

# The effects of competition in sports on children ages nine through twelve essay S...

[Psychology](#)



Over the years, the growth and changes in children's sports have reflected the popularity of professional sports in our society. Sports games and sports news are available to the public twenty-four hours a day on television and the Internet even the radio. Due in part to this, schools and other organizations have changed American athletics from more of a fun playtime to intense competition. The effect of competition in youth sports on children has been the subject of much criticism and praise by physicians, psychologists and parents for years. Many people feel competition can be very beneficial and are strong supporters of competition amongst young children. These people claim that competitive sports aid in the development of social skills, problem solving skills, health fitness and psychological well-being. Many feel that a child's character and morals can be greatly improved through competitive sports.

On the other hand, competition can have potentially devastating effects on our nation's youth. There is, of course, the very real possibility of harmful physical injuries. Children are often humiliated and ashamed upon losing, which can be damaging to their self-esteem. Another problem with competition in young children, particularly nine to twelve year olds, is the parental pressure that so often accompanies it. Plenty of children have been pressured and forced by their parents to compete in sports at a young age, to the point where they burn out later in life. The positive and negative effects that competition can have on children ages nine through twelve has been a topic debated by experts for years.

Competition can be defined in many different ways for different situations. In the context of youth sports, competition is defined as a social process  
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occurring when one's actions are performed for the purpose of achieving a goal or meeting set standards where their performance is compared to others' and sometimes for the purpose of winning a prize or recognition (Vallerand, Gauvin and Halliwell, 1986). But others have a different idea of what competition means. Siedentop (1994) believes that competition is instinctive to humans. Any time a game is played, some form of competition occurs. Competition occurs continually throughout a child's day, both in the classroom, at play and at home between siblings, but perhaps the most intense form of competition can be found in sports and athletic programs. Children can compete as an individual, as part of a team, or both.

An example of competing in both ways is swimming. A swimmer competes individually for the best times, but their score also contributes to the overall team score. The main thing that all competitors have in common is the strong desire to triumph over their opponents. The age at which competition begins to be appropriate for children is controversial and not easily agreed upon in the parenting and athletic worlds. Developmentally, children under the age of nine are not ready for competition. Usually, children ages six to eight and younger compete for fun - if it can be called competition. For the younger children, it is important for self-esteem development that each child win and succeeds, so its better to have them play group games where everybody wins (Johnson, 1993).

An appropriate age for children to begin competing at a very basic level is eight or nine years old, but some students that young may lack the social and cognitive maturity required for successful participation (Frankl, 2003).

Nine to twelve year olds are capable of understanding competitive play and winning means something to them. This is because these children have a better understanding of their physical capabilities. The older the children get, the better and more fun competition is for them (Frankl, 2003).

Young children are not developmentally ready to compete. There are lots of reasons for this, ranging from being harmful to self-esteem to placing too much emphasis on product rather than process (Mincemoyer, 1994).

Because competition in sports is so wildly popular among America's youth, the effects of competition on nine to twelve year olds development in various areas must be examined. As far as physical development of children aged nine to twelve, children vary greatly. Boys can weight anywhere from 60 to 100 pounds, and girls can weigh anywhere from 55 to 100 pounds. Heights for both sexes range from 50 to 60 inches (Mincemoyer, 1994). Children also begin to experience changes in their bodies that are the early stages of puberty.

Small muscles develop quite rapidly during this time in children's lives, and the sheer amount of energy children this age have can contribute to over-stimulation when participating in competitive athletic activities (DeBord, 2008). Plenty of crucial mental development occurs within this age range as well. Children become much more independent and might even behave antisocially at times (Mincemoyer, 1994). Also contributing to their ability to compete is their expanding attention span and concentration abilities. They will demand to learn all of the rules, and expect there to be reasoning behind them. Students of this age are more rational than logical

and are beginning to be able to see more than one side to an issue or dilemma (Johnson, 1993). Eager for recognition and approval, they are achievement oriented and are easily frustrated by complex tasks or assignments. Emotional and social skills are other aspects to a child's development that can be affected by competition. Children begin to understand social interaction among their peers and often join clubs or gangs (DeBord, 2008). This is shown in sports through students joining teams.

Students become more competitive during this time, and it is common to begin seeing their siblings as a rival as opposed to a friend. They can start to distinguish between the idea of what is fair and what is unfair. Most importantly, at this age students begin to enjoy competing and cooperation, but learning to cooperate with their peers proves far more difficult than competing with them (DeBord, 2008). Competing at this age can still be detrimental to students, however, because they fear strongly embarrassment, which often arises from losing in a competition (Johnson, 1993). Emotionally, this is a transformative time for children. They begin to show signs of their independence through rebelling and arguing with their parents.

