

But Why: A Podcast For Curious Kids

Why Do We Compete?

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Jane [00:00:21] This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm, your host on this show. We take questions from kids just like you and we find answers.

Jane [00:00:33] Have you ever felt competitive with a friend or a sibling? Competition comes up in a lot of different ways in life. Maybe you're running a race with a friend and you really want to beat them. Maybe you play on a team in a sport and you want to win your next game. Maybe you're trying to play a song without making a mistake and you're competing against yourself. Or maybe you just want to be the first one of your family members out the door when it's time to go play.

Jane [00:01:00] Perhaps, though, you're somebody who doesn't like the feeling that others are competing against you, you don't really like competition, maybe you'd rather not play games where scores are kept or people win first, second or third place. Maybe you like competing in soccer, but you don't like competing in school. There are lots of different approaches to competition and a lot of ways we feel about it. We're thinking about that today because of a question that came in by email from Kai. Kai is three and he lives in Tokyo, Japan. He had his mother write his question down and email it to us. Kai asks, Why do we need to compete with other people, especially friends, for example, on a sports day or at gym class?

Niko [00:01:45] Well, that's a very interesting question from Kai.

Jane [00:01:48] That's Niko Besnier. He's someone who thinks a lot about how people relate to one another.

Niko [00:01:53] I'm a university professor of anthropology, anthropology being the study of how people in different cultures do things differently, organize their lives in different ways and get along or not get along.

Jane [00:02:11] And one of the things Niko has spent a lot of time studying is sports. He actually wrote a book along with two other anthropologists, all about how sports and professional athletic competitions evolved in our modern world. So we called him up to talk a little bit about ideas, about sports and competition. But we're also going to hear from some other kids in this episode, one who competes in spelling bees and says she's really competing against the words in the dictionary and another who plays a lot of different sports and has some thoughts on why he doesn't mind losing. But first, Niko Besnier wanted to tell us about a couple different aspects that he thinks are important when it comes to talking about sports in particular.

Niko [00:02:54] One is that doing sport, playing sport is fun. It's fun to play together with your friends, your classmates, to chase around after balls to run and jump with your friends. We've all experienced this rush of pleasure and and fun that we all experience doing these things. But the other aspect that is in some ways contradictory to the fun part of sport is that it enables us to measure our strength, our speed, our physical ability

against those of other people. So in other words, it's the competition part of sport and competition that can become extremely serious. So frequently the fun part of sport gets lost.

Jane [00:03:45] This might happen when kids emphasize winning over the enjoyment of the game or of being part of a team, or sometimes adults get too invested and push kids to be more competitive than they'd like, Niko says. Sometimes even teachers encourage competition in ways that not all kids enjoy.

Niko [00:04:02] But sport doesn't have to be that way all the time. I mean, it is it's fun and useful to measure our physical abilities against those of others. But we have to also remember that the fun of sport is extremely important. And in fact, there are societies in which it's emphasized much more than the competitive aspects of sport. So, for example, among the the Warao Indians of the Venezuelan rainforest who live very deep in the forest and feed themselves through the fruit and that they can pick in the forest and the animals they can hunt. Boys and men have festivals, hold festivals where they shoot arrows with bells and see who can shoot the farthest or the most straight arrow and so on. But they do it for the fun of it, not to compete. Of course they compare, but there is no winner essentially. It really is a fun exercise. And the Warao Indians do not really have this this notion of competition in sport.

Niko [00:05:14] So when friends get too competitive in sport class, on sport days and gym class, you should remind them we're having fun. Sport is primarily for fun.

Niko [00:05:28] We don't need necessarily to compare how strong we are, how fast we are running, because it sometimes make children who are smaller and less strong feel bad about themselves and these bad feelings can stay with them for a very long time.

Jane [00:05:47] So if you don't really want to compete, it's OK. There's nothing wrong with you. If you like to play games, you like to play sports, but maybe competing and seeing who can win isn't the thing that you enjoy most.

