In order to make youth sports a vehicle for positive youth development, each child, parent, coach, and community must work together in promoting a task-oriented environment in which cooperative skills are taught within a competitive arena.

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Cooperation versus competition: Is there really such an issue?

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Approximately 40 million children in the United States between the ages of five and seventeen participate in organized sports, school athletics, or weekend sports. These children compete on the field and in the arena in team sports such as baseball and softball (or T-ball), soccer, and basketball, and more individual sports such as gymnastics, tennis, and golf.

Stepping onto the field at the age of five can be potentially intimidating to a young boy or girl. The batter’s box and the tee box can be lonely places, as can right field when a fly ball is coming your way or the back line when a tennis serve is coming your way. How can parents, coaches, community members, and sports organizations be sure that children are emotionally and mentally prepared for organized sports or competition? To answer this question, we must be willing to explore child and adolescent development, achievement motivation, and types of competition.

The pressures of competition can be great, especially for children who are not emotionally, mentally, or physically equipped to
understand it. How we view competition can greatly reduce some of these stressors. Instead of defining and teaching competition only in terms of winners and losers and, worse yet, winning at all costs, we must start viewing and building competition by keeping elements such as cooperative skills (for example, teamwork) and achievement motivation (for example, mastering skills) in mind.

Instead of teaching the second-grade soccer team that the game is just about how many goals the team scores and whether their team scores more than the other team, coaches should emphasize that the game is also about such matters as learning to dribble the ball, learning to anticipate the defenders, and working with the other players to score and defend against a goal. Confidence can arise from mastering these skills as easily as it can from saying, “We [or I] won the game!” Of course, the factor of winning and losing the game is still a part of playing soccer, but it does not have to be the only or even primary focus.

If all these things are kept in focus, it does not have to be a question of cooperation versus competition; rather, we must answer the question of how to teach cooperative skills within a competitive sport.

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**Understanding competition and readiness for sports**

The first step to reorganizing our view of competition and incorporating cooperative skills into youth sports participation is to understand how children perceive and process competition. Midura and Glover define *competition* as “the process of comparing skills.” Although children often do not fully comprehend competition, even at young ages they naturally compete. For example, if a two-year-old girl sees another young child push a toy, causing it to make noise, she will often go over, take the toy, and begin pushing it herself. It is not that she wants to hurt the other child or even to make the other child angry; rather, she wants to see that she too can cause the toy to create a noise. She is comparing her skills to those of the other child, something one can call com-
peting. However, just because the toddler “competes” does not mean that she understands “competition” or intends to compete.

Further illustration of the notion of competition without understanding can be seen from observing children playing board games. A child who is playing a game with his older brother and continually loses usually will throw a tantrum or quit. This is because he views competition only as peer comparison. The child does not comprehend competition by comparing objective standards, such as accumulated points or the relative skill level of the participants. This limited understanding of competition can create frustration and behavioral issues for the board-game-playing child as well as for the young athlete. Parents and coaches must understand the child’s perception of competition to make participation in sports more meaningful.

Keeping in mind that young children view competition in terms of comparison to others, parents and coaches’ second step is ensuring that children are not forced into sports too early. Just because a T-ball league might have a rule stating that children who have reached their fifth birthday by July 1 are eligible to participate does not necessarily mean that Sam, who turns five years old on June 18, is ready to participate. Sally Harris, a researcher, defines sports readiness as “a process in which an individual child’s cognitive, social, and motor development is evaluated to determine whether the child can meet the demands of the sport.”

Parents often ask teachers, principals, family members, and even neighbors whether they believe their child is “ready” to start school, taking into account their child’s mental, emotional, social, and physical maturity. In the context of organized sports, such questions occur much less frequently, if at all. If parents do seek information from others on their child’s readiness, it rarely goes beyond physical aptitude, such as asking whether their child is “too small” to compete on the soccer field.

When discussing child and adolescent participation in sports, there is a need to explore all aspects of development. The relevant developmental domains are motor (physical), socioemotional, cognitive (thinking), language (receptive and expressive), and adaptive
(dressing and eating). Obviously playing sports encompasses not only physical or motor development but all of these developmental domains.

Parents would likely agree that sports participation demands development of skills in each of these different areas. Nevertheless, they regularly fail to take into account their child’s readiness to participate in organized sports. Why would parents be unsure of the readiness of their five year old for kindergarten but not T-ball?

