



The Benefits of Cooperation

Cooperation is conducive to better health and liking one another.

—Alfie Kohn



Was your child eliminated from the spelling bee and came home in tears? Have you heard of an athlete who took steroids to win? How did you feel when you were chosen last in a game because you were not as "good" as the others?

All of these events reflect our preoccupation with competition. The concept is deeply rooted in our nation's education, sports, politics, and even in families. Author Alfie Kohn, in his well-researched book **No Contest, the Case Against Competition** (see page 21), writes how "we are encouraged to pit ourselves against one another and taught that competition is a prod to productivity, a builder of character, and an unavoidable part of human nature." Kohn claims "any win/lose structure is psychologically destructive and poisonous to our relationships."

It's ironic that we play games to be together yet spend our efforts trying to bankrupt someone, destroy their armies, conquer the world, etc.—all goals which create hostility and separate us. Success doesn't require someone else's failure.

Competition was virtually unknown to the Zuni and Iroquois in North America and to the Bathonga in South Africa. The Mixtecans of Mexico regard envy and competitiveness as a minor crime. From kibbutzniks in Israel to farmers in Mexico, cooperation is prized and competition generally avoided.

It doesn't have to be a "dog eat dog" world. We can unlearn that kind of learned behavior. Why not play "King of the Mountain" where everyone stands at the top? Or where everyone occupies the last chair in "Musical Chairs"? How about family members deciding together who does which household chores? What about businesses sharing information and resources? Just imagine the global benefits of nations working together and negotiating so everyone wins!

Cooperative concepts are beneficial in school, work, play, in personal relationships and are easily understood in the context of games. Here are several benefits:

■ Bonding, Support, and Playfulness

It is hard to maintain positive feelings about someone who is trying to make you lose. Hurt feelings and arguments often result from competitive play. In cooperative play, challenge, discovery and success are shared. Emphasis is on participation, acceptance and the "joy of play." In the end, it's your relationship with each other that counts. Children gain stronger bonds with parents, siblings and playmates.



■ Teamwork and Shared Decision Making

Competition makes it difficult to share our skills, experiences and resources because each person is separately involved in his or her exclusive goal. In our schools and work places, students and employees are often taught to regard each other not as potential collaborators, but rather as opponents, rivals and obstacles to their own success. In cooperative settings, every person's role is important and valued. Individuality is respected, and concern for the needs of others fostered.

The challenge shifts from "striving to be number one" to working toward a mutual goal. The idea that we all share in decision-making is a powerful tool.



■ Openness, Trust and Safety

Often competition—in work and play—results in arguments, hurt feelings and separation. Many games are based on secrecy and intimidation resulting in players feeling unsafe. In work or play, people really want and need to feel safe, be open and honest, and above all, feel trusted. Cooperative situations help create that atmosphere, because participants give encouragement and support of one another.



■ Self Worth and Personal Power

Cooperativeness has been linked to greater learning, emotional maturity and strong personal identity. Participants often become more flexible in their thinking and willingness to invent creative solutions. The result is enjoyment, personal confidence and a feeling of self-worth. As your personal power grows, you get that "I can make-a-difference" feeling.



■ Well-being

Most competitive situations are highly stressful: the possibility of failure creates agitation if not outright anxiety. The fear or anger generated from being eliminated or losing often causes embarrassment, tension and hostility. Cooperative activities are non-threatening and non-judgemental. As a result, this creates an atmosphere for relaxation and well-being—the foundation for more genuine, healthy and playful fun.

You are welcome to reprint this article for others to use...