Niko [00:05:57] Right. I mean, people do sport for many different reasons, and we should also think of the of the quality of sport as something that brings us together and makes us enjoy each other's company.

Jane [00:06:14] Now, sports is one way that people compete, but that's not the only way that humans compete. And it's not always that we're competing against other people. Sometimes we compete against ourselves. We want to do something better this time than we did it last time or faster. Or for people who have brothers and sisters at home, brothers and sisters can compete with each other about everything who can do the dishes faster, who can put all the stuffed animals away faster, who can enjoy the parents more? There are a lot of ways that we compete with one another. And I'm wondering if competition is part of human nature?

Niko [00:06:50] It is in part, yeah. We we certainly need to compare ourselves with others to have a sense of who we are and what we're able to do or not able to do. It's when competition becomes so overwhelming that it starts to dominate everything that we do, that it becomes problematic because then it leads us to put other people down to be disrespectful of them. And this is when competition is actually very problematic. And then, of course, competition can lead to terrible things like war and invasion and the creation of inequality among people where some people don't have enough to eat and others have

more money than they can ever use. So this is where competition becomes a real problem, but it is very much part of human nature. And you mentioned actually something very important, namely that we compete with ourselves. So today I'm running faster than I did yesterday and that can be measured with the clock or with these days with watches. And there is some value to this in the sense that it helps us improve ourselves so we don't stay at the same level all the time. And this is both about physical exercise, physical activities like sport as well as mental ones. So if I'm learning a language, for example, a new language today, I have learned ten more words. So I speak the language better than I did yesterday. So and that is a very valuable thing.

Jane [00:08:28] That was anthropologist Niko Besnier. One of his books is called *The Anthropology of Sport*, written with Susan Brownell and Thomas F. Carter. So, Kai, to come back to your question, part of why we compete is just human nature. Many people like the feeling of having a goal and trying to reach it or trying to reach it faster or better than someone else and playing sports or having sports day and gym class is a great way to see what your body can do and to find ways to move around and have fun with your classmates. But we don't have to compete. And if competition is not something you enjoy, you have some choices. One would be to talk to your friends and to your adults and your teachers and tell them a little bit more about why competing at these events makes you feel bad. Maybe there's a way your school could change its sports day so it doesn't feel so geared towards winning. Like maybe they could decide not to keep score or you and your friends could just decide not to keep score when you're playing for fun. Another thing you could do is concentrate in your own mind and heart and body on the things that do make you feel good, like learning a new skill or seeing how you can get better at something by practicing or helping one of your friends or teammates score a goal. In a few minutes, we're going to hear from a kid who likes to think about sports that way. But first, we wanted to talk to someone who competes at a very high level about what she likes and doesn't like about competing.

Harini [00:09:59] My name is Harini Logan. I'm 12 years old and I live in San Antonio, Texas.

Jane [00:10:05] Harini is a competitive speller. Do you know about the Scripps National Spelling Bee? It's a yearly event in the United States where the best spellers in the country get together on TV to compete in a spelling bee. That's where you have to spell words correctly in order to move on to the next round. And eventually one person wins the whole competition. This event is just for kids and Harini has competed in it twice.

Harini [00:10:31] I actually watched the National Spelling Bee on television when I was in first grade, so I was about six years old when I watched the bee. And I remember telling my parents, Mom, Dad, I want to be like those big kids on TV, like I want to smell like them because I loved reading ever since I was young. So I always wanted to, kind of, figure out what else I could do with my reading, and I watched this bee and I was like, hey, this seems really cool. So I really wanted to try it out. So that's how I first got into competitive spelling.

Jane [00:11:15] Even though Harini says it's competitive spelling, that doesn't mean that the kids who are competing have to be mean to each other. In fact, it's kind of the opposite.