In some ways, the sports field or arena is similar to the classroom setting. For example, in a classroom, students are expected to learn new skills, handle new situations, and get along with others. Furthermore, they are constantly striving to be the “best” in the classroom or, at the very least, to be an “A” student. In the context of sports, young athletes are also expected to master new skills, cope with new situations, and get along with their teammates. In addition, they often feel pressured to be “the best,” “the man,” or to be “like Mike” (basketball superstar Michael Jordan). Given that youth face many of the same pressures and challenges on the field as in the classroom, cognitive, social, and motor readiness is equally as important. Considering the added pressure of competition, readiness becomes the critical question.

**Positive youth development**

Equipped with a fundamental understanding of the child’s perception of competition and the tools a child will need to participate in sports, parents and coaches can begin the important step of teaching cooperative skills within a competitive game by promoting child and adolescent development. This focuses the activity on personal development rather than performance. Furthermore, this focus fosters the primary goals of youth sports: increasing physical activity, having fun, learning life skills, and showing good sportsmanship.

A child’s readiness for learning is influenced by three important factors, each important in the sports context: prior experiences, maturity, and motivation. Encouraging positive youth develop-
ment requires understanding each of these factors and knowing what parents and coaches must find out from the child.

When exploring a child’s prior experience, parents and coaches need to ask the following questions: (1) Has the child ever completed any of the tasks required in the sport? (2) Does the child have the physical prerequisites to play the sport, that is, can he or she physically meet the demands of the sport?

In terms of maturity, coaches and parents need to have realistic expectations of young athletes. They should consider the following developmental questions:

- Is the sport appropriate for the developmental age of the child?
- Is the level of competitiveness of the sport appropriate, or does it create too much pressure for the child?
- Does the child understand that he or she will still be loved and respected regardless of how well he or she performs?
- Do the young athletes have the cognitive maturity to understand the rules of the game?
- Are the children emotionally mature enough to handle the pressure of the game?

Ensuring that the sports environment has a cooperative focus is critical, because children are not likely to learn and excel in an environment that is intended for adults.

The third factor to assess in order to understand if a child is ready for youth sports and competition is motivation. According to motivation theorists, children and youth are motivated to become competent and achieve within their social environment. They want to be competent and possess skills that help them become physically, emotionally, and socially adept. Furthermore, they not only want to become competent; they also want to be able to display their competence. Whether a young athlete is able to feel comfortable to showcase his or her abilities depends on the sports atmosphere. This showcase is more likely to occur when young athletes are encouraged to take positive risks. Positive risk taking involves calculating the potential benefits and harms of exercising
one choice of action over another, developing plans and actions that reflect the positive potentials, and using available resources and support to achieve the desired outcomes and minimize the potential harmful outcomes (for example, practicing with one’s competitor to prepare for an upcoming event).

Achievement motivation and youth sports

Motivation is an important part of a child’s readiness for youth sports and, more important, competition. To help a young athlete be motivated to play sports in a positive manner, we must understand and promote developmentally appropriate practices and understand and promote cooperative skills within the competitive framework.

Children are motivated to achieve and display competence. Parents and coaches have the ability to alter a youth’s perception of his or her competence. This is important because a young athlete who does not perceive himself or herself as competent may lack persistence and play with less skill. This is true even if the child is a talented athlete. In addition, a young athlete who feels competent within a sport but is not the best player will most likely want to play. The child or youth’s perception about his or her skill is more important than actual skill.

In order for parents and coaches to help a young athlete have a positive perception of his or her competence, they need to understand achievement motivation. Several studies have examined achievement motivation within youth sports. Most of these studies’ findings indicate that a certain type of motivational climate must be created in order for children not only to become competent but also to feel comfortable to show that competence. This climate is created by using an intrinsic, or task-oriented, atmosphere instead of an extrinsic, or ego-oriented, one. Within a task-oriented climate, competence in youth sports is defined as skill improvement or mastery of a skill, enjoyment of the sport, or feeling of team camaraderie. An extrinsic climate promotes the idea that competence is defined by adult approval, social sta-
tus, and winning. Although the definitions are very different, each climate demands competition and commitment to the sport.

