

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 control," And 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's 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, turning on the weak hand in backstroke, 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.”

Pumping...Rubber?

There's little disagreement that stronger swimmers are faster swimmers. But strength experts never seem to agree on which method of strength training will translate into better swimming performance, other than to say that something is always better than nothing. Fortunately, there's more agreement on the subject of appropriate strength training methods for age-group swimmers. The most important point of agreement is that weight lifting prior to puberty is neither necessary nor advisable. Dr. Robert Willix, director of the Willix Health Institute, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, says: “Using heavy weight training before the growth plates (the area of bones where new growth occurs) have developed, could stunt the growth process and actually be harmful.

ASCA polled a number of age group coaches on their strength training methods and found broad agreement on what's appropriate for swimmers ages 12 years and young. If your child is interested in getting stronger, but strength training is not a part of his/her club's program, here are some suggestions for at-home activity:

1. Use proper stretching techniques to maintain and enhance natural youthful flexibility. Stretches should be slow and steady “static” movements, not bouncy “kinetic” ones.
2. Use surgical tubing for stroke-specific strength building and to strengthen the rotator cuff to alleviate shoulder problems, which are common during late adolescent growth spurts.
3. Do calisthenics such as push-ups, chin-ups (or flexed-arm hang), pull-ups, and dips for increasing upper body strength.
4. Perform various abdominal exercises (Note: Keep legs elevated so abdominal muscles and not the hip flexors do the work, and to protect the lower back from injury).
5. Play backyard or playground soccer, volleyball, basketball, or ride a bike to strengthen the whole body.

Strength experts stress the importance of proper supervision to ensure safety and proper technique.

