



## Approaching Competitive Games with Care: Five tips to help kids become better at losing

By Linda Murphy, MS, CCC-SLP

One of the hardest things for all kids to learn is how to manage the ups and downs of games that have a competitive focus. In other words, all individuals must learn how to win respectfully and lose gracefully. All kids work on these skills as they grow, but for kids with social learning challenges, it can be especially difficult.

If your child is one who struggles in this area, try to approach this type of play as an opportunity teaching with empathy and understanding. If you stop to think about why this learning is *so* hard for kids with social learning challenges, it makes sense. Kids with social learning challenges have so many losses and misunderstandings

in their lives. These happen day-to-day, week-to-week...much more than they do for the average child.

Nobody gets their way all the time, but an important difference for a person with social learning challenges is that they are not as prepared or equipped to handle the disappointment. Their difficulty perceiving unspoken social norms, making predictions, and appreciating the big picture, along with a lowered resilience due to many disappointments over time, make any loss especially painful for them.

In addition, due to known challenges accessing episodic memory (or the ability to remember your own personal experiences that may be relevant in the present moment), it

may also be harder for individuals with social learning challenges to easily recall their last win, so they truly do feel like they “NEVER” win.

You can help kids with social learning challenges the most by understanding the difficulties they face, approaching them with care, while they work towards building their resilience, improving their ability to predict loss, and overall strengthening their ability to manage loss with grace. In other words, be kind while kids are working to improve their ability to understand that losing a game is expected and manageable. It also will work to help them stay emotionally regulated.

As you enter competitive activities with this compassionate mindset, there

are additional ways to thoughtfully approach and practice winning and losing. The goal is to carefully build kids up and help them experience a series of successes in their own emotional regulation, which will then grow over time. In contrast, placing them in less thoughtful contexts where they lose big can break them. This is not what you want, as it is not good for anyone.

Here are five tips, or thoughtful ways to approach competitive games, that provide kids important opportunities to build their ability to manage loss.

**Tip 1: Create many small opportunities which allow for balanced wins and losses**

Play games that have many small opportunities to win or lose, versus games that have only one big win at the end. Examples include the card game War, Rat-a-Tat-Cat (a card game by Gamewright, in which you play a game with several rounds), or even Tic Tac Toe (all you need is a piece of paper and a pencil!) These are more likely to be positive competitive experiences, because the small losses are manageable. For example, in a game such as War, it will be easy to illustrate this type of idea to your child: “Yes, you may have just lost that one round, but look...you still have a whole deck of cards left and chances are, you will win a round again very

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soon!” Each quick round also provides the adult opportunities to model self-talk for the kids, which they can then use themselves (“It’s okay my card was a lower number. I’ll have another turn to try again in a second!”) as well as language of good sportsmanship (“Good game! You won that round fair and square.”)

Kids can manage loss better in these types of contexts because they can see very concretely (in the deck of cards in their hand for example) all the future opportunities to come where they might win. They can also see their accumulation of previous wins close by in their win pile, which keeps feelings of loss from getting too big.

**Tip #2: Play winning/losing games as a team**

Have kids play games in partnership with others so that the loss is not individual. When playing as partners, kids have the opportunity to share the loss with someone, which creates camaraderie and helps it hurt less. In addition, a positive relationship can often support their ability to handle the loss, especially if one person in the partnership is skilled at losing well. Kids could partner with each other or, if at home, different caregivers could partner with different kids. Examples of this strategy in use might be with a game of “Team Candy Land” (we use one Gingerbread person as we move towards Candy Castle, instead of several game pieces), or with The Ladybug Game by Zobmondo!! (we have one ladybug piece that moves across the board, so together we gather 10 aphids to give to the ants at the designated time.)

**Tip #3: Kids vs. Grown-ups!**

This one is especially fun and builds upon Tip #2. Create “Kids vs. Grown-ups” opportunities when playing a competitive game. This is always a great way to carefully help kids get

their toes wet while practicing the skill of “losing.” Grown-ups can give the team of kids the successes or wins they may need to stay positively engaged and then introduce a loss when you know the children are in a good place to handle it. For example, play several rounds of Tic Tac Toe, where the kids decide together where to place their mark. Give them space to win several rounds in a row and give them time to celebrate their power and connection as a team. Then, strategically beat them or insert “Grown-Up Wins,” when you know their memories and joy of winning as a team are still strong. These are small losses but important ones, because you are gradually helping them build memories of themselves handling the loss well. End with a “Kid Win” so they walk away with positive memories of the overall experience and a desire to come back and play (win or lose!) again.

**Tip #4: Use reflection and journaling**

Have you ever heard your child say, “I NEVER win!” when you know this is just *not* true? With this tip, you will use concrete means to store and recall personal memories, related to the truth of winning and losing, over time. Find a spiral notebook or journal of your child’s choice, and start to log wins in the moment and across time. Record information with the child, such as the date and game that they won, so they can refer to it and reflect with it as needed. With this tool, kids don’t have to solely rely on what may be imperfect memory. The truth will become evident, and comforting, over time. Caregivers can say and show them: “Yes, you did lose this time, but let’s use your journal to remember all the other times you have won!” Making wins concrete and observable in this manner will help kids perceive their personal history accurately, and as a result, build resilience.



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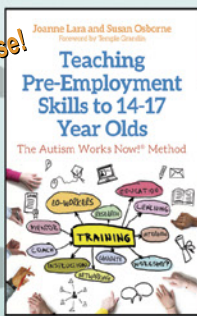
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### Tip #5: Pace yourself

Go slow and introduce losses thoughtfully. You want to create a positive forward momentum where the child builds solid memories of themselves as "someone who can handle loss" and as someone who stays emotionally regulated when they lose. If the loss is too great too quickly and the child falls apart, it will only reinforce the idea they may have of themselves as "someone who can't handle loss." This is not what you want. Instead, start small and work up gradually to bigger challenges. For example, think about the game Sorry! by Hasbro and how many losses and disappointments are inherent in the game. This is not where you want to start, but it certainly could be a game that you can work up to over time as you sense your child is ready.

Mindfully inserting losses at a pace the child can handle may mean letting them win a few rounds while highlighting or recording these wins for them, before introducing a loss. When they do lose, and handle it well, highlight this in the moment ("Wow! I love how you managed that loss. You are really becoming a good sport.") When the adult times it right, kids will be more likely to see that losing happens to all of us and gradually

begin to accept when it happens to them. You want them to begin to think of themselves as someone who is okay when they lose. They don't have to like it, but they can handle it. This is what is most important.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Learning to be a good sport while losing is hard work for all kids, but especially for kids with social learning challenges for many reasons. Remember to approach kids with empathy and understanding while you carefully work to build their skills in this area. No kid wants to have a meltdown because they lost a game; support them to stay emotionally regulated while losing by thoughtfully creating opportunities where they successfully handle loss, which will build upon these experiences over time. ■



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