

## Why Your Child Hates to Lose How to deal with a competitive kid.

By Jessica Grose  
*The New York Times*

Published Dec. 2, 2020  
Updated Dec. 3, 2020, 8:17 a.m. ET

*A lot of parenting questions boil down to: Is this a thing, or is something wrong? We run an occasional series explaining why certain things seem to happen to your kid (or to your body or to your relationships) as your child grows. This week, we're talking about competitiveness. If you have a question for a future "Is this a thing?"*

**Q:** My almost 5-year-old son cries at school, home and at dance class when he's not first in line, or if he doesn't win a game. He sometimes won't play games like bingo or tag because he might not win. Should I be worried? We have talked to our son about taking turns and about people not always winning.

— Linda Blanton Mourad, New Braunfels, Texas

**A:** Linda, like your son, I don't like to play games that I think I'm going to lose. I'm 38, so I don't have meltdowns about it, but you still won't find me on a tennis court. The experts I tapped to answer your question agree: Dealing with our competitive urges is a lifelong process, and what your son is going through is partially a developmental task, and partially a personality struggle.

Let's start with the developmental piece of it. Age 5 is when most kids are starting to remember rules for games, and it takes all of their mental energy to retain those rules, said Sally Beville Hunter, Ph.D., a clinical associate professor of child and family studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The rules are very important to them, so it's not just that remembering those rules is taxing; it's also upsetting to get them wrong.

Dr. Hunter gave the example of a youth soccer game. If you've ever observed a kindergarten league, the children are just little amoebas around the ball — they have zero sense of position, strategy or direction. And they are often crushed when they realize they scored in the wrong net.

Emotionally, children learn to self-regulate their feelings in preschool and early elementary, but they're only just starting to figure out fairness. Around age 5, the tendency to show your competitiveness is not fully tempered by empathy yet, said Chris Moore, Ph.D., a professor in the department of psychology and neuroscience at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, who has [studied fairness in kindergarten-age children](#).

Dr. Moore described an experiment where children were given a choice: They could have one sticker, and another child would also get one sticker. Or they could get two stickers and the

other child would get three stickers. Even though in the second scenario the child would get more stickers, 5-year-olds were more likely to choose the first scenario. “If someone else is doing better than them, kids don’t like that,” Dr. Moore said. “And there’s some situations where kids like it even less.”

Now that we’ve established that your child’s behavior is quite typical and part of the developmental work of being a little kid, we can talk about how to help him manage his big feelings. [Becky Kennedy, Ph.D.](#), a clinical psychologist based in New York, suggested prepping him before you begin a game or activity where winning and losing will be involved. “You’re almost preregulating the emotion,” she said.

You could say something like, “We’re about to play a game where someone is going to win and someone’s going to lose, and that’s tricky. When I lose, I get really upset.” Telling your child that this is a behavior you also struggle with may help them feel less ashamed, and help them shift into problem-solving mode, Dr. Kennedy said. You can then add, “I can’t get rid of that bad feeling, but I can take a deep breath and remind myself that I can handle hard things.”

If you’re the one playing a game with your child, you can continue to talk them through a potential loss, Dr. Kennedy said. The goal is to slow them down. So if you’re two moves away from winning, you could point that out to your child, and ask questions like: “What would happen if I win? Do you think you might want to say ‘no fair’?”

If they’re playing games with other kids, over time they will become more cognizant of the way their behavior affects their peers, Dr. Hunter said. Children start understanding that if they have a full-body meltdown during first-grade recess, other kids are going to look at them funny, and they will get embarrassed.

But just because they’ve learned to hold it together in front of their friends doesn’t mean there won’t be sulking or a tantrum at home after a loss. “You do see some kids are quite driven to be competitive, and that’s something that may stay with them their whole lives,” Dr. Moore said. Heck, I am still mad about a virtual trivia match my husband and I lost ... in June. It’s all perfectly normal human nonsense.