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Does the Winner Truly Take It All? Rethinking Youth, Perpetual Competition, and Character Development Through a Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Competition is an intrinsic aspect of human behaviour, evolving from fundamental survival mechanisms to complex socio-cultural phenomena such as status acquisition, achievement recognition, and recreational engagement. Despite its ubiquity, our understanding of competition—particularly among vulnerable youth—remains limited, with variability across cultural, temporal, and individual contexts. This systematic literature review, based on high-quality peer-reviewed articles, seeks to analyse the opportunities and challenges of early competition, providing a comprehensive overview for stakeholders. The review focuses on three key areas: competition in general, its advantages and disadvantages, and its future prospects. The findings indicate that, notwithstanding prevalent negative associations (e.g., akin to war), competition and cooperation are interdependent constructs that collectively underpin motivation, engagement, and developmental processes across diverse domains. Here, an interesting paradox emerged: healthy competition fosters cooperation by enhancing motivation and goal attainment, while its absence may reduce engagement and intrinsic motivation. By its nature, competition produces unequal outcomes, generating winners and losers, which can elicit diverse psychosocial responses (ranging from pressure to pleasure). Despite limited cognitive understanding of competition, children evidently show preferences for competitive play structures, which, when thoughtfully managed from an early age, foster the development of essential life skills such as resilience, coping strategies, humility, and teamwork. As per the findings, foundational principles including fairness, equity, and a calibrated balance between challenge and enjoyment are essential to fostering adaptive coping and positive developmental trajectories. However, effective implementation requires sustained collaboration between parents and educators, prioritizing cooperative, task-focused pedagogies and fostering

respectful relational dynamics through appropriate feedback, guidance, pressure. Additionally, the alignment of expectations with children's developmental readiness—accounting for individual and contextual factors—seems to be crucial for optimizing developmental outcomes. The review concludes by outlining methodological limitations and emphasizing the need for further research due to the limited understanding in this field.

Keywords/key phrases: globalisation, competition, coping with winning and losing, youth, character development, systematic literature review (SLR)

1. Introduction: A 'Win or Perish' Scenario from Early Times?

Competition has long been embedded in human society, historically celebrating exceptional individuals—rulers, generals, and Olympians—who gained status, power, and recognition. Rooted in evolutionary and social mechanisms such as self-interest, individuality, freedom, herd instinct, social comparison, (in)equality, scarcity, and the formation of hierarchy and rules, competition has always shaped hierarchy and rule systems (Thorbjørnsen, 2019). Many secured immortality through history, as we believe the victors often shaped the narrative...

In today's globalized and digitized world, driven by rapid change and VUCA dynamics (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity) illustrated by challenges such as long-ongoing conflicts in the East, the COVID-19 pandemic, or climate change, the pressure to excel begins early. Children are increasingly exposed to competitive demands in academics, sports, and extracurriculars, aiming to secure future opportunities in an intense global labour market (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Globalization, ICT, and AI advancements have intensified these demands by eroding spatial and temporal boundaries, raising standards and expectations (Achoki, 2023; Bajor et al., 2019; Donald & Mouratidou, 2022; Fellows, 2024; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Németh et al., 2021; Omelchenko et al., 2018). While national talent was once celebrated independently, individuals now compete on a global scale, pushing parents, teachers, and coaches to emphasize high performance from early childhood. Márta Fülöp, a Hungarian psychologist specializing in competition, noted that although the human tendency to compete remains constant, competitive stimuli have multiplied—particularly in school environments and on social media (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). As Pucciarelli and Kaplan (2016, p. 311) put it; *"higher education has become a crowded global marketplace"*, adapting to an increasingly digital and dynamic environment.

This growing pressure is reflected in various cultural contexts. In the USA, this pressure is frequently dramatized in American media, where students are shown juggling demanding schedules, challenging coursework, and extracurricular activities in their pursuit of admission to elite universities—a common theme in many films. These challenges can lead to significant stress, sometimes even driving reliance on performance-enhancing substances to cope (Choi et al., 2014). Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, in China, the intense academic pressure during entrance exams has historically led to tragic outcomes reported by many news sources, including a rise in student suicides, underscoring the grave consequences of an excessively competitive environment (Andrada, 2023; Zhao et al., 2018).

These developments raise urgent questions: How does lifelong competition affect youth development? Is it worth and/or sustainable? Does the winner really take it all? Building on existing literature, this review explores both the benefits and challenges of early and ongoing competition. It aims to identify critical factors for supporting children, parents, educators, and coaches in fostering resilience and mitigating the potentially adverse effects of excessive competition in an increasingly demanding world.

2. Systematic Literature Review

The following section discusses the methods, design, and findings of the paper.

2.1. Method & Design

To explore the complex phenomenon of early competition, this study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) focusing on peer-reviewed international research related to competition and character development. SLR enables the transparent, replicable identification, evaluation, and synthesis of existing literature. Studies were selected from major databases—including Scopus, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and Web of Science—based on predefined inclusion criteria, followed by a manual refinement of relevant sources (Anand et al., 2022; García-Peñalvo, 2022; Gough et al., 2012; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021; Okoli, 2015; Paul & Barari, 2022; Paul et al., 2023). The review proceeded through structured phases of screening, appraisal, and synthesis to ensure methodological rigor and comprehensive coverage:

