



## Competition

### What Place in Our Programs?

**STUDENT TEACHER SARAH LANEY** had this learning experience with an older preschool group at a university child care center in Minnesota:

A wind chill factor below zero means the children play downstairs today and not on the playground. The basement playroom lacks the capacity for children to run and be free. Sarah decides the restlessness in the room can be broken up by allowing small groups to go in the long hall outside the classroom and run, run, run.

**Sarah:** Suzzane, Johnson, Jayne, and Zack, would you four come join me at the door? (*The four come running with excitement.*) Since we can't go outside today, I am going to let groups of four run down this hallway and back. Be aware of others and careful of anyone running behind, in front, or alongside you.

**Johnson:** Sarah, you mean we can run as fast as we can?

**Sarah:** Exactly!

**Zack:** I can run really, really fast, Sarah!

**Suzzane:** Zack, I can run fast too.

**Sarah:** I am excited to see you all run and do your best!

**Jayne:** I don't like to run a long time . . . (*looking down at her shoes.*)

**Sarah:** Jayne, run as far as you would like, or you can skip or jump if you'd rather.

**Jayne:** I like to skip!

**Johnson:** Um, teacher, how will we know when to start running?

**Sarah:** That is a good question, Johnson. I have a whistle. (*The boys jostle to see who will go first.*)

**Zack:** Johnson that was not nice, you are not supposed to push.

**Johnson:** But I want to go firrrrrsssttt!

**Sarah** (*seeing the conflict*): This is not a race. (*She puts her whistle in her pocket.*) Are you ready to just run and have fun?

**All:** Yeaah!

**Sarah:** You can start. (*The kids start running or skipping.*)

**Johnson:** Teacher, look, I am the first one. I am fast! (*Johnson is definitely a fast runner and has broken away considerably from the group.*)

**Jayne:** I am skipping, Teacher! (*Jayne is doing her own thing and doing it well.*)

**Suzzane** (*trying so hard her panting is echoing through the hallway, while her little running feet are going as fast as they possibly can*): Wait, Johnson, don't go so far. Wait for us!

**Zack** (*a fast runner as well; not far behind Johnson and gaining*): Suzzane, c'mon, I am waiting for you. You can do it. We will run there and back together! (*Zack slows his pace intentionally to allow Suzzane to catch up.*)

**Sarah:** Johnson, Zack, Jayne, and Suzzane, you all ran or skipped all the way down the hall and back! (*addressing Zack*) Zack, I like how you waited for Suzzane and encouraged her to keep running. That was a friendly thing to do!

Zack grins. Sarah is excited about how he acted. Zack has had lots of problems lately, and later Sarah tells the other teachers about his friendliness.

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Dan is looking for anecdotes about how teachers have built relationships with children to help them with problems in social-emotional development. Thanks to student teacher Sarah Laney for contributing this anecdote and her reflections about it. Thanks also to the staff of Campus Childcare at Bemidji State University for their ongoing cooperation. Children's names in all anecdotes are changed.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.



In this anecdote the student teacher put away her whistle. She overcame the stereotype that at school running is organized racing. Instead, Sarah met the need of the young children to run for the sake of running, not to win or lose. Intuitively, she guided the children away from competitiveness, toward cooperation. This moment of liberation empowered Zack, often competitive in activities, to slow his running pace and include Suzzane, not leave her behind.

### Emotional readiness first

The developmental egocentrism that Jean Piaget ([1932] 1960) documented in young children—due, we now know, to still developing brains and very limited experience—makes winning and losing hard for them to understand (unlike us adults, right?). Take the game Musical Chairs. Each time the music stops, the leader removes a chair, and the child who cannot find a seat quickly enough is out of the game. Young children do not yet have the social perspective and emotional readiness that allow them to understand “it’s just a game.” Judging from the emotional reactions I’ve seen in this activity, children who are out of the game are more apt to be feeling, “This adult doesn’t like me” or “I am not worthy of playing this game” (see Hyson 2004).

Piaget demonstrated that between the ages of three and seven children become much more capable of understanding the rules in games. As our anecdote illustrates, perceived rules can have a great impact on the children’s behavior. When an adult even benignly imposes rules, they are often beyond young children’s capacities to emotionally handle and may elicit some strong reactions:

**Zack:** Johnson that was not nice, you are not supposed to push.

**Johnson:** But, I want to go firrrrrsssttt!

There is a difference between rules teachers impose and rules that evolve from children’s activities; in the latter instances children are more likely to understand the expectations. Child-generated rules become conventional as children approach middle childhood, but before that their rules can be interestingly preconventional. For example, four preschoolers once played a game of cards this way: One child dealt the cards. The four picked up their hands, giggled, put their cards back down, and the same child dealt them again. Their game went on like this for 20 minutes. An adult who might have tried to teach a “real” card game probably would have then seen the children scatter. A year or two later, of course, the four children easily might play a regular game of cards.

