
Book Reviews

Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture

Hilary Levey Friedman

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013. Preface, appendix, notes, works cited, index.

228 pp. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780520276765

“Are these parents crazy? Have they lost their grip? No. Their children face very real gates and gatekeepers through which they need to pass if they are going to achieve in ways similar to their parents” (p. 12). With this statement in the introduction to *Playing to Win*, Hilary Levey Friedman expresses her understanding of the behavior of the parents she interviewed in order to write *Playing to Win*. The book derives from Friedman’s doctoral dissertation based on her sixteen-month-long field study of families in or near an unnamed large city in the Northeast United States. Each family had at least one child of elementary school age involved in organized, competitive chess, dance, or soccer. Friedman spent time at chess tournaments, dance studios, and soccer fields, met parents there, and, through

word of mouth, met other parents with children competing in these activities. She conducted open-ended interviews with parents from ninety-five different families and, in some cases, also interviewed children, teachers, and coaches to understand their perspectives.

According to Friedman, these parents invested large sums of money for lessons and participation fees and spent large amounts of time and energy carting their children to practices and events, studying the activities, and encouraging their children to work hard and achieve in order to compete successfully. Why? What payoffs did they seek? Few if any of them expected or wanted their children to become professionals. Rather, they viewed the competitive activities as valuable training for success in a competitive world. They believed the competitions would foster in their children a set of attitudes and skills that would serve them well in such future competitions as getting into a high-ranking college, finding a high-paying job, and gaining career promotions. In other words, they were investing in what Friedman refers to as “competitive kid capital.”

On the basis of her interviews with

parents, Friedman defines competitive kid capital as consisting of five general attitudes or skills. The first and most central of these is internalizing the importance of winning. In the parents' views, success in this world depends on winning, and to win you have to want to win and work hard to win. The other four skills pertain to how to win. They are: bouncing back from a loss to win in the future; learning how to perform within time limits; learning how to succeed in stressful situations; and being able to perform under the gaze of others.

To encourage the drive to win, many parents rewarded their children with cash prizes, material goods, or other treats—all above and beyond the trophies provided by event organizers—but only if they won or improved their ranking. They also often bribed their children to practice. From Friedman's account, it appears that the parents had relatively little concern about whether or not their children experienced intrinsic pleasure from the activity. They worried about winning—about working hard to gain extrinsic rewards by outperforming others in competitions—not about playing for the fun of playing.

The children themselves, according to Friedman, were less focused on winning than were their parents, but they did like the trophies and the prizes. When children were asked what they enjoyed about the activity, they often talked about making and meeting friends and even feeling badly about beating their friends. They also talked about winning prizes but rarely noted the love of the activity itself. For example, when one seven-year-old was asked why she liked chess, she replied, "Because I get the trophy!" (p. 184). In contrast, according to Freidman, none of

the parents mentioned making friends as a reason for having their children participate in these activities.

I am sure that Freidman is right in her assessment that these parents are not crazy. I do believe, however, that they are tragically misguided. Yes, we live in a competitive society. But, when I look around at the people who are truly successful in this society—the ones who are happiest, most loved and respected, most creative, most truly productive—I see people who are *not* focused on winning in the sense of beating others in competitions but people who are intrinsically motivated and who care deeply about others and the welfare of the community. They have passionate interests, which they pursue not so much for material rewards as for pleasure, meaning, and social value. They achieve success in the work world partly because they are intrinsically motivated by the work itself—so it is play for them—and partly because they value others and are therefore valued by others. They are oriented more toward cooperation, even altruism, than competition. The parents Friedman interviewed are trying to teach their children precisely the *wrong* values for a truly successful life.

Friedman notes that the children in her study, with some exceptions, seemed happy and not particularly stressed by the competitions and parental pressures. But that may be because they were all of elementary school age. Other research, like Suniya Luthar and Shawn Latendresse's "Children of the Affluent: Challenges to Well-Being," (*Current Directions in Psychological Science*, February 2005), indicates that the debilitating effects of strong parental pressure to succeed, coupled with greater parental concern for achievement than for

character, begin to show up in such forms as depression, anxiety, rebellion, and substance abuse at about age twelve or thirteen and grow larger after that.

If it were true that success in our society requires the training in the competitive kid capital that Friedman's respondents describe, then I would say that the parents are not crazy but that the society is. What a sad, pathological world it would be if success really depended more on beating others than on helping them and if material prizes were more valued than friends.

Still, even as I am judging, I commend Friedman for her nonjudgmental stance. She reports the views of these parents quite neutrally, with, if anything, more sympathy than judgment. It is a valuable study and an excellent, highly readable report. I recommend the book to anyone who wishes to understand the mental set of many modern parents, which leads them to turn what should be playtime into work time for their kids.

In addition to reporting the findings of Friedman's study, the book also includes an insightful chapter on the history of children's competitive activities in America. We learn here that such competitions were first developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily to keep poor, mostly immigrant children (especially boys) off the streets and teach them the values of cooperation, hard work, and respect for authority. With the Great Depression, however, funds for such activities dried up and, after that, adult-organized competitive activities became increasingly the province of children whose families could afford to pay for them. Interest in such activities among the middle and upper classes grew gradu-

ally at first, but exponentially beginning in the 1970s, and exploded after that. The families studied by Friedman are at the top of that explosion.

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The Well-Played Game: A Player's Philosophy

Bernard De Koven

Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013.

Foreword, new preface, original preface, descriptions, appendix. 148 pp. \$24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780262019170

For a while now, my search for the perfect reading to introduce new students to games involved defining games as objects, as constructed things. Games are created activities bound by rules that allow only particular actions by their players, who are all trying to get somewhere, to win or to score big, or otherwise to succeed. There are ways to define games, however, that do not focus on constraints and goals. Instead, they focus on the activity of play, the interaction between players and games and gaming communities, and all the stuff *around* games, not the stuff *of* games. Yet for some reason, I never let go of my tendency to categorize and label and objectify when first introducing games. And in failing to let go of these formal definitions, I may have been introducing games to my students as decontextualized objects that stand apart as inert things, waiting to be explored and prodded. But no. That is not what games are. They do not exist except in the enactment.

And then I read the new edition of