

SPECIAL REPORT

# TOUGH COMPETITION

Whether it's sports, test scores or the latest clothes and gadgets, kids these days feel the pressure to come out on top. But they need to learn that life doesn't have to be one big amazing race. Here's what to teach instead.

» BY CYNTHIA HANSON «

WHEN SUSAN MARKLE'S 11-YEAR-OLD SON, STEPHEN, JOINED THE BASKETBALL TEAM, she had no clue how mean the game could get. Two years ago Stephen—his team's highest scorer—was dribbling down the court in a playoff game when he fell so hard he fractured his collarbone. Susan is pretty sure it wasn't an accident. "Some of the other parents told me he was pushed by another player," she says. "When kids are willing to injure one another to win, it tells me this whole competition thing is out of control."

Being competitive is part of the American way, right up there with having an independent and pioneering spirit. "But kids are more intent than ever about winning at all costs—in sports, in school and in their social circles," says Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *12 Simple Secrets Real Moms Know* (Jossey-Bass). "Competition is different and more dangerous than it used to be. Worse yet, young children are now being drawn into it, and they *really* can't cope with the pressure."

What's going on? For starters, kids are soaking up the never-ending reports of athletes cheating their way to victory by taking steroids—and then lying about it. What's

# A Better Game Plan

more, shows like *American Idol*, *Survivor* and *America's Next Top Model* reinforce the idea that being number one is all that matters. "We have a whole generation of kids who fear they're going to get voted off," says Wendy Grolnick, Ph.D., coauthor of *Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids* (Prometheus Books).

The flip side of that fear is kids' false hope. "When people appear out of nowhere to achieve national celebrity, kids think, 'I can do that too, and if I don't, then I'm a nobody,'" explains Susan Newman, Ph.D., author of *The Book of No* (McGraw-Hill). Reality TV judges press home the message: On the season finale of *American Idol* last May, Simon Cowell declared, "You've got to hate your opponent." But, as Newman points out, "Kids shouldn't be taught to hate their competitors. They need to learn how to cooperate and support one another because team players are the people who succeed in the real world."

Parents have also become key influences in this high-stakes game. "Moms and dads have always lived vicariously through their children," says Newman, "but now those dreams are fed by images of stardom and celebrity." To that end, parents force kids into advanced classes and onto elite travel teams, and hire tutors and private coaches to ensure their kids' success because being just "okay" isn't enough anymore.

Yet the pressure to compete, whatever its source, can lead to paralyzing stress and can program tweens and teens for self-defeating perfectionism. "Kids may set the bar so high they end up never being satisfied with their performance," Borba explains. "They can also become reluctant to try new things—an essential part of adolescence—out of fear they'll make a mistake."

The good news is you can do a lot to help your child handle the heat, win with grace and rebound from loss. After all, healthy competition, with realistic expectations and an emphasis on striving for excellence, is good for all kids. It educates them about discipline, time management and goal-setting. Take a

Smart steps you can take to tame over-the-top competition and teach fair-mindedness.

- 1 **Emphasize personal best.** Encourage your 7-year-old to improve his swim time, not to beat the rest of the swimmers; urge your 14-year-old to get a higher score on his next algebra test, not a perfect 100.
- 2 **Buy thoughtfully.** When kids ask for the latest gear, make sure it's not something they can use to show up their peers. If they have a good reason for wanting a new gadget or outfit, offer to split the cost or buy it for their birthday or a holiday.
- 3 **Discuss your family's values.** If your child complains that other kids are getting extra time for tests, explain that special accommodations are designed for those who truly need them. Anybody else who uses them is cheating—and your family doesn't cheat.
- 4 **Talk about role models.** Point out when two opposing football players collide then help each other up. Likewise, call attention to a player who celebrates a sack with an unsportsmanlike dance.
- 5 **Ask the right questions.** Don't give subliminal messages about winning. Ask what your child is learning at school, not how she did on tests; ask how he felt about the game, not who won; ask whether the party was fun, not who was there and what they wore.
- 6 **Refuse to keep score.** If you say you're jealous of Aunt Janet's new car, you'll teach kids to judge others by what they have. Cheer for your kids, but don't analyze missed opportunities or keep a log of their race times. If your school has a grade-tracking website, visit it sparingly, and limit your child's visits to no more than once a day.

look at how parents can bring back the balance—and teach the right kind of winning attitude.

## ★ > THE SCHOOL DAZE

When Katie, from a Chicago suburb, was 10, she wanted to play the saxophone because she thought it was cool. But a classmate learning the oboe had a different motivation. "The friend's mom picked the less popular instrument so her daughter would stand out from the crowd when applying to college," says Katie's mother, Laura. "The girls were still in elementary school!" Borba isn't surprised: "Building a résumé used to be a high school task," she says. "But now even first-graders are being programmed to have an edge."

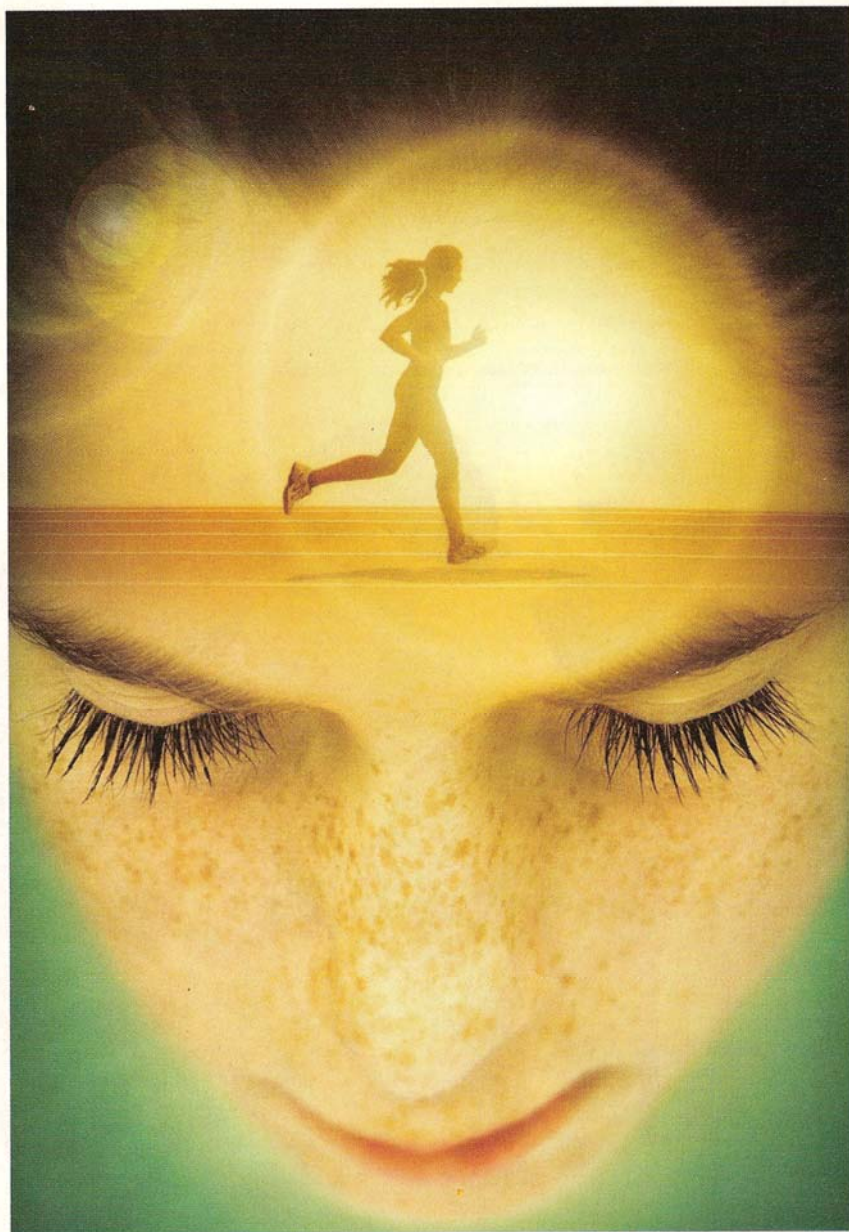
Some schools are fueling anxiety with websites where teachers update grades daily, enabling students and parents to track them. Moms and dads can use these sites to stay informed—or to push kids relentlessly. And even traditional subject-based competitions like spelling bees and history contests are

now part of the spiking pressure—there are far more contests now, with more kids expected to participate and at younger ages.

A recent phenomenon alarming experts and parents alike is the growing "extended time" trend. "I've had a number of requests recently from parents who want me to make a false diagnosis of ADHD or a learning disability so their child can get additional time on tests or extra tutoring, or be placed in smaller classes," says Ron Zodkevitch, M.D., a child psychiatrist and member of *Family Circle's* Health Advisory Board. The practice became common in 2003, after the College Board announced that it no longer would report whether time accommodations were made for students with disabilities. "Parents are using unethical methods on their child's behalf," observes Borba, "and skewing results for everyone else."

