

# Competition and Children

Here are some thoughts on competition and children from Rainer Martens, founder of modern sports psychology. Martens, Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois, founded the American Coaching Effectiveness Program, and is one of the leading authorities on children in sports.

## The Early Years

According to Martens: “Competitive sports evolve out of the process of social evaluation.” Children begin competing with each other from a very young age, but focus mainly on their own efforts. Each can happily claim to have “won,” simply meaning they have done something well and are satisfied. These games are very healthy growth experiences because there are no “losers.” At 5 and 6 years of age they begin to compare their efforts with others. In other words, they learn to keep score. Martens says this process of competing and comparing is part of what helps kids “find out what they can and should be.”

Problems emerge when winner/loser comparisons overshadow the importance of competing with oneself to do things better than they have been done before. At this point, competition stops building character and confidence and begins to tear it down.

## Can Competitiveness Be Taught?

All coaches are familiar with the idea that some youngsters thrive on competition, while others shrink from it, but Martens thinks that in the right environment, children can learn competitiveness by being taught to concentrate on mastering specific techniques. This not only improves the mechanical aspects of performance, but is also the best way to reduce competitive stress. “If people focus on mastering specific acts they can learn to control their performance.” On the other hand, the thing over which a young swimmer has the least control – how fast competitors swim – is the greatest source of anxiety in competition.

Martens advice to coaches and parents of young athletes is to concentrate on how to improve performance rather than on what happens if the child wins or loses. “Focusing on smaller, more solvable technical challenges increases physical efficiency, and reduces anxiety and stress,” Martens says. “This increased the number of potential winners because skill instead of the final score has become the immediate objective.”

## Every Child Is A Winner

In this scenario, an age group swimmer’s final instructions before a race would focus on successfully doing something he or she previously had difficulty with – keeping the hips up on the last half of a butterfly race; or pressing through to the hips in the freestyle stroke -- rather than on “beating that kid in lane 5.” After the race, the child could then be congratulated on his or her technique improvement, no matter where he or she placed. In this way, a race with 30 contestants could potentially yield 30 winners rather than 1 winner and 29 “losers.” This gives life to the credo “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game that counts.”

Martens thinks the competitive climate for youth athletics is steadily improving as more youth coaches learn to teach mastery of sports skills, and understand why it is advantageous to do so. “At the recreational level there is more and better, more useful and pleasant competition going on than ever before.”