



Cooperative PLAY

The Antidote for Excess Competition

- By Suzanne Lyons -

This e-book is Part 1 of my big book on Cooperative PLAY. Part 1 is about competition, and why it's a problem. Later, we'll talk about the social alternative - cooperation. Enjoy!



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The Antidote to Excess Competition

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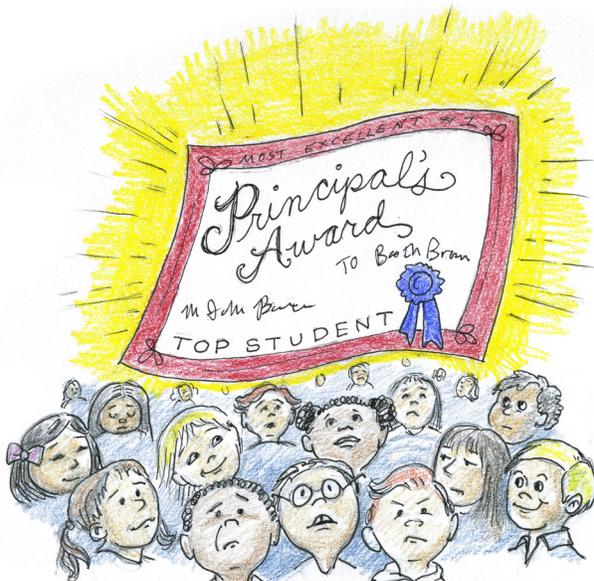
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Introduction

Parents await the results breathlessly in rows of folding chairs. It's the end-of-year awards ceremony at Cottage Hill Elementary School, and I am here as mother of two young children. Introductory remarks have been made and perfunctory thanks offered the PTA. Some niceties have been exchanged. But now it's time for the beef, the main event, that part of the show that gets the blood pumping in children and parents alike. Who among the children will receive awards and which ones won't? Who will wear the medal for best citizenship? Who will receive the President's blue ribbon fitness award—the one that requires a staggering number of pull-ups but comes with a letter from the President of the United States? Even more to the point, who will receive the highest prize in this mini kingdom—the exalted Principal's Award?

One student from each grade level receives the Principal's Award each year. The criteria for winning are vague but still the award is keenly understood by the primitive part of every brain. To win it is to receive overall top status in the eyes of the school community. When you win the Principal's Award, the teachers recognize you as the top kid, better than the rest in some overall sense. Your award bests the other awards. Essentially, you've been pronounced most likely to succeed in school, and by extension in "life."

Actually, the competition doesn't stop with winning the Principal's Award. The ultimate, most coolest kid (and his or her family) enjoys winning this award multiple years. The pressure to win never ends. On the other end of the scholastic spectrum are the students who never win any awards. They sit ingloriously year after year on the linoleum floor watching other children receive all the praise.



Welcome to the world of hypercompetition, kids! Here, you are asked to compete every day in school and on the sports field too. To "relax" at home, one option is to play a board game. But it will be a competitive game such as Monopoly™ or Aggravation™ so if you lose you will likely feel jealous or angry or inferior. And if you win you will likely feel smug, aggressive, ego-inflated or guilty (though you will not be able to articulate these feelings because they contradict the cultural assumption that such games are fun).

Introduction

Next on the agenda, you're supposed to do lots of homework. Because then you can get high scores on tests, receive good grades, and be on the accelerated track. Your hurt or stressed feelings don't matter; it's performance that counts. Don't be distracted by any concern or compassion for the kids who aren't "making the grade"; it's a dog-eat-dog world and you've gotta learn to be tough. If you can do it—if you can get those top grades, or win in athletics, or somehow be the best at something, you can continue to ascend the ranks of our competitive society. Eventually you'll be admitted to a selective University, then perhaps win a plum position in a corporate setting or profession. If you are really the best of the best, someday you can live in the biggest house in a prestigious neighborhood far away from the undistinguished masses. You can drive a luxury car with a bumper sticker that says "He who has the most toys wins."



Competition is defined as a social arrangement in which two or more individuals try to achieve a particular goal that cannot be attained by everyone, as social observer Alfie Kohn points out in his seminal work *No Contest, The Case Against Competition*. Someone wins and someone else loses. In a competitive activity, individuals work against each other. In a competitive society, a TV program about cooking takes the shape of "Battle" of the "Iron Chefs"; yoga becomes an Olympic sport; and funding for education is a "Race to the Top."



The opposite of competition is cooperation—a social arrangement in which individuals actively work together to achieve a mutually desirable goal. A third mode by which people can pursue goals, the social scientists point out, is through individualism. In this arrangement, individuals neither work against nor with one another. They pursue goals in parallel.

Introduction

Do we, as Americans in the 21st century, value competition over the other modes of pursuing our goals? And do we suffer unnecessary stress, reduced productivity, and impaired personal relations as a result? Do we harm our environment unnecessarily because we are engaged in so much competition? And, does our tendency to compete underlie a diverse array of unjust and inhumane social conventions?

Numerous studies and insights from fields as diverse as education, science, spirituality, sociology, the arts, politics, business, and even sports tell us that competition has myriad downsides and is usually counter-productive. Evidence shows that, rather than motivating excellence, the pressure to compete distracts us from doing our best. Rather than facilitating problem-solving, competition tends to make us secretive, nervous, and short-sighted so it is harder to find solutions. Cooperation, it turns out, is a far more helpful, healthful and rational mode of social engagement than competition. It holds distinct advantages over individualism in many contexts, too. Do your personal experience and intuition corroborate these findings? Mine certainly do.



This book is divided into four parts:

Part 1 • we'll spotlight the research on competition and examine some of the myths surrounding it.

Part 2 • we'll explore the social alternative to competition—cooperation. We'll discuss why cooperation is key to one's own happiness and prosperity. And we'll see why we simply can't do without cooperation if humanity is to move toward a sustainable future.

Part 3 • we'll examine the power of cooperative play. We'll find that cooperative play is an entire realm of simple, fun, natural, and wholly beneficial activity whose positive effects are rarely noticed or appreciated. It's time to change that.