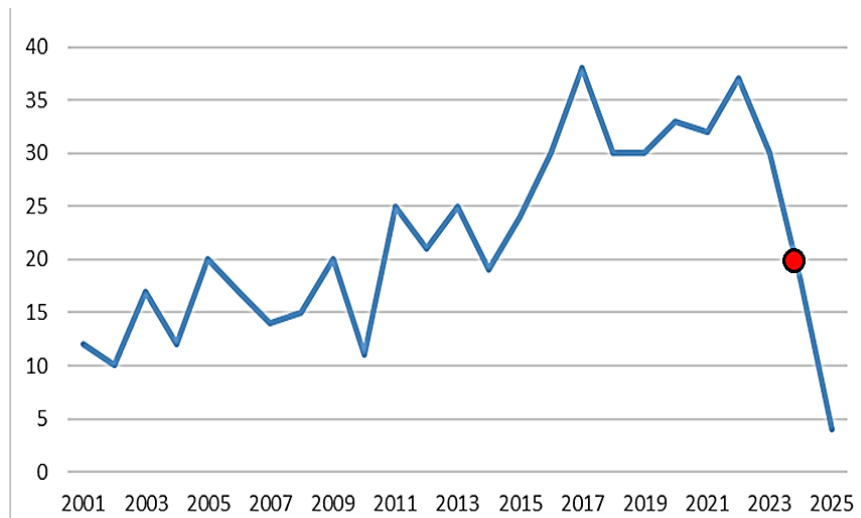
1. Article identification: A web search was conducted to locate potentially relevant papers within the primary domains of interest. The parameters were as follows:
 - a. Year published: no limitations (data gathering concluded in January 2025)
 - b. Keywords: competition & character (development)
 - c. Keywords scope: title/abstract/keywords
 - d. Language: English
2. Selection of relevant articles: The exclusion criteria emphasized high-impact journals (based on Scimago.com rankings) and prioritized open-access full-text publications. Included sources comprised of books, book chapters, conference proceedings, forum papers, summit reports, notes, and research articles/reviews in English, with duplicates removed.
3. Qualitative analysis of papers: The selected documents were manually analysed qualitatively to identify the most relevant papers and key themes for this study:
 - a. Loosely related: mentions competition and youth without these being a central focus (excluded).
 - b. Partially related: discusses the implications of competition on youth development to some extent (included).
 - c. Closely related: focuses on the pros and cons of competition for youth (included).

This process yielded a comprehensive overview of the literature, highlighting key trends, methodologies, and publication patterns, and informed the development of a conceptual model to structure the paper's findings.

2.2. Relevant Literature

As Figure 1 indicates, publication trends show a marked rise in scholarly interest in terms related to this study since the 2000s, underscoring the topic's growing relevance (based on the initial review stage, using given keyword searches limited to English-language publications).

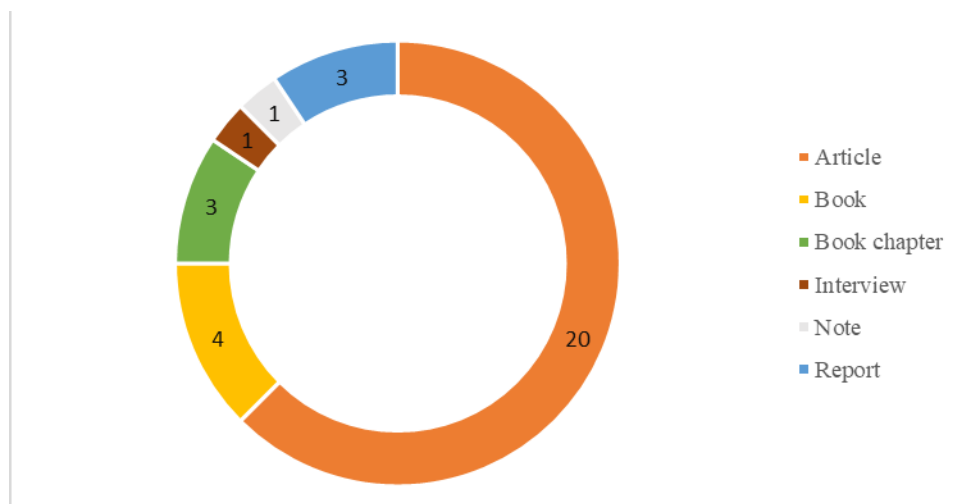
FIGURE 1. STAGE 1 DOCUMENTS BY YEAR OF PUBLICATION (N=769)



Source: own compilation

The initial broad search required refinement to ensure relevance and quality. As advised, by applying further filters such as access, source type, and journal ranking, we narrowed the selection for manual qualitative analysis. Given the topic's specificity, additional relevant articles were identified through supplementary searches (e.g., following the example of Griszbacher (2024) using Google Scholar as an additional source), enhancing the dataset. Together, these steps yielded the key sources forming the basis of this review (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. SELECTED DOCUMENTS FOR THE REVIEW (N=32) BY TYPE



Source: own compilation

From a methodological perspective, research on this topic seems to frequently employ experiments (e.g., Castle & Howells, 2024; Deci et al., 1981; Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Vallerand et al., 1986a, 1986b; Wadhwa & Kim, 2015), meta-analyses (e.g., Johnson et al., 1981; Stanne et al., 1999) and discussion papers (e.g., Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Kochanek et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2017) to explore its complex landscape. To uphold a consistent standard of quality, the analysis primarily focused on papers from Q1-Q2 journals:

