

# Trophies for Everyone

**Prompt:** Our society has shifted its beliefs in how we should treat competition in young people. The concept that “everyone receives a trophy” has taken the place of only rewarding those who achieve excellence within that activity. Rewarding all participants in youth activities and sports has become standard practice in American culture.

Imagine that your principal is deciding whether or not to give all students who participate in school sports trophies. The principal has asked students for input before making this decision that will affect all sports teams in the future of the school.

Write an argumentative essay that answers the question: “Should kids get a trophy for participation?”. Clearly argue one side of the issue or the other. Use specific examples from the sources provided to support your claim. Be sure to include a counterclaim that addresses the opposing side of the issue.

# Source 1

## “Should Kids Get A Trophy For Showing Up?”

by NPR Ed (National Public Radio: Education), Corey Turner

Talk about a spirited debate ...

Just Google the question, "Should kids get trophies for participation?", and the first page yields headlines like "Losing Is Good For You" and "Hell YES all the little league kids should get trophies!"

I remember collecting a shelf full of participation trophies from years of playing YMCA soccer. Did they make me who I am ... or spoil me rotten?

### On the 'No' Side

"No," says Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck. Kids should not be given trophies simply for participating, she says. Dweck explains her answer with an anecdote from a mother she'd recently spoken to.

"Her daughter rarely showed up for her soccer team. She had a terrible attitude," Dweck says. In spite of that, "at the end she got a giant trophy and would have been devastated had she not."

Dweck concedes a child shouldn't have to be the best player on the field to get a trophy, but it should reward something, like improvement or team spirit.

Next up: Susan Harter, a professor of developmental psychology at the University of Denver.

"What do I think about that? I think it's a little bit excessive," Harter says, leaning toward No. Instead of a firm No, though, she re-frames my question: At what time of [a child's] life do we want to bring home the cruel reality that somebody's better than somebody else?

I got a lot of questions-as-answers to my unanswerable question. Like this one from Tovah Klein, author of the book, *How Toddlers Thrive*: "You know, I'm always thinking about, 'What is that debate really about?' Do you really care if everybody gets a trophy?"

Klein says kids should play because they enjoy playing. She argues, play should be intrinsically rewarding and that "[kids] don't need an adult saying, 'You get a trophy because you played well today.' "

So far, the score is roughly 3-0. Is there no one out there willing to argue on behalf of the humble participation trophy?

### The 'Yes' Votes

Kenneth Barish, a clinical associate professor of psychology at Weill Cornell Medical College, isn't afraid to say it: He thinks kids should get trophies for participation. "This is a minority view now," he says with a laugh, admitting that he's had to defend the idea even within his own family.

Barish says he sees no harm in adults encouraging participation with a trophy and that he's found no evidence the practice leads to entitlement among kids.

"It may be all they get," says Jorge Perez, vice president of youth development and social responsibility for the YMCA, another Yes vote. The Y has made a habit of giving participation trophies, he explains, "because we want to anchor the experience."

A few years back, Perez says, several young men visited him with YMCA baseball trophies they'd received as kids. And these weren't fancy, first place trophies. They were "tiny," given simply for participating. But the men had kept them and clearly valued them. Perez argues these trophies act as an important marker, to say 'I did this, I finished this.'

"That's why those kids hold onto those trophies," Perez says. "That's why Mom doesn't throw them away."

Wait. She doesn't?

### **The Basement**

And that's when it occurred to me: I don't know what happened to my shelf-full of participation trophies. If they'd been important to me or my mom — markers, as Perez says — I would presumably know where they are.

"I went down in the basement," my mother tells me after I call and ask if she knows what happened to the trophies. "I was appalled at the number of boxes that have your name on them. And none of them said 'Trophies.' "

She insists I threw the awards away years ago — because they didn't mean anything to me. But then she surprises me by telling me she did find one ... not a trophy at all.

"A dark, plum-colored ribbon with gold print on it that says 'Decatur YMCA Soccer, Participant, 1983.' "

I would have been 7 years old, and this is likely my very first award for participation. I have no idea how it survived for three decades — whether I saved it or my mother scooped it out of the dust bin years ago — but it did, this fragile little ribbon. And so I'm inclined to make that another Yes vote in the participation debate.