Part 4 • gives directions for specific cooperative games that everyone can play to take the edge off the competition.

Competition: The Win-Lose Framework

It's a leisurely Saturday afternoon and you're out biking with friends. The road winds through pines, the sun is high, and the air feels fresh. When the fastest riders in your group reach the top of the hill, they wait for the slower ones, loop back to offer assistance, or perhaps take a side-route and arrange to meet up with the others later. The slower riders keep plugging up the hill, building their strength and confidence. If there is a flat tire, anyone with a patch kit is more than willing to stop and help. You encourage one another to do your best. And you all strive because you know that, as a team, you can go farther in greater safety and happiness than anyone can travel alone.

Now, imagine replacing the cooperative spirit of this adventure with a competitive one. In this scenario, riders vie to outdo one another. Rather than evaluating the day's success with reference to personal standards, or simply enjoying the ride, riders rank themselves against each other. In the competitive regime, riders are concerned with who is in front, who has the most expensive gear, who is in the best shape, who gets where first, etc, etc. Psychological torment and the social stigma of being the "worst" await he who arrives last.

Which scenario is likely to foster healthy relationships, self-esteem and a passion for bike riding over the long haul? For anyone not suffering sadistic or masochistic tendencies, the cooperative framework is clearly preferred. Most of us have been conditioned to accept the competitive regime, but when you stop to think, it makes little sense. Cooperation has a plethora of benefits while competition begets an array of sorrows.

Chapter 1. Documenting the Down Sides of Competition

The argument against competition rests, not just on common sense and personal experience, but on a bulwark of research and scholarship too. You can refer to the Bibliography for more information, but here are some key findings.

- **Competition Reduces Productivity** If the question is, “Do we perform better when we’re trying to beat someone else?” the answer is “No.” There are hundreds of studies that prove the point. As a summary, let’s look at the meta-analysis (review of others’ research) by sociologists David and Roger Johnson at the University of Minnesota. The Johnsons reviewed 122 studies that compared educational achievement in competitive, cooperative, and individual settings. The results? Cooperation promoted higher achievement than competition in 65 studies, 8 studies favored competition, and 36 studies found no statistical difference. In the rare cases that competition benefitted performance, the evaluated tasks were simple or rote, rather than complex or creative.¹ Teachers, bosses, and parents, take note: Contrary to popular mythology, competition does not improve performance.
- **Competition Erodes Self-Esteem** What’s the net impact of the ceaseless tallying of wins versus losses? It pecks at one’s self-esteem. The social science illumines a telling fact: Competitive people tend to love themselves conditionally. They’re tough on themselves, basing their self-worth more on objective measures and others’ opinions rather than on a deep sense of acceptance and feeling “good enough.”²
- **Competition Elicits Envy** Competition assures that status, material goods, or whatever is desired can only be obtained by a privileged few. Envy is inevitable. Mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell concluded: “There is, so far as I know, no way of dealing with envy except to . . . encourage in youth the idea of a collective enterprise rather than competition.”³
- **Competition Promotes Aggression** “The competition-aggression link has been consistently demonstrated across a number of studies”, writes psychology researcher Alexander Ask in his study *To Kill or Not to Kill: Competition, Aggression, and Videogames in Adolescents*.⁴ Sure enough, the more intense the competition, the more aggressively people behave.



Witness the extreme case of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan in the 1994 U.S. Figure Skating Championships. If you're not old enough to remember, Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan were two of the nation's finest figure skaters. Though they were both on the American Olympic team, they were rivals by virtue of the fact that only one of them could win the gold. During a practice session before the Olympics, a thug leapt out of the shadows at a Detroit skating rink and bashed Ms. Kerrigan's knees with a metal club. Harding was later implicated in planning the attack in order to eliminate Ms. Kerrigan from the Olympics. Competition fosters aggression. Ouch!

- **Competition Arouses Anxiety** By definition, contests create losers. Threatened with the scathing label of “loser”, contestants feel vulnerable and anxious. Winning can evoke anxiety too, especially for sensitive people who justifiably suspect that their peers will resent them for winning. Psychoanalyst Rollo May concluded, upon completing his study of competition in America that “competition is the most pervasive occasion for anxiety in our culture.”⁵ Competition—more anxiety-provoking than climate change, disease, or the threat of war!
- **Competition Destroys Trust** Why would you trust someone whose success depends upon your failure? Indeed, competition makes trusting an opponent's benign motives irrational. Intensifying this basis for mistrust is that competitive high stakes encourage people to cheat and play dirty. Empiricists have diligently documented the fact: “Competition leads to a breakdown of trust.”⁶
- **“Healthy Competition” Is an Oxymoron** Competition produces emotional stress so it's bad for one's physical health. For example, consider the link between headaches and competition in children. The National Headache Foundation reports that tension headaches, the most common type, “are almost always caused by stressful situations at school, competition, family friction, or excessive demands by parents.”⁷

