

The competitive child

Some children are naturally competitive. These are the children that constantly want to be first, to be the fastest, to win games and take losing to heart. Competitiveness is by no means a negative attribute. In fact, it is a trait that will probably serve children well when they become adults because they will always strive to reach the goals they set. Unfortunately, the time resting between childhood and adulthood is long, meaning adults interacting with these types of children are left to guide and curve their behaviours.

The lower brain

When looking at any child's behaviour it is vital to understand which part of the brain they are operating from. Although there are numerous parts of the brain, each with their own vital functions, it is important, in the instance of the competitive child, to understand the lower portion of the brain, otherwise known as the limbic system. The limbic system consists of many individual processing components, including the parts that control emotion – the very thing that escalates a child's need to act competitively. For this reason, it is vital that adults understand the role the limbic system plays in a child's quest for competitive superiority.

When the limbic system is firing on all cylinders it becomes the ruler of the child's universe. Their thoughts are scattered, they are quick to emote and they fail to see reason. If children's limbic systems are ruling their roost, anyone trying to deal with the child or prompt them to see reason will almost always fail. In fact, the more adults try to encourage the child to think rationally the more the child will run in the opposite direction. Limbic systems are, unfortunately, disinterested in calming down and thinking about things rationally. Instead, it is all about the here and now, focusing only on what they want and what they do not want. As such, it becomes the perfect companion to make children ignore reason and see things from another's perspective.

Calming the lower brain

When the limbic system is running the show there is little an adult can do to control a child's thoughts or, at times, behaviours. Because of this fact, adults' only option is to engage strategies that work towards calming the child's limbic system. Because every child is different there is no one size fits all solution. Thankfully, however, because adults know their children best, they will already have a fair idea of what increases and decreases a child's emotional reactions. Taking the time to get to know children's reactions can seem tricky, but the key to understanding children's responses lies in a simple question which can be asked after an incident with a child has occurred – that being - did the child's emotional response increase or decrease when I just did/said that?

If the answer is that the child's emotional response decreased due to the adult's efforts then chances are it is a strategy that will prove useful in similar, future situations. If, on the other hand, the child's emotional responses intensified, for example, they began arguing more or crying louder, then chances are that it is a strategy that might benefit from being put out to pasture.

How the competitive child fits into the equation

Because the competitive child is always set to a default attitude of 'I want to win', their lower brain is already, for the most part, living in a permanent hyper-aroused state. This idea means that children who are competitive will be triggered quite quickly because they are always on the lookout for opportunities where they can prove themselves through winning.

Anyone who deals with a competitive child will recognise that talking a child off the competitive ledge is impossible. As such, other methods need to be employed if success is to be achieved.

Teaching a young dog new tricks

Telling the competitive child not to be competitive is like asking red not to be red anymore. It just will not happen. There is, however, hope for change. But to understand how change will happen there is need to first acknowledge how it is that children learn. Take for example the simple task of learning to walk. Children did not learn to walk over night. Instead it required hours of practise. When they learnt to walk, they fell down a lot, and they probably became frustrated at times, too. Nevertheless, despite any frustrations, they will have gotten up as many times as they fell. The result of their persistence means that they are now proficient in walking without support or without conscious effort.

If the above example is used as the basis of how all skills are mastered, it follows that children will need as many opportunities to practise losing (and winning) as they did walking. In other words, one of the keys to unlocking a more gracious losing attitude lies with how many opportunities children have to get it wrong so that they can learn to get it right.

Manipulating change in the competitive child

Just because children are exposed to more situations where they win and lose does not mean they will learn to curb their competitive streak. Instead, it is the way which adults support their wins and losses that matter more. Examples of this suggestion might include an adult narrating what is happening before a child's limbic system becomes over-aroused, stopping and acknowledging the child's disappointment, or allowing the child time to get their feelings under control before the game proceeds.

Simply telling a child that winning does not matter or that losing is a fact of life will not be enough to convince their lower brain to react rationally. Instead, they must be taught to recognise and name the emotions they are having as well as how these emotions encourage certain behaviours. Because recognising, naming and linking behaviours to feelings is quite a sophisticated task, children will need concrete examples to be able to succeed. As such, provide them with examples based on your own reactions. For example, "I feel so angry that I'm losing. I want to swipe everything off the board. Instead of doing that I am going to go and jump and down over here until I feel my anger go away."

Some adults, the ones who are not very competitive, may need to consider exaggerating their responses when leading by example. Alternatively, parents who are themselves competitive will need to curb their own reactions and remember that competitiveness sparks competitiveness. In instances where a child and adult become competitive with each other the problem behaviour will grow rather than shrink.

The long and short of it

Competitive children tend to be competitive from an early age. As a whole, competitiveness is not a bad attribute. It will, in adulthood, help children succeed and achieve their goals. Dealing with children's competitive nature in the interim, however, is not regularly viewed as positive. As such, adults dealing with children who have a competitive streak need to utilise a few snippets of information to help curb children's reactions to winning and losing. In order to understand what drives competitive reactions, adults need to understand the emotional nature of the limbic system. Acknowledgement of its role helps adults to understand why competitive children cannot easily be talked off the emotional 'I-want-to-win' ledge. As such, adults dealing with competitive children need to utilise various strategies to support children to lessen their emotional responses.

No one-size-fits-all solution exists to eliminate unwanted behaviour, meaning that adults need to measure the success they had in the past when decreasing a child's limbic system responses. Strategies that manage to decrease a child's emotional response should be reused in instances where children have other competitive meltdowns. If the opposite happens, those strategies should be avoided going forward.

Because competitive children live in a hyper-aroused competitive state, adults need to set up planned experiences where children can practise winning and losing. Role modelling how to recognise, name and deal with emotions is crucial in changing a child's attitude towards needing to win.

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