



# THE UGLY FACE OF COMPETITION

By Wilson McCaskill

There is nothing wrong with competition but frequently something wrong with the way we react to it.

A reoccurring point of concern with teachers during our *PITW Mentoring Sessions* is how poorly children react to competition. While it's something students are eager to be a part of, competition all too easily ends in upset, aggression, accusations and a raft of ugly behaviour.

I am not sure if poor student conduct during competition is getting worse with time or diminished resilience is more quickly triggering higher levels of unpleasant emotionalism.

I do know that more and more teachers are reluctant to involve students in anything competitive because the likelihood of having to deal with a behavioural crisis is almost guaranteed.

Perhaps, as some have suggested, the excessive consumption of reality TV, where everyday people are thrust into competing against each other using the rule that *bad behaviour makes good television*, has had a more detrimental affect on the competition landscape than we realise.

I have no idea how much reality TV primary students watch but I suspect that there are multiple influences conditioning their behaviour when it comes to competition, not the least of which are violent video games. I know that many teachers are complaining of the erosion in behaviour since "Fortnite" became the all-consuming black hole of children's lives.

I suspect the *fun at all costs* mantra of sporting institutions, organisations, clubs and even schools to entice children into physical activity also has a large part to play in their inability to cope with the winning and losing premise of competition.

It seems inevitable that if fun is the main objective, competition will get ugly. If you are eager to compete then by default you are eager to win. And if you win, fun and elation are yours. If you don't, whatever you feel simply can't be as good as those who won and that's the bit that's not fun. That's the bit that gets you emotional and looking for reasons other than your own failings for why the others won.

If fun is the ultimate objective of competition then having more fun than anyone else during competition becomes the competition within the competition. This being the case, it is not surprising that something is going to give. Losing just can't be as much fun as winning. In fact, it can feel really awful and this can prompt many students to



lash out in a multitude of ways at those who win and others they believe robbed them of their promised feel good.

I'm not sure why we believe the best way to attract children to anything is to promise that it will be fun. It is never a promise we can keep; yet *fun* is the lure we perpetually use to entice children towards things that have little chance of being fun unless you win or do well in them. No wonder children get upset.

Understanding this, some schools and clubs will abandon competition altogether or make competition so bland and benign that those who participate don't feel much of anything at all.

***“Not all learning can be fun but all learning must have a purpose that children can understand, relate to and commit to.”***

Engaging effectively and appropriately with competition maybe easier for children if they have some understanding of the complex role it plays in every sphere of our lives. Just as having a deeper understanding of why they come to school (see *PITW Volume 1, Professional Learning Section page 3*) helps students to engage more fully with curriculum; finding a deeper purpose for competition than simply beating another may help students to fully reap its many benefits.

***“The real value of competition lies in its potential to better the person irrespective of their place in the event.”***

Most of us were and still are thrown into competition with little guidance in how to make sense of it. The assumption that immersion leads to understanding too often proves false. Competition is equally likely to bring out the worst in us as it is the best and proclaiming that competition's ultimate aim is fun, causes too many competitors to stumble before they have started.

***“We have made fun the end point of all endeavour. Consequently, when fun ceases so does endeavor and with it go all the associated benefits.”***

***“We insult our children by believing the only way we can motivate them is to make things fun. Children can labour in the pursuit of noble causes. They can toil to reach a higher goal. They can suffer for the sake of self-betterment. And when they do, they transcend the fleeting experience of fun and reach the promised land of lasting self-respect.”***

In the past year I have been sharing a “*Competition Code Of Conduct*” with teachers whose classrooms love competition but whose behaviour during and after competition make the experience unpleasant and at times dangerous. I have offered it merely as a template and trust that teachers will adapt and adjust it to work more effectively in their given context. I anticipate it will only be used in classrooms where competition has created a significant behavioural problem.



Feedback indicates that if accompanied with well-guided discussion and an understanding of key words, a significant improvement in behaviour can be expected. It also helps to discuss what sorts of outcomes can be expected for failing to stick with the code of conduct. (See, Volume 3, 3Rs Method, Restitution, pages 17 -31)

These do not need to be set in stone as peer guidance and advice when things go wrong may be all that is necessary to get a student back on track. A wayward student accepting the advice of peers and then doing the right thing is far better than employing the threat of something unpleasant. Additionally, meaningfully reading of one or two of the relevant conditions in the code, at a difficult moment, may serve to redirect a student's behaviour.

Not all teachers made it a document to be signed. Some simply turned it into a class poster and asked all students to sign the poster. Others displayed the code of conduct and asked for a verbal assurance that students would adhere to its conditions. Of course, the age of the students influenced the manner in which the code of conduct was adapted and used.

My preference is for each student to have their own copy on which they enter their name and sign (assuming they are old enough to do so). These are then shown to their parents and returned to the classroom. For the first few weeks after signing I recommend that a student or students read out the Competition Code Of Conduct prior to the commencement of any competition and the class shakes the hand of one or two of their peers to acknowledge their individual and collective acceptance of the code. (See, Volume 3, GPS Strategy, Handshake Code Of Conduct, page 20)

As time passes and appropriate conduct becomes the norm, the reading of the code followed by handshaking can cease. However, it would be wise to occasionally remind everyone of his or her obligations to the code and seal that obligation with a handshake. Let me go further; when everything is going well is often the best time to ensure everyone knows why.

For very difficult classes I would recommend discussing and signing the Competition Code Of Conduct at the start of each term, as the holiday period will have provided ample opportunity for the erosion of behaviour.

I hope the following template gives you something helpful to work with.



# COMPETITION CODE OF CONDUCT

I, \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_  
(Name) (Class / Year)  
promise to follow the \_\_\_\_\_  
(School name)

***Competition Code of Conduct*** and will accept the decision of my peers if I do not do so.

1. I will be fair and honest and trust my classmates to do the same.
2. I will win with humility and lose with honour.
3. I will accept the role of the umpire is difficult and will support his or her decisions.
4. I will use competition to better my skills and more importantly to better my character.
5. I will respect and acknowledge the achievements of my classmates regardless of their place in the competition or event.
6. I will manage my own behaviour as a spectator or a competitor to make sure it is of the highest standard and in keeping with the expectations of my school community.
7. I will do my best knowing that my personal best is always the ultimate test.

Name/Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_