### Life’s conflicts and resolutions

Erik Erikson, the mid-twentieth century psychologist, posed “eight ages” (1963), which I refer to as “critical life conflicts,” that humans face in the cycle of life, infancy through older adulthood. To the extent individuals can resolve each conflict successfully, they are likely to experience mental health. Those who can resolve the four early life conflicts almost certainly struggle less to resolve the later conflicts. The dilemmas children experience in the early years strongly point to the essential guiding role adults play in each young one’s life. Erikson (1963) outlines the dilemmas as

1. Basic Trust versus Basic Mistrust [Infancy]
2. Autonomy [healthy awareness of self] versus Shame and Doubt [Toddlerhood]
3. Initiative versus Guilt [Preprimary]
4. Industry versus Inferiority [Primary]

In a deft refinement of Erikson's preprimary dilemma, David Elkind (1987) offers a co-conflict that is useful to think about in understanding the place of competition in early childhood:

Initiative and Belonging versus Guilt and Alienation

With the additional terms, Elkind indicates that preschool to primary grade children need to experience healthy transactions with the world and at the same time find a place of acceptance within social groups. In an adult-organized competitive game, many young children leave feeling they are to blame for an unhappy experience *and* feeling alienated from the rest of the group. (This double whammy can affect both winners and losers.) In contrast, when teachers guide groups to run for the sake of running (or skip for the sake of skipping) and play games for the sake of playing, they nurture both a sense of initiative *and* belonging in children: The players win just by participating successfully—as do both Zack and Suzzane in the anecdote.

### When winning is losing

But what of young children who enter the classroom with “built-in” competitiveness? Whether it is a consequence of disposition, family priorities, or both, these children seem to feel they are worthy of acceptance by others only if they are competing and winning. This mind-set makes life's future conflicts more challenging. Ironically, here is a situation in which the teacher must be tougher (in a friendly way) than the child. Each day the teacher offers the child intentional, focused, unconditional acceptance; kindly discourages a winner-loser mentality; and presents meaningful individual and cooperative activities as clear opportunities for success. A relationship with the child is critical to this effort.

Referring to the anecdote, Sarah commented to me that she had been working hard with Zack to help him resolve conflicts less aggressively. On this day, for the first time, her supportive relationship paid off.

And what of our country's emphasis on competition? Shouldn't we prepare young children for competing? Well, yes, by following Erikson's and Elkind's construct. We guide children to develop reasonable trust in the world, a sense of self that is good, a confidence in doing things for their own sake, and a feeling of acceptance as a member of the group. As children grow, these social-emotional qualities will fundamentally aid children to be industrious in all kinds of situations and not to feel inferior and alienated.

Elkind (2001) writes about the importance of helping young children make meaning of their childhood by celebrating them more for who they are than for how they perform. We owe a lot to Elkind for showing us that there is more to being a child than duly participating in adult-organized competitive events, including in the classroom (1987, 2005). Forced winning and losing come to today's children too hard and too fast.

Courtesy in the face of competition, cooperation to resolve the larger dilemmas in life: these are the goals that should come first in our classrooms, not an

emphasis on the hard lessons of winning and losing. Sarah sensed this when she made the running activity less competitive, and Zack responded by slowing down to let Suzzane catch up.

### To increase your knowledge

Seek out works by David Elkind and others, especially the following:

Elkind, D. 1993. *Images of the young child*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Elkind, D. 2001. *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon*. 3rd ed. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Gallagher, K.C., & K. Mayer. 2006. Teacher-child relationships at the forefront of effective practice. *Young Children* 61 (6): 44–49.

Quann, V., & C.A. Wien. 2006. The visible empathy of infants and toddlers. *Young Children* 61 (4): 22–29.

### Steps you can take

1. Review your regular classroom practices. Identify those that reinforce children's perceptions of themselves as winners or losers. Brainstorm modifications you can make to build a more inclusive group spirit. Try your ideas and note changes in children's levels of satisfaction with that part of your program.
2. Work on your relationship with a child whose competitive behavior is causing problems for him or her and for the group. Reflect about possible sources of the child's competitiveness—personality factors? Prior experiences? Adult expectations? Use your relationship to help the child find meaning in noncompetitive, individual expression and in cooperative activities with other children.

### References

Elkind, D. 1987. *Miseducation: Preschoolers at risk*. New York: Knopf.

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Elkind, D. 2005. Viewpoint. Early childhood amnesia: Reaffirming children's need for developmentally appropriate programs. *Young Children* 60 (4): 38–40.

Erikson, E.H. 1963. *Childhood and society*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton.

Hyson, M. 2004. *The emotional development of young children: Building an emotion-centered curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Piaget, J. [1932] 1960. *The moral judgment of the child*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

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