

1988

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### Recommended Citation

Cohen, Neil I. (1988) "Youth Competition: Problems and Solutions," *Visions in Leisure and Business*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/visions/vol7/iss3/16>

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YOUTH COMPETITION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

BY

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ABSTRACT

The obsession Americans have with being #1 has led to an attitude of disdain toward all those who do not achieve the status of champion. We fail to realize that for every successful college athlete there are tens of thousands of college students. For every professional athlete there are hundreds of thousands of successful adults raising families and contributing to their communities and to society.

If there is any meaning to active participation, doing one's best within acceptable criteria, it appears to have been lost since that infamous day Howard Cosell coined the word "Superstar."

Parents expect and demand success and perfection from their children. Program leaders/administrators provide the first resistance many parents face in this area. How we deal with those attitudes may make all the difference.

YOUTH COMPETITION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Competition, as we adults know it, is an acceptable form of rational, social, and athletic behavior. Adults have the experience, the knowledge, and the ability to deal with the results of competition—that is, winning and losing. Unfortunately, adults also expect young children to react in acceptable adult fashion to coaching, to competition, and to winning and losing. This expectation is too much. Very young children should not compete because they cannot compete. Children are unable to cope with these pressures and with the adult reaction to their mistakes, losses, and even to their victories. Adult expectations for young children are not their expectations or desires, nor are they within the child's scope of understanding. Remote goals and even the "carrot-held-in-front-of-the-rabbit immediate gratification objectives" can teach youngsters nothing. They are unable to understand these concepts.

Adults control children; they regiment so many of their activities

in each facet of life, and they should. Teaching right from wrong, ethical behavior, proper/acceptable patterns of social interaction--these and many, many more are properly within the realm of adult duties and responsibilities. Nowhere is it etched in stone, however, that adults have the right to deprive young children of the joys of being children. Adults should be forbidden from putting a uniform on any child. They should be restricted from organizing children into age groups, teams, and/or ability levels. They should be stopped if they attempt to hold organized practices for any purpose other than teaching elementary skills, injury prevention, and "sportsmanship." Even these concepts are out of the realm of most young children's understanding.

Few things are more devastating than seeing a young child being pulled along, in any race, by a well-intentioned older brother or sister, except maybe when it is a domineering parent who is convinced that his or her offspring is, through their encouragement and coaching, going to be an Olympic champion. Let the child develop at his or her own pace; support the child and love the child; don't attempt to live the child's life for him or her.

Children play, and their games include running. Children run naturally, not to compete, but to play. Adults should not attempt to separate the running from the playing. When the child is ready to compete, it will be evident to everyone. The desire or lack of desire to compete is a trait that a child grows into at his or her own rate. Forcing children to compete is the same as insisting on his or her love rather than earning it. The results of such behavior are frightening. They appear in open hostility between parent and parent, from adult to child, and in the eyes of a frightened child unable to understand that which is being directed at him or her.

Coaching young children is often a crime which goes unpunished. It is a violation of a child's right to be a child. Effects of this will be seen in the activity itself and the children exposed to it. The "little leaguening" of running will eventually become a chore, a job, and then will no longer be the pleasure so many runners are able to achieve. Parents, let your child grow, let your child experience the wonders of childhood; let your child be a child. Coaches, treat the children you have in your possession as people who will return to you those emotions and performances they possess because they can and are willing to demonstrate the charming qualities that are inherent in children.

Competition for children--most youngsters are better off kicking a ball, playing house, riding a bike, or watching "Sesame Street" than "carbohydrate loading," missing gym class because a race was only three days away, or eating alone at 8 p.m. because "practice ran late again." Children should run if they want to run and compete as they choose, but not before their time. They should spend time with their families without having their parents worry about some mild-mannered ogre who may be pushing them beyond their physical or psychological limits.

Also, parents should support the child but not dictate to him or her. This even includes when the child tells the parent, "I don't want to go to practice anymore. I want to quit." To force that child to continue because he or she will thank the parent for it in the

future, is an attitude that fosters the love/hate relationship which impacts adversely on the family unit. These are the parents who lose sleep over the child's next competition, bring adult pressures to a child's thoughts, and center their lives and actions on the success or failure of an innocent 12-year-old. Growing up without competition is tough enough, to add the stress of athletic competition to the ever-changing emotional state of a young child is asking for trouble. There are exceptions, but to expect any one child to be the exception based on parental intervention flies in the face of reality; the chances for achieving a parent's definition of athletic success are small, and even if there is success, how can it be measured against all that has been sacrificed? The age-group champion at 9 years old is often the forgotten 16-year-old in high school. The 10-year-old who watches MTV and reads Rolling Stone Magazine may eventually win an Olympic gold medal that he or she never dreamed of nor practiced for as a child. An early start in high-pressure team or individual athletics may also signify an early finish.