TABLE 1. PAPERS IN SCOPE BY JOURNALS

Author	Title	Journal	Q
Agans et al. (2018)	Peer motivational climate and character development: Testing a practitioner-developed youth sport model.	Journal of Adolescence	Q1
Castle and Howells (2024)	Model for effective learning in competition: a pedagogical tool to enhance enjoyment and perceptions of competency in physical education lessons for young children.	Children	-
Choi et al. (2014)	Children's development through sports competition: Derivative, adjustive, generative, and maladaptive approaches.	Quest	Q1
Daniels (2007)	Cooperation versus competition: Is there really such an issue?	New Directions for Youth Development	Q2
Deci et al. (1981)	When trying to win: Competition and intrinsic motivation.	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Q1
Epstein and Harackiewicz (1992)	Winning is not enough: The effects of competition and achievement orientation on intrinsic interest.	Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin	Q1
Fülöp (2009)	Happy and unhappy competitors: What makes the difference?	Psychological Topics	-
Fülöp and Jurišević (2020)	The beauty and the beast paradigm: Is it good or bad to be competitive? An interview with professor Márta Fülöp.	Horizons of Psychology	-
Garcia et al. (2013)	The psychology of competition: A social comparison perspective.	Perspectives on Psychological Science	Q1
Johnson et al. (1981)	Effects of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic goal structures on achievement: A meta-analysis.	Psychological Bulletin	Q1
Kochanek et al. (2019)	Competitive readiness: Developmental considerations to promote positive youth development in competitive activities.	Journal of Youth Development	Q4
Mossman and Cronin (2018)	Life skills development and enjoyment in youth soccer: the importance of parental behaviours.	Journal of Sports Sciences	Q1
Nguyen (2017)	Competition as cooperation.	Journal of the Philosophy of Sport	Q2
Omelchenko et al. (2018)	Competition as a factor of social development.	Studia Warmińskie	-
Rieger et al. (2014)	The winner takes it all: The effect of in-game success and need satisfaction on mood repair and enjoyment.	Computers in Human Behavior	Q1
Stanne et al. (1999)	Does competition enhance or inhibit motor performance: A meta-analysis.	Psychological Bulletin	Q1
Tauer and Harackiewicz (2004)	The effects of cooperation and competition on intrinsic motivation and performance.	Journal of Personality and Social Psychology	Q1
Thornton (2013)	The winner takes it all?	Practical Pre-School	-
Uyanik et al. (2023)	The analysis of relationship between competition styles and play skills of preschool children.	International Journal of Progressive Education	-

Moreover, current winner-take-all dynamics are thought to favour risk-takers, potentially disadvantaging more risk-averse individuals (Rieger et al., 2014).

As noted by Fülöp (2004, 2009) and Stanne et al. (1999), competition is a complex, pervasive feature of human societies, embedded within systems of both cooperative and competitive relationships. According to Deutsch (2014, p. 4), one of the founding fathers of the field of conflict resolution, social dynamics depend on goal interdependence—positive (“*sink or swim together*”) or negative (“*if one sinks, the other swims*”, and vice versa)—with most situations involving a mix of both. As per Garcia et al. (2013), Festinger’s social comparison theory further explains how individuals engage in competition to assess and improve their performance relative to others, which is also often influenced by socialization patterns (Fülöp, 2022). While competition offers valuable competence feedback, especially in zero-sum settings, it can also reduce intrinsic motivation following failure, despite individuals’ fundamental need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Rieger et al., 2014; Vallerand et al., 1986a, 1986b).

Modern competition manifests early and in diverse forms, influenced by individual, situational, and cultural factors, and is often driven by social comparison in both real and digital environments. While young children may not fully grasp the concept, they naturally engage in competitive behaviours—competing for toys, attention, grades, or extracurricular success (Bajor et al., 2019; Daniels, 2007; Fülöp, 2004, 2009; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Kochanek et al., 2019; Stanne et al., 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Thornton, 2013; Uyanık et al., 2023; Vallerand et al., 1986a, 1986b). Playtime serves as a vital context for learning and development, enabling children to explore, express emotions, and acquire cognitive, social, and emotional skills safely. Despite definitional variations, play is widely recognized as essential to childhood development, with cooperative and competitive play both contributing to early literacy, numeracy, and broader competencies (Parker & Thomsen, 2019). Notably, children often prefer competitive play, which enhances attention, motivation, and performance, suggesting the value of balancing enjoyment with challenge in early education (Castle & Howells, 2024; Uyanık et al., 2023).

Societal norms often glorify a win-at-all-costs mindset, fostering hyper-competitive behaviours in youth settings. While this result-driven culture can motivate excellence, it may also overwhelm young participants. Competitive readiness, as Kochanek et al. (2019) noted, is a gradual process shaped by individual and environmental factors. If introduced appropriately, competition can empower rather than intimidate. Although children demonstrate cooperative behaviours from infancy (Warneken, 2018), those aged 3–7, in Piaget’s pre-operational (egoistic) stage, may struggle with the emotional demands of competition (Castle & Howells, 2024). Competition is learned—emerging around age five—and by age ten (Uyanık et al., 2023), children begin using peer feedback for self-evaluation (Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Kochanek et al., 2019). Hence, age-appropriate support and consideration of developmental stages are critical to ensuring that competition fosters growth without undue pressure.

Fostering positive youth development requires setting realistic expectations aligned with children’s physical, mental, and emotional readiness—shaped by factors such as maturity, traits, prior experiences, motivation, and social evaluation (Kochanek et al., 2019). While competition, particularly in sports, is influenced by these variables, Thornton (2013) noted that children naturally develop competitiveness. Therefore, rather than avoiding early competition, efforts should guide it constructively. As Kochanek et al. (2019) and Castle and Howells (2024) emphasized, competition is not inherently good or bad; its developmental impact depends on its delivery and the child’s perception.