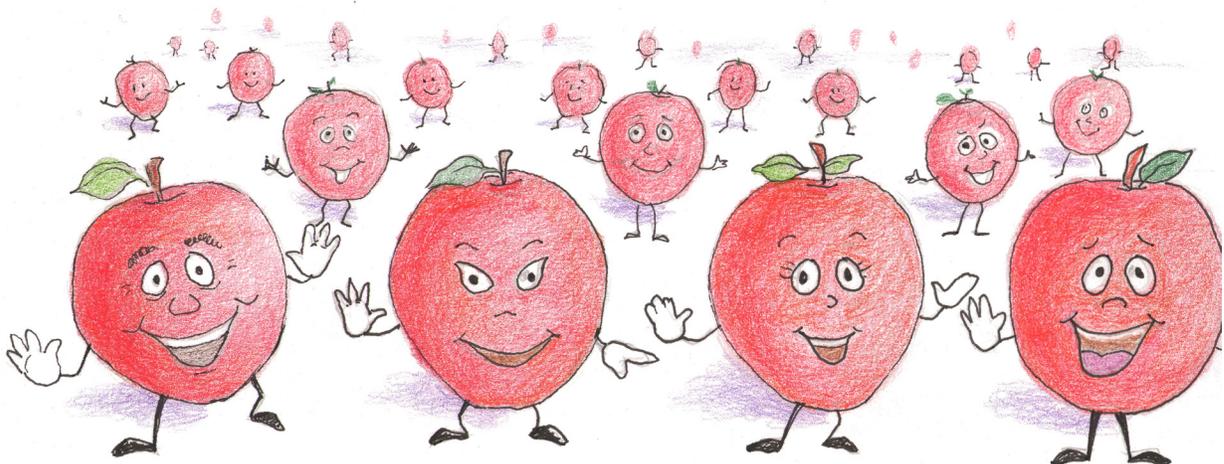


- **Competition Discourages Sharing** Nathan Ackerman, pioneer of family therapy, wrote: “The strife of competition . . . impairs the mutuality of support and sharing and decreases the satisfaction of personal need.”⁸ In the competitive mindset, we perceive scarcity then battle for goods and hoard them rather than share a perceived abundance.

- **Competition Compromises Integrity** Being careful, slow, and meticulously honest usually produce the most accurate and reliable work in the long run, but these attributes can be heavy baggage in competitive scenarios. There is pressure to drop them, which lightens not just the load but one's integrity too. So we see, for example, cases of journalists failing to vet their facts in the rush for an exclusive story and scientists overstating their conclusions in the race for research funding.
- **Competition Intensifies Inequity** Anthropologist Margaret Mead observed the distribution of wealth in cultures around the world in her 1937 cross-cultural study, *Cooperation and Competition Among Primitive Peoples*. She found that social goods are distributed unevenly in cultures characterized by a high degree of competition; a much smaller gap exists between the rich and poor in cooperative cultures.⁹ This makes logical sense. The members of a group who possess the best resources at the outset of competition are most likely to win. As competition continues, those individuals with the initial advantage continue to win preferentially. They therefore accumulate more resources and concentrate more advantage over time. Competition thus assures that resources will continue to pile up for those members of the group who had the initial advantage, and this of course intensifies the initial inequity.
- **Competition Decreases Personal Motivation** Competition provides extrinsic rewards—rewards outside the task itself—things like status, grades, blue ribbons, money, etc. In the long run, studies reveal a counterintuitive finding: extrinsic rewards actually decrease internal motivation. Extrinsic rewards are flashy and distracting compared with the internal rewards of doing an enjoyable or helpful task. They take the focus off of the inner experience and put it on the outside world. When we're rewarded in competition, we become driven like mice in a maze lusting for that big piece of cheese. Our inner compass cannot direct us to what we really want when our attention is riveted on rewards.

An experiment done by motivational psychologist Edward Deci shows this effect. Two groups of college students were asked to solve a puzzle. Those in one group competed while those in the other group did not. Upon finishing their task, the students were given the opportunity to play with a new puzzle. Students from the competitive group were less motivated compared to students from the noncompetitive group, who wanted to keep playing. Deci stated, "It appears that when people are instructed to compete in an activity they begin to see that activity as an instrument for winning rather than as an activity which is . . . rewarding in its own right."¹⁰

- **Competition Inhibits Complex Problem-Solving** A pandemic strikes. Your life is at risk. Would you prefer that researchers collaborate to develop a cure, or that they work in competitive isolation? Since competition inhibits the free exchange of ideas and sharing of resources, complex problems are harder to crack in a competitive milieu. Research bears this out. Charles Zastrow, professor of social welfare, writes: “The negative consequences of competition in problem-solving are numerous. Competition decreases creativity, coordination of effort, division of labor, helping and sharing, and cohesion. Competition promotes ineffective communication, suspicion and mistrust, high anxiety about goal accomplishment, negative self-attitudes, animosity between group members, and negative attitudes toward the group and its tasks. Competition also encourages the rejection of differences of opinion, divergent thinking, and cultural and individual differences. A competitive atmosphere leads to a low effectiveness in solving complex problems.”¹¹
- **Competition Breeds Conformity** To compete is to rank oneself against others; it’s to compare apples to apples. If we are to engage in a competition, we must all qualify as apples first. Hence psychologist Arthur Combs explains why competitive struggles produce a conformist climate: “Competition can only work if people agree to seek the same goals and follow the same rules. Accordingly, as competitors strive to best each other’s records, they tend to become more alike.”¹²



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- **Competition Preserves the Status Quo** If competition promotes conformity, it also preserves the status quo. This is simply because people who are trained to conform are, by definition, less innovative and creative than they could otherwise be. The cumulative effect of conformity is social stasis.
- **Competition, Unrestrained, Creates Monopolies and Destroys Small Business** In economics, the term hypercompetition refers to the condition wherein excessive competition among businesses drives the price of goods down to the point that profit margins are unsustainable. The only businesses that can weather hypercompetition are those with large initial resources. There is consolidation across an industry as smaller businesses fail. The Big Box stores and colossal financial institutions that define the economic terrain today are the hollow remains of decades of deregulation and hypercompetition in the United States.
- **Competition Isn't Fun** Popular sports, games, and much other fun fare is structured to create winners and losers. Thus, we come to associate competition with happiness and mirth. Yet, experiments have been conducted that separate out the cultural messages surrounding competition from the thing itself. When people take their mental filters off, when the hoopla about contests and prizes and the thrill of victory is silenced, there is evidence that people vastly prefer cooperating to vanquishing others. Struggling to be - at one another isn't really fun after all. It's not the element of competition but the teamwork, zest, sense of accomplishment, exercise, strategy, playfulness, and immersion in the moment that accompany some competitive activities that make these activities fun. Terry Orlick, sports psychologist at the University of Ottawa, showed that children prefer cooperative games to competitive ones. Explains Orlick: "Given the choice, two-thirds of the nine- and ten-year-old boys and all of the girls [who had experienced playing both cooperative and competitive games] would prefer to play games where neither side loses . . ." ¹³ These kids remind us: it's more fun to play with one another than against each other.



Chapter 2. Why Do We Do It?

Given all the reasons not to compete, and the fact that we don't enjoy it much, why do we do it? The main reason, the social scientists say, is socialization. Socialization is the process by which social norms are learned. It is normal in American culture to be competitive.

