

Skill-Building Opportunities

Too Competitive

Question: My daughter has become extremely competitive with her friends and classmates in sports, video games, board games and even tests at school. She wants to be the best at everything. She gets angry when she's not. How can I help her control her anger before she crosses the line while competing?

No one wants to be a bad loser, or even a bad winner. Unfortunately, children learn early on that losing is “bad,” and their wish to win is intense. This can lead to feelings of anger, sadness and frustration when things don't go the way they want. Stay strong: there's lots you can do to help your child learn to manage her behavior and emotions in competitive experiences while promoting the life skill of Focus and Self Control.

Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia refers to self control as inhibitory control and defines it as “the ability to resist a strong inclination to do one thing and instead do what is most appropriate.” Inhibition involves controlling attention, emotion and behavior in order to achieve a goal and is critical for social interaction. This ability continues to develop during your child's school-age years and into adulthood.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1 Talk to your child.

In a calm moment with your child, share what you've noticed about her competitive behavior. Encourage your child to talk about her feelings. Ask questions like:

- “What does it feel like to come in first place? What does it feel like when you lose?”
- “I noticed that you get very angry when you're not the winner of a game. What do you think we can do to try to help you enjoy the game more and not spend so much time worrying about winning or getting so angry when you lose?”

Once you help her understand what she's feeling and why, she'll more likely be able to step back and notice how her feelings affect her actions. This kind of reflection is an important part of Focus and Self Control.

Child development researcher Clancy Blair of New York University studies emotional and intellectual development in children. Blair says:

“When children are having behavior problems—when they're having a temper tantrum or are acting in a way that is really exuberant or very negative—[that] really inhibits the child's ability to listen and focus ... [Children should] have their emotions work with them, not against them.”

2

Brainstorm problem-solving strategies together.

Once you and your child have had a discussion about how her competitive habits don't really serve her well—for example, she doesn't enjoy games when she is upset or gets angry about losing—you can work together to create ways for her to manage her behavior. When you ask her to set a goal, make a plan, follow it and discuss how it is working, you promote your child's self control. Some suggestions include:

- Help her create a plan for how she'll manage when she begins to feel upset or angry as she competes.
- Suggest strategies. For example, encourage her to take three deep breaths before responding when she's angry.
- Come up with a sentence she can repeat to herself to help her focus and gain control of emotions.
- Have her ask herself questions in the moment like: "Is this a small thing or a big thing? Is this worth getting angry about? How can I make this more fun?"

Make sure to have a conversation to discuss the strategies your child has tried. Keep trying different ideas to find what works best. When she uses problem-solving strategies to deal with stress on her own, she should feel more confident in her ability to slow down and manage her feelings using the skill of Focus and Self Control.

Daryl Rock, Superintendent of the Harlem Children's Zone in New York City, emphasizes the importance of making mistakes when learning at his school:

"We give children the freedom to make mistakes. We teach our kids that failure is not a way of labeling who you are—it's just a way of identifying what you don't know and what you need to put more effort into. When kids understand that, they're not hesitant about trying something, because if they fail, it's not a reflection on them. That just tells them, 'This is an area we need to work on.'"

3

Praise your child's efforts.

Kids are more willing to take risks and be persistent when they're praised for efforts, not for their ability. You are helping your child learn to be motivated to improve for her own sake, instead of for other people's praise.

- Instead of telling her: "You are so smart" or "You are so good at sports or games," acknowledge how hard she is working: "You worked really hard to stay calm when you and your friend argued over whose turn was next."
- Talk to her about her "personal best." According to researcher Craig Ramey of Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Research Institute, this idea encourages children to work toward their own improvement rather than beating or besting other children. Ask her to identify her own goal for her "personal best" when playing games and taking tests.

- Think about your verbal and nonverbal communication with your child. If your child feels a lot of pressure to do well, she is more likely to feel stressed and act out of frustration, instead of using reasoning. Give hugs, smiles and words of encouragement, both when your child succeeds and when she struggles.
- Show her how you respond to disappointing circumstances: “I feel pretty disappointed that I didn’t get that promotion at work, but I’m going to work hard until it’s time to try again.”

4

Play cooperative games that promote Focus and Self Control.

While it’s important to encourage her to work out difficulties while playing competitive games, also give her the opportunity to play games that use cooperation instead of competition. Some ideas are:

- Encourage her and her friends to build a structure using household objects and recycled materials.

This task asks her to focus on her goal, to use flexible thinking to create an original idea, and to control her actions while working with others to reach a goal.

- Suggest that your child and her friends act out one of their favorite stories. Have them look for costumes and other items to help them tell the story. The children can choose the different roles and put on the play for an audience later. Your child must use her attention, memory, creative thinking and self-control while working in a team.