Po Bronson
Warrior or Worrier?
Know Your Child's Competitive Style

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On your mark...Get set...GO!

Award-winning journalist and author Po Bronson spoke for the Common Ground Speaker Series on the topic, *Warrior or Worrier: Know Your Child's Competitive Style* referencing his recently published book, Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing, co-authored with Ashley Merryman.

In Top Dog, Po Bronson puts current scientific studies side by side with societal conceptions of winning and losing. During a time of 'everyone gets a trophy' mantra, Bronson argues that children benefit from competition. Parenting is not just about safety and security; it is about expanding your child's comfort zone. For example, a child needs to know he or she is safe, but children also have to get used to the frustration and jealousy that come from competition. Kids are not fooled when adults don't keep score. They know exactly who got what goal and who missed.

Bronson focuses his talk on helping parents develop healthy competitive skills in their children: "Healthy, successful, adaptive competitiveness is choosing what matters to you and fighting for it, while letting other challenges pass," says Bronson. Moreover, parents need to give room for rest and recuperation between stressful situations. Let your child experience pressure that comes in predictable ebbs and flows, broken up by moments of fun and excitement – set up a type of pre-season, regular season and off-season. Bronson references Rena Subotnik, a psychologist at the APA, who states "children benefit from competition they have prepared for intensely, especially when viewed as an opportunity to gain recognition for their efforts and improve for the next time."

PEER PRESSURE: Bronson cites two studies to demonstrate that people will compete if they think they have a fair chance, but not if it seems there is no point. First, the longitudinal study by psychology professor Joseph P. Allen from the University of Virginia found that argumentative teens are more likely to resist peer pressure. Investigators discovered teens that who hold their own in family discussions were better at standing up to peer influences to use drugs or alcohol. Among the best protected were teens who had learned to argue well with their moms about such topics as grades, money, household rules and friends. The healthy autonomy they'd established at home seemed to carry over into their relationships with peers. Researchers also say that by developing the ability to communicate with parents on a rational level, whether the parents and teens agree or not, teens build safety in the parental relationship that keeps them from turning to friends as authorities instead of their parents.

Second was an experiment done by the Air Force Academy in an attempt to improve the performance of cadets who were at risk of failing. Without telling the students, it created groups in which it mixed the highest- and lowest-performing cadets, hoping the stars would rub off on the others. What happened was that the at-risk cadets, constantly being reminded of the gap between them and the others, fell further behind. Seeing no chance to win, they stopped competing, thus protecting themselves from the damage of constant stress. Something else unexpected happened. The mid-range cadets who were left over wound up competing against each other, seeing they each had a chance to be among the best in their group. Their performance surged. The study concluded that to be successful, people need a 'fighting' chance to succeed.

GENETICS: Chun-Yen Chang, director of the Science Education Center at National Taiwan Normal University, studied 779 students who had recently taken the Basic Competency Test – a high-stakes test taken by ninth-grade children in Taiwan. The scores on this test will determine which high school the students are admitted to – or if they get into one at all. Only 39% of students make the cut, with the rest diverted to vocational schools. The researchers were interested in a single gene - the COMT gene that carries an assembly code for an enzyme that clears dopamine from the prefrontal cortex.

When it comes to competition of any kind, children tend to fall into one of two categories: "those who need to avoid stress to do well (worriers), and those who actually need stress to perform their best (warriors).

Whether your child falls into the former or latter category has to do a lot with the COMT gene. All of us have either "busy, hard-working" or "lazy, slow-working" COMT enzymes. Busy COMT enzymes keep the highest dopamine surges in check and completely clear it out when the stress subsides. As a result, people with busy COMT thrive under pressure. Lazy COMT enzymes, meanwhile, allow dopamine to linger in the brain, even when it's not stressed. The residual dopamine helps these folks function at a higher level during the status quo. When they're stressed, however, the dopamine surge crashes their system and they crack under the pressure.

However, parents can wire their children so they are ready to compete. One way is to make sure parents never put their children in a competition they don't have a fighting chance of winning. And competition is not just about athletics – competition could be a science fair or a spelling bee. In any competition, parents can help their children by asking them the right, open-ended questions: Do you need to work harder next time? What could you have done to produce a different result? The most important lesson for parents is to encourage their children to work through challenges in a problem-solving way.

A similar mental shift can also help students in test-taking situations. Jeremy Jamieson, assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Rochester, has done a series of experiments that reveal how academic competitions can benefit both warriors and worriers equally. Jamieson's studies of students at Harvard studying for the GRE show that through practice, one can teach one's body to transform the physiological manifestations of stress into a positive force that drives performance. Through exposure to stress-inducing situations, everyone benefits. The warriors get the thrilling intensity their minds are suited for and they can shine, and the worriers get the gradual stress inoculation they need, so that one day they can do more than just tolerate stress – they can embrace it. And through the cycle of preparation, performance and recovery, what they learn becomes ingrained. Jamieson is frustrated that our culture has such a negative view of stress: "When people say, 'I'm stressed out,' it means, 'I'm not doing well.' It doesn't mean, but it should mean, 'I'm excited – I have increased oxygenated blood going to my brain.'"

FUN PARTY TRICK: Finger Length Predicts Aggressive Behavior: According to Pete Hurd, a neuroscientist at the University of Alberta, during fetal development there's a surge in testosterone in the middle of the second trimester that seems to influence future health and behavior. One easy-to-spot result of this flood of testosterone: a ring finger that's significantly longer than the index finger. Measure your right hand index and ring fingers, base to tip. A longer ring finger can be an indicator of a propensity towards risk-taking, higher levels of achievement in sports, as well as a mental toughness in athletics. In one study, college varsity athletes (male and female) were found to have shorter index fingers than other students. Additionally, men with shorter index fingers are more likely to pick fights, and women with the same hand shape are more likely to react with aggression after being provoked.

BOYS VS. GIRLS: Gender Differences: Studies show that girls, from age 3 years old, form social bonds in pairs, or dyads, and don't like to compete within that relationship (this is why girls are more likely to turn on a previously trusted friend after only one incident). Girls also tend to play games that encourage taking turns, that foster sharing, that encourage feeling equal to one another. It is especially important for parents of girls to make sure their daughters have enough competition in their lives. Girls can get competitive experiences just by playing in groups at home. "Instead of having one girlfriend come over to play, invite a few," says Bronson. Since boys seek out group experiences, they live in an environment that automatically encourages competition and differences of opinion and ability. The challenge with boys is that they're overconfident and they don't pay attention to the likelihood of being successful. They ignore odds. Parents can help boys by teaching them to understand competition better – that often winning will only come from working hard, not just showing up.

FAMILY FACTORS: Competition can also come from sibling rivalry and singletons may be at a disadvantage. Bronson suggests that parents of only children should focus on group play. "Instead of having one kid over for a play date, have two, or four, or more." Though Bronson does not insist that all play dates be approached this way, "it's simply important to know about. It's a great way to supplement what may already be working in a family."

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