

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Why finishing 4th beats winning

We all love to see our kids be successful. But maybe it's their struggles rather than their wins that will set them up for future success.

Everyone wants to win. We want it for ourselves.
We want it even more for our kids.

It's great to see the smile of satisfaction on a child's face after winning a game, a race or finishing on top of the pile in any endeavour.

Winning feels good. It means they're doing well.
It's equated with **success**.

It's a good habit to develop ... *or so the theory goes.*

But winning is just one part of the story.

Not finishing first carries emotion too, though it's not necessarily positive.

It's good for kids to experience disappointment, annoyance and frustration just as it's good for them to experience positive emotions.

It's good to learn when you are young that ***bad feelings happen, but they don't last.*** This is a valuable life lesson.

Not winning also teaches kids that there is a link between success and effort. It teaches them that perseverance pays off eventually.

Helping kids to accept setbacks and unpleasant emotions, rather than blocking them out, is *the key to building their resilience.*

What about the child who never wins?

Some children seem to never win, or hardly ever do. A friend has a child who always seems to have 4th place sewn up in any race – just missing a ribbon – unless he is trying to get into a four person relay team, in which case he finishes 5th.

As a caring parent my friend works hard keeping her son's chin up year after year. And that's what she has to do. I suspect her son will learn the value of struggle. But it will pay off in his adult life when he understands that persistence is a fabulous asset.



So if you have a child who continually comes 4th (figuratively as well as literally) here are some strategies you can focus on:

- 1. Encourage liberally:** Stanford University professor Carol Dweck (who has written a great deal on this very topic) encourages parents to use process praises: "You used smart strategies", "You worked hard on that one", "You thought long and hard to work that problem out". She says this helps kids value effort and work for longer-term results.
- 2. Focus on struggles, not just on victories:** Your focus as a parent reveals your values. If you value effort and struggle then you need to be on the lookout for these so you can applaud them. If winning is all you value, then you'll only focus on that. There is a **choice** here.
- 3. Share stories of struggle and overcoming adversity:** Whether it's stories from your own life (kids love to hear about when their parents struggled) or stories from public news and sport, inspire and encourage your kids with the narratives of the struggles of others.

It's easy as a parent to get caught in the winning trap. We sometimes just get carried along with the hype.

But maybe, just maybe, finishing 4th is better for kids in the long term than always being a winner.