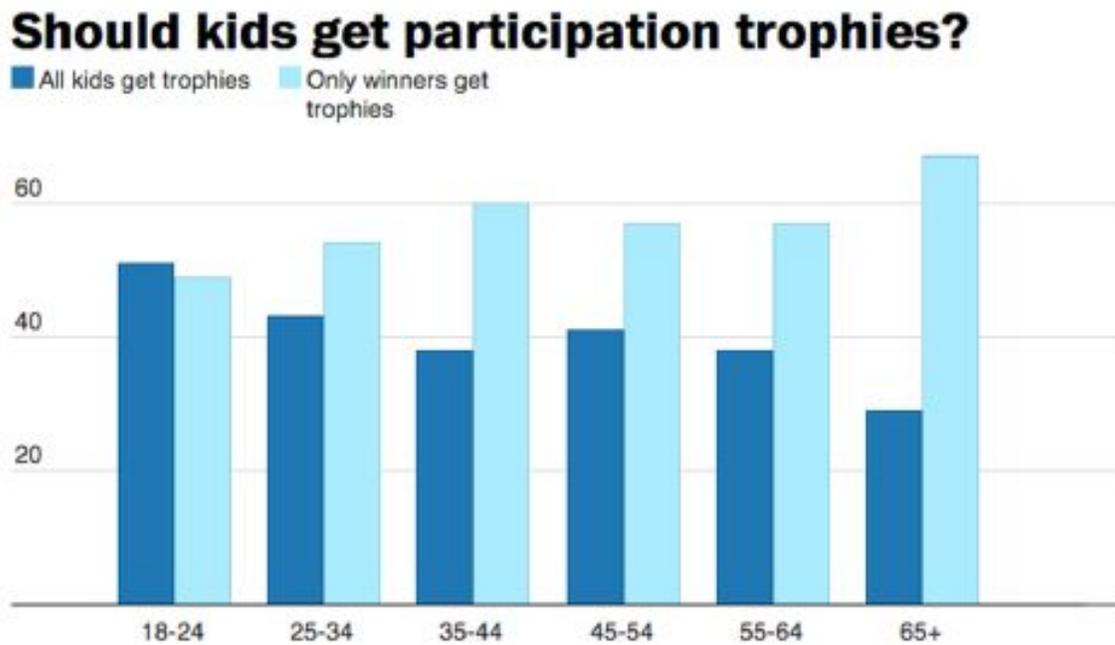
Which means ... we have a tie. No winner, no loser. Trophies for everyone.

Or not.

## Source 2

### "Should Kids Get Participation Trophies?" (Infographic)

The infographic below shows how many people ages 18-65+ believe that trophies should be awarded to everyone who participates in a sport, and how many believe trophies should only be awarded to the winners.



Source: [Reason-Rupe poll](#)

The Washington Post

## Source 3

### **"In defense of participation trophies: Why they really do teach the right values" by Lisa Heffernan**

Lots of parents hate participation trophies, and Pittsburgh Steeler James Harrison is no exception. He recently took to Instagram to air his dislike, arguing that his sons, ages 6 and 8, need to learn that everything in life should be earned and that effort alone is not a cause for recognition.

These shiny bits of plastic have been blamed for creating an entitled generation who learned to expect adulation for the unexceptional on the playing field and later in life. There has been little or no research to prove the benefits or harm of participation trophies in sports. Yet, they have come to symbolize our fear that we are too easy on our kids and are failing to teach them the harsher realities of life.

When my kids were young and received trophies, I was at best ambivalent, and felt sharing an end-of-season pizza with their team was an adequate reward for practicing, playing in games and learning to be a teammate.

But as my sons grew older, the values these trophies might convey to young children became clearer.

As parents we would like to assume that when families and kids sign up for a team they honor that commitment and show up. We hope that we are teaching our youngest kids to love athletic endeavors of any sort, as we know this benefits mind and body. We would like to believe that most coaches and parents value effort and the process of learning a sport, with its rules, skills and protocols, not simply the game's outcome.

And we would be wrong.

Kids join teams but they don't always attend practices or show up for games. Allison Slater Tate, mother of four and editor of Club Mid at Scary Mommy, feels participation trophies teach a worthwhile lesson: "There is something to teaching kids that it is worth keeping a commitment, that we value this. Winning and losing is not a lesson that kids need to search out to find. It's everywhere. But they also need to learn how important it is that everyone shows up."

