

“Science Says Participation Trophies Are a Big Win for the Little Ones”

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The pee-wee soccer season has come to an end and the Red Dragons squad of 5-year-olds has gathered with their parents for the team party. Just a couple of hours earlier, they were locked in combat with the Incredible Hulks, swarming the YMCA field like crimson and forest green bumblebees, chasing a ball that sometimes, by sheer chance, found its way into an unguarded goal. And not always the right one, but no matter ... no one was keeping score.

A few of the Dragons were budding stars, stealing the ball from opponents, dribbling up field and repeatedly depositing it in the goal. Some tried but were either overpowered or not ready for prime time, opting to pass to a more competitive teammate and get out of harm's way. Still, others picked flowers or chased butterflies, clearly not battle ready.

But one by one, between the cheese pizza and sheet cake, each Red Dragon came forward, hearing kind words from their coach about hard work and potential and love for the game.

And each of them — the stars, the kids who tried and failed, and those who chased butterflies — got a trophy.

Who knew that awarding a four-inch plastic figurine with a soccer ball for a head would generate controversy? But lately, the time-honored practice of handing out “participation trophies” to children who have played youth sports has come under fire in the media as one of the ways America's children are being coddled. Rewarding our kids for showing up, practicing, even trying, regardless of whether they win or lose, sends the message that losing is acceptable. It is not about trying your best, goes the argument. It's about winning. Period.

### **Best Effort Not Enough, Says NFL's Harrison**

Most recently, this was the message of Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker James Harrison, who took to social media to say that he was returning the trophies given to his young sons. Their shelves should stay bare, he said, “until they earn a real trophy.”

“I'm not about to raise two boys to be men by making them believe they are entitled to something just because they tried their best,” Harrison wrote.

Perhaps there are better models for child-rearing than Harrison, whose resume includes a

domestic abuse charge. Still, his isn't the only voice, or the first, to criticize the practice.

"I hate those participation trophies," Glenn Beck, the conservative broadcaster, said on his show in 2013. Indeed, the "attaboy" statues are so loathsome to Beck that he instructs parents to go into their children's bedrooms and confiscate them to teach the kids a lesson about how the real world works.

"Then together, father and son, smash the heck out of that trophy," he advised, because, "you don't get a trophy for being a loser."

While Harrison's argument seems to be gaining traction, the fact is that he and the growing numbers who agree with him are taking an incredibly simplistic and wrong-minded stance.

In *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*, American author and education theorist Alfie Kohn calls the mindset underlying the anti-participation trophy movement the "BGUTI" (or "Better Get Used To It") principle. It is the belief that kids need to experience failure so they can be ready for the harsh realities that await them in life. The thinking, such as it is, is that facing defeat at an early age, or learning the importance of beating others so they can taste failure instead of you, will better prepare our children for the cruelty and competition of the dog-eat-dog adult world. Don't reward them for their efforts, the "principle" goes, only for victory.

Yet, Kohn says, people seem to need no evidence to support these claims.

"We're left wondering why it would help to be brought down to Earth even before one had the chance to soar," Kohn says. "Those who support BGUTI practices have an obligation to explain how exactly this is supposed to work. What's the mechanism by which the sting of a strikeout, or the smack of an undodged ball, or the silence of a long drive home without a trophy, is supposed to teach resilience?"

### **Science Says Reward Effort**

The experts tell us there is no such benefit. Kenneth Barish, associate professor of psychology at Weill Medical College, Cornell University, says participation trophies are not in any way harmful to kids' psyches. Barish cites a study by Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck that looked at how children are affected by praise. Dweck and her colleagues gave some 400 fifth-graders an easy IQ test. After taking the test, some of the kids were praised for their intelligence: "Wow ... that's a really good score. You must be smart," while the others were praised for their effort: "Wow ... that's a really good score. You must have worked hard."

The impact of the different types of positive reinforcement was remarkable. When the kids were asked to take another test and given the choice between an easier version that they would “surely do well on,” or one that was “more difficult but presented an opportunity to learn,” 67% of the kids praised for their intelligence chose the easier test while 92% of those praised for their effort chose the more difficult one.

Whether it’s in the classroom or on the soccer field, rewarding effort works.

Dr. Joe Evans, Dr. Joe Evans, a child psychologist and director of the University of Nebraska Medical Center’s Munroe-Meyer Institute’s child psychology program who also coached youth sports, agrees. The awards motivate young kids just developing an interest in sports, he says. They are “really not for achievement but for the effort ... If you only gave achievement awards, we’d only have two or three kids playing ball.”

Emphasizing participation over results early on will bring far more kids into the game. And what’s important about that? Studies overwhelmingly show that participation in sports is linked to better grades, lower dropout rates and, particularly among girls, an increased desire to attend college. But if they don’t participate when they’re young, they’re less likely to participate when they’re older.

So, what is wrong with giving a kid a trophy for coming out, attending practice and playing, even if his team was winless or he was the weakest player in the lineup?

And what of the butterfly chasers? Today, chasing the ball may not seem so interesting, but next year it might. Some may even develop a lifetime love for the sport and excel. But does sending a kid home empty-handed teach him the “valuable” lesson of losing, or will it teach him there’s no value in the effort? It’s like Woody Allen once said: “80% of success is showing up.” That is particularly true in youth sports, where it’s all about a positive introduction to the game.

And let’s be honest. Participation trophies aren’t fooling anybody, including the children who receive them.

James Harrison, I’m sure, couldn’t agree more. Harrison’s 12-year career has been more successful than most, including two Super Bowl victories. But by his standards, that made him a loser for 10 of those seasons.

Apparently, he saw nothing wrong with collecting his reward for failure during that decade of football without a championship. Harrison never gave back his paycheck.