

“There’s Nothing Wrong With Encouraging Participation With an Award”

By Eric Priceman

The New York Times

October 6, 2016

To properly debate the merits of participation awards, we need to distinguish between an award and a reward. An award is something earned for achievement, while a reward is given for accomplishment. Just syntax maybe, but anyone that has ever achieved at the highest level has had to endure multiple levels of accomplishment first.

Instead of focusing on everything wrong with a child receiving a participation award, let’s think about what might happen if we never rewarded accomplishment. Rewarding accomplishment is part of the education process, but it needs to be refined properly so everyone understands it. The whole notion that we are creating a nation of wimps because we hand out participation trophies is only the case if we want it to be. These awards only detract from creating a competitive society if we let them do so.

As the father of three adult children and the president of a company that makes trophy components, I went through this with each of my children. They all received their fair share of participation awards, and they were taught that these awards were placeholders in life. They were records of accomplishment. They appreciated receiving something for their participation, but I guarantee that their competitive spirits were juiced each time they saw someone else’s achievements win a place award.

It is both odd and sad that in this age of social media, too many people choose to criticize participation awards. These awards are definitely not the end-all to get children to participate, but used properly they incentivize accomplishment. We need to worry that some of these critics are at least partially responsible for the numbers that show group participation declining across-the-board. Instead of concerning ourselves with what our kids get for participating, let’s make it a goal to increase participation as a whole. If participation awards contribute even in a small way toward this goal, then we must realize that the problems are not with participation awards, but elsewhere.

Eric Priceman is the president of Victory, a manufacturing company based in Chicago that makes components for trophies and other awards.