

Competition VS. Creativity: Which "State" Do You Live In

Written by Scott Noelle

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We civilized folk seem to be addicted to competition—obsessed with who is the best and the worst, who has the most and the least, who are the winners and the losers. In our culture we habitually frame most everything in terms of conflict and competition.

“Do you love dancing? You should enter a dance contest!”

Bit by bit, starting in childhood, we were taught that nothing is really worthwhile unless it confers some kind of competitive advantage.



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Competition is not just about contests, sports, and business. Anytime you believe you have something to lose, anytime you feel one-up or one-down, anytime you deem yourself or your child “deserving” or “undeserving”—all of these perceptions arise from the mindset of competition. You might even fall into the trap of competing to be the most non-competitive!

In keeping with the American competition ethic, a recent study ranked all 50 U.S. states in terms of how “family-friendly” they are. But the study overlooked one vital fact: The best state in which to raise kids is not a place, it’s a state of being—a state that transcends competition, dissolves conflicts, increases love and compassion, and facilitates learning. I call this state “creative presence.” Children call it “play.”

Presence is being in the here and now. When you were a child, presence was your natural state. But from Day One— or, if you were lucky, after a brief grace period as a baby and toddler—your parents and teachers began to train you in the art of non-presence. They didn’t mean to do that, of course. They were just trying to “civilize” you.

Every evaluation, punishment, reward, restriction, and reaction—saturated with your caregivers’ subtle or blatant anxieties—compelled you to forget the present and pay more attention to the past and the future. At times it may have felt so painful that you had to “leave your body” just to cope. Regardless of the intensity or mildness of your non-presence “training,” no member of our culture can escape it completely.

Creativity is a state of openness to yet unseen possibilities. It arises naturally when you are fully present. As a baby, when your basic needs were met and you were free from stress, your whole world was nothing but possibility. Infinite possibility. As far as you knew, anything could happen. This is fertile ground for creativity to grow in.

Your nature was (and is) to exercise and refine your creativity through exploration and experimentation (play), guided primarily by pleasure. You felt your creative power when you discovered you could make something happen— like eliciting a smile from your mother, tasting the goodness of your big toe, or painting a masterpiece with ketchup and mustard on the kitchen floor—and this feeling was irresistibly pleasurable.

It would never have even occurred to you to resist such creative pleasures if not for your

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caregivers' anxiety about them. Eventually you learned that creativity got you in trouble and presence was often too painful to bear. So you turned the volume down—perhaps way down—and the absence of creative presence started to feel “normal.” In this way, the suppression of creative presence is passed from generation to generation.

But you are tired of this legacy of half-lived lives. Been there, done that. And you don't want your kids to have to “recover” from their childhood, so you're committed to parenting consciously, and you've rejected anxiety-producing parental behaviors, such as threats, bribes, punishments, and the like.

Great! You know what you don't want to do, so now you ask, “What should I do instead? Should I try a new technique?” Perhaps. But if you are coming from fear— fear of damaging your child, fear of being a bad parent, etc.—even the most enlightened parenting techniques eventually fail.

“Should we move to a more family-friendly state?” Well, yes... Move to a more family-friendly state of mind. Move from fear, competitive thinking, and conflict orientation to love, presence, and creativity. Your children are affected by your state as much as—often more than— they are affected by your words and your actions.

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