

Adolescents and Competition: The Drive for Success

West R. Loveland

John Brown University

April 25, 2012

Author Note

West R. Loveland, Department of Psychology, John Brown University.

Address correspondence concerning this article to West Loveland, JBU Box 2320, 2000 West University Street, Siloam Springs, Arkansas 72761. E-mail: Lovelandw@jbu.edu.

Abstract

Competition is what drives every human to succeed. Some levels of competition can be harmful while for others it may be beneficial. On a daily basis, adolescents are facing new challenges as they grow and develop. These challenges consist of bullying, image, peer pressure, faith, and feelings towards their parents. Each of these factors plays a part in the competitive drive that fuels every person. Adolescents learn to cope with these factors throughout their life and learn from their mistakes. By living one's own image and not their image of other 'popular' adolescents, one may truly find satisfaction in their life. The reason most adolescents are not happy with their current lifestyle is because of this competitive ego. When one adolescent rises above the others, many adolescents strive to meet or even surpass the new level of popularity. Search yourself and see if the power of competition is taking control of your life; you might be surprised.

Keywords: Adolescents, bullying, image, competition

Adolescents and Competition: The Drive for Success

Imagine a world where there was no competition. There were no basketball games or any other sports. But more importantly, take away the lust, greed, and desire to be better than everyone else. After all this is what we do; compete against one another. Finding the right balance between healthy styles of competition can be acceptable but there is still the risk of harming others. Everyone has a motive in this world but it can still be competitive. There are numerous explanations of competition that an adolescent may experience as they develop and grow such as image and living a certain lifestyle. There are many psychological explanations as well when it comes to a competitive mindset that Sigmund Freud describes perfectly.

Id, Ego, Superego

Sigmund Freud and the id, ego, and superego consist of a logical explanation of our desires. The id is an unorganized part of the personality structure which contains the basic drives. The ego seeks to please the id's drive in realistic ways that benefit in the long term. The superego aims for perfection in one's decisions. Each of these ideas correlate to the competitive decisions we make.

Growing up, each person is taught what it takes to survive in this fallen world. Instead of this, we should be taught how to serve in this world. When one is focused on the idea of survival, their view changes over time. They look for physical things so that they blend in with the popular crowd when they should only be trying to fit in Jesus' crowd. This is where the church is at fault. Have you noticed how many churches there are; different sizes and crowds? It would seem that each church is trying to recruit more than the other so that they can create an image of themselves. There is only one God of this universe so why is there a need for more than one

church? There are so many different versions of churches and because of this there is a competitive drive between them. If there was only one type of church there would be an equal crowd for everyone to worship. Competition is what drives the human into sin, to an extent. Every argument, war, decision, etc., is the cause of one person trying to beat the other. If one of my classmates was to rebuttal my argument then they would be trying to defeat my argument; thus showing a competitive drive. This describes the id because everyone wants to succeed over others in any way possible. This is a world full of growing success and business empires. It seems that everything is controlled by a higher power. "The id is entirely unconscious and is governed by the pleasure principle" (Hergenhahn, 2009, p. 531). Simply put, the id wants immediate gratification of that need an adolescent has. This competitive drive can twist even the sanest minded and the church needs to realize the effect they have among adolescents.

The ego is driven by the external influence we face on a day to day basis. Feist and Feist (2009) said, "It is governed by the reality principle, which tries to substitute for the pleasure principle of the id" (Feist & Feist, 2009, p. 29). We all surrender to the power of the almighty dollar. Without it, one may not feed their family or pay their bills. Again, think of a world without competition. One where there was no money or bills to be paid, just a harmonious universe. As adolescents develop, their id remains the same but the ego begins to adapt and change to the surroundings. But this higher power constantly requires more and more power. This is the superego which explains how a powerful person or company strives for perfection and to be number one. There are numerous other examples to compare such as clothing, automobiles, businesses, and professions. But the point is that the psychological aspect of these (id, ego, and superego) completely defines their true purpose.

