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Winning and losing are very much part of life and as such it is important that we teach our children to win and lose graciously.

Even young children can be incredibly competitive when playing games with others. Many children's cartoons and stories include elements of competition and so they understand from a young age the concepts of victory and defeat, and more importantly, they understand that the world often admires winners and often looks down on those who are defeated.

While dealing with the pressures of competition is something that older children and youths learn to deal with as they mature emotionally, there is a concern among psychologists that younger children, particularly those below 9 years old, may lack the maturity and understanding to deal with competitive situations especially when they lose.

This is not to say that we cannot or should not expose our 5 to 8 year olds to some form of competition, but in the process, we need to offer them the support, encouragement and understanding so that they learn to be comfortable with it.

The following are some tips on how to help our child become a more gracious competitor and in the process learn to accept defeat with dignity and respect.

1. Cultivate a healthy understanding of competition

I know parents who keep their children away from competition to shelter them emotionally. While I understand where they're coming from, it's hard to avoid competition completely.

Almost every children's game from "snake and ladders" to "cops and robbers" have an element of competition to it. Even studies can be competitive with class tests and exams. It is important to help the child gain a sense of perspective. Healthy perspectives can be reflected in the following statements:

"The most important thing when we play games is to have fun with each other rather than to win. It's not important who wins, as long as we're all having a good time as friends."

"Everyone takes turns to win and lose. It's alright to lose sometimes. This is all part of the game."

"Sometimes it's good to play games with each other because we challenge each other to improve and become better. It doesn't really matter who wins as long as we're all improving and doing the best we can."

If your child has a record of throwing tantrums after losing, you can mentally prepare them in advance before a game with the phrases above, so that they are reminded of these.

We also need to be careful about how we behave when we watch sports on TV and cheer our own teams on. When we make comments like "this team is hopeless because they lost", or "this player is lousy or stupid because they cannot win" we're indirectly sending the message to our children that we are intolerant of losers.

It sends them the message that winning is everything and this may explain why they get so upset whenever they lose.

2. Never link success to recognition and love

The problem with society in general is that we have come to place such a great emphasis on winning that it has come to the point where the "winner takes it all" while the "losers" are left with nothing. No wonder then that children feel so insecure whenever they lose. No wonder they take it so much to heart.

The issue is that they link success in competition to self worth and self esteem. As parents, we need to be clear with our children that success is not a determinant of love and attention.

Firstly, we need to be careful about what we say when they win. How we react when they win,

determines how they react in the future when they lose. If they get the idea that we only shower them with praise and support after they win, once again they start to think that love and recognition only comes with victory.

In fact, our reaction should be similar whether they win or not; "We're proud of you. You tried your best. We hope you had a good time, that's the important thing." These are things you can say to your child whether they win or lose.

3. Teaching by example

One way of cultivating a healthy understanding of competition is by playing games as a family with your child. This creates a safe and friendly environment where the child can observe how adults react to winning and losing. Obviously in these situations we need to model positive reactions to defeat and victory.

When we win, we should not gloat, or boast, or make the losers feel bad or small. When we lose, we should not mope, or complain, or throw a tantrum, as even adults sometimes do. When we make mistakes, we laugh at ourselves. We don't take ourselves too seriously since it is all just a game.

If we really believe that the purpose of games are to have fun then we should model this in our behaviour and emotions at home. After a while, children will learn that everyone has fun, regardless of whether they win or lose.

4. Using famous role models

If your child has a particular role model, perhaps a famous sporting personality, use them as examples (assuming of course that they are gracious losers!). For example, watch TV sports with them and show them how after a match the winners and losers all shake hands.

You can phrase it this way: "See even the best players lose sometimes and look at how sporting and friendly they are when they do. Look at how they go over and congratulate the other team. In the end all of them should be proud of their effort, win or lose."

5. Empathize with them when they fail

In spite of your best efforts, there will be times when children still get torn up when they lose. It is important that we draw a line between legitimate and acceptable responses to loss and unacceptable responses to loss.

Throwing a tantrum certainly should not be accepted and if they do following a loss, the child should be taken aside and firmly but gently we should let them know that "while we understand you are very upset, I will not allow you to behave in this way. It's alright to be upset, but you should not shout at others. I'm going to give you a few minutes to calm down and then we can talk about this some more."

Having said that, when a young child is genuinely sad and disappointed because they have lost in a competition, we should not just brush aside their emotions. We can help by helping them understand how they are feeling. Get them to share how they feel. Empathize with them; "I know how it feels; sometimes when I lose at something, I feel bad too, but I try to remember that in the end as long as I've tried my best, that's the important thing. I am proud of you because you tried your best.

Remember sometimes we win sometimes we lose."

Conclusion

Adult life is full of competition. By preparing our children to face the realities of winning and losing, we help them build emotional resilience. We teach them that in the end, it is not the winning and losing that makes us great or small, but it is the manner in which we accept victory and defeat that defines us as people. When we are gracious in all things, we win no matter what happens in the game.

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