider one of the first games our children learn to play: musical chairs. Take away one chair and one child in each round until one smug winner is seated and everyone else has been excluded from play. You know that sour birthday party scene; the needle is lifted from the record and someone else is transformed into a loser, forced to sit out the rest of the game with the other unhappy kids on the side. That's how children learn to have fun in America.

Terry Orlick, a Canadian expert on games, suggests changing the goal of musical chairs so children are asked to fit on a diminishing number of seats. At the end, seven or eight giggling, happy kids are trying to squish on a single chair. Everyone has fun and there are no winners or losers.

What's true of musical chairs is true of all recreation; with a little ingenuity, we can devise games in which the obstacle is something intrinsic to the task itself rather than another person or team.

In fact, not one of the benefits attributed to sports or other competitive games actually requires competition. Children can get plenty of exercise without struggling against each other. Teamwork? Cooperative games allow everyone to work together, without creating enemies. Improving skills and setting challenges? Again, an objective standard or one's own earlier performance will do.

When Orlick taught a group of children noncompetitive games, two thirds of the boys and all of the girls preferred them to games that require opponents. If our culture's idea of a good time is competition, it may just be because we haven't tried the alternative.

**How can parents raise a noncompetitive child in a competitive world? Competition is actually destructive to children's self-esteem. It interferes with learning, sabotages relationships and isn't necessary for a good time. But how do you raise a child in a culture that hasn't yet caught on to this?**

There are no easy answers here. But there is one clearly unsatisfactory answer: Make your son or daughter competitive in order to fit into the "real world." That isn't desirable for the child -- for all the reasons given here -- and it perpetuates the poison of competition in another generation.

Children can be taught about competition, prepared for the destructive forces they'll encounter, without being groomed to take part in it uncritically. They can be exposed to the case against competition just as they are taught the harms of drug abuse or reckless driving.

You will have to decide how much compromise is appropriate so your child isn't left out or ridiculed in a competitive society. But at least you can make your decision based on knowledge about competition's destructiveness. You can work with other parents and with your child's teachers and coaches to help change the structures that set children against one another. Of you may want to look into cooperative schools and summer camps, which are beginning to catch on around the country.

As for reducing rivalry and competitive attitudes in the home:

- Avoid comparing a child's performance to that of a sibling, a classmate, or yourself as a child.
- Don't use contests ("Who can dry the dishes fastest?") around the house. Watch your use of language ("Who's the best little girl in the whole wide world?") that reinforces competitive attitudes.
- Never make your love or acceptance conditional on a child's performance. Some parents give subtle messages; they may say to their child, "As long as you did your best..." but Bobby knows that Mommy really likes him better when he wins. Nothing is more psychologically destructive than making approval dependent on victory.
- Be aware of your power as a model. If you need to beat others, your child will learn that from you regardless of what you say. The lesson will be even stronger if you use your child to provide you with vicarious victories.

Raising healthy, happy, productive children goes hand in hand with creating a better society. The first step to achieving both is recognizing that our belief in the value of competition is built on myths. There are better ways for our children -- and for us -- to work and play and live.

### **Competition Quotes** **"America's most sacred cow"**

"Well researched and sound, No Contest , (Alfie Kohn's book on competition) exposes erroneous assumptions about the inevitability and value of competition. This book deserves our attention"

Carl Rogers

"Most people think that learning is encouraged through comparison, whereas the contrary is the fact. Comparison brings about frustration and merely encourages envy, which is called competition. Like other forms of persuasion, comparison prevents learning and breeds fear"

Krishnamurti Total Freedom

"Contrary to the views espoused by Freud, Lorenz, Ardrey and others, aggression is NOT essentially innate. Rather, it seems to be a learned form of social behavior, acquired in the same manner as other types of activity and influenced by many of the same social, situational, and environmental factors."

Robert A. Baron Human Aggression  
(from over 300 research studies)

"Cooperation is an essentially humanizing experience that predisposes participants to a benevolent view of others. It allows them to transcend egocentric and

objectifying postures, encourages trust, sensitivity, open communication, and, ultimately, prosocial activity. But raising children in a competitive environment not only deprives them of these advantages, it is also positively destructive. In fact, one group of researchers has concluded that, competition may serve to suppress generosity to others to a greater extent than cooperation serves to enhance it.”

Alfie Kohn The Brighter Side of Human Nature

“David and Roger Johnson and their colleagues published an ambitious meta-analysis (that is, a review of other’s findings) in 1981. In what is surely the most conclusive survey of its kind, they reviewed 122 studies from 1924 to 1980, including every North American study they could find that considered achievement or performance data in competitive, cooperative, and/or individualistic structures. **The remarkable results: 65 studies found that cooperation promotes higher achievement than competition, 8 showed the reverse, and 36 showed no statistically significant difference. Cooperation promoted higher achievement than independent work in 108 studies, while 6 found the reverse, and 42 found no difference. The superiority of cooperation held for ALL SUBJECT areas, and ALL AGE groups.**”

David W. Johnson, et al

“The Effects of Cooperative, Competitive and Individualistic Goal Structures on Achievement”

“For two centuries our educational system has been based upon competitiveness . . . If you are a student who knows the correct answer and the teacher calls on one of the other kids, it is likely that you will sit there hoping and praying the kid will come up with the wrong answer so that you will have a chance to show the teacher how smart you are. . . .Indeed, children’s peers are their enemies – to be beaten.”

Elliot Aronson PhD, The Social Animal

“In so far as man is concerned, if competition, in its aggressive combative sense, ever had any adaptive value among men, which is to be GREATLY DOUBTED, it is quite clear that it has no adaptive value whatever in the modern world. Perhaps never before in the history of man has there been so high a premium upon the adaptive value of cooperative behavior.”

Ashley Montagu Darwin, Competition and Cooperation

“Sports is war minus the shooting”

George Orwell

“”The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Harrow and Eton”

Wellington

“The true mission of American sports is to prepare young people for war.”

Eisenhower

“Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that, upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory.”

Gen. Douglas MacArthur

“The high incidence of ulcer has often been related to the excessively competitive life in modern Western culture.”

Rollo May Ph.D

“Competitive pressures are a prominent contributor to the alarming rise in suicide rates among young people.”

Herbert Hendin M.D. Suicide in America

“**The competitive mentality prevails in schools and destroys feelings of human fraternity and cooperation.** It conceives of achievement not as derived from the love for productive and thoughtful work, but as springing from personal ambition and fear of rejection.”

Albert Einstein

Alfie Kohn spent seven years reviewing more than 400 research studies dealing with competition and cooperation. In his classic work, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, he concluded that, “**The ideal amount of competition... in any environment, the classroom, the workplace, the family, the playing field, is none.... [Competition] is always destructive.**”

Noetic Sciences Review, Spring 1990

Robert Augros and George Stanciu, in their book *The New Biology: Discovering the Wisdom of Nature*, **found that in fact cooperation, not competition, is the norm in nature**, because it is energy-efficient and because predators and their prey maintain a kind of balanced coexistence. They found that “nature uses extraordinarily ingenious techniques to avoid conflict and competition, and that **cooperation is extraordinarily widespread throughout all of nature.**”

“Take someone who doesn't keep score, who's not looking to be richer, or afraid of losing, who has not the slightest interest even in his own personality: he's free.”

Rumi

“Competition has been shown to be useful up to a certain point and no further, but cooperation, which is the thing we must strive for today, begins where competition leaves off.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt

"Competition is a sin"

John D. Rockefeller