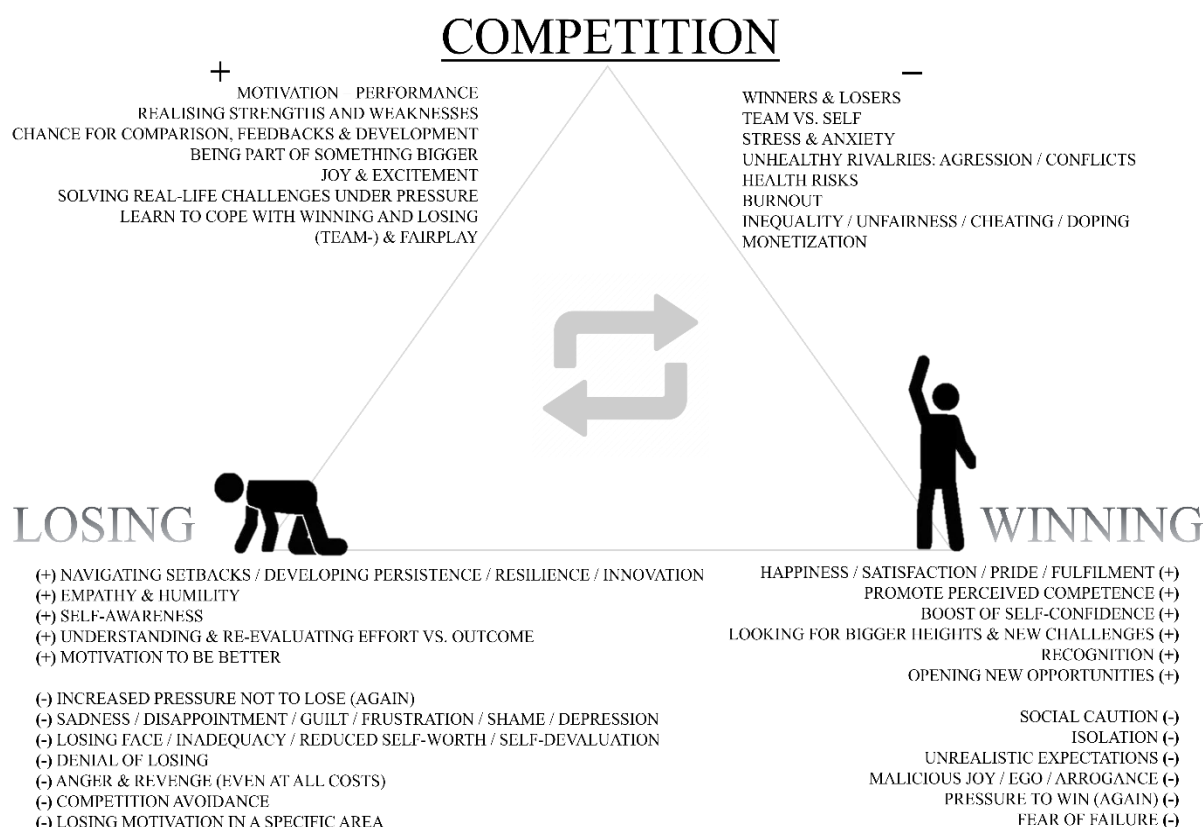
3.2. Winning or Losing? Experiencing the Pros and Cons of Competition Early On

The win–lose structure of competition can exert emotional and psychological pressure. Accordingly, Fülöp and Jurišević (2020, p. 128) described a desired “*balanced*” coping pattern: winners feel proud and motivated for new challenges, while losers may feel disappointed but remain determined—promoting resilience regardless of outcome. However, repeated success may also trigger pressure to maintain performance, potentially leading to stress and reduced engagement in other areas (e.g., over-investing in competition and failing to balance sports and academics; Choi et al., 2014). As Thornton (2013, p. 19) notes, being a consistent winner—or “*big fish in a small pond*”—can also limit opportunities to build resilience. Repeatedly outperforming weaker peers may diminish motivation, increase boredom, and hinder the development of persistence. This dynamic, visible in both education and youth sports, may contribute to burnout, particularly among high-achieving children (“*gifted kid burnout*”; Grugan et al., 2024). When later faced with stronger competition, such individuals may struggle with self-doubt and underperformance.

Additionally, Wadhwa and Kim (2015) found that while clear failure may reduce motivation, near-success can heighten it, often intensifying effort toward unrelated tasks. Rooted in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, this “*almost winning*” effect can drive persistence and even fuel engagement in activities like gaming (see also “*The Gamification of Learning*” by Sailer & Homer, 2020). Thus, partial or near-success may serve as a powerful motivator across diverse contexts.

Schools are key arenas for constant comparison—grades, skills, and performance—all contributing to a competitive academic climate (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). As education increasingly resembles a globalized marketplace (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016), many families still prefer the “*small fish in a big pond*” model, valuing peer learning opportunities (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020, p. 130). Early failure, while emotionally challenging, can foster resilience, persistence, and adaptability (Choi et al., 2014; Kochanek et al., 2019). Learning to manage pressure, time constraints, and public evaluation equips children with strategies to navigate future high-stakes environments. As Daniels (2007) and Kochanek et al. (2019, p. 49) argue, such formative experiences are key to developing responsibility, purpose, and “*competitive kid capital*.”

FIGURE 4. THE TWO FACES OF COMPETITION



Source: own design based on Agans et al. (2018), Bajor et al. (2019), Choi et al. (2014), Daniels (2007), Fülöp (2009, 2022), Fülöp and Jurišević (2020), Kochanek et al. (2019), Thornton (2013)

As summarized in Figure 4, competition can motivate growth, support peer relationships, and foster character development. Yet, it may also cause stress, anxiety, and conflict. Its effects depend on goals and context—while balanced competition is beneficial, extremes of hypercompetitiveness or complete avoidance are problematic (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Tauer and Harackiewicz (2004, p. 210) note that competition is a “*double-edged sword*,” potentially undermining intrinsic motivation when perceived as over-controlling or enhancing it through challenge and positive feedback.

As shown in Figure 4, both winning and losing can negatively impact mental health, causing stress, burnout, or fear of failure. As a result, Thornton (2013, p. 18) questioned: “*How young is too young to encourage children to compete to be best in sport or any aspect of life? How are we to nurture the majority, who (on purely statistical grounds) cannot be winners, or the children who will generally be losers?*”. These questions become especially critical during early developmental stages when children’s brains are malleable and vulnerable to external influences (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kochanek et al., 2019), such as coaches, parents, competitors and referees in this case. Competition may lower self-esteem and motivation in young children, risking disengagement and diminished lifelong interest, affecting health and well-being. This developmental stage is critical for shaping children’s preferences, including their attitudes toward competition and free-time activities. While evidence shows that competitive behaviours can emerge as early as age four, enjoyment remains a key factor influencing children’s preferences and willingness to engage in an activity (Castle & Howells, 2024).