Socialization

Socialization is constant and often unconscious social learning, an osmosis of norms, beliefs, and values that adapt an individual to his culture. The socializing forces that encourage competition in America are very strong. Voices from politics, the media, school, sports, religion, the family, and other social institutions ring with its mythic glories. Look! Over there, it's Vince Lombardi: "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing!" There's Miss America, the valedictorian, King of the Hill, the American Idol, and beside them, it's Andrew Carnegie: "The first man gets the oyster, the second man gets the shell." And over there, it's President Obama in his second State of the Union address exhorting Americans to "Win the future."¹⁴ The President used this phrase repeatedly in his address. He has good reason to believe that the competitive ethos resonates with the American psyche.

Competition begins in the home. Families are the first socializing force. Recent research shows that toddlers have cooperative impulses¹⁵ but the training to compete often begins earlier. For some families, it's never too early to begin training: witness the spate of prenatal IQ-boosting products that promise to give baby an advantage. As a young mother living in the San Francisco Bay Area during the dot-com Internet boom, I witnessed fervent academic competition at the pre-school level. Upwardly mobile moms got their toddlers on waiting lists for the "best" pre-schools, for these schools were stepping stones to the "best" elementary schools which in turn paved the way to the "best colleges" and the privileged ranks of society.

When our little contenders venture out of the home to school, they receive an onslaught of socialization there. According to educator Rick LaVoie, 85% of the activities that elementary students engage in are competitively structured.¹⁶ Awards assemblies, grades, competitive games, contests, and other educational practices pit students one against each another.

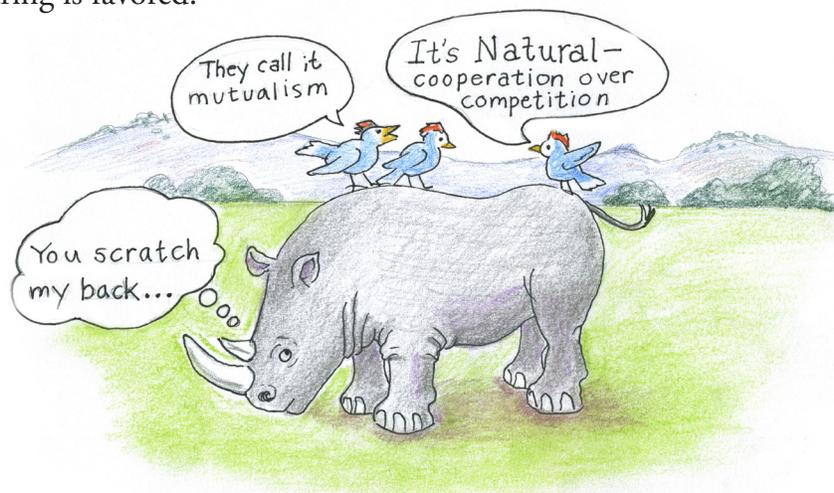
Typically, parents, teachers, and administrators send the same message in concert amplifying the volume. My own experience as a science teacher suggests to me that we propagate competition largely by teaching it to our children in school.



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The social script that directs our behavior convinces us that competition is not just desirable but also inevitable. A pervasive myth says it is unavoidable, part of “human nature”. But this bromide ignores the fact that competition is not universal. Some cultures do not compete. The Inuit of Canada live without any competitive social structures whatsoever.¹⁷ And, as Margaret Mead observed, the Bathonga people of South Africa are essentially noncompetitive in all their social and economic matters.¹⁸ Economist Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics for her cross-cultural studies demonstrating that people in many cultures can and do cooperate to share limited resources—a river, the local fish population, etc. Traditional economic theory, which can be traced to founding philosopher Adam Smith, posits that individuals will always act on behalf of their own immediate self-interest. Ostrom’s work disproves this. Narrowly defined self-interest is not the necessary motivating force in all economic transactions. It is within human nature to work out cooperative solutions based on what the Dalai Lama calls our “enlightened self-interest”—our knowledge that one’s self interest is inextricably tied to the good of the whole community.

Still, a variant of the human nature myth entrenches competition deep into our DNA: We compete because we are animals. And animals, word has it, exist in a ceaseless Darwinian struggle. “Survival of the fittest” (to use a phrase that was coined not by Darwin, but by Industrialist Herbert Spencer)¹⁹ condemns all of nature to endless competition, red in tooth and claw. This perspective thrives where science is thin and poor. In fact, much biological literature heralds the opposite news: cooperation, rather than competition, is the norm in nature. Biologist Petr Kropotkin concluded, for example, that “competition . . . is limited among animals to exceptional periods . . . Better conditions are created by the elimination of competition by means of mutual aid and support . . .”²⁰ As Steven Jay Gould explained, “The equation of competition with success in natural selection is merely a cultural prejudice. . .”²¹ In nature, mutualism and symbiosis connect organisms in an intricate web of cooperation. Direct competition is riskier, expends more energy, and is less efficient than strategies based on sharing, so sharing is favored.



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Finally, let's not forget the role of Capitalism in socializing us to compete. In America, competition is imbued with a patriotic gloss because our economic system is Capitalist—inherently competitive. We feel a sentimental pull toward competition in the same way we cherish the thought of apple pie, ice cream, and softball played on a warm summer night. Some of us unconsciously conflate competition with love and loyalty for country and consider it essential to the “American way”.

It's a popular notion that competition makes America great because it spurs innovation. And America's history of innovation is a source of great pride. Granted, economic competition may spur product innovation along the lines of toasters that heat up faster or educational software that helps students memorize vocabulary terms more accurately. These sorts of iterative product innovations have some value, and they may be enhanced by competition, but they represent small refinements to existing ideas. Again, I harken back to the research that shows competition may sometimes accelerate the rate at which simple or rote tasks are accomplished, but it actually impedes complex problem-solving.