Harini [00:11:24] And that's one of the things that appealed to her, because there was this kind of friendship between the spellers that I could see on TV, like whenever they finished

spelling and they would go back to their seats, like I would see these spellers giving each other high fives, smiling and being happy for their friends and fellow participants. And I just really thought, wow, it would be really cool to have friends that like the same things I do that kind of like to read, like words in general. So I thought it was, I love the friendship between the participants as well.

Jane [00:12:04] Harini started by doing regional competitions in her first year. She won. She's been to the national event twice in 2018 and 2019. One of the words she had to spell in 2019 was butyraldehyde. I'm not sure I've ever even heard that word, let alone have to spell it. For the record, butyraldehyde is a chemical compound and it's spelled b-u-t-y-r-a-l-d-e-h-y-d-e, butyraldehyde. But I only know that because I'm reading it. Very impressive, Harini. In 2020, the National Spelling Bee didn't happen because of Covid-19, but this year it's back and Harini hopes to be competing in it again. And even though it is a competition, Harini says she doesn't feel like she's competing against the other kids in the bee or against herself.

Harini [00:13:01] I feel like I'm competing against the words that are given to me because it could seem like some people might perceive it, like you're kind of competing against your fellow spellers. But I think what's really going on is each person is, we're all competing together against the words that are given to us, against the dictionary. Because if one person knows the words they get and the other person doesn't, you're not really competing against each other. You're kind of competing against the word. So it's like if you get it right, yes, I win. I've won this competition against the word. But if you don't get it right, it's OK. I'll try harder and next time I will win this competition against the word. So I think it's just friends competing against a word list or the dictionary. I don't think they're really competing against each other.

Jane [00:13:55] I love that way of thinking about it. We asked Harini to offer some suggestions for those of us who maybe get more discouraged than she does when we don't do as well as we wanted to.

[00:14:06] I feel like that's a kind of thinking process that happens to a lot of people. And even when I was younger, I experienced it like I placed like like over 50, probably somewhere in the 60s in my first NSF National. And at first I was really hurt and upset and I felt like, no, I don't want to do this anymore because I'm just bad at it. But then I kind of really thought about it. And of course, my parents talked to me about it and helped me realize that you're not going to go anywhere unless you try harder, because if you try harder, you're not going to be the same. You're going to be better. It doesn't matter if the person next to you or opposite you is faster or better or smarter.

Harini [00:14:54] You just need to be able to do what you can do and do that to the best of your ability. And that's really what matters. If you feel like you're not as good as someone else, just remember that they're not you and you're not them. You're your own person. So be the best person that you can be. And then that's all you need.

Jane [00:15:17] We also put Kai's question to Harini, why do we need to compete with others?

Harini [00:15:23] That's a really good question.

Harini [00:15:25] I really think that the answer to this is competition really teaches you a lot, because whether it's in the preparation leading up to that competition or the

competition itself or even the outcome of the competition, it can teach you a lot about not only your abilities, but also like new things that kind of change the way you look at life, because, for example, when you're preparing for a competition, you'll learn a lot about how to work hard and how to never give up on something. And during the competition, you learn teamwork. That's also one thing we learn in spelling bees because you want to be with your community, with your friends and compete. So teamwork is also another thing you can learn in the competition and after the competition. One thing to learn if you win: sportsmanship! Like you don't gloat about it, you still kind of appreciate yourself, but you don't overdo it so people around you feel bad. And if you don't win, it doesn't matter. I'm going to try harder next time. Just because I didn't win this time doesn't mean I can ever win. So competition, not just on your own, but even with friends, teaches you a lot.

Jane [00:16:48] That was Harini Logan. She's a competitive speller from San Antonio, Texas. Good luck in your spelling bees this year, Harini. When we come back, we'll hear from another kid who has a great approach to competition and sports.

Jane [00:17:02] This is But Why: a Podcast for Curious Kids from Vermont Public Radio, I'm Jane Lindholm. Today, we're exploring the idea of competition. Three year old Kai in Tokyo, Japan wants to know why we have to compete with other people, especially our friends. We've been thinking about how competing can lead to inequality and how sometimes people's feelings can get hurt. But competition can also allow us to push ourselves to get better at something. It can be a way to meet friends and it can help us learn. When Kai sent this question, I thought of another young person with a great attitude about playing sports. So I asked his mom if he'd be willing to talk to me. And we met up the other day wearing our masks to be safe at our local school playground.