### How kids are losing out

> **Paralyzing anxiety.** A recent Associated Press/MTV survey found that



Cheer for your kids, but don't analyze missed opportunities or keep a log of their race times. Ask how your child felt about an event, not who won.

school is the main source of stress for 13- to 17-year-olds. "Some kids hook their self-esteem to their successes and failures," says Grolnick. "If they do poorly on a math test, they think, 'I'm terrible at math, and I'm a terrible person.'"

> **Cheating.** Ninety-five percent of high schoolers admit to participating in "questionable behavior" while doing schoolwork, say surveys by Rutgers University Business School in New Jersey. In a 2006 study of 36,122 high school students by the Josephson Institute of Ethics in Los Angeles, 59% agreed that "successful people do what they have to do to win, even if others consider it cheating."

> **Loss of learning.** In a study Grolnick conducted of 91 fifth-graders, kids who were told to focus on the results of a test were less likely to remember the information later.

#### ★ > **THE SOCIAL WHIRL**

It's natural for kids to become obsessed with appearance and consumed with self-doubt when puberty hits. And it's also a time when peer pressure escalates. "Although kids have always competed for status, there's more edginess, influenced by the winner-take-all mentality in our society," says Jane Shure, Ph.D., coauthor of *Inside/Outside Self-Discovery Program for the Middle School Years* (ToucanEd).

The meanness is also fueled by kids' hyper-connected culture. In a matter of seconds they can score winning points by harassing one another, spreading rumors and sharing unflattering pictures via cell phones and the Internet. The extreme transparency of online social circles—sites like *MySpace* and *Facebook* display the number of "friends" each user has and let users rank friends—has ratcheted up social competition.

Kids also exploit today's plethora of consumer goods to gain cachet. While some just want to have items in common with classmates, others are bent on outdoing peers. Advertisers have always played to this, but, says Shure, today's sheer number of products can fuel kids' material status-seeking out of control.

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> **Weakened individuality.** "Kids have always been ostracized by their peers if they don't conform to some standards of the day," says Shure. Yet too much emphasis on not being a loser may rob a child of the ability to think things through and stand up to peer pressure.

> **Risky behaviors.** When kids are pegged as social losers, either by others or by themselves, "there's a chance they'll turn to smoking, drinking, experimenting with drugs or eating disorders, either to fit in with peers or numb their pain," says Shure.

> **Damaged personalities.** Kids who want to join the popular group—or stay in it—won't challenge its leader to stop mean behavior and could become bul-

74% of parents have seen a coach yell at a child for making a mistake, promoting a do-or-die ethic. "Coaches think success is winning the championship," says Engh. "But what should matter is that kids are learning teamwork, discipline and sportsmanship."

### How kids are losing out

> **Unnecessary injuries.** Of the more than 30 million children and teens who participate in organized sports, about 3.5 million yearly seek medical treatment for overuse injuries and fatigue from overtraining, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. And that doesn't include injuries resulting from recklessness.

> **Underhanded play.** A poll of more than 5,000 high school athletes by the

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lies themselves. By using materialism to win friends, kids don't learn how to make true pals based on shared values.

### ★ > SPORTS WORLD

In the past decade children's sports have become more intensely organized—by adults. And many kids are beginning to specialize in a single sport as early as age 6. Why? Often to increase their chances of landing a college scholarship or turning pro. Yet, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, fewer than 1 in 35 male high school basketball players will play college hoops; only 1 in 200 high school baseball players will reach the major league. "Making it to the highest level requires more than just practice," says Fred Engh, author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports* (Avery). "It takes a highly competitive personality, a love for the sport and incredible natural talent."

Still, a 2008 survey by the National Alliance for Youth Sports found that

Josephson Institute of Ethics found that nearly half of the football players they asked agreed it's okay for the coach to tell a player to fake an injury to get a time-out. Nearly half of baseball players agreed that it's acceptable for a coach to order his pitcher to throw at an opposing hitter.

> **Quitting too soon.** Kids pressured to be superstars may stop having fun, lose their intrinsic motivation—and the skill-building benefits of sports—and even give up. "Excelling takes hard work," says Grolnick. "Kids who play for the love of the game perform better over the long haul than those who play only to beat others."

It's inevitable that your child will have to go head-to-head with others. Sometimes it'll be healthy fun; other occasions may be tough or even painful. But, in the end, knowing how to face competition honestly and with a good attitude can set kids up for a happy, fulfilling life—the best victory of all. ●

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