Looking back at the creation of humans, there has been a steady drive for competition. It is all sin driven. Comparing churches is just the same because everyone wants to have the best image. But with every negative comes a positive. There is some healthy competition within this world. Churches may compete against others but they all also compete to save and serve others. Another form of healthy competition can be seen when one person is striving for success. By working with another, one may push the other to be better and reach their goal. This may be good and all and seen as a positive for that person but the downfall is that there is still competition between that person and another. Someone has to lose at the objective and it will hurt them. Sitting in class the other day the topic of groups or stereotypes came up. Both of these ideas can relate to every single person. Which group do you fit in? Are you a jock, emo, cheerleader, drama queen, nerd? Well it should not matter where or what stereotype a person fits into when it comes to friend selection but sadly it does; just like churches accepts members. We should all join together as one to serve a merciful God. The point is that when you do something in your life, take a step back and see how you are affecting you as well as others around you. Your competitive drive might be making a bad decision.

Peer Pressure and Image

As adolescents enter high school peer pressure begins to take effect. Every adolescent wants to fit in no matter what it takes. They feel that if they do not meet the popular groups needs then they are not culturally accepted. This is becoming quite the trend in today's schools but the reality is that many obedient adolescents are not living to their full potential. By pretending to be something you are not, you are rejecting what God has originally created. Everyone was created for a reason but they cannot fulfill this if they live a different life. There are numerous television programs which display children in high school struggling to fit in with the popular crowd. Many

adolescents can relate to those that are outcasts and rejected by others. When this happens, often they do anything it takes to meet the needs of the 'popular adolescents'. With that is smoking weed, cigarettes, drinking, stealing, or even harassing those that are also different; many adolescents are desperate for attention and the feeling of power. In reality, these adolescents are being bullied by their peers. Nationally, schools have begun an anti-bullying program that has attempted to cease bullying but the crisis still continues. Serious bullying to a sensitive adolescent can cause detrimental effects to their natural development stages. Research on bullying suggests, "...it is not the behavior of the complete class that affects the evaluation of behaviors by peers, but particularly behavior of popular adolescents that sets the norm with students" (Dijkstra et al., 2008, p. 1295). Overall, these so called friendships that adolescents try to have with the popular group can be very harmful. Recent studies have supported this by saying, "...having a task-oriented competitive goal orientation was associated with more negative friendship qualities" (Schapiro, 2009, p. 85). Bullies sadly have a goal to harm the non-popular adolescents by proving that they are better than them. This level of competition is shown by the gestures and actions they perform to other adolescents.

Another important factor to consider is the image of adolescents. Many adolescents care about the way they dress in their designer clothes and high top shoes. If one was to wear a pair of plain jeans, most adolescents would harass another for their lack of taste. Other factors include a car, where their parents live, who is a member at the top country club, and even the amount of cash flow through the household. Image is just about the most important factor when it comes to everyday life of a young adolescent. The sad part is that even Christian adolescents try to create an image noticeable by others. They only dress and act a certain way which causes conflict among others because they (Christians) feel that this is the correct lifestyle to live. Competition

is the direct cause of this image battle among adolescents and it needs to be properly addressed. But there is no way for everyone to live a harmonious lifestyle because of the Fall. Man has always desired a better life and success and will continue to until the end of time. An adolescent's self-esteem is very important just like any other persons. As they develop, research from McClure et al. (2010) shows that:

Self-esteem, as an overall reflection of an individual's self-worth, encompasses beliefs about oneself as well as an emotional response to those beliefs. Representing the capacity to feel worthy of happiness and be able to successfully address life challenges, self-esteem is an improvement determinant of adolescent mental health and development. (p. 238)

Self-esteem is a major part of a person's wellbeing. Along with it is the importance of how one looks. This competitive drive for looks and figures can control one's life, especially women. "Even when evidence to the contrary shows that females perceive themselves to be overweight. Such preoccupation with physique can lead to dangerous attempts to control weight, including excessive levels of physical activity" (Rhea, 1998, p. 28). Weight control can be a dangerous situation for many and that is why competition can be so dangerous.