Participation trophies remind young kids that they are part of something, and may help build enthusiasm to return for another season, says Tom Farrey, executive director of The Sports and Society Program at the Aspen Institute and author of "Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children."

"From ages 0 to 12, the goal is to help kids to fall in love with sports, to want to come back the next year, to want to go into the backyard and improve their technique," Farrey said. He cautions against focusing on winning and losing in the pre-tween years. "There is a time and a place to sort the weak from the strong, but it is not before they grow into their bodies and their minds and their interests."

Another reason to defend trophies for everyone is that, at a time when parents complain of the escalating competition in youth sports, they remind kids that we value their effort, regardless of ability or results. Participation trophies tell them that what matters is showing up for practice, learning the rules and rituals of the game and working hard.

Finally, we offer these rewards to remind our youngest kids that being part of a team, and all that entails, is something we value. Being there for your teammates and those in your life, when it suits you or when Saturday morning cartoons look like a lot more fun, is a lifelong lesson that cannot be taught too young.

"The idea of giving trophies only to the winners doesn't emphasize enough of the other values that are important," says Kenneth Barish, Clinical Associate Professor of Psychology at Weill Medical College, Cornell University and author of *Pride and Joy: A Guide to Understanding Your Child's Emotions and Solving Family Problems*. "We want kids to participate in sports, to learn to improve their skills, to help others, to work hard and make a contribution to the team."

But what about the kid who doesn't work hard? The child who knows he's getting a trophy no matter what, so he does not need to apply effort? "There will always be kids who don't work hard. There will always be kids who did not work hard on any winning team too," Barish explains. "And I rarely encounter a kid who didn't work hard because they think they are getting a trophy anyway. When I do encounter this attitude, it is a symptom of a deeper problem that kid is having with putting forth effort."

When my son was around 8, at the end of one of his final seasons with participation trophies he scoffed at the fact that such an award was still on offer. He told me that everyone got a trophy so it did not matter. I realized that such recognition was probably ending at just the right moment for him. Hilary Levey Friedman, a sociologist and author of "Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture," thinks these trophies hold sway over only the youngest kids: "Think about the ages that kids still believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, as a rule of thumb, that is the age when a gold [participation] trophy seems to be quite magical as well."

In her research among kids who were involved in highly competitive activities, Friedman found that "as kids get older [participation trophies] lose their meaning... But that first participation trophy, it does mean something, especially among the younger kids. The children see them more as symbols and remembrances of an experience."

Friedman points out that the context in which participation trophies are given conveys their meaning. Offering a trophy to a young child can be an empty gesture unless coaches and parents tell children *why* they are being awarded.

I never had to teach my son that he would need to win competitions in order to be rewarded. Life, many athletic defeats, and other setbacks taught him that lesson. Despite the fact that he would play on many teams and win other awards, he never discarded those early participation trophies. He's off to college now but they still sit on his shelf, as a fond memory of a team that showed up, played hard and — if I recall right — lost every game.

## Source 4

### "Do We All Deserve Gold? Setting Kids Up To Fail" by Vivian Diller

The singer and activist Harry Belafonte confesses in his new autobiography, "My Song," that he learned a thing or two about raising kids. "I wanted to give my children all they wanted, all I hadn't had. In so doing I may have deprived them of what they needed most: the grit and the tools, to take on the world and make their own way." Surely, Belafonte, like most parents, wanted the best for his kids. But he rightly asks if it is best to reward them for just showing up.

I have been thinking of this issue, since Michael Coren, host of Canada's national news program *Arena* asked me to comment on his country's new approach to kids' sports. He told me that instead of awarding first, second and third place winners, all participants would soon be receiving trophies — win or lose.

Convinced this change stemmed from overly protective and narcissistic parents (or trophy makers who would win big by such a move), I answered, "I'm not sure this is good for Canadian kids or, for that matter, kids anywhere." I went on to talk about the pros and cons; awards can intensify competition, impact self-esteem, get parents too involved and add tension among coaches, but they also teach kids about winning and losing, about success and failure. I left the interview reflecting upon the general trend toward over-praising children—and the real world they will eventually face as young adults.

