



FACT SHEET

Family and Consumer Sciences

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Play TAG with Your Kids: Tips to Ensure Positive Competitive Experiences

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Remember playing tag as a kid? Kids running all over dodging whomever was “it.” Some remember tag fondly, while others remember it poorly. Either you were fast and enjoyed the chase, or you were ridiculed for being slow and always being “it.” These differing memories of tag parallel in many ways the debate among child development experts about how competition affects children. Some experts believe competition can be structured in a way that is good for children while others think it is inherently bad. Research indicates that males are more into competitiveness and rough play where action and adventure are involved. There are also major changes in the level and amount of competition when adolescent years begin. Adolescents are shifting the level of influence from their parents to their peers.

The increase in year-round sports has also led to reducing the frequency of family vacations and quality family time. The increased pressures to do less as a family has put more social pressure on competitive sports. Varsity high school sports are very regulated and have definite boundaries of when the season is allowed. In contrast, community based or sponsored sports rely on parents and coaches to determine the

season and practice schedules. Because of this, there has been an increase in the amount of time spent away from family activities and rituals and more time with team sports. Many youth find their schedules to be overloaded and they have very little time to “just hang-out” with family and friends.

For children, competition is any activity where skills, qualities, or other like characteristics are openly compared to those of others. This definition is broad and covers activities from sports, to music, to grades in school, to building robots, and any other type of contest. As a parent, you may want to get your child involved in such activities, but you may also wonder if it is really good for them. What can you do as a parent to be more assured that competitive activities will have a positive impact on your child? Try playing TAG!

Target Individual Needs

Plan to pay special attention to your child’s individual needs before, during, and after competition. Be involved in selecting and monitoring your child’s competitive activities to make sure they meet the

unique needs of your child. For example, if your child can benefit from adult role models who provide highly structured activities, make sure the competitive activity you promote involves such adults. On the other hand, if your child is in need of time to socialize with other children, make sure the competitive activity is group oriented and has built-in “free time” for socializing. You are the “expert” in terms of your child’s individual needs. Target these needs as you get them involved in competitive activity.

The most critical aspect of targeting your child’s needs is making sure that your child is developmentally ready for the activity. Your child’s enthusiasm for the activity will be directly related to their “readiness” for competition. If you observe that the other kids seem to be better adapted to the activity, maybe your child is not developmentally ready. Michael Nelson (1991) provides these recommendations for determining what activities your child is developmentally ready for:

- Children 3 to 5 years old should avoid competition as it can interfere with their learning of fundamental skills. Walking, running, swimming, tumbling, throwing, and catching are recommended activities. The key is to emphasize fun play.
- Kids aged 6 to 9 still should have minimal emphasis on competition. Sports like swimming, running, or gymnastics can be attempted to learn the fundamental skills and work toward the transition to full competition.
- At ages 10 to 12, children can compete in activities for which they have mastered the basic skills. At this age most children have the cognitive, social, and emotional maturity to handle modest competitive pressure.

Deciding when to stop a competitive activity is just as important as deciding when to start. If your child is not ready or is no longer interested in an activity, help them find a new one that will be fun. When it becomes clear that they are no longer interested in competing in an activity, help them make a change. Remember, this can be difficult if you, as an adult, are still enjoying their participation in the activity. Your overzealous enjoyment of the activity can put stress

on your child to perform to your expectations and take the fun out of the activity. Targeting your child’s needs, and not your own, is essential.

Ask and Observe

In a game of tag, the person who is “it” switches off. One minute you are chasing, the next you are being chased. Trading places while communicating with children is equally important. Sometimes your child will be the sender of information and tell you everything you need to know about an activity. Other times you will need to be the sender of probing questions to find out what is going on. Asking meaningful questions will better help you understand the value of the activity to your child.

The most tempting questions that follow competition are related to the outcome. “Did you win?” “How did you do?” “What was the score?” Interestingly, these questions have little to do with the reasons children give for participating in competitive activities. According to a study by Barber, Sukhi, and White (1999), youth most often give the following reasons for liking to compete:

- Fun
- Learning and improving skills
- Excitement, action, and challenge
- Team spirit
- Exercise

Consequently, questions related to these reasons for competing may make more sense. “Was it fun?” “Did you learn anything?” “Wasn’t that exciting?” “Are you making new friends?” These questions will give you a better idea of your child’s enjoyment of the activity. This information should be used to judge the value of the activity, rather than relying simply on winning and losing.

While questioning and listening are crucial for spotting problems early, watching your child’s non-verbal behavior can be equally important. If they say they are having a great time, but constantly look like they are dreading every minute, something is wrong. Children may not always tell you how they really feel. This is especially true if you seem to be overly enthusiastic about their participation. Pay attention

to their nonverbal behavior, while encouraging an open line of communication. When in doubt, ask another simple question, “What could be better?” As a parent you can use this information to help others change the activity, or simply find another competitive arena that better matches your child’s interests. It is not unusual for children to go through several activities before the right one is found.

Give Positive Feedback

It is easy to get consumed by the outcome of competitive events. Unfortunately, there is quite an addiction to seeing your child perform better than others. Limiting your positive feedback to those instances where children win is de-motivating. Instead of focusing on winning or losing, focus on your child’s enjoyment, skill development, and reactions to the activity. For example, you can say, “You looked like you were having lots of fun out there,” or “Your skills have really improved,” or “I really liked the way you tried something new.”

There is no such thing as providing too much positive support. In fact, positive reactions from parents are related to greater enjoyment and positive self-esteem for children.

Let the Fun Begin

In this game of TAG the parent is “it,” trying to help their child learn and have fun. *Target individual needs*. You are the expert concerning your child’s unique needs. *Ask and observe* as a way of monitoring the activity. Good communication can prevent undue stress for your child. Most of all, *give positive feedback*. By targeting your child’s needs and learning how they perceive the activity, you will be better equipped to support them in the ways they need as individuals. So get busy playing TAG, and your child will get busy enjoying life through competition.

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