Roles

This section specifically looks at the parents in an adolescent's development stage. Each adolescent comes from a different household; so naturally everyone is raised differently causing them to develop differently. As one flips through the channels on the television, they come across shows such as sweet sixteen. In this show, a female adolescent celebrates her sixteenth birthday as if it were her last birthday party. At these parties, the parents usually spend anywhere between

5,000 dollars to 60,000 dollars. There are not any real averages for total sweet sixteen's in the United States but this is a ridiculous amount to spend on a birthday party. Competition is what drives the adolescent females on this show to have the most extravagant party in history. If their party does not have a famous disc jockey or rapper then it will not be worth the migraine. On top of this, each girl on the show walks out of the party to find a brand new Mercedes or BMW parked outside. Naturally her so called friends are gathered around it to celebrate but the truth is they are either trying to become noticed or crash a party. Competition is not only devastating to many but it can also be devastating to the father's pocket book. But this is not really the adolescents fault. Rather the fault is on the parents for allowing such behavior to occur. Many children are handed everything to them growing up that they have not properly matured enough. Once a person has all the power, the only thing that will drive them is to gain more power; the same for money. Parents need to leave a legacy for their children so that this may be passed on for generations. By living a selfish lifestyle fueled by a competitive edge, adolescents are sure to follow.

Boundaries define the identity of the family but an established hierarchy refers to power within a family. According to Osmon and Brisben (2004), "...there needs to be some ordering of who has the most power and responsibility in order for the organism (the family) to function well" (p. 5). The modern family consists of a father who works and supplies the financial background for the family while the mother is in charge of the house responsibilities and the children. In the evolving family structures, families have adopted their own hierarchy that they live by which is best suitable for them. New hierarchies are created as the balance of power is shifted throughout the family. By effectively communicating these boundaries and roles, the adolescents may understand better. When one member of the family has trouble understanding

the presented role, the others must effectively communicate it to them so the problem will cease. Ledbetter (2009) states, "...that communication behavior modeled in family environments may influence communication behavior in a variety of social relationships" (p. 141). Again, by creating a modeled communication pattern for the family, rules and other social aspects within the family may be met. Conflict is what families want to avoid but when it comes, stop, differentiate yourself, and effectively communicate what issues need to be addressed. This will build a stronger bond within the family and develop respect for one another. It will also calm the fight for power and attention within the household especially between the young adolescent and parents.

Parents also need to pay special attention to controlling the development of their children. Without a parent claiming the hierarchical spot within the family, instability can arise. According to Foreman and Davies (2003), "Family instability was defined as the frequency of residential mobility, intimate relationships involving the primary caregiver, family units in which the child lived, child illness, and other stressful family events during the child's life" (p. 94). Children need someone to look up to and follow, not lead.

Bible

Everyone was created in God's eyes perfect in every way. This is the central message that should be passed on to every adolescent as they develop. Throughout the history of time there has been competition, even within the Bible (1996). 1 Corinthians 9:25 states, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that lasts forever" (Holy Bible, 1996, p. 912). Even among the professional athletes, they are competing for a simple trophy that will soon fade only to exist as a

memory in the record books. But when you compete for Jesus and fight for the trophy of eternal life in heaven and that seems like a better deal. Adolescents need to realize what the real competition is about so that they may be serving Jesus for all that He has done for us. Again, this brings back living a harmonious lifestyle that we fail to grasp in this life. The Bible (1996) does not point out to many examples of competition listed directly, but it can be viewed indirectly from just about any story told. Each story has a protagonist and an antagonist that competes for power throughout time. The most popular competition is between God and Satan. Each is technically competing to either save or destroy our souls but the choice is ours. Adolescents need to become aware of what they have to live for in this world and know that a glorious prize awaits in heaven.

Resentment

Resentment is a very strong word to use but it really captures the idea of what most adolescents feel towards their family and others at school. Starting with their family, as an adolescent grows up, the desire for freedom fills their body. They are beginning to receive new responsibilities and roles around the house giving them the sense of power. Sometimes this power can get the best of some adolescents because once their father commands something they tend to put up a fight. This fighting then leads to anger and repressed feelings that cause most family conflict. In reality, the parents would like to be appreciated and respected as the adults they are and the adolescents would like to feel accepted as a leader or helper around the house. Words of affirmation can go a long way in a relationship especially for a thick headed adolescent. Polar to this would be a volatile relationship between the adolescent(s) and the parents. LePoire (2006) said the following:

By contrast, volatile couples appear to engage in conflict with a vengeance. Volatile couples can be characterized as direct and competitive in their conflict styles...Volatile couples are the couples you know who always seem to be in some battle or other over something seemingly trivial, and they tend to battle. (p. 198)

It is important that this is avoided in the household although everyone fights with their parents. Adolescents crave their freedom and if the parents do not respect that to an extent then volatile relationships are almost certain. For other students at school, most adolescents tend to resent the popular crowd since they are not accepted by them but they still desire to be like them; it is a never ending cycle. When an adolescent is neglected in public by others (by friends or parents), the result can be harmful. Once the adolescent does meet someone that does accept them, they are immediately attached to them (ignoring common relationship of 'getting along together'). The reason this can be a negative is this person may not be right for them as a friend or even perhaps a relationship. Relationships can be ruined if one is to upset the adolescent who was hurt in the past. With relationships, this particular adolescent may find someone but there is always a sense of fear or rejection. Rejection is a terrible thing to happen to an adolescent especially during their development stages of life. As a result, this can lead to problems in the workforce when they are criticized or even corrected on their work. Once this happens, the adolescent may want to slack off or even may become angry at their boss/supervisor and could end up losing their job. There are many long term effects of such instances that may cause the adolescent to struggle in their future.

References

- Dijkstra, J. K, Lindenberg, S., Veenstra, R. (2008). Beyond the class norm: Bullying behavior of popular adolescents and its relations to peer acceptance and rejection. *J abnorm child psychol*, 36(1), 1289-1299. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.jbu.edu/docview/205024216/fulltextPDF/136478079225BE07313/2?accountid=27685>
- Feist, J., & Feist G. J. (2009). *Theories of personality* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Forman, E. M., & Davies, P. T. (2003). Family instability and young adolescent maladjustment: The mediating effects of parenting quality and adolescent appraisals of family security. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 32(1), 94-105. Retrieved from <http://www.erlbaum.com/Journals/journals/JCCP/jccp.htm>
- Hergenhahn, B. R. (2009). *An introduction to the history of psychology* (6th ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Holy Bible*. (1996). New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Corporation.
- Ledbetter, A. M. (2009). Family communication patterns and relational maintenance behavior: Direct and mediated associations with friendship closeness. *Human Communication Research*, 35(1), 130-147. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2958.2008.01341.x

LePoire, B. A. (2006). *Family communication: Nurturing and control in a changing world*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

McClure, A. C., Tanski, S., E., Kingsbury, J., Gerrard, M., & Sargent, J., D. (2010). *Characteristics associated with low self-esteem among US adolescent*, 10(4), 238-244. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.jbu.edu/docview/755478103/fulltextPDF/1364275E9656562763C/6?accountid=27685>

Osmon, B., & Brisben, D. (2004). *Introduction to family science: An integration of family theology with the basic principles of family science*. 16. [unpublished material originally created for introductory to family science]

Rhea, D. J. (1998). Physical activity and body image of female adolescents. *Journal of physical education, recreation & dance*, 69(5), 27-31. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.jbu.edu/docview/215767982/fulltextPDF/136478079225BE07313/3?accountid=27685>

Schapiro, M (2009). Competitive goal orientations, quality, and stability in gifted and other adolescents' friendships. *A test of Sullivan's theory the harm caused by rivalry*, 53(2), 72-88. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.jbu.edu/docview/212087693/fulltextPDF/136405BED047BCF04EE/2?accountid=27685>