

Competition

The notion of competition is an interesting one, as it can be both healthy and motivating, and yet potentially very destructive and demoralising.

A quick scan of the definitions for this concept raises synonyms of rivalry, contesting, opposition, conflict, battling, fighting, and expressions like 'keeping up with the Joneses'. A formal definition from a number of dictionaries states it is, "the activity or condition of striving to gain or win something, by defeating or establishing superiority over others."

These words conjure images of gain or advantage at the expense of others and, if this is true, how does this fit within a community striving for the success of all? Clearly, there is a notion of competition that is self-indulgent, self-focused and potentially destructive to others, but does it have to be this way?

I believe that the negative aspects of competition are borne out of the value we place on our achievements and on ourselves. The question of who we are and what is our purpose is an ancient philosophical question, and one that people far wiser than I have battled with. I would add, however, that we are so much more than an aggregation of grades, of awards, or our final place in a competition. In contrast, I believe that our very essence is best examined by how we add to the collective good; how we treat others and how we aid in improving the life of others.

These suggestions conjure images of grand schemes but, in reality, the time taken to say 'hello', to wish someone a 'good day' is sometimes the greatest gift we can give – the gift of ourselves. We can never be fully aware of the struggles faced in life by another, but a simple kind word goes a long way to make someone's day, and to let them know that we care enough to communicate at a personal level.

Belonging to a community, whether it is a sporting club, an association, a social club, or a school brings about an obligation to help make a positive difference in the lives of others. Let our natural sense of competition drive positive change for all, enable us to celebrate the achievements and accomplishments of others, and to encourage and support the efforts of all. Let us resist the potentially damaging behaviours associated with the unhealthy expression of competition and not seek to propel our child alone, but rather all children. Let us help our children to learn that we do not always come first, and that we have an obligation to consider the feelings and impact of our actions on others; help to develop resilience, an appreciation of how truly fortunate we are, understand our duty in service; and promote a positive and healthy outlook on life.

Without this approach, young people face a world beyond school in which disappointment is harder to manage, more difficult to understand, and one in which they may not have had the requisite experiences to build the necessary resilience and growth mindset needed to continue in a positive and constructive path.

We all want to protect our children from life's little disappointments (and so we should), but by helping them manage and deal with these challenges now, we help our children develop the positive psychology frameworks and resilience needed to navigate life itself.

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