

“Participation Trophies Send a Dangerous Message”

By Betty Berdan

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Like many other kids my age, I grew up receiving trophy after trophy, medal after medal, ribbon after ribbon for every sports season, science fair and spelling bee I participated in. Today the dozens of trophies, ribbons, and medals sit in a corner of my room, collecting dust. They do not mean much to me because I know that identical awards sit in other children’s rooms all over town and probably in millions of other homes across the country.

Trophies used to be awarded only to winners, but are now little more than party favors: reminders of an experience, not tokens of true achievement. When awards are handed out like candy to every child who participates, they diminish in value. If every soccer player receives a trophy for merely showing up to practice and playing in games, the truly exceptional players are slighted. The same applies to teams. Regardless of individual effort or superior skills, all who participate receive equal acknowledgment.

Trophies for all convey an inaccurate and potentially dangerous life message to children: We are all winners. This message is repeated at the end of each sports season, year after year, and is only reinforced by the collection of trophies that continues to pile up. We begin to expect awards and praise for just showing up — to class, practice, after-school jobs — leaving us woefully unprepared for reality. Outside the protected bubble of childhood, not everyone is a winner. Showing up to work, attending class, completing homework and trying my best at sports practice is expected of me, not worthy of an award. These are the foundations of a long path to potential success, a success that is not guaranteed no matter how much effort I put in.

I believe that we should change how we reward children. Trophies should be given out for first, second and third; participation should be recognized but celebrated with words and a pat on the back rather than a trophy. As in sports as well as life, it is fact that there’s room for only a select few on the winners’ podium.

Betty Berdan is a high school junior from Connecticut who has participated in competitive sports since she was 7.