

Win, Lose or Draw

Why schools need competition in competitive sports

IT'S THAT TIME of year again when, traditionally, many schools will hold their annual sports day. For more than a decade now there has been an ongoing debate as to whether or not competitive sport has a place in schools. In schools, traditional sports day events such as the 100m sprint, sack race and egg & spoon race are disappearing in favor of more inclusive sports days where all children take part in a series of events, acquiring points for their team. The focus is now more on participation. No individual stands out as winning, but more to the point, no individual stand out as losing. This begs the question: Is competition in schools really so terrible?

Of course, there are strong arguments on both sides. The main argument against competitive sports days is that competition can embarrass the less able and even dent their confidence. Many teachers consciously hide from children their ranking in the classroom for fear that it could have a negative effect on their attitude towards learning. However, the sheer nature of sports and competition means that it is very difficult for teachers to hide winners and losers on the field. While most people would view that in a negative way, it could be argued that competitive sports provides valuable learning opportunities for children to develop important life skills within a safe, nurturing environment.

Most adults would agree that life is competitive at times, for example when applying for jobs. Through sports, we can teach children how to behave when they win, how to behave when they lose and how, sometimes, losing can spur us on to

try harder and do better next time: "You will never know how to fail if you have never been allowed to fail, and learning how to fail is important."

Moreover, taking part in competitions, regardless of ability, allows children to learn and develop attributes such as interpersonal skills, resilience, adaptability and a sense of fair play - all of which are qualities we want for the well-rounded children we are trying to mold. Another common argument for competitive sports in schools is that many children need opportunities to shine outside of the classroom, such as in music, art, drama or sports; particularly those who don't excel in reading, writing or math.

Again, it is about recognizing that each of us have different strengths and learning to respect those differences. One is not better than the other; they are just different. That is the message that needs to be communicated and learnt. Even children learn that we can't be good at everything, but we are all good at something.

Not Winning

Furthermore, the argument that some children shouldn't be subjected to competitive sports could be seen as limiting children's experiences. Granted, no one is good at every sport but, given enough opportunities, I believe every child can find at least one sport that they can enjoy and perform well in. Nobody enjoys losing but competing individually and winning can also be joyful, thrilling, even exhilarating. Even now, I still remember the excitement of competing in and, sometimes, winning athletic and swimming races at school. Are



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we depriving some children of that?

Recently, the term "healthy competition" has been introduced. Exactly what that means is open to interpretation. Pessimists might say that it is just a way to 'dress up' the same thing, but for me it is about adults being increasingly focused on how to ensure competitive sports remain fun and a successful learning experience for all. Adapting the language we use in front of children is just one way to ensure that competition remains 'healthy,' for example, using phrases such as "not winning" rather than "losing" or "failing."

My personal belief is that schools should provide opportunities for both competitive and non-competitive sports. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

Non-competitive sports days are great because they allow every child to enjoy being physically active, to participate equally and to feel they are contributing something towards their team. However, as someone who has enjoyed sports from a very young age, I also see the need to provide competitive opportunities for those who show particular sporting skills and interests (and a desire to test themselves against others). That is just some people's nature.

How schools can find the right balance between the two is perhaps the more pertinent question. Inter-school sports fixtures and links with sports clubs in the community are just two of many possible solutions. What we can say is that there is no easy answer and that this debate will most likely continue for many years to come. ■