Sports environments that create an ego-oriented climate can be detrimental to young athletes. Because ego-oriented tasks are norm referenced, that is, they are usually based on peer comparison or adult approval, young athletes learn to be motivated mainly by winning. Unfortunately, ego-oriented climates dominate sports in the United States. The sports fan mentality certainly creates the notion that winning is everything and the scoreboard is the only thing that matters. Ego-oriented climates often generate an illusion of incompetence, or the belief that a youth’s athletic ability is lower than it actually is. Youth who believe their abilities are lower than they actually are are often play at a lower level than they are capable of and do not achieve a high level of competence.

To the contrary, because it correlates winning with the youth’s effort rather than his or her ability, the task-oriented climate provides a learning space that enables young athletes to learn from their mistakes and continually improve and master their skills. This type of climate provides young athletes opportunities to develop their skills and become the best they can be without putting pressure on them to always be the best. There are always going to be times when a team loses, and the task-oriented climate helps the young athlete understand that losing is temporary. Youth can learn to view losing as an opportunity to improve and not as a failure.

Youth who learn and play a sport within a task-oriented climate tend to have a more positive attitude toward the sport. Thus, they can learn to lose and not feel as though they are losers. They believe that their effort is important to their success and that success is not based solely on winning. Because of the nature of competition, this belief is extremely important for young athletes. They begin to realize that they can be competent even when comparing their ability to that of others. They realize that although peer comparison is natural, it does not define their competence. Task orientation allows young athletes to understand that the power of sports is not having dominance over people but rather being competent. Furthermore, in task-oriented climates, youth are more likely to
take on more challenging tasks and prefer to play teams that challenge their skill.\textsuperscript{11} Win or lose, they want the chance to increase their skill against the best. This challenge continually motivates them to improve their personal skill level.

Ego goals are often based on “being the best,” and young athletes who cannot be the best or even perceive themselves as not being the best will eventually put less effort into the sport and eventually quit. Conversely, children whose skill is actually considered low are more willing to put more effort into a task when they are in a task-oriented climate.\textsuperscript{12}

Parents and coaches can create a task-oriented sports environment in several ways. First, having appropriate expectations of young athletes is extremely important. Are the expectations too high or too low? Are the young athletes encouraged to learn from their mistakes? Children prefer specific and constructive feedback. Athletes who hear “good job” or “way to go” with no instruction often feel as though they are not worth instruction.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, praise can often create a feeling of incompetence, whereas specific encouragement, such as, “I like the way you followed through with the swing; next time try to choke up on the bat at the same time,” can help a young athlete master a skill.

The message that adults send to young athletes is also important. Do the parents and coaches model the importance of effort and mastery of skills? Or is the idea of points, winning, and championships all the young athlete hears about? After a game or match, are the parents and coaches asking, “Did you win?” or “Did you have fun?”? Adults should also help children understand that they are accepted whether or not they win the game. In addition, adults can model the importance of intrinsic or task-oriented goals by focusing on the belief that success is based on hard work (effort) and progress (improvement), not scores.\textsuperscript{14}

Adults need to be aware of the importance of the parent-coach relationship. For example, directiveness refers to the degree to which parents instruct their children what to do in order to be good players. Parents who give too much unwanted advice (high directiveness) or too little advice when a child has asked for help (low directiveness) can often cause stress for the young athlete.\textsuperscript{15} This is especially
true when the parent’s advice is counter to that of the coach. The child may feel torn between doing what his or her coach says or what his or her parent says. Parents and coaches must have a respectful relationship that simultaneously promotes the task-oriented climate. Coaches should also have a respectful relationship with their young athletes. Both parents and coaches must understand the importance of competition and how to promote appropriate competition if they are going to create a task-oriented climate.

Types of competition and the task-oriented climate

Youth sports have many positive attributes. Sports enable children and youth to learn new skills, belong to team, become physically active, and compete. Competition too has many positive qualities. First, it can give youth a sense of purpose and responsibility. Second, it can affect a youth’s self-esteem in a positive manner if the youth perceives himself or herself as competent. Third, through competition, youth can learn many of life’s lessons. For example, they can learn that no one wins every time or there are some times you lose even though you tried you best. There are even times when you might lose because of an unfair call or because the other team cheated. Youth sports can teach the young athletes that no matter how they lost, their effort and character still make them competent and useful.

In order to make this sense of competence and this belief in the importance of effort readily available, the competitive climate must be addressed. There are three types of competitions: the military model, the reward model, and the partnership model. The military model can best be described as athletes viewing the other team as their enemy. In the military model, athletes are taught to “take out” the enemy. In addition, athletes are not supposed to be friends with other teams and are not expected to help their opponents in any way. The reward model is described by the ego-oriented climate: young athletes are competing for ego-oriented rewards such a social status, the state championship, or adult approval. Often
effort is overlooked, and performance is the only benchmark of success. This type of competition fosters a win-at-all-costs philosophy.