Many studies reviewed focus on sports competition (e.g., Agans et al., 2018; Castle & Howells, 2024; Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Mossman & Cronin, 2018; Nguyen, 2017), reflecting parallels between sports and other competitive settings like classrooms, where individuals develop skills, face challenges, and compete for success (Daniels, 2007). Choi et al. (2014) emphasized (sports) competition as pivotal in shaping children’s identities. Sports offer an ideal setting for adolescent development due to high participation and social-emotional engagement. Skill acquisition and enjoyment drive participation, with enjoyment crucial for retention and dropout prevention. Coaches, peers, and parents—through appropriate praise, guidance, and pressure—significantly influence life skills development (Mossman & Cronin, 2018). Children learn actively from experiences and social contexts, because emotions and relationships deeply impact learning—and stem from how children are treated at school, home, and in their communities—a positive (supportive) climate is essential. It fosters the physiological and psychological conditions necessary for effective learning (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

FIGURE 5. CHILDREN GAME DAY RULES ILLUSTRATING EARLY COMPETITION CHALLENGES



Source: own design based on Choi et al. (2014) and Murphy (1999)

In early development, emphasis should be on pleasure rather than pressure, though parents and coaches may sometimes overlook this (Figure 5). A win-centred approach can foster excessive competition, leading to poor social skills, unrealistic expectations, and fragile self-concepts (Choi et al., 2014). Murphy’s *“The Cheers and the Tears”* book (1999) provides valuable insights and alternative approaches to navigating the competitive and stressful world of youth sports. The book addresses questions such as, *“Put Fun and Development into Your Child’s Youth Sports Experience?”*, *“My son came home in tears and says he wants to quit the team—why??”*, *“How can I make practices and games fun??”*, *“When my daughter gets injured, is she playing too hard or getting pushed too hard??”*, *“I suspect my son may be taking steroids—what should I do??”*, *“Are competitive sports bad for my child?”*.

Thornton (2013) highlighted the delicate balance in managing competition among young children: while winning is naturally preferred (find key reasons in Figure 4), inevitable winners and losers can cause frustration and lasting impact on both children and parents (Figure 5). Early exposure to low-stakes competition helps children (and parents) learn to navigate these

inequalities. The Positive Coaching Alliance's "*Triple-Impact Competitor*" model encourages character development by focusing on improvement of 1) self, 2) teammates, and 3) the game rather than just outcomes (Agans et al., 2018). This approach nurtures character traits that extend beyond the sports context. Similarly, Kochanek et al. (2019) and Mossman and Cronin (2018) stressed that growth and the acquisition of life skills are most likely when youth engage in developmentally appropriate environments, both internal and external, guided by supportive adult mentors.

It is observed that framing an activity as serious competition often reduces intrinsic motivation by shifting focus from enjoyment to winning (Deci et al., 1981; Fülöp, 2009; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Vallerand et al., 1986a, 1986b). Intrinsic motivation—engaging for inherent pleasure—is undermined when competition fosters a controlling environment prioritizing outcomes (e.g., "*must beat the opponent at all costs*") over mastery (e.g., "*making a nice pass*"). This shift, marked by external pressures, deadlines, and even (money) rewards, especially harms children and amateurs by diminishing enjoyment, long-term interest, and psychosocial development (Choi et al., 2014). As summarized by Epstein and Harackiewicz (1992), control, information, and competence evaluation processes critically influence intrinsic interest. Many can recall overly strict parents, coaches, or teachers whose harsh methods left lasting negative impressions, causing individuals to harbour aversion or resentment toward a subject or activity even decades later.

Children's motivation to achieve competence is clearly influenced by parents and coaches (Daniels, 2007; Kochanek et al., 2019; Mossman & Cronin, 2018). Well-motivated athletes who enjoy their sport are more likely to persist and benefit from competition, especially in supportive environments with moral role models (Agans et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Conversely, hostile atmospheres and pressure can impair performance and reduce persistence, leading some children to quit activities (just think of a young child ending a game early with a "*never playing again*" tantrum after repeatedly losing rounds to older siblings in a board game). As a consequence, adults must understand children's perceptions of competition, avoid forced participation, and as mentors guide competitive experiences sensitively (Daniels, 2007; Kochanek et al., 2019; Thornton, 2013). Encouraging healthy interactions between winners and losers and promoting rivals as partners is essential, as unguided competition may be harmful (Fülöp & Juriševič, 2020). In sports, an individualistic, win-focused culture can foster toxicity, while a task-oriented climate emphasizing mastery, skill development, and teamwork enhances enjoyment and performance (Daniels, 2007; Fülöp & Juriševič, 2020). Task orientation encourages athletes to focus on skill development, embrace challenges, and improve against the best, regardless of winning or losing (see equally "*other-referenced competition*" and "*task-referenced competition*" in Fülöp and Juriševič (2020, p. 125)).

Despite potential drawbacks, leisure activities like competitive sports and games are vital for well-being. Many engage in these intrinsically motivated (switch-off) programs, hobbies during free time, enhancing enjoyment and social bonds (Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992; Stanne et al., 1999). Mahayosnand and Sabra (2024) highlighted rising depression and anxiety in Gen Z, underscoring leisure's role in improving mental, physical, and emotional health, as well as life satisfaction and employability. For example, amateur sports support holistic development and healthy lifestyles, but outcomes depend on perceptions and competition structure. Properly

managed competition fosters behavioural growth, moral development, cooperation, and social skills, while also offering psychosocial and therapeutic benefits (Choi et al., 2014). However, Mahayosnand and Sabra (2024) cautioned that the commercialization of such activities may harm mental health, raising concerns about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.