They also begin to develop their own moral codes and decide for themselves what is right and wrong. Self-esteem is incredibly important at this age and still very fragile. Most students fear embarrassing situations and losing in a game is devastating and embarrassing, causing a lot of harm to their self-esteem. This age group craves acceptance and feels a strong need to belong

(Mincemoyer, 1994). One of their greatest fears is that their peers will not accept them. Although children ages nine to twelve are going through a lot of changes and are in many ways young adults, they are still children and need to be treated as such during competition.

Sports and athletic competition are hugely popular with youngsters - in fact, in 1980 nearly seventeen million American children participated in organized athletic programs, with increasing numbers through the ages of twelve, but then there is a progressive decline in participation (Seefeldt, 1980).

The reasons why students stop participating in sports needs to be explored. A study done by Alderman and Wood in 1976 found that young athletes usually participated in athletics to “ fulfill incentives of affiliation and excellence” (Seefeldt, 1980). Other popular reasons for student involvement in athletic competition was making new friends/maintaining friendships or achieving high levels of personal skill. A less popular reason for pursuing athletics was stress relief and boredom. These reasons were the same regardless of sex, race, religion or any other factor. From this, it is obvious that students are participating in sports for reasons outside of competition and winning: they want to have fun and be social, all while improving their physical fitness and skills (Seefeldt, 1980)(Mincemoyer, 1984).

While the reasons why students participate in sports seem mostly positive, many of the reasons students discontinue are less so. In a 1975 survey on soccer, baseball and swimming dropouts, 65% reported quitting due to an overemphasis placed on winning. In another survey done on elementary students, 60% dropped out because they deemed themselves unsuccessful,

and the remaining 40% dropped out because they never played in any games (Seefeldt, 1980). This points to a need to de-emphasize competition in youth sports, and place more emphasis on fun and the use of no-cut policies allowing everyone to participate, not just the star athletes. In these same studies, over 90% of students were recorded saying that they would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench and never play on a winning team. When winning is overemphasized and taken out of context, children run the risk of lower self-esteem and social problems. In a winner takes all atmosphere, there inevitably are many losers.

Children in these competitions end up being held responsible for events that are entirely out of their control. A child can play their best, try their absolute hardest, and still lose, making the child feel inadequate (Frankl, 2003).

Although our current system works for and benefits a select group of talented athletes, the remaining less-skilled athletes are left in the dust.

Their needs and desires to learn how to play the game, acquire skills, be with friends and have fun while being physically active are ignored and eventually burn out and leave sports all together (Torres and Hager, 2007). Many coaches, teachers and parents perpetuate the problem by becoming too involved in a young athletes sport participation and overemphasize the importance of results as opposed to what they can gain from simply participating (Torres, et. al, 2007). As a result, many experts believe that the competitive aspects of children's sports should be removed because they mask the importance of skill acquisition, learning and emotional and psychological development (Torres, et. al, 2007).

Competition can be good and even beneficial for children if done the right way. First and foremost, it is essential that the conditions of the competition make the children feel comfortable and safe within the setting (Siedentop, 1994). Once that comfort and safety is established, competition can be beneficial. Children can benefit physically, personally, and socially. Physically, children can learn about their own physical abilities and limitations, as well as develop physical fitness and skills. Competitive sports are also a good stress relief, because they allow children to clear their minds of outside pressures and literally run off their tension (Shookhoff and Metzl, 2003). Playing sports encourages healthy fitness habits such as exercising into their later years and increases awareness of the body. As far as personal development, students can learn how to set and achieve goals, and develop stronger problem-solving skills.

Competition also teaches students how to handle losing, but this can sometimes be negative, as we will see later (Johnson, 1993). Resilience is a major life skill that can be taught through competition, as sports provide plenty of opportunities for learning how to deal with misfortune and disappointment, and how to move on after a loss. Team sports provide kids with a chance to be leaders, as well as learn how to perform as a group and work together with others, reinforcing values such as fair play, sportsmanship, and setting a good example (Shookhoff, et. al, 2003). Being part of a group is extraordinarily important to children age nine to twelve, as part of their developmental steps is the need of approval from a group.



Sports make kids feel like they belong, whether it's to the group of athletes in general or their team in particular. Perhaps the most significant benefits of competitive athletics among children are the social benefits. Student athletes learn to form relationships with other kids, and sports often enhance a child's popularity in school (Johnson, 1993). Their relationships with adults are also strengthened. Many kids are afraid of or intimidated by adults and don't have much contact with them outside of their parents or schoolteachers. For young athletes, attention from adults is not only flattering but also helps them overcome shyness and develop social skills when talking to adults. Sports can bring together students from a variety of different backgrounds. The multicultural environment of athletics is hugely important and probably the single most beneficial thing children 9 to 12 can gain from competing. Sports are a great equalizer: rich or poor, black or white, none of that matters in the world of sports (Shookhoff, et. al, 2003).

While there are plenty of positives that can come from competitive sports, the negatives and disadvantages are ever present. There is, of course, the opportunities for physical injury. There is also the proven fact that competition has a negative effect on intrinsic motivation to succeed. In a study done by Vallerand, Gauvin and Halliwell (1986), it was found that those who were competing to beat others had decreased intrinsic motivation towards completing a task. This is further supported by a study done on girls aged seven to eleven who were asked to make collages. Some of the girls competed for a prize, while others did not. Seven artists then evaluated the work of the girls. It turned out that the children who were trying to win produced less creative, less complex projects than the girls who were not

competing (Kohn, 1987). This goes to show us that children succeed in spite of competition and not because of it. Students need to be intrinsically motivated to do well (Vallerand, et. al, 2003).

Another negative effect of competition on nine to twelve year olds is the possibility for teaching aggression and hostility (Johnson, 1993). By definition, not everybody can win in a contest. If there is a winner, there must be a loser. This causes children to begin looking at their peers as obstacles in the way of his or her own success, and might even go so far as to make an athlete suspicious of potential friends; they never know if they might compete against them in the future (Kohn, 1987). This hostility can even turn into aggression. Take hockey, for example. Seefeldt (1980) reports that the more experience a child get with hockey, the greater the likelihood of learning aggressive demeanors. Because aggression and violence is accepted as the norm in this sport, student athletes sometimes get carried away and are aggressive outside of the game.

Competition causes anxiety in young children, which is harmful to their mental and physical well-being (Seefeldt, 1980). The negative effect competition can have on a child's self-esteem is the most important downfall of competition. Take Kyle, a young tennis star that appeared on the Phil Donahue Show. When asked how he felt when he lost (a rare occurrence) the eight year old lowered his head and said "ashamed" (Kohn, 1987). Children need not feel ashamed about losing, as when there is a winner there is always going to be a loser, and nobody wins every time. Children, who have not yet developed a total sense of self, look to others for reassurance and

approval. Having a parent be disappointed in them because they lost can be confusing and very hurtful. To lose, particularly in public in front of a crowd, can be devastating for a child's self worth (Mincemoyer, 1994).

Competitive sports are a double-edged sword. There are plenty of both positive and negative effects of competition on children age nine through twelve who participate in sports and athletics. Because children of this age are usually developmentally ready for and excited by competition, they stand to learn a lot from competing. Children learn social skills, physical health, teamwork and it teaches resilience and acceptance among our youth. It provides children with the opportunity to be a part of a team and experience what its like to work with others. On the other hand, competition can be nasty, harmful, and many young athletes burn out and drop out of sports all together by the time they reach high school. Competition can breed aggression and hostility among athletes and deeply damage a child's self-esteem and self-worth. Children need to feel good about themselves in order to succeed in any walk of life, are plenty of positive and negative effects. If used correctly, competition can be beneficial and fun, without hurting any kids along the way.

## References

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org/sportapolisnewsletter16.htmJohnson, C. E.

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I chose this article because it simply explains and breaks down the advantages and disadvantages of competition in children under its own heading with easy to read bullets. It uses plain English and organizes the information into logical sections. This reference is useful for understanding the effects of competition because it explains both the positive and negative effects and because it answers many important questions like when competition becomes appropriate and ways to help children succeed. It also explains the developmental stages at several age groups, which can help promote understanding of the effects.

This article goes into great detail about the negative effects of competition on children, explaining each point in several paragraphs, which is why I chose this reference. It explains the reasoning behind Kohn's arguments that competition is detrimental to children. This article is useful to the understanding of the effects of competition because Kohn is an expert in his field and provides great examples of real situations where competition has proved to be negative, as well as providing tips for reducing rivalry and avoiding the negative outcomes of competition.

Mincemoyer, C. (1994,). Cooperation, competition, and kids. Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences, 2, Retrieved from SPORTDiscus Database.

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I chose this article because it delves into the negative effects of competition on children's self-esteem, something I find very important to this topic, and it cites many substantial primary sources within itself. It is a valuable resource because it describes competition throughout childhood and discusses a lot of relevant topics, from burn out rates to why competition doesn't work with younger children. Many other studies are cited and support the conclusion that competition has a negative effect on self-esteem.

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