In *New York Magazine's* cover story, "The Kids Are Actually Sort of Alright," Noreen Malone writes how today's 20-somethings are struggling in the cold world after enjoying childhoods filled with warmth and support. A Millennial herself, Malone writes, "our parents tried to see how much self-confidence they could pack into us, like so many overstuffed microfiber love seats, and accordingly we were awarded clip-art certificates of participation just for showing up." Outside of collecting dust and decorating childhood rooms, have these plaques and trophies served any real purpose?

Malone believes these awards have had some long-term value. "Self-esteem among young people in America has reportedly been rising since the seventies," she writes, and "it's now so dramatically high that social scientists are considering whether they need to find a different measurement system—we've broken the scale. Clearly, all that praise we got growing up, win or lose, must have really sunk in." For me, the problem isn't the profusion of positive reinforcement kids get nowadays, but rather the failure to distinguish the accomplishments that deserve it, from those that don't. And whose responsibility is it to provide the endless high fives—coaches, schools or parents?

Stanford researcher, Carol Dweck offered her thoughts about this issue in the *New York Times* piece, "Too Much Praise is No Good for Toddlers." After studying children's coping and resilience mechanisms for over 40 years, she says too much praise may lead to less resilient children. Acknowledging children's every day achievements, she says, will likely have negative repercussions on their motivation to work toward them. "Parents should take away the fact that they are not giving their children a gift when they tell them how brilliant and talented they are." Dweck doesn't discourage praising kids altogether, but suggests focusing it more on their approach to difficult tasks, their ability to strategize and concentrate—the kinds of skills Belafonte wished he had emphasized while raising his own children.

Perhaps if we offered the gold, silver and bronze for actual achievements, kids would learn lessons that better served their needs as adults. Perhaps if we let them lose and teach them to congratulate those who win, we would help them build the motivation and endurance needed to face real life challenges—e.g. sustaining a long-term marriage or securing employment—two very elusive trophies in today's world.

I'm sure having once been a professional ballet dancer—now a psychologist, 58, and long retired— has skewed my point of view. Competition and rejection were daily experiences—not at home, that is, but in the world of professional dance. By age 10, critiques were commonplace. "That pirouette was terrible," I was told by my teachers. "Practice until you get it right," was the mantra of choreographers. By the time I was a teen, I knew that having talent was not a guarantee for success. Discipline and repetition were equally important. I lost roles. I earned others. I eventually toured with a dance company. My parents enjoyed watching when they could and clapped along with the rest of the audience. But I did not grow up constantly hearing I was the best—not at ballet, finger-painting or anything else. The result? A fierce determination to do my best at whatever I chose to do.

Thinking about this issue, I am reminded of those "Rules of Life" that made the rounds a while ago. Credited to Bill Gates in a speech he gave to highschoolers, but more likely originating from Charles Sykes, author of "Dumbing Down Our Kids," these rules address how our feel-good, politically correct teachings are creating a generation of kids set up for failure.

Instead of trophies for all, perhaps handing participants a copy of these life lessons would have more long lasting value. The ones I would include are:

- Life is not fair—get used to it!
- The world will expect you to accomplish something before you feel good about yourself.
- If you think your teacher is tough, wait till you get a boss.
- Your grandparents had a different word for burger flipping—they called it opportunity.
- Before you were born, your parents weren't as boring as they are now. They got that way from paying your bills, cleaning your clothes, and listening to you talk about how cool you think you are.
- In some schools they have abolished failing grades and they'll give you as many times as you want to get the right answer. This doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to anything in real life.
- Life is not divided into semesters. You don't get summers off and very few employers are interested in helping you find yourself. Do that on your own time.
- Your school may have done away with winners and losers, but life has not.

We need look no further than the 2011 World Series for the value of earning trophies for true achievements. The St. Louis Cardinals were unlikely candidates to even get to the playoffs: 10 and a half games out in August, they were down to their last strike—twice— in the sixth game of the World Series. But with grit and grace, they hung in to eventually defeat the Texas Rangers. No doubt the championship trophy meant a lot to the team and the fans. But, it makes me wonder: had these players been awarded medals as kids—win or lose—would they have had what it took to earn the huge one in the end?