Competition is but one facet of working with children. It is a means, but it is also a result. It is often an outgrowth of misunderstanding among and between the organization, the parent, and certainly the child.

The sources for this are many and varied, but as professionals we must recognize the problems before they arise. The problems often come from the area we would like to consider as our foundation.

That foundation, the base of support for any non-school-sponsored recreation, is usually the parents of the children. The parents either realize this before they become involved or become aware of this in rapid fashion as they fund, transport, and attend the activities of their children, as they discuss the program with other parents while waiting to pick up their children, or at differing social settings. There are some organizations that run smoothly under these conditions, but most do not or not for long. Parents become disenchanted with the role their child achieves; they often attempt to alter that role through some form of intervention. At first it comes as "helpful advice," but before long it turns to subtle pressure, and if that fails, it quantum leaps to some sort of revolt. At each step the parent truly believes he or she is doing "what is right" for his child and therefore perceives it, also, as in the best interest of everyone. Whoa! How did we get to this point? Well, we arrived at this stage because we are all human; there are egos and vested interests that tend to override the goals and objectives that are either stated or assumed by all parties. How do we minimize or eliminate the problems, and how do we do that without alienating the base of support that is so necessary for the growth and success of our programs?

A statement of purpose must be the cornerstone for any activity. To assume that parents and youngsters understand the purpose of any competitive activity is taking a risk that can and will, more often than not, lead to misunderstandings, erroneous expectations, and the erosion, if not the collapse, of the activity, program, and even the organization which began the process.

There must be guidelines or rules which govern the actions of the group. They must be concise, few in number, enforceable, and they must be enforced. Rules are only good if they are fair and if enforcement is both swift and just. Fewer rules create fewer problems, yet no rules at all create havoc. Lists of rules call for lists of punishments, and there are always those who attempt to interpret rules to fit the occasion and suit their actions.

All groups are headed by either paid administrators or volunteer leaders. Benevolent dictators, some of us like to see ourselves in this position, work well in these roles, but over the long haul, a democratically-run organization, with its layers of responsibility, eliminates all but the most "off-the-wall" complaints and people. It has been said that we spend 90 percent of our time on 10 percent of our people. If this is the case, we must call a halt to it. Problems and problem people should be dispatched with the same speed and concern we use to treat those people and issues that we enjoy. To spend an inordinate amount of time on problems and problem people deprives all others of the time they deserve, and it undermines all that we are expected to do. When we are preoccupied with problem people, the youngsters who are the easiest to work with notice it first.

An advisory board whose status is thoroughly defined yet whose input is non-binding creates a forum for open discussion and avenues for relief and resolution of problems. This board establishes a process which supports the purpose of the organization, addresses issues, diffuses controversy, and among other items provides a time factor that will, in itself, add reason to the equation.

If there is controversy, the voice of the administrator will come through as the focal point of authority, therefore, it is essential that he or she be speaking for and with the knowledge and approval of the group.

Those of us who have a history working with groups know the problems that arise, yet all too often we use the same techniques that have either worked or failed in the past--we don't adapt to new lifestyles or changing attitudes which impact on "the same problems." Remember, each year we get a year older, but those we service stay within the same age grouping. Changes in our society bring differing emphasis on those "same old problems." We must be prepared to change with the times. We do not have to change our values or our standards, but our delivery of services must be in keeping with the changes occurring around us.

It is far better to try to resolve problems, even if we fail, than to ignore the problem or dismiss the people without making the attempt to solve the matter(s). If your efforts fail, it is time to cut your losses and devote your energies to those who want and need your efforts. To realize that we cannot reach or please everyone is a giant step in understanding how the process works. The support you get from those in the group will solidify the foundation your organization needs if it is to serve your community into the future. Competition, wholesome competition, is one way to prepare our children for the future--it is not the best way nor is it the worst way, just one way. We owe our children an atmosphere in which they can learn and choose as they grow; anything

more would be control, anything less would be negligence.