

Academic competition: are the students really winning?

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Working intensely on a still-life portrait for days, in preparation for an art exhibition at your community's recreation center. Interviewing with an executive for your dream job, attempting to portray yourself as the best candidate for the position.

Even pretending you're in a race on the freeway with the car in the next lane. All of these situations can be simplified into one word, one that no American doesn't have in their vocabulary: competition. Now, I'm not saying competition is totally and thoroughly a negative thing; it can actually be beneficial in certain instances. However, competition taking place in the classroom is not acceptable, and is most definitively detrimental to the students' learning. Competition is thought to be a positive addition to one's life; it supposedly builds character and enhances self-confidence.

That ideology has spread like wild fire in recent years; and it most certainly is enforced by staff in the public school systems. Teachers, day after day, put students up against each other, whether it is on purpose or not. They do this through various activities, such as class spelling bees, a coloring contest, and even a game of who-can-finish-the-math-problems-first. Each child attempts to out-do their peers for projects and speeches, and basically learning in general. This practice has gotten way out of hand, according to Alfie Kohn. An expert who has very distinct opinions based on facts about education and parenting, Kohn says he believes competition, which simply means that one person can succeed only if the rest fail, is "inherently destructive.

” In one of his articles, he refers to the relationship between self-esteem and competition as “ sugar is to teeth”. This may sound a bit dramatic, but it does hold truth. When one is forced to look at the facts, they must realize that competition brought into a school setting sets the weaker students up for failure. If they find themselves among peers that appear smarter than them, they will either participate and lose, or become frustrated and quit. These win/lose situations cause many children to become fed up with the specific subject the competition refers to, or worse, learning completely.

And for those so-called “ winners;” they aren’t building up their character; they are simply allowed to gloat for the time being. And, if winners continue to win, but have a sudden “ loss” in the competition, they become depressed, as well. On top of destroying a young person’s self-esteem and confidence, academic competition is also detrimental to learning itself. Many teachers think that contests or races in the classroom allows for a fun, interactive way for students to learn and review. Yet, this is hardly the case. When one is taking part in a competition, they become anxious and feel pressured, resulting in a lack of concentration.

Lack of concentration can spell disaster for test scores, too. As Kohn said, “ Trying to be Number One distracts students 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.” So, besides causing a downward spiral for self-worth and education, academic competition also affects one’s social relationships. When children take part in competition

continuously, they become accustomed to seeing everyone as either a potential threat to their winning streak, or as a child to whom they are superior to.

Alfie Kohn says that competition leads children to envy winners, and winners see everyone else as obstacles to his or her own success. This leads to social isolation, and possible hostility towards potential “rivals.” However, these negative aspects can be turned around; if you catch them in time. How so? Replace some competitiveness in the classroom with cooperative assignments. Teachers; have the kids work together instead of working against each other.

Cooperation can help children communicate with each other, share their talents and opinions, and trust/accept people that are different. In fact, David Johnson, a professor of social psychology at the University of Minnesota, and his colleagues reviewed all the studies they could find on this subject from 1924 to 1980. Sixty-five of the studies found that children learn better when they work cooperatively as opposed to competitively. Isn't that something? All in all, competition, when used the majority of the time, is hazardous to a child's education and well-being. Granted, it may help to prepare children for the real world, but it can destroy one's self esteem and their attitude towards learning.

It even prevents students from learning in the first place! However, when competition and cooperation can be present in a classroom at the same time, everyone can enjoy learning and socializing a bit more. So teachers, create fun new ways for students to work together. Parents should also do

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the same in their homes. Children are impacted by more than just one person; make your influence be a positive one.