

## Winning, Losing and Cheating

During the primary school years children do a lot of learning about right and wrong. Part of this learning takes place during their games. They make up rules and they learn about winning and losing. Learning to lose is a hard lesson and takes much longer than learning to win! Some children learn this quicker than others. Maybe we don't have to learn to win, but losing is very different and some children need extra support as they learn to manage their feelings in games. Many children will cheat occasionally, but some children go on cheating, and they may be under some stress which keeps this behaviour going.

### Learning about rules

During the primary school years children are learning about the difference between right and wrong.

When they are five or six they mostly need to please their parents more than they need to do what is right. If they think their parents will be unhappy or cross if they lose, they may cheat to win because they think that will please their parents. By the time they are 10 or 11 they usually have an understanding of what it means to do the right thing.

During these years they want to play together and are starting to learn to play competitive games, where there are winners and losers. Playing games with others helps children to learn about rules, fair play, right and wrong. There is often a lot of talk between children about what is fair. Games also offer a way to safely get rid of angry feelings – children can kick a ball (instead of a person) and use lots of energy by playing very hard. Games help with learning about self-control and getting on with others. If you just do what you feel like, when you feel like it, you are not likely to win, or even do well, or be liked by others. Games that children can play alone such as computer games and golf can help them to get practise at managing their feelings.

### Cheating

Very young children do not understand the meaning of cheating and it is too early to make them keep to rules.

As they get into primary school age they are starting to think about the meaning of things like 'right' and 'wrong' and 'fair'. Children may break rules at this time as they learn to manage to lose and about what is right and wrong.

It is not until they are into the upper primary years that they really take in the meaning of these things. If they cheat then it is usually because they have a problem or stress that needs to be dealt with.

### Winning

Winning is very important for children, because doing well often helps them to feel important in their group.

They need to have some practice at winning in order to feel it is safe to lose. In the early primary years children will be more interested in having friends than doing right, and many children find it very difficult to lose. All children find it difficult to lose from time to time, just as many adults do. If a child does not have good self-esteem or is under stress for some reason, winning may be even more important to help her feel better. If children who cheat are forced to obey the rules and they keep losing, they may stop playing altogether and never learn about rules or enjoy playing games with others.



Rob's cheating robbed the game of its pleasure

Many children cheat in order to win (or cheat at school work for the same sorts of reasons – to do well and get praise). Some ways that they try to cope with not winning:

- They may stop the game or refuse to play.
- They may mess up the game for others.
- They may get angry or sulk.
- They may act younger than their age and even feel, for example, as if the ball is trying to hit them or is making them kick it crooked.

## What parents can do about cheating

Show your child how to be a 'good sport' by the way you cope with losing yourself, and by what you say to her if she loses. If she thinks winning matters too much to you she will find it harder to lose.

- Since cheating means that you are purposely trying to mislead or trick someone, children cannot be thought of as cheating until they understand what this means. It is not something that just children do, they learn to do it, and it is important for adults to be sure that they 'practise what they preach' when they talk to children about cheating.
- There are lots of ways that even adults cheat: during games (by trying to put others off so they play badly or by wrong scoring, on things such as income tax, or by trying to get away with not paying the full price in shops.)
- Some people feel that if you can get away with it, it is OK. If parents act in these ways it will be hard for their children to learn not to cheat.

If you find that your child is cheating at school or at sport, take a step back first and have a think about the cause.

- It may be that the child is not yet old enough to really understand about rules and right and wrong. In this case, what is needed is gentle teaching, not punishment.
- If your child is old enough to understand and is often cheating or acting as a 'bad loser' check that there is nothing else going on in the child's life that is causing stress and making him feel less confident.
- Talk to your child and let her know that you noticed and try to find out what led to this happening. Talk about 'right' and 'wrong' and why it is important not to cheat.
- Remember that this is often something children stop doing as they get more confidence and it need not be something to worry about too much.

Practise playing, winning and losing.

- Play lots of games which your child can win – games of chance such as 'snakes and ladders', and games where you do not try too hard so she has some practise at winning.
- Gradually move onto games of skill, making sure that your child still has a good share of winning.
- Provide times for your child to play games that are for one person only, such as computer games or patience. These games help him or her to learn to improve skills when there is no-one to compete against.
- Children need lots of time to play at making up their own games with rules – even if they never get to play the game.
- But, remember that too much practice at losing will not teach children to be good sports.
- If your child wants to play a particular game, learn some of the skills together. Practise in the backyard or in the park.

## What you could do

- Think about how your actions and what you say affect your child.
- Notice your child's good points and skills, not just what she cannot do well.
- If you go to school sport try to support your child and her team without making anyone feel bad.
- Give children lots of personal encouragement to do things for themselves and to feel good about what they can do in other parts of their life.
- If children are still having difficulty with losing after the age of 10 or 11 there may be something in their lives which is making them feel bad. If you are unable to work out what it is, it may help to talk to a counsellor about it.

Source: [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)