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Newsletter for Parents of SAMA Member Schools

Dear Montessori Parents

One of the cornerstones of Montessori education is an atmosphere of co-operation rather than competition. All that we do in our schools is aimed at encouraging the development of independence along with a realization for, and appreciation of, interdependence.

The article below gives you some ideas of how to provide your child with opportunities to experience the benefits of co-operation. In our society right now, it might be the ideal chance to offer your child another way to engage with those in his or her world.

Warm Regards
Sam Streak
SAMA President

The Benefits of Cooperation

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Many events in our everyday lives reflect our preoccupation with competition. The concept is deeply rooted in our nation's education, sports, politics, and even in families. Author Alfie Kohn, in his well-researched book *No Contest, the Case Against Competition*, writes how "we are encouraged to pit ourselves against one another and taught that competition is a prod to productivity, a builder of character, and an unavoidable part of human nature." Kohn claims "any win/lose structure is psychologically destructive and poisonous to our relationships."

It's ironic that we play games to be together yet spend our efforts trying to bankrupt someone, destroy their armies, conquer the world, etc. — all goals which create hostility and separate us.

Success Doesn't Require Someone Else's Failure.

Competition was virtually unknown to the Zuni and Iroquois in North America and to the Bathonga in South Africa. The Mixtecos of Mexico regard envy and competitiveness as a minor crime. From kibbutz in Israel to farmers in Mexico, cooperation is prized and competition generally avoided.

It doesn't have to be a "dog eat dog" world. We can unlearn that kind of learned behaviour. How about family members deciding together who does which household chores? What about businesses sharing information and resources? Just imagine the global benefits of nations working together and negotiating so everyone wins.

Specific Benefits of Cooperation

Cooperative concepts are beneficial in school, work, play, in personal relationships and are easily understood in the context of games. Benefits include:

Bonding, Support, and Playfulness

It is hard to maintain positive feelings about someone who is trying to make you lose. Hurt feelings and arguments often result from competitive play. In cooperative play, challenge, discovery and success are shared. Emphasis is on participation, acceptance and the "joy of play." In the end, it's your relationship with each other that counts.

Teamwork and Shared Decision Making

Competition makes it difficult to share our skills, experiences and resources because each person is separately involved in his or her exclusive goal. In our schools and work places, students and employees are often taught to regard each other not as potential collaborators, but rather as opponents, rivals, and obstacles to their own success. In cooperative settings, every person's role is important and valued. Individuality is respected, and concern for the needs of others fostered. The challenge shifts from "striving to be number one" to working toward a mutual goal. The idea that we all share in decision-making is a powerful tool.

Openness, Trust and Safety

Often competition—in work and play—results in arguments, hurt feelings and separation. Many games are based on secrecy and intimidation resulting in players feeling unsafe. In work or play, people really want and need to feel safe, be open and honest, and above all, feel trusted. Cooperative situations help create that atmosphere, because participants give encouragement and support of one another.

Self Worth and Personal Power

Cooperativeness has been linked to greater learning, emotional maturity and strong personal identity. Participants often become more flexible in their thinking and willingness to invent creative solutions. The result is enjoyment, personal confidence and a feeling of self-worth. As your personal power grows, you get that "I can make a difference" feeling.

Well-being

Most competitive situations are highly stressful; the possibility of failure creates agitation if not outright anxiety. The fear or anger generated from being eliminated or losing often causes embarrassment, tension and hostility. Cooperative activities are non-threatening and non-judgmental. As a result, this creates an atmosphere for relaxation and well-being—the foundation for more genuine, healthy and playful fun.

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