



San Diego County's 4-H Tips



Keeping Competition Healthy

Competition is a part of our society. It is vital youth develop a positive attitude about competition. Often it is the actions and attitudes of the significant adults in the youth's life that determine his or her positive or negative reaction to competition. Understanding the youth's perspective and the adult's role is the first step toward creating a positive environment for developing successful skills to compete.

In 4-H, a youth's performance or competence may be publicly demonstrated and evaluated in a variety of competitive events. An increase in anxiety often occurs with these events. Youth Sports Institute surveyed youth and found that 3 of the top 10 reasons for dropping out of a youth activity or sport program are:

- it was no longer fun.
- there was too much pressure
- there was too much emphasis on winning

In another survey youth ranked "to have fun" as the Number 1 reason to take part in a youth program or activity and "to win" was ranked 12th. Youth and unfortunately a portion of society in general, equate success with winning, and failure with not winning an event. Winning in and of itself can be a failure-oriented goal. If winning depends on placing higher than others, then many participants will not learn to win.

Focusing on the improvement of a skill is a success-oriented goal that helps a youth regardless of their placing. By attaining or exceeding personal, realistic performance goals, everyone has the opportunity to win. Also, skills learned and demonstrated throughout the year allow youth to be recognized for their achievement many times, instead of just once a year. You can support everyone being successful by offering opportunities for youth to set and attain personal goals throughout the project experience. The more this happens, their self-confidence becomes stronger.

Youth in 4-H competitive events may be combined together across a broad age range. Within that broad range specific age groups can have different developmental needs. Every individual youth also has a different motivation for participation in activities. They can include:

- Involvement in an activity with friends
- To please their parent
- Looking for some type of recognition or evaluation of their competency or mastery in a project.

Some youth may not like competition. For them it is more important to participate, belong, and have fun with other youth and adults. Cooperative group activities can have just as positive effects for youth as competition. Research shows this to be true especially for young children.

Adults need to take the time to understand the youth's motivation and provide support rather than push their own expectations. Everyone needs to work together to ensure there is a healthy and supportive environment if competition is to be a positive experience. The piece that is important in any 4-H activity and especially so in competitive events is the reflection or personal evaluation time spent with the youth after the activity is over.

If youth have fun in the competitive activity they can still feel they came out a winner even if they do not place high. The reverse is also true. If the overall experience is not fun then winning a blue ribbon may mean nothing to them. For young members, belonging to the group is the most important aspect. Therefore, creating opportunities for them to do fun or challenging things as a part of the club or project group can be more important than actually competing. Give members this age a chance to help and be involved in the decisions regarding group assignments and displays.

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Losing is never as joyful as winning. However, a true loser is one who yells, cheats, argues, sulks and refuses to think, "How can I do better next time." How adults respond and follow up in this situation is very important. Sarcasm and teasing is never appropriate. Young people can have difficulty sorting out what is meant by teasing and what is a direct attack on them.

Some adults try to soften the blow of not placing and make excuses or they may even blame someone else and deny what actually happened. This can be confusing to a young person. Avoid denial and excuses to "soften the blow." Recognize the youth's effort. Try, "I can see that you tried your best, and I am proud of you".

Loss or failure should be viewed as unavoidable and a learning experience. The young person may be viewing the loss or failure as proof that he or she will never succeed. Appropriate questions can be asked to avoid negative reactions and help guide the youth toward positive growth. Successful people try to evaluate the outcome, rather than focus on the win or loss. Ask the young person questions such as:

- ◆ "How do you feel you did?"
- ◆ "What do you think happened?"
- ◆ "What do you think caused this to happen?"
- ◆ "What can you do differently next time?"

Follow these questions with encouragement to try again. It is important that all youth have an opportunity to process with someone about the experience. It can be a 4-H leader, parent, or teen leader.

The philosophy of child first, winning second is easy for most adults to endorse, but it is often difficult to practice in the heat of a competitive contest; and it is true children learn by watching what adults do as well as from what adults say.

Suggestions for parents and 4-H leaders:

- Use a positive approach. Praise for the positive aspects of what one does throughout the duration of the event, not just the competitive part.
- Focus on the youth's development of skills, abilities and personal goals by offering encouragement and praise.
- Check your personal expectations or needs at the door. Don't live out your own life's dreams through your child's participation. Help your child set their own realistic expectations and support them.
- When possible participate, contribute or assist with all the activities your child is involved in during the fair or other competitive event, not just the day of the show or judging.
- Be a positive role model. Enjoy the event and activity in a socially appropriate manner. This includes an absence of alcohol, the use of appropriate language and a cooperative spirit. Promote courtesy, respect and consideration for everyone involved in the event.
- Make sure every child has an opportunity to process their feelings and experiences after the competitive activity or event. This can help resolve any sense of failure from participation and emphasize something positive from the experience.
- Positive expectations and ethical standards encourage and support appropriate behavior. Adults who turn a blind eye to bending and breaking of the rules or cheating in the name of participation or "winning" promote poor sportsmanship and poor ethical behavior.

Healthy Competition can:

- Teach respect for others. It is important to learn to give credit to the performance of others. Always assume that each person is trying as hard as your youth to do the best they can. Respect for others means accepting them and their actions.
- Teach honesty and positive ethical behavior.
- Teach cooperation. 4-H competition cannot exist without cooperation. Everyone involved should help each other toward being successful. It reduces the stress, takes pressure off the individual and helps everyone celebrate in winning.
- Teach how to set and achieve realistic and personal goals.

If everyone takes the time to support the efforts of the youth and 4-H leaders at all 4-H activities, then all participants can anticipate an enjoyable experience.

Adapted from:

*Moving Ahead, Preparing the Youth Development Professional, 4HCCS MI-7515
Leaders Guide for Working with K-3rd Grade Youth, University of California Pub. 4-H 1150*