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“ There was only one winner when I was a child and that's how I learned to cope with the disappointment. – SARAH F, KENSINGTON

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# To win or not to win – that is the question

**I**N THE lunch-time race to the swings, the kid who gets there last knows he's the slowest runner. He is not as good, he misses out on the spoils and before long he will stop trying.

The playground is the real world but there is a gentler trend in junior sport - to rub out the finish line and put away the scoreboard.

Supporters say children need to learn skills without the pressure to compete and without being demoralised by comparisons with others.

Department of Education and Children's Services sports manager Peter Roberts says the department supports modified sport in schools, giving children of all abilities the chance to participate.

Mr Roberts, who is on the Sturt Football Club board