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Parents' winning strategy

Ease up when competing with kids, or let them lose?

STEVE WARDEN | The Journal Gazette

It could be a warm summer evening or a crisp winter's day. It could be on a gymnasium's polished wooden floor or on a cracked asphalt court. It could be with your daughter or son, granddaughter or grandson.

Actually, it could be any game of sport or competition, played any time, anywhere. It could be a family board game such as Monopoly or Life, a game of checkers, an afternoon of croquet, a battle of war with a worn deck of cards.

In this one hypothetical instance, though, let's say it is the time-honored Indiana basketball game of H-O-R-S-E, a test of shooting skill in which one player must duplicate another's made shot from the same distance or be penalized a "letter." The last player who hasn't accumulated enough letters to spell H-O-R-S-E wins.

Here is the conundrum every parent has ever faced with his or her young child while playing this game: When the time comes for the final shot, do you make it or intentionally miss it? Make it, and the child is out of the game, often banished to the sideline if there are more than two players. Miss it, and he or she remains a thrilled participant.

As you're handed the ball for the fateful shot, your little boy or girl looks on.

What do you do?

The answer? It depends.

"When playing a game with your child, the question of whether or not to let them win depends on their age, temperament and social skill set," licensed educational psychologist Charlotte Reznick tells iVillage, a website that addresses family issues.

That has been the age-old question, hasn't it? Do you or don't you let your kid win? Are you building self-esteem by allowing him to beat you, or are you setting a dangerous precedent? And if it's the other way – if you choose to teach early the harsh realities of life, in which nothing is given to her unless it's earned – do you risk bruising an undeveloped ego, which could affect her into adulthood?

Lesa Rae Vartanian, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at IPFW, has a passion for chess. Often she plays against her 11-year-old daughter.

"I'm a big believer (that) an empty victory is not a terribly useful victory," Vartanian says. "I don't know if you should ever let a child win, because I think it takes something away from the accomplishment. I don't know if I would say I always brought my 'A-plus' game to the table when we played, especially four or five years ago. She's 11 now. I maybe didn't play my best, but I would not say I would ever let her win.

"Once she did start cleaning my clock at chess, it was a big deal. I don't think letting children succeed when they really haven't earned it does anybody any good in the long run."

Jon Ray has heard the same argument many times over. And he says he understands and respects its merits. It's just that he didn't buy into it when playing sports and games with his kids.

The president and CEO of the Fort Wayne Urban League doesn't hesitate to say that he let all three of his children occasionally win when they were younger. No harm, no foul, he implies.

"A lot of people say, 'I'd never let them win.' But for me, I thought it was important so they could see that they could win, but not before they were capable. ... They were winning close games that were engineered that way."

All of Ray's children had successful high school basketball careers. Rashida, 26, was a three-time All-Summit Athletic Conference and two-time All-State player at Harding High School and earned a scholarship to play at Valparaiso University. Bomani, 24, played at Wayne High School and received a scholarship to Purdue-Calumet University in Hammond. And Jabar, 20, was second-team All-Northeast Hoosier Conference at New Haven High School, attended Garden City (Kansas) Community College and will be on scholarship next season at the University of Tulsa.

Ray's convinced that enabling his children to experience success early helped provide self-confidence during their formative years.

"You have them in sports to build their character and strength," Ray says. "For me, you don't want to break them down to the point where they didn't have any confidence."

Going back to Reznick's comments, it all depends.

IPFW women's basketball coach Chris Paul has a definite line with his two sons Jalen, 16, and Jackson, 13, and his daughter, Jersey, 9.

"I don't let 'em win," Paul says emphatically.

"My philosophy is, if I'm playing Jersey and we're playing one-on-one, I'm not going to block her shot every time. But I don't believe that if I go out there with Jalen or Jackson and we play around the world and we have a shooting contest, I don't really believe I'm teaching them anything if I let them win.

"I think the problem is as I'm watching the kids grow up and watching AAU and watching junior high sports and high school sports, there's this theme now – there's this perception – that everybody has to be successful; that everybody has to have a trophy and that everybody has to win.

"Then all of a sudden, the real world hits, and that's not how reality is. We all don't win. We all don't just automatically get something for just showing up."

And so Paul subscribes to the belief that success is sweeter when earned.

"I subscribe to the process of 'I'm going to teach you how to work for what you want,'" he says. "I'm not going to give it to you.

"You don't want to beat somebody in the ground over and over and over. I get that. But maybe there's a point where you say (to the child), 'Good work,' where you lost 10-8 as opposed to 10-0."

Says Vartanian: "I think it's worse to be a poor winner than a good loser. I've had friends tell me, 'Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a loser.' I think that's a really limiting philosophy to have.

"Really, nobody can win all of the time. It's how you handle yourself in those times when you're challenged or defeated or didn't perform at your best.

"In my philosophy, raising my kid, that's what makes you a winner," Vartanian says. "You come back, play again, learn from the last time you played, and feel good about who you are and what you do regardless of the scoreboard or outcome."

To explain why he allowed his children to win, Ray goes back to his own childhood and back to his own chessboard.

"My dad wasn't a sports guy, but we played chess," Ray says. "The first time I beat him in chess, I thought I beat him. As I learned later, I really didn't. That kept me interested in the game, though. If I was always destroyed by him in chess, I probably wouldn't want to play.

"I was too young to know that I didn't beat him. When I got older and better at chess, I realized that when I was 8 years old, there was no way I was beating my dad. By the time I figured it out, I could be competitive with him."

With that said, it's back to the playground; back to the asphalt or hardwood floor. Your little boy has H-O-R-S. It's your shot. What do you do?

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