



## Competitive Gymnasts: 10 Ways to Keep the Peace between Friends in Competition

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Competition can be very good for your gymnasts. It can help them learn how to set goals, work as a team, develop skills, and enhance confidence. However, when competing with friends or siblings, some young and inexperienced gymnasts can get confused. How do I act if I win? And perhaps more distressing; how can I cope if I lose?

As coaches and gym owners, you know that gymnasts compete with friends and against friends often. The mixed feelings that come with wanting to cheer on your friends and siblings but also win yourself can be confusing. And for those who do not place at a meet; clashing feelings of envy, shame, guilt and pride are to be expected.

Of course, it's not just about the few gymnasts who go to semi-finals or finals, but also about the more subtle wins and losses that happen everyday in class. The coach provides more praise to one gymnast than another. One gymnast is picked over another to demonstrate a skill. A certain gymnast shows more aptitude and power than another and perhaps is even promoted to the next level a little more quickly than another. These ingredients can make competition tough to handle. While it's impossible and unadvised to negate all rivalry, there



are ways for coaches to encourage gracious winning and losing. In fact, it's part of being a good coach. So how can we set the stage for friendly competition and help our young gymnasts cope when competing with friends or siblings?

**(1) Beware of Comparing:**

When coaches make comparisons between friends or siblings, it undermines the effort and goals of both individuals. No matter if the statements are favorable or unfavorable; comparisons can create unneeded friction and animosity. Therefore, comments such as "you're so much better than Ashley" and "if you practiced more, you could be better than Shawn" are both harmful. It's also important to teach parents to refrain from making this mistake as well.

**(2) Praise their Personal Best:**

Powerful coaches recognize their gymnasts' personal milestones independent of winning or how someone else performs. When they reach their personal goals, even if they don't win, celebrate with them! It's vital that your students know that their personal best is good enough regardless of whether they bring home a trophy or how their friends place.

Think about it—is it more important for your gymnasts to win (even if they don't do their best) or is it more important that they do their best (even if they don't win)? Your message and attitude will permeate the outlook of your competing gymnasts.

**(3) Support Good Sportsmanship:**

When you see it, let them know you appreciate it. We often refrain from giving children praise when they're doing something right, and instead, scold them when they make the wrong choices. Seize those moments when your gymnasts congratulate other competitors, tell them "good luck," or cheer them on. These behaviors show strength of character and when you take note of them, they'll be more likely to do them again and again.

**(4) Nip poor sportsmanship in the bud:**

Ensure that your gymnasts know that talking behind their friends' backs when they're competing, purposefully hindering other people's performances in any way, or playing "head games," is unacceptable. Make it clear that it's OK to feel frustrated temporarily and want to do better the next time,

but it's poor sportsmanship to blame or set-up your friends or fellow competitors for failure.

**(5) Provide a Great Example:**

Remember; your students are looking to you and other adults to see how to act. Are you gossiping about the other competitors? Saying negative things about the judges? Complaining to the parents? Or, are you complimentary, supportive, and respectful? Again, be sure to teach the parents to follow your positive lead. If you want your gymnasts to show good sportsmanship, make sure you and other important adults are showing the behavior you want your students to emulate.

**(6) Ensure Their Readiness and Reasons:**

Not all children are ready to compete when they're given the opportunity. It takes cognitive, social, and emotional maturity to handle competition. If they're competing to appease you or keep up with friends, they're not ready. If they're doing it for positive, fulfilling reasons such as fun, excitement, exercise, team spirit, challenge, or goal-achievement, they're much more likely to be ready for it and enjoy it, no matter whether they win or lose.

**(7) Reframe Your Questions and Comments:**

It's natural to focus on winning and losing, especially when we're right in the moment. After a loss, it may be tempting to ask; "What happened?" or "Why didn't you win?" and follow up with a critique of his or her performance as well as the performances of his or her friends. But these questions, especially when you're dealing with a young or inexperienced competitor, aren't really the important aspects of competition. Reframe your questions by asking your children and their friends; "Did you all have fun?" or "What did you learn?" There is time to break apart the routines and discuss improvements when they get back in the gym to train for the next competition.

**(8) Teach Parents to be their Children's #1 Fans:**

Instead of focusing on winning or losing, help parents and other important adults in the child's life to focus on the

gymnast's enjoyment, skill development, and reactions to the activity. After all, it's your job to be their coach...and you don't need their assistance with your job! For example, teach them to say, "You looked like you were having lots of fun out there" or "Your skills have really improved." There is no such thing as providing too much positive support. In fact, positive reactions from parents are related to greater enjoyment and positive self esteem for children.

**(9) Encourage Your Gymnasts To Make a TFL Pact:**

If you know that your students will be competing with good friends and siblings, get them all together to make a "Team for Life" Pact. Encourage them to tell each other that no matter what happens, they'll always have each other's backs, cheer them on, and be a supportive team. Make sure they uphold that pact both in and out of competition.

**(10) Ground them in Character:**

Top coaches use a powerful character education system to teach their gymnasts how to bring out the best in themselves and others whether in the gym or out. A formal character education program should be an integral part of every gym and every class. In just five minutes per class, you can inspire your gymnasts to be more respectful, responsible, grateful, team-oriented, or whatever the powerful word of the month is that month. When you teach your gymnasts how to best represent your gym and themselves when in competition, they will know exactly what to do and will surely rise to the occasion.

At the heart of every young gymnast's competition should be fun, friendship, and learning. Otherwise, what's the point? What will keep them coming back?

When the routines have all been performed, the scores have been tallied, and individuals and teams have been rewarded, gymnasts can reconnect with their closest buddies and remember that their respect for each other is bigger and more important than any one competition. Competitions will come and go, but friendship, if nurtured and respected, can last for years—and perhaps even a lifetime. ✧