Del [00:17:48] I am Del Philip Guilmette. I am from Monkton, Vermont, and I am 10 years old.

Jane [00:17:55] What grade are you in?

Del [00:17:56] I'm in fourth grade. I like soccer a lot. It's like my key sport that I play a lot. I guess I love cross-country skiing. That's also really fun for me. And there's a few sports that I just play because a lot of my friends play it and it's kind of fun. But I'm not definitely not as good as them. But like baseball and basketball are the two main sports that are like that I guess.

Jane [00:18:23] I asked Del what he likes so much about playing sports.

Del [00:18:26] That you got to work so hard on it and you get so much better and that they're just it's so rewarding. And you get and I think it's just fun to exercise and going outside. I'm just running around, kicking a ball, throwing a ball, whatever it is, I think, so fun.

Del [00:18:46] And I guess once you get that maintain and even maintain like that, that like great feeling of just being outside, kicking a ball, having fun, being with your friends, you like love it, you just love it.

Jane [00:19:06] I wanted to talk to Del because something he told me more than a year ago has really stuck with me. One day when I saw him in the winter, he was about to have a basketball game against another local team that night. And he told me he didn't think his team was going to win, that the other team was a lot better, but that, in fact, Del kind of

liked the games where the other team was better, even if it meant his team lost. He liked them more than the games when he was on the better team and won easily. I've been thinking about that a lot. So I asked Del to explain his way of thinking.

Del [00:19:40] If I think I can win it, but then I kind of like disappoint myself, then, yeah, I probably will feel bad. But most of the time, like, it's just like I have so fun doing it, I don't even think about if I lost or not. It's just I want to play the sport, had a great time and just enjoyed it so much. And that's just what always occurs to me when I lose. The best players at the game, whatever sport it is, like soccer, Pele and Messi, basketball, like Michael Jordan, LeBron James, all the sports, all those players didn't get better because they played these easy like the teams that they knew they're going to beat. They played those teams that are better at them and then they got better and practiced and just played those teams that you need to play to get amazing.

Jane [00:20:33] Del also has some advice for Kai or for kids who might like sports but don't like the feeling of competition.

Del [00:20:40] I mean, just have fun if you don't compete. It's not. No, I hope at least, that no one's going to stop you. Like, just have fun out there and have the greatest time you can.

Jane [00:20:52] Remember back at the beginning of the episode when we were talking with anthropologist Niko Besnier, he says the way Del approaches sports is a great way to think about competition.

Niko [00:21:02] He is determining what is good for him, how playing will help him rather than letting his parents or other children make that take that decision for him. So this is it sounds like he's got the right attitude, one that is actually very mature and and very useful.

Jane [00:21:25] I have to say, I think both Del and Harini are very impressive. And I appreciate both of you giving me a lot to think about when it comes to competing with myself and others and in the ways to get better at the skills I want to improve in.

Jane [00:21:39] One thing that Harini mentioned that I just want to highlight as we wrap up this episode, is the importance of keeping in mind the feelings of others, especially if you are a very competitive person and maybe some people are not. It's OK to celebrate your accomplishments and definitely OK to work hard and push yourself to do your best. But you don't want to do it in a way that makes others feel bad, or puts them down. Don't forget, the benefits of competition are supposed to be having fun and learning things, and that goes for both kids and adults.

[00:22:12] That's it for this episode. Thanks to Niko Besnier. He's a professor of anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and the author of two books about sports and competition. And big thanks to our speller, Harini Logan and to our athlete Del Guilmette. But Why is produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, at Vermont Public Radio. Our show is distributed by PRX and our theme music is by Luke Reynolds.

[00:22:38] We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious!