



WHY AREN'T WOMEN WIRED TO WIN?

We have long had a confused relationship with our competitive streak. *Anna Pursglove* argues that it's time we learned to go all out for victory

Illustrations LUCI GUTIERREZ

MY son came home from school yesterday upset that he hadn't won a competition. It transpired that this 'competition' was in fact an award dished out every week by his primary school to those deemed to have displayed 'super citizen' qualities.

I tried to explain to my disgruntled six-year-old that being a super citizen wasn't a win/lose deal: that the idea was to reward children who showed themselves to be kind, considerate and helpful. He was having none of it. 'But I do those things anyway, Mummy!' he countered. 'So I should get an award every week. And that would be silly!' Maybe he's got a point.

Similarly, the stickers for displaying 'Olympic values' awarded at school over the past year in the build-up to the Games have perplexed my best friend. They are, according to her daughter, given to pupils in recognition of their understanding and use of the 'Olympic and Paralympic values of respect, courage and determination'. Yet the concept of winning (and losing) – the very underpinning of the

Olympics, surely – is conspicuous by its absence.

It's fair to say that we have a confused relationship with our competitive streak. We'd sell our grandmothers for a ticket to the 100m final yet here we are telling our children that the main point of the Olympics is determination. That whether or not Team GB runs fastest, throws furthest or jumps longest is a matter of supreme unimportance – provided the athletes have tried their best. Emma Citron, a consultant clinical psychologist, agrees that the 'educational pendulum has swung towards discouraging competition,' but warns that this won't necessarily produce a generation of altruistically minded super citizens. 'Children are extremely good at seeing through meaningless praise,' she says.

Chartered psychologist and family relationships expert Dr Lynne Jordan explains that however hard we beat the 'taking part is what counts' drum, children are still attracted to those who compete successfully. 'Freud talked about identification with the aggressor,'

she says. 'This essentially means that children tend to identify with the most powerful person in a situation.' So yes, Robin is cool – but Batman is way cooler.

Dr Jordan points out that competition is in fact a primal motivator. 'Children are driven to win at a very young age,' she says. 'Competition is what motivates all of us to do things better. If you strip away competition entirely, then nobody has a reason to strive for anything.'

So if a competitive streak is not only attractive to us but is hard-wired, why do we find it so difficult to admit to having one? And why are we giving our children mixed messages about theirs? Competition, after all, is everywhere you look: our most popular TV shows – *X Factor*, *Strictly* – are based on it; our electoral system is predicated on it; the job market is rife with it. And never have sharper elbows been needed to negotiate the cutthroat world of modern parenting.

Yet still we pretend to ourselves and to others that we're perfectly happy for someone else to ➤

'If you strip away competition entirely, then nobody has a reason to strive'

◀ walk off with the cup. Career mentor and women's life coach Jessica Chivers says we are the victims of biology: 'Faced with a challenge, men will tend to display the "fight or flight" response. Women resort to a "tend and befriend" approach. In other words, in stressful situations, our brains tell us that the best way to get what we want is to be helpful

– but not necessarily to focus on our own game.'

Leadership psychologist Averil Leimon, however, claims that our difficulties with competition are more than hormonal. 'We are letting girls down badly when it comes to teaching them how to deal successfully with rivalry,' she says. 'Ask a group of ten-year-olds if they want to be prime minister and they'll mostly say yes. You certainly won't see any kind of gender divide in their responses. Ask them again at 15, however, and a far higher proportion of the girls will be disinclined to lead. Somewhere in adolescence we are putting girls off risk-taking.'

One big problem, says Leimon, is the language we adopt. If a man is competing then he's 'locking horns' or 'taking it on' or 'going head-to-head'. These are strong, positive, forceful images. Women in competition, conversely, will be 'cat fighting' or 'ruffling feathers' or engaging in 'handbags at dawn'. Girls are subtly but surely being told that to compete is to expose themselves to ridicule.

Another stumbling block, continues Leimon, is that we tell girls they need to do things perfectly. 'This perfectionism actually holds women back,' she says. 'I see time and again that a woman aiming for a top job will over-prepare, whereas men are far more willing to take a chance and, potentially, to fail.' There's no doubt that we like to compete. Just look at how much energy we devote to going up against our own ideals of perfection: looking younger, thinner, having the perfect home and so on. Turning this focus outwards could potentially help us compete more successfully in the wider world.

And if further proof were needed about the female tendency to retreat, see as evidence last year's revelation of the lack of women on the boards of the UK's biggest companies. A report by Deloitte found that 20 per cent of companies in the FTSE 100 have women in their boardrooms and that these women held just five per cent of executive positions.

It would seem then that between the unhelpful stereotypes of the boardroom bitch and the homebody mummy, a void has opened up with few competitive female role models to fill it.

Ruby McGregor-Smith, chief executive of strategic outsourcing and energy services company



MITIE, is one of those few. In 2007, she was appointed the UK's first female Asian FTSE 250 chief executive. She is regularly asked why women are reluctant competitors. For her, the problem is that somewhere along the line, we've decided that being winners and being decent human beings are mutually exclusive aspirations.

'I hope that the myth of the trade-off for women between being either successful or nice is disappearing,' she says. 'I think that women do sometimes find it more difficult to put themselves forward for roles that they may not feel completely ready for, whereas men focus more on what they can do rather than what they can't do. Women bring different skills to the table that are as valuable as a lot of the more typically "male" traits.' Among these, says McGregor-Smith, is the ability to build strong relationships and to collaborate.

It's a sentiment echoed by International Monetary Fund boss Christine Lagarde, who recently told a newspaper that she, too, believed collaborative skills were often underestimated:

'I think when you drill down and ask what it takes to be managing director of the IMF, then the ability to listen, the ability to understand the perspective of your entire membership, respect and tolerance for political diversity, cultural diversity... that's very important, actually.'

Joanna Thornell, managing director of banking services at Coutts, also believes traditionally female talents of nurturing and collaborating shouldn't be overlooked in the boardroom. She advises that women needn't see these as a barrier to achieving in other arenas too: 'This does not make women

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less able to apply themselves to wider tasks, such as detailed business analysis and strategic planning... a diverse mix of skills often leads to a more productive and creative workforce with improved decision making.'

And the more I canvass this small band of comfortably competitive women, the more I'm told that times are changing.

Jane Scott, UK director of the Professional Boards Forum, believes the savviest companies are already beginning to value traditionally female skills and to actively seek them out. 'There's never been a better time for women with ambition and skills,' she urges.

So if the phrase 'competitive woman' has become sullied in recent years, it is certainly due for rehabilitation. Although this news is yet to filter through to at least one primary school in West London where I attended my best friend's

daughter's sports day (friend, incidentally, was absent as she was making her mark in a City boardroom; I, being freelance, offered to step in).

Watched over by (an almost entirely female) staff and parents, the children were engaged in highly complex team activities involving helping each other in and out of dressing-up clothes while catching coloured quoits and putting them in a box. Judging by the bemused looks on the faces of the kids, they, like me, were not entirely sure how this was all supposed to end (certainly not with rosettes saying first, second and third).

I remember my own sports days where the point was to charge down a track as fast as you could brandishing the

requisite egg/spoon/sack/baton and to stop when you reached the finishing line. Someone won. Everyone else lost. No children were emotionally harmed in the process.

When I asked my charge whether she had finished her races, she corrected me. 'They were games. And no, I haven't finished – it's the bit now where you take photos.' I wondered vaguely whether this might be the medal ceremony. 'Nooooooo,' she said loudly and slowly as though addressing someone particularly stupid. 'We don't do medals. This is the Participation Parade.' ■

HOW TO BE A WINNER

- If you find it hard to admit you're ambitious, then ask yourself what you'd like your legacy to be.
- Don't be afraid to do something badly. Get comfortable with saying 'I'm learning'.
- Try to use 'I' instead of 'we' – women are bad at laying claim to their achievements.
- Avoid negative phrases such as 'I don't know if I'm good enough' or 'I just got lucky'. Negative thinking will hold you back.
- Make a plan – and don't be afraid to share it. People will find you less aggressive if they can see what you're working towards.