The partnership model is very different from these other models. First, opponents are not considered the enemy but rather personal challenges. Athletes prefer to play teams whose skills can challenge their own skills. This model promotes the importance of task-oriented goals such as improving or self-mastery of skills and effort. The model is an egalitarian approach to promoting balance competition in youth sports, and the balance shifts with the ages of the children who are playing. Thus, younger children need more focus on cooperative games. The partnership model of competition promotes competence more as a personal issue and less as a team issue. For example, a team may have lost badly, but each individual looks at his or her own effort and skill level during the game. The individual’s assessment of how well he or she played is based on the effort he or she put forth, not on some external score.

Cooperation and the partnership model of competition

*Cooperation* has been defined as “people playing with one another rather than against another, they play to overcome challenges, not to overcome other people; and they are freed by the very structure of the game to enjoy the play experience itself.” Another definition of *cooperation* is “working together willingly to achieve a common purpose.” Thus, if the partnership model of competition is apparent, young athletes would be cooperating within the competition. For example, individuals would view their game as an opportunity to learn and become better and be appreciative of the excellent opponent to be playing against. By incorporating a task-oriented or cooperative climate, the experience of competition provides youth lessons in appropriate conflict resolution skills, more tolerant attitudes, and a better sense of community.

A cooperative attitude by the team implies that the effort of each player is as important as the ability of each player. Thus, all players are important to the team regardless of their actual skill, and
the players support each other throughout the competition. Players with a cooperative spirit within competition play to overcome challenges within the sport, not to overcome people. Each player is required to provide individual effort and a sense of competence in order to help the team achieve its goal of being the best that it can be. However, because the competition is balanced with cooperative skills such as mastery of a skill or effort, the youth can feel successful whether he or she is the winner of the game, event, or match. Cooperation skills within the competition promote a sense of community and belonging.

Winning in youth sports

In order for youth to truly win at youth sports, it is up to both parents and coaches to create a cooperative or task-oriented climate. This can be done by promoting positive youth development, fostering achievement motivation, and creating a climate based on the partnership model of competition. By teaching cooperative skills within the competitive area, we are able to let all young athletes win by learning to not only feel competent but to be comfortable enough to showcase their competence during any game or real-life situation. However, it is important not only to have the youth, parents, and coaches be involved in the endeavor but also to have communities involved as well. In the past, an athletic triangle has been referred to by researchers as an important model to promote youth sports. The triangle refers to youth, coaches, and parents as the primary participants in youth sports. However, I, along with my coauthor of the Putting YOUTH Back into Sports curriculum, Daniel Perkins, believe that the athletic square is a more appropriate model for today’s world of youth sports. The athletic square creates a partnership of youth, parents, coaches, and communities in youth sports. (Communities can include sports organizations, supportive businesses, and the media.) We need to educate not only parents and coaches about the importance of sports-based positive youth development but
communities as well. Each community, sport organization, and parent needs to ask the following questions:

- Does the community and sport organization promote both physical and psychological safety?
- Are sports communities promoting a task-oriented atmosphere?
- Do these communities help provide a developmentally intentional learning experience? For example, do the rules of the organization help participants build positive relationships? Are the rules based on appropriate developmental expectations?
- Are the knowledge, skills, and competencies that youth are expected to learn through youth sports identified?
- Are there appropriate boundaries and structure within the organization?
- Is each individual child respected for his or her effort and competencies? For instance, is a young athlete’s effort as important as his or her ability?
- Do the media within the community focus beyond the winning and provide opportunity to highlight the efforts of the young athletes regardless of outcome of the game or match?
- Does the community promote a balanced approach to cooperation within the competitive sport?
- Is the social norm within the community of good sportsmanship?

For sports to be a positive force in the development of young people, communities and the organizations within them, coaches, parents, and the youth themselves must be intentional in their words and actions. We all must create an atmosphere that fosters positive youth development.

This issue must not be cooperation versus competition but how cooperation within competition can promote positive youth development. In order to make youth sports a vehicle for positive youth development, each child, parent, coach, and community must work together in promoting a task-oriented environment in which cooperative skills are taught within the competitive arena.
Notes


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