A distinction must be made between iterative product innovations (which arguably are supported by a competitive economy) and deeper conceptual innovations which can move a society in a more humane direction (and which are not supported by a competitive social milieu.) Innovations such as freedom of speech and religion, civil rights, national parks, and even Democracy itself are among the breakthroughs that have fostered unity, pride, and enduring humanitarian progress. Note that these sorts of innovations require free-thinking, trust, concern for one's neighbors, and cooperation. They are hindered by the mistrust, selfishness, anxiety, envy, and other negative qualities associated with competition.



Economic competition has brought us a cornucopia of consumer goods, useful and otherwise, and in a spectrum of prices. It's also brought us hypercompetition and the triumph of the mega-corporation over small-scale economies. Cooperation, on the other hand, has brought us progressive social innovation. In a Capitalist nation, it's important to be aware that the benefits of competition are circumscribed to a small economic sphere while cooperation has actually been the key to civil society.

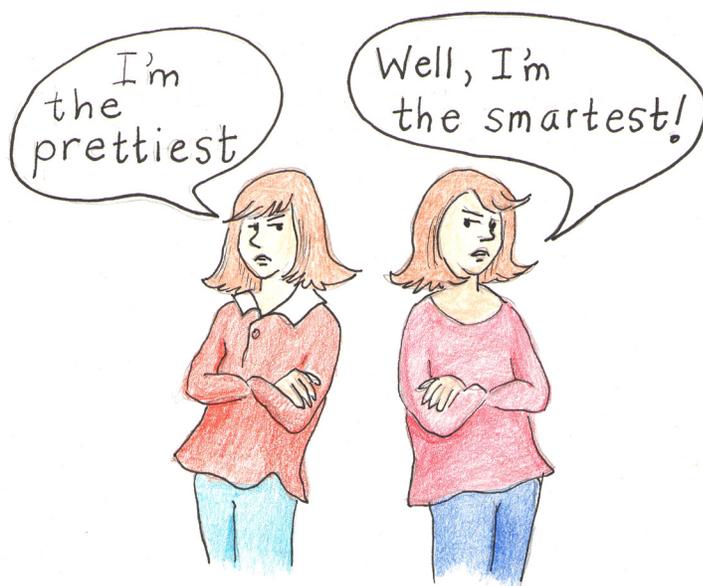
Psychological Factors

Garden-variety competitiveness, the ongoing jostling for position that happens at school, work, and in family life, is largely explained by socialization. But we are more than what we learn from culture. Everyone has a distinct personality, a set of psychological traits that reflects some alchemy of nature and nurture. Some people are more competitive than others even when they're subject to the same cultural messages. What are the psychological factors that account for this?

Indeed, some individuals stand out as super-competitors. Have you met them? These folks thrive on face-to-face combat and they enjoy trouncing their opponents, they need to win to be happy, and they compulsively turn even noncompetitive situations into contests. Their relationships and peace of mind suffer as a result. What psychological factors drive competition, especially in the worst-case scenario of hypercompetitive individuals?

You might suspect that traits such as aggressiveness, egoism, greed, or Narcissism (self-importance coupled with a lack of empathy for others) could be in play. Psychologists in the main confirm this although they usually trace the negative traits underlying competitiveness back to low self-esteem. A couple examples illustrate the point.

Consider 46-year old identical twins Jennifer and Judi. They had been engaged in a lifelong pattern of cut-throat competition when they sought help from TV talk show host "Dr. Phil."²² Their



sordid story was laid bare under the glaring lights of daytime television. Said Jennifer: "My sister and I have been locked in competition all our lives, vying to outdo the other. It's like a boxing match.' She and her sister competed over "everything", she said, including who's "prettier, skinnier and smarter". Pulling herself up in a gold upholstered chair and tossing back her soft brown hair, Jennifer drew the line: 'I'm the prettiest. I was the most popular. I'm nicer."

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But Judy had victories to brag about too: “I did a one-upmanship when I was a senior. I was prom queen. She only made it to the court — got ya!” The twins revealed they had made serious life decisions based upon competition with each other. “I didn’t have children because I feared it would only fuel the competition” reported Judy.

The psychologist weighed in: “This is not about your sister,” Dr. Phil admonished the twins. “This is about the fact that you and you have never accepted yourself.” According to Dr. Phil, low self-esteem aggravated by weak identity along with large helpings of pettiness and mean-spiritedness underlay the twins’ nasty rivalry.

Psychotherapist and career coach Sarah Timmons has also treated people for being too competitive. Once, a young account manager consulted Ms. Timmons after he was passed over for a promotion. As Timmons recalls “The young man was frustrated because he had recently brought in one of the largest accounts the company had ever landed, but he wasn’t awarded the promotion he felt should be coming his way.” When he asked his superiors about it, they gave him an earful. They said he wasn’t a team player. He consistently behaved unfairly and aggressively toward colleagues by hoarding resources and claiming all the credit to advance his own position. The bosses intoned that the young man would likely never be promoted.

When Ms. Timmons administered a personality test to this stymied yuppie, she wasn’t surprised that he topped the charts on competitiveness. She also wasn’t surprised to find that her client was lacking in self-esteem. Deep down, the poor lad was convinced that he wasn’t okay if he wasn’t Number One. Apparently, his dad had rewarded him richly for winning but punished him emotionally for



losing in sports and school. And so it was a deficit of confidence, rather than an oversupply, that fueled this man’s competitiveness—and Narcissism—at his job. When Ms. Timmons helped her client see the pathology in his upbringing, the insight freed him. In time, he found a new job and was able to start afresh with a more collaborative spirit. His own cooperativeness was returned in kind and soon he was promoted to a position he felt proud of. “It’s like night and day when I see him now” Timmons said. “He is happier, healthier and more successful, and it’s all because he stopped being competitive.”

Interestingly, in addition to treating him for low self-esteem, Ms. Timmons helped her client practice mindfulness. Mindfulness is a treatment for what Timmons calls “wound-up worrying” or incessant, anxious mental chatter. The practice involves relaxation and breathing exercises as a prelude to meditation. Speculating here, I have to wonder if mindfulness practice abates excess competition because it draws a person out of their “left-brain” mode of consciousness. I recently attended a lecture given by neuroscientist Dr. Jill Taylor-Bolte, famed for her bestseller *A Stroke of Insight*. Taylor-Bolte explained that competition as an expression of left-brain mental activity.²³ Whereas the right brain sees the whole, the left brain breaks the whole into parts. Competition requires ranking individuals in a hierarchical order—and it is therefore a very left-brain process. To stop the constant ranking, then, it’s helpful to switch over to the right-brain by practicing mindfulness.

In *No Contest, The Case Against Competition*, Alfie Kohn concurs with the psychologists that competitive behavior is fundamentally linked to low self-esteem. He states: “Specifically, I would offer the proposition that we compete to overcome fundamental doubts about our capabilities and finally, to compensate for low self-esteem.”²⁴ The proposition makes sense. If you doubt your self worth, objective proof that you’re the best offers some solace.

Winning and the Brain

Still, the question of why we compete is complex. Contests from soccer tournaments to spelling bees and bake-offs to lotteries allow people the opportunity to win, and winning excites the brain. Neuroscience research shows that structures in the central part of the brain release certain neurotransmitters when one wins, and this produces a jolt of euphoria.²⁵ Moreover, very recent research is beginning to show that many centers of the brain are in fact activated by winning, not just the structures that control pleasure-producing neurotransmitters. Like a dog proudly prancing around the yard when he’s got the ball, we humans feel gleeful, proud, and fortunate when we win a prize. Winning feels good.

We deeply enjoy winning, so contests are here to stay. But this doesn’t mean that we are doomed to engage in a constant and mean-spirited contest to grab the goods at others’ expense. In fact, winning and competition are not the same thing and it’s important to be clear about the distinction. Winning is triumph; competition is triumph over someone else. It’s winning that the brain enjoys, not winning to the detriment of someone else.

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Any teamwork task that allows an entire group of people to beat a common non-human opponent is an opportunity for winning with absolutely no downside. Cooperative games are structured this way. As you will read in Part 4 of this book, cooperative games are great fun, they bring people closer together, they promote positive solutions, and they are in no way less challenging or exciting for the lack of a human opponent. Everyone wins. No one gets left out. Win-win.



Also, winning can be accomplished without producing casualties when competitive activities are conducted in a gentle and benign manner. In this case, there is underlying cooperation—a tacit agreement among players to be gentle, to avoid judging those defeated as “losers”. It’s as if the competition takes place within an essentially cooperative arena. There’s mutual support and if you lose, there’s no disgrace.

The problem with competition, though, is that it is rarely so benign or simple. There’s usually a lot on the line in terms of status or goods. Stress, aggression, ego, anxiety, inequity, mistrust, etc. are typically present. It takes skill—and awareness of the potential downsides of competition—to conduct a contest so that no one gets hurt.

Structural Competition

Here’s another reason we compete: We want the fruits of victory. Of course! Sometimes, we have no choice but to compete in order to get what we want. Do you want to go to college? You may well have to take another applicant’s place. Do you want a promotion in your job? This likely requires you to show the boss you’re more deserving than your colleagues. Do you dream of holding political office so you can help the world? Before you can be benevolent, you’ll have to beat your opponent. Like video games? To play, chances are you’ll be stuck in a battlefield. Legions of our social institutions, activities, and life opportunities are structured competitively. Like it or not, we are thrust into the fray.

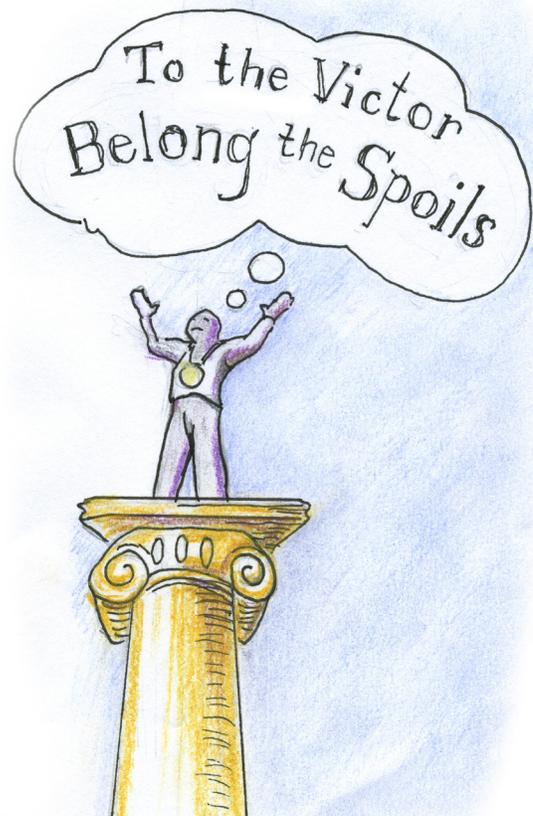
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Situational competition like the foregoing examples is called structural competition. It's competition that exists within social structures such as schools, organized sports, and workplaces. The flip side of structural competition is intentional competition. Intentional competition is competing by choice²⁶. Whereas structural competition is a framework people are placed in, intentional competition is an attitude. When you set your sights on beating an opponent in a perceived zero-sum game, you're engaged in intentional competition.

It's possible to engage in structural competition without intentional competition and vice versa. For example, in college admissions, a student doesn't normally know who he is competing against and his primary goal is not beating them; it's gaining access to the college of his choice. Conversely, the woman who "eyes the competition" at a party to verify that she's the most attractive is engaged in intentional competition but not the structural kind. This being said, intentional and structural competition usually go hand-in-hand.

Structural competition breeds intentional competition. If you're placed in a competitive situation, it's a natural response to want the rewards of victory rather than the punishment of defeat. The more you want those rewards, the more competitive your intention becomes. Also, just spending time in competitively structured institutions makes a person more competitive because the milieu is saturated with social messages convincing us that we need to compete. Finally, structural competition engenders intentional competition because, in competitive arenas, we are likely to experience damaging feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, aggression, selfishness, egoism, etc. that only intensify the drive to prove oneself better than the rest.

