

# Do Participation Trophies Actually Make Kids Worse Off?

Like many young adults my age, I received a fair number of participation certificates, ribbons, medals, and trophies growing up.

Arguably, the “accomplishments” that earned those awards were not always impressive. For example, I participated in pine wood derby races, and more often than not, was quite content to let someone else do the bulk of the work of making my car. I also played soccer, but spent more time chasing butterflies and picking dandelions than I did running after the ball. In my two years of archery I got one bullseye. On someone else’s target.

These lackluster performances were not characteristic of every activity that I pursued, but, regardless of my effort or the outcome, I often found myself walking away with certificates and ribbons affirming that I had participated.

In recent years, the concept of participation awards has received some scrutiny, including when NFL player [James Harrison](#) announced he had returned his kids’ participation trophies a few years ago. His actions reflect the concern that, in a society which gives out awards without accomplishment, “participation” becomes less about effort and more about simply showing up.

“Ironically, participation medals don’t build confidence, but they do create entitlement,” founder of Understanding Teenagers, Chris Hudson [says](#). “Confidence and resilience don’t come from false praise or rewarding normal behavior.”

But perhaps the problem of entitlement is not the only one generated by participation awards. What if participation awards are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of how

motivation works? Could participation awards end up undermining the potential of an entire generation?

I recently read Daniel Pink's book [\*Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us\*](#), which makes the case that businesses, schools, and society in general are working off assumptions about motivation that are inherently flawed.

The traditional approach to motivation is based on if-then scenarios. If you do X work, you get Y reward. Pink challenges the model of if-then rewards, demonstrating that, while they may work in the short-term and for specific kinds of tasks, they ultimately kill motivation and creativity. Pink writes, "Traditional 'if-then' rewards can give us less of what we want: They can extinguish intrinsic motivation, diminish performance, crush creativity, and crowd out good behavior."

In other words, rather than motivating people to perform better or maximize their creative potential, the if-then rewards model treats creative work like a menial task, thus killing the worker's enjoyment of the job. Or, in the case of education or extra-curriculars for children, if-then rewards fail to cultivate creativity and curiosity, and instead train children from an early age to treat tasks as hoops to be jumped through, rather than puzzles to be solved or challenges to conquer.

*Drive* focuses primarily on the workplace, examining how a reward system causes a temporary uptick in engagement, but doesn't have a lasting effect, and, in the long run, undermines creativity and leads to workers who are uninterested and unmotivated. In order for motivation to be lasting and effective, it needs to be based intrinsically, rather than being based on extrinsic reward systems. This is true of adults and children alike.

Pink writes, "Try to encourage a kid to learn math by paying her for each workbook page she completes—and she'll almost

certainly become more diligent in the short term and lose interest in math in the long term." If learning is based on rewards, then the reward must increase in order for the motivation to stay consistent when the work becomes harder.

Based on what Pink has to say about the nature of motivation, would it be fair to say that participation awards actually work to undermine a child's motivation and creative potential? By giving out participation awards, we introduce an if-then reward system to extracurricular activities, clubs, and even homework, regardless of a child's performance. If the reward for an activity is a ribbon saying that the student participated, then the incentive to continue participating will quickly diminish.

Because of the way if-then rewards affect people, Pink proposes we adopt an alternative approach to motivation. "We need to upgrade," he writes, "And science shows the way. This new approach has three essential elements: (1) Autonomy—the desire to direct our own lives; (2) Mastery—the urge to get better and better at something that matters; and (3) Purpose—the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves."

Participation awards send the wrong message to children by devaluing participation. If involvement in an activity is worth no more than a ribbon or certificate that will most likely end up getting thrown away at some point, then how valuable is that activity in the first place?

If we want students to try activities, to learn to work hard, to overcome challenges, and pursue their dreams, we need to stop demeaning their activities with something as flimsy as participation awards. Instead, students should be given freedom to explore and encouragement to persevere. Being able to look back at an activity with a feeling of accomplishment is a much stronger motivator and far less patronizing than an embossed satin-ribbon that says "Participant."

[Image Credit: U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Brandon Valle]