

Lately my father has been pointing out the perils of competition. This from the guy who passed on every competitive bone in my body. Actually, he is just cluing in to the ongoing conversation "is competition good or bad?" The answer, as it is to so many of life's questions, is "it depends."

One of the common concerns about competition in modern society is that it's about winning and losing. In the view of some, this spawns rivalry and rivalry can have negative results. The word itself brings to mind negative intention to beat the other side with a vengeance. To come out a winner at all costs. On the other hand, we have some impressive examples of young athletes in Canada who are competitive and who work very hard to achieve excellence; at the same time they cheer for their rivals in international competition.

What is the concern about competition in school and on the playing field? Recently I read that a child's feelings of self-worth become dependent on external sources when competition is highlighted in daily life. The argument is that children begin to see themselves as only valuable when they win or when they achieve at a higher level, such as the honour role in their school or straight A's in the classroom.

The complaint is that we have a culture that defines success as victory. I think we do have some examples of kids who were so driven by parents to become dominant in their sport that they their world view got skewed.

There's no doubt that self-esteem is a delicate matter. Our core feeling about ourselves can get so distorted that we end up trying to fill ourselves up from the outside in. Unfortunately we are designed from the inside out, so we have to find our worth by looking inward. It doesn't work the other way.

A significant point in the winner-loser culture is how it feels to lose. When winning is the ultimate, a loss can generate feelings of shame. This kind of shame is primed to become toxic and I think this is really the crux of the 'competition is bad' school of thought.

On the other hand, each person has a basic need to be the best we can be. This is the need to self-actualize. Can we do that without being competitive? Well, researchers have identified that creativity flourishes without competition. One study found that kids were more creative when there were no prizes to win. When prizes were offered, the kids were less spontaneous and less varied in their creations. Other studies point out that kids learn better in school when competition is removed. They are less anxious and they have more concentration.

This is something to think about and I am not totally convinced that competition is a bad thing but here's a closing thought. Call to mind the children's game of musical chairs. Were you the child who was left without the chair early in the game? or most of the time? How did it make you feel?