In fact, structural and intentional competition comprise a feedback loop—they feed on each other. To wit: A little girl loves to ride horses. She displays great acumen. In a natural and nearly inevitable progression, she finds herself shunted into the show ring by well-meaning adults. She goes along with the shift and barely notices the transformation of a free and internally motivated pleasure into a judged and measured discipline.





Every blue ribbon delights applauding parents and teachers sitting in the stands. An entire system of affection and approval hinges on her riding performance as teachers, coaches, parents, siblings, friends, and adversaries all have a stake in the girl's success or failure, especially as she moves up the competitive ranks of the sport. The girl begins to experience social status—and to want it. As she grows up in the structurally competitive world of equestrian sports,

then, her attitude will tend to become more competitive because she is pressured to compete, and she has a greater investment at stake. By the time she is in a position to organize or judge equestrian events herself, she has been toughened by competition and steeped in its ideology, and she is therefore apt to uphold the paradigm. And so it goes: We engage in structurally competitive activities and adapt to them by becoming intentionally competitive. If we win, we tend to rise in the hierarchy of our pursuit and eventually even gain access to decision-making roles. At that point, we are drenched in an ethos of competition and we use any discretion we may have to perpetuate structurally competitive institutions.

The previous example leaves out the exacerbating influence of social privilege. Structurally competitive institutions exist largely because they favor people with power. Remember that individuals who win, over time and on average, are those with the most resources to begin with. Privileged people, those in positions of power and influence, are most likely to be rewarded by competition. And so privileged people have an economic incentive to maintain competitive regimes. Why question a hierarchical system when it's set up to benefit you and yours? Besides, as the example of the horse-lover points out, people who benefit from competition tend to not see the problem. They enjoy competition more than disadvantaged people because they win more often, and winning is fun. It helps to lose to see the downsides of competition.

If the culture is ever to evolve beyond hierarchies and competition so that all people own status as inherently dignified individuals rather than “winners” and “losers”, structural competition must be mitigated. In the workplace, schools, the economy, sports, and in family life, as long as people are ranked against one another and rewarded accordingly, it will remain adaptive to compete, to get ahead by pushing others out of the way.

Chapter 3.

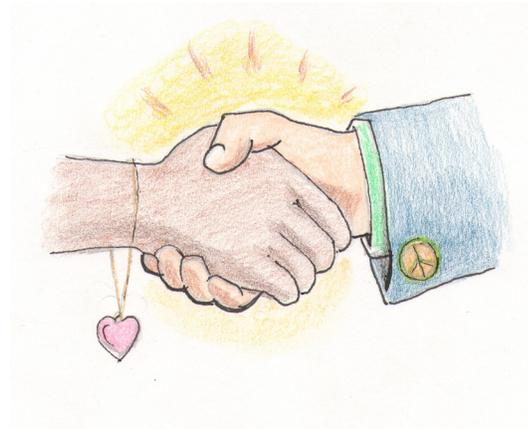
Shedding the Competitive Mind Frame A Personal Story

I am not a purist. I've been known to play Ping-Pong with my kids and keep score, and once in a while, my inner Attila expresses itself in a game of shuffleboard with my husband. I don't maintain zero tolerance for the zero-sum game.

But most of the time, when I engage in competition, it's not because I want to. It's structural—it comes with the territory. And so it is that I graduated from “rival” universities with degrees in physics, Earth science, and in education, having traversed a thicket of “weed-out” courses, frightening finals, and harrowing bell curves. I've raced for results in science research and I've worked overtime in the corporate world. I've taught science and assigned grades. I've written two textbook programs, published by the world's largest educational publisher and I've enjoyed a few laps in the laurels that came with that. And I own a business. I'm a middle daughter, and I was a mom on the soccer sidelines. Now I'm watching my kids navigate the competitive corridors of high school. I'm trying to help them find their way in the mad crush for educational and life opportunities. I have lived in the United States all my life, participated in its culture and customs. In these experiences, I have known competition.

I began to question the paradigm, though, seventeen years ago when an offhand remark struck me like a slap. Epiphany: I'm working for an educational publisher as an editor and I'm chatting with my boss. She sits behind her desk, under glaring lights, in her blue and white rayon dress with its busy geometric print. Assessing my work, she describes me as a “real competitor”. She means it as praise—she has sharp elbows herself. But the words sound odd, distasteful. It's hurtful to be described this way. I realize here and now that something is wrong. I'm not very competitive, thank you very much. I don't like the aggressive feelings that accompany competition, I don't like the way it distracts me from my inner life, and I feel sorry for the people who have to lose. Especially when it's children who are competing, or when contestants are forced to engage, or when the playing field is not level, the battle for victory appears absurd and unfair, and it's painful to watch.

Switching Gears



Ever since being anointed a “real competitor”, I have become interested in reducing the competition in my life and replacing it with healthier alternatives—pure, peaceful solitude and productive, joyous collaboration. And, over time, I have become interested in sharing what I understand about competition and cooperation with others, who teach me right back. I find the intention to cooperate rather than compete brings me into a richer, kinder world of sharing and mutual respect.

My explicit intention now is to avoid competition and replace it with cooperation wherever I can. Putting forth this intention has improved the quality of my life. The benefits are multifold. Certainly, becoming a conscious cooperator has improved my relationships. I’ve found that, when you seek to cooperate, others usually reciprocate in kind. It seems the first cooperative gesture signals safety and generates trust. Occasionally cooperative overtures are spurned, but that’s good information. It means that a relationship needs work or that it’s not worthy of one’s energy.

Lightening up on competition is freeing. When you don’t compete, you don’t rate yourself against others. You don’t care if you’re “good” or “bad”. Thus, I can be a so-so artist and be satisfied with that. By objective standards, I’m a deplorable singer. Who cares? I sing anyway. At the same time, not competing means that you don’t become vain or egotistical about the things that you do excel in. Cooperation keeps the ego in check. Competition fertilizes it. When you compete with others, and win, you’re at high risk for growing that big, unwieldy ego which can pump you up but ultimately cut you off from other people.

I also find that adopting a cooperative attitude enhances true productivity. Cooperation implies give and take. In the spirit of community, it’s appropriate to ask for help with the things that matter to you as well as to help others with their projects. Mutual aid increases the odds that you’ll get those things that are important to you accomplished. In all these ways, and too many others to parse here, I have found that toning down competition benefits oneself.