3.3. The Inevitable Presence of Competition: Future and a Double-Edged Reality

It is clear that competition cannot be simply labelled good or bad, nor eliminated, as it is inherent to society and essential for goal pursuit and well-being (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Societies have always competed—over resources, in sports, and through economic systems—with competition evolving alongside social development into complex forms involving self-regulation and social control (Fülöp, 2004; Omelchenko et al., 2018). Competitive skills are crucial for youth to realize their potential and optimize talents, with competitions serving as key mechanisms to identify gifted individuals across fields like science, arts, and sports (Bajor et al., 2019). Today's competition extends beyond physical resources to the contest for talents themselves, vital in knowledge-based economies where attracting and retaining talent is a critical global concern (Achoki, 2023; Bajor et al., 2019; Donald & Mouratidou, 2022; Fellows, 2024; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Németh et al., 2021). Resultantly, talented individuals must develop adaptive coping strategies to succeed amid heightened standards. This intensified competition spans sports, arts, academics, and science, fuelled by financial stakes and supply-demand dynamics (Frank & Cook, 1996). Prestigious events like the Nobel Prize or the Olympics epitomize this phenomenon, not to forget that the entertainment industry also heavily invests in so-called game shows like *“Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?”* or *“Survivor”*.

Despite its widespread appeal, the benefits of competition have been widely debated, especially given associated issues such as emotional distress, injury, and unethical behaviour (e.g., doping) (Daniels, 2007; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Johnson et al., 1981; Kohn, 1986; Stanne et al., 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Vallerand et al., 1986a, 1986b). While competition can enhance performance, studies have shown that cooperation often yields even better outcomes than both competitive and individual conditions (Stanne et al., 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004). However, findings remain inconsistent, influenced by variables such as setting, task type, and participant characteristics (Epstein & Harackiewicz, 1992; Fülöp, 2004; Johnson et al., 1981; Stanne et al., 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004; Vallerand et al., 1986b). Historically framed in opposition to cooperation, competition has often been viewed negatively, complicating efforts to define when it is constructive—what Fülöp (2004, 2009) terms the *“Beauty and Beast”* paradigm. Main critics like Kohn (1986) argue that competition undermines motivation, promotes extrinsic goals, damages self-esteem, and fosters unethical behaviour, ultimately *“making everyone a loser”*. Eventually, such notes have led some to propose eliminating competition in schools and workplaces. Kohn and others propose restructuring institutions to eliminate zero-sum dynamics. Still, as Fülöp (2009) suggested, the impact of competition largely depends on its ethical and moral framing.

Nguyen (2017) explored a moral paradox in competition: players must engage intensely with opponents to fully enjoy the game, blending competition with cooperation. While some models view cooperation as intentional, Nguyen argued that competition can offer a context in which aggression is positively channelled depending on consent, intentions, and game design. This balance, however, is fragile. Poorly designed or unjust/unfair competitions risk long-term harm,

especially for youth (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). As Fülöp (2022) noted, fair competition allows winners and losers to celebrate mutual effort, reinforcing social bonds. In contrast, unjust competition fosters secrecy, mistrust, and a desire for revenge, weakening relationships and trust in future competitive contexts.

Evidently, most of us grow up in competitive societies, and whether we prefer it or not, we frequently find ourselves in competitive situations. Living under these circumstances necessitates learning to navigate both success and failure early on, developing resilience and maintaining integrity. While research has yielded valuable insights, it has also exposed limitations—particularly the tendency to frame competition narrowly, often in opposition to cooperation (Fülöp, 2004). Moreover, as concluded by Fülöp (2022) and Kollár and Szabó (2017), foundational theories in this field, largely developed between the 1980s and early 2000s, continue to shape current discourse, with few scholars challenging these frameworks (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Consequently, determining the conditions under which modern competition yields positive outcomes remains an ongoing challenge. As Fülöp (2009) noted, the key question has shifted from whether competition promotes well-being to identifying which forms are most constructive. This reframing highlights important avenues for future research on how competition can support both individual development and societal progress:

1. How and when should children be introduced to competition?
2. What roles do parents, teachers, and coaches play in fostering healthy competition?
3. How do children perceive competition at various developmental stages?
4. What is the optimal balance of pressure for children (e.g., sports, academics, and extracurricular activities vs. fun-time a week)?
5. What are the most effective coping strategies for competition-related character development?
6. How do cultural, gender, and family dynamics influence (youth) competition?
7. What is the appropriate level of parental involvement in children's competitive activities?
8. How can we ensure positive competition and character development?
9. What is the right balance between competition and cooperation?
10. To what extent and for how long can competition remain (healthy) in our lives?

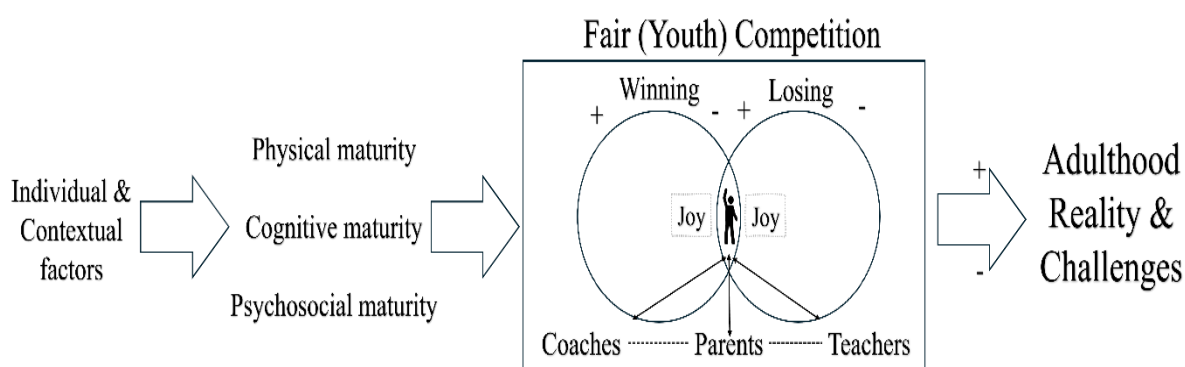
4. Discussion: It is Not Only About Winning, After All?

In today's globalized world, individuals are increasingly exposed—consciously or unconsciously—to competitive dynamics across education, sports, business, and broader societal interactions. Managing these forces constructively is essential to fostering adaptive outcomes. As stated by theorists, recent global developments, including globalization and the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the importance of resilience, motivation, and skill development—core components of effective competition (Achoki, 2023; Donald & Mouratidou, 2022; Fellows, 2024; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Németh et al., 2021, among others). This study affirms that competition is a fundamental aspect of human behaviour and, when appropriately structured, can benefit even young children. However, to date, existing research remains limited, particularly regarding early childhood, and often frames competition primarily

in contrast to cooperation (Castle & Howells, 2024; Fülöp, 2004, 2022; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Given the divergent views in the literature, this review offers a timely synthesis of key findings, contributing new insights to the field. It examines the complexities of youth competition, identifies emerging challenges and opportunities, and outlines directions for future research. In doing so, it provides practical and theoretical guidance for policymakers, educators, and researchers, while underscoring the need for collaborative efforts to promote healthy, developmentally appropriate competition.

This review confirms that while competition entails inherent advantages and disadvantages—particularly concerning the experiences of winning and losing (see Figure 4)—it holds significant potential as a catalyst for both individual and collective development. It fosters opportunities for skill acquisition and the cultivation of essential life competencies, including resilience, emotional regulation, and coping strategies, among others. Nevertheless, in the absence of appropriate support, competitive experiences—especially for youth and novices—can evidently lead to negative consequences such as demotivation, burnout, and unequal participation. The underlying tension between pleasure and performance pressure, exemplified by Daniel’s question “*Did you win?*” versus “*Did you have fun?*” (2007, p. 50), further highlights the importance of a balanced approach. Aligning with Fülöp and Jurišević (2020), we advocate for helping young people navigate both victory and defeat constructively, emphasizing persistence and the pursuit of new challenges. To promote healthy development, it is recommended to align competitive experiences with realistic expectations and developmental readiness, accounting for physical, cognitive, and psychosocial factors (Figure 6). It is suggested that central to this process are supportive interpersonal relationships (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Schools, in particular, play a key role by providing structured environments where social and competitive interactions—guided by professional mentors—foster engagement, adaptability, and a sense of belonging among peer groups.

FIGURE 6. SUMMARY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPETITION AND DEVELOPMENT



Source: own design based on Choi et al. (2014), Daniels (2007), and Kochanek et al. (2019)

One of the most compelling derivatives of our research is the inherently complex and seemingly paradoxical nature of competitive games, which often integrate elements of both competition and cooperation. This duality invites further consideration of psychosocial dimensions related to cooperative dynamics, as discussed by Richard et al. (2002), including factors such as perceived power in parent–child relationships, security in parental attachment, self-concept, internalized feelings of safety, environments that encourage autonomous conflict resolution, opportunities to test one’s capabilities through challenging tasks, experiences of peer rejection

or popularity, and the quality of friendships between participants. These variables may all influence, or be influenced by, competitive behaviours. As Nguyen (2017) noted, competition is not antithetical to cooperation; rather, each element reinforces the other, as competitors mutually drive one another toward higher levels of performance and continuous improvement. This interplay is aptly captured by football legend Cristiano Ronaldo in his remarks about his rivalry with Lionel Messi: *“Maybe Messi also plays a part in motivating me, the same way other players make you raise your game because you’re working at being better than them. Any kind of competition adds to my motivation. (...) I’m sure the competition we provide motivates him as well. It’s good for him, for me, and for other players who want to develop. Messi has four Ballon d’Or and I’ve got three. All of this is positive for the world of football.”* (AS, 2015). Such reflections illustrate the value of reframing competition as a constructive, developmental force rather than through a zero-sum lens.

As evidenced, competitive activities such as games often function as a form of escapism, providing participants with the opportunity to suspend social constraints and engage in equitable, skill-based challenges that channel focus, determination, and even aggression into constructive and often exceptional outcomes (Nguyen, 2017). In light of growing global pressures that have placed early childhood playtime under strain (Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Parker & Thomsen, 2019), educators are increasingly urged to implement child-centred pedagogies that support holistic development. Integrating play that cultivates social competencies and facilitates experiential learning is vital. Expanding access to free, self-directed play—particularly when supported by high-quality resources—is strongly recommended. Such play also contributes to the formation of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships, which are essential to children’s well-being (Uyanik et al., 2023). Nevertheless, as discovered, issues of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity remain central, as children—still adapting to new and complex environments—are particularly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of perceived injustice (Fülöp, 2009; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Echoing the insights of Choi et al. (2014), Daniels (2007), and Mahayosnand and Sabra (2024), this review underscores the importance of incorporating both structured and spontaneous leisure activities into daily life in a way that balances enjoyment and competence (Castle & Howells, 2024). Such integration not only enriches experience—as described by Stanne et al. (1999, p. 134) as adding *“spice”* to life—but also promotes healthy competitiveness, personal growth, and psychosocial development.

Consistent with previous research, this paper reinforces the view that, despite often carrying negative connotations, competitive experiences are diverse and context-dependent—they are not inherently beneficial or detrimental. Individuals engage with competition in varied ways, and most real-world contexts integrate both cooperative and competitive elements, making it difficult to isolate or define either in their purest form (Fülöp, 2009; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Stanne et al., 1999; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004). There is a growing need to better understand individual motivations, particularly by listening to children and developing personalised approaches that align with their developmental needs and goals (Castle & Howells, 2024). Striking a balance between competition and cooperation is critical: insufficient competition may limit growth and achievement, while excessive competition can undermine self-confidence, especially among less-skilled participants, leading to withdrawal and disengagement (Choi et al., 2014). The consequences of competitive experiences—both positive and negative—can have a lasting impact on future life choices, particularly during pre-adolescence, a formative period spanning roughly ages 4 to 10 (Castle & Howells, 2024;

Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kochanek et al., 2019). Contrary to Kohn's (1986) argument that competition is inherently harmful and akin to warfare, contemporary research affirms that competition plays a significant role in stimulating development, enhancing motivation, and providing excitement (Agans et al., 2018; Bajor et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Fülöp, 2009; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020; Kochanek et al., 2019; Parker & Thomsen, 2019; Thornton, 2013). Nonetheless, prolonged or poorly managed competition can produce harmful effects, as even elite athletes require recovery periods (both physically and mentally) and often experience early retirement due to burnout. As Thornton (2013) argues, efforts to eliminate competition entirely in childhood may simply drive it underground, as children naturally love to play (Castle & Howells, 2024; Uyanik et al., 2023). Consequently, competition becomes harder to observe and regulate, while the innate human drive to compete persists. Rather than seeking to suppress competition, the focus should shift toward helping children cultivate a healthy outlook on both winning and losing. As this review has shown, equipping young people with integrity, resilience, and perspective in competitive contexts prepares them to thrive in an increasingly competitive global society. When guided appropriately, competition can serve not as a source of division, but as a powerful mechanism for empowerment, personal growth, and the promotion of positive societal outcomes.

5. Conclusion, Limitation, and Recommendation

Competition, for better or worse, has endured from antiquity and remains integral to human society. Although this review does not provide definitive answers to currently popular questions, such as to "*what makes a happy competitor*" (Fülöp, 2009) or what constitutes a life of endless competition, it contributes to academic discourse and professional practice by offering valuable insights and encouraging further exploration of this critical topic. The findings of this study strongly indicate that, despite its challenges, competition—when approached the right way—can be essential for both societal and personal growth, especially for young people who enjoy playing and competing but require proper mentorship, especially in the beginning. These results also have wider implications, advocating for a robust collaboration among parents, educators, and coaches (Castle & Howells, 2024; Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Kochanek et al., 2019; Mossman & Cronin, 2018; Thornton, 2013), while encouraging cooperative, task-focused ("*balanced*") approaches and fostering respectful, nurturing relationships. Based on the reviewed literature, these strategies can help cultivate environments in which young people prioritise self-improvement, teamwork, and skill acquisition over mere victory. Mentors and educators are also advised to frame competition as a form of real-time feedback rather than a fixed measure of self-worth (see Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). While competitiveness represents one expression of the broader social comparison process (Garcia et al., 2013), establishing supportive settings in which both success and failure are viewed as learning opportunities can foster resilience and mutual development (Figure 4 & 6). Ultimately, this orientation seems to help to equip children to navigate the complexities and inequities of adult life, thereby enhancing their capacity for long-term success and well-being. Although this paper centres on youth competition and development, its conclusions are broadly applicable to a wide range of competitions across diverse domains beyond sport, including adult amateur, semi-professional, and professional stakeholders.

While the systematic literature review provided valuable insights into existing knowledge on competition, this study has limitations that warrant further investigation. As with any SLR (see Anand et al., 2022; García-Peñalvo, 2022; Gough et al., 2012; Mohamed Shaffril et al., 2021;; Okoli, 2015; Paul & Barari, 2022; Paul et al., 2023), a key limitation is the lack of primary research, restricting conclusions to the analysis of existing data. Additionally, research/review decisions can be subject to debate, and may be influenced by factors such as the researcher's background, expertise, and perspective. For instance, language constraints, keyword selection, or quality criteria (e.g., prioritizing English, Q1-Q2 journal articles with the given keywords) could result in the exclusion of relevant studies, while the sample (n=32) remains inherently limited by the available content in the chosen databases (e.g., ScienceDirect or Google Scholar).

Although many theoretical papers compare competition and cooperation (e.g., Daniels, 2007; Deutsch, 2014; Fülöp, 2022; Johnson et al., 1981; Nguyen, 2017; Tauer & Harackiewicz, 2004), while others focus primarily on sports competition (e.g., Agans et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2014; Daniels, 2007; Nguyen, 2017), the broader landscape of (healthy) competition remains insufficiently explored. Despite its widespread presence, competition is often under-researched, particularly when not contrasted with cooperation (Fülöp, 2004; 2022), and its effects on certain age groups remain unclear (Castle & Howells, 2024; Fülöp & Jurišević, 2020). Given that competition can be a sensitive issue for youth, further research is essential to prevent potential long-term harm. A deeper understanding of its impacts is crucial for educators, researchers, and students to navigate expectations and outcomes effectively. Based on the insights from the review, future research could explore: (1) the optimal introduction of competition, (2) the roles of parents, teachers, and coaches, (3) competition at different developmental stages, (4) balancing pressure on children, (5) competition-related character development and coping strategies, (6) cultural, gender, and family dynamics, (7) parental involvement, (8) the role of positive competition in character development, (9) finding the right balance between competition and cooperation, and (10) the long-term effects of constant competition in modern life. To address these issues, both qualitative and quantitative research is needed, plus given the complexity of competition, interdisciplinary collaboration—incorporating insights from sports, education, psychology, ethics, and related fields—can provide a more holistic understanding of its multifaceted effects.

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