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Of course it also benefits other people. You're kinder, more generous, less avaricious, and more relaxed so all those around you enjoy the big switch. Thus, trading competition for cooperation is smart in terms of enlightened self interest, but beyond self-protection, it's a generous, loving gift to those around you.



Sometimes, the intention to cooperate rather than compete works like magic, with ripples beyond what you can imagine. It worked like that for me. Dedicating myself to cooperation eventually brought me here to this enjoyable moment, sitting at my computer with a glass of pomegranate juice and an open window, writing a book for you. I'm trained as an Earth scientist and educator. In this work, I do a fair amount of worrying about the environmental perils our planet is facing. In the course of writing and teaching science, I have come to see that connecting cooperation with science education is key to environmental sustainability. Why? Two huge reasons: Cooperation promotes complex problem solving and it fosters sharing of resources. Students need to learn about the role of cooperation, then, to become good planetary stewards. Of more immediate relevance to students, though, is that competition creates so much



misery in the science classroom that it prevents students from learning basic information about the natural world. Cooperation, not competition, accelerates true learning. Competition is particularly disadvantageous to those from socioeconomically marginalized groups. Given all this, I knew I wanted to promote cooperation in science education. But how?

Around the time that I began to connect cooperation with science education and sustainability, I attended a conference for nature educators. I met a woman there who has a successful business in the Netherlands selling cooperative games. Anne Mijke van Haarten came to stay with me for a few days after the conference and taught me all about cooperative games. Anne was a special education teacher and “play therapist”—a profession that is less common here in the States. Through Anne, I learned about the power of cooperative play for both learning and leisure. Anne and I had fun and shared our thoughts. We celebrated my husband's birthday with a picnic of buckwheat crepes (Dutch recipe). We played Frisbee (a very cooperative game) on a sweeping ridge as the Northern California sun set.

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The rest of this story unfolded quickly in a series of serendipities. Anne wanted to meet one of the pioneers of cooperative games, a man named Ken Kolsbun; luckily he lived fairly close to me; I drove her there; we discovered Ken was retiring and selling his business; Anne couldn't buy it because she lives in Europe; I wanted to work with the dynamic of cooperation—voila! I bought Ken's garage business—a toy company (originally called Animal Town, then later Child and Nature) that featured cooperative games and other playthings related to healthy living and nature. I learned how to operate a store from Ken and his wife Jann, then split off and expanded the cooperative games part of Child and Nature, and added resources and research. I thereby founded the business CooperativeGames.com—a Web shop devoted exclusively to cooperative play. I am living quite happily ever after. My customers are congenial. My suppliers use Earth-friendly materials and employ fair trade practices. Most everyone seems to hold the common good in mind and heart. And it's just plain fun working in the field of cooperative play!



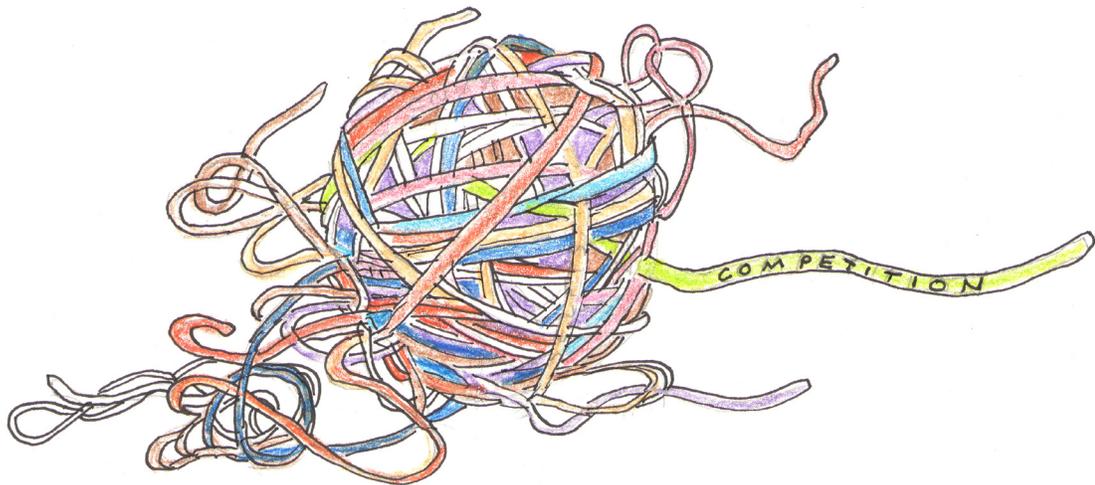
We all have to coexist with competition. It's structurally embedded in the institutions we depend on. But, mindset matters. There's safety in choosing not to compete. That is, we can escape many of the downsides of competition by purging intentional competition from our own lives. It feels so much better to coexist rather than compete. Ahhh!

A Ball of String

Competition is bound up with a host of negative social dynamics and foolish personal attitudes. Though we have come to think of competition as fun, productive, patriotic, and inevitable, in fact it is none of these. Our confusion about competition arises from an interplay of social and personal factors—mainly socialization, low-self-esteem, and the conflation of competition (which is actually not fun) with winning (which is fun.)

Competition, as research and reflection show, is linked to greed, insecurity, envy, anxiety, egotism, aggression, the unbalanced compulsion to live in the serializing world of the left brain rather than the whole self, stress, conformity, unconscious acceptance of social norms, materialism, and low self-esteem through a tangle of pathways too complicated to completely comprehend. Who's to say whether it's greed that fuels competition, for example, or the other way around? Of course, it's chicken-and-egg—a feedback loop. Which of our negative patterns are linked to others—and what's the equation for how they relate? We'll never know. The strands in the entire ball of negative living are wound up together.

But, sometimes, by tugging on a single strand, you can unravel a whole tangled ball of string. So too, if cooperation could replace competition in our social interactions, we might loosen a larger network of interconnected afflictions. We begin where it's easy to begin. We play cooperatively because it's fun right now—and because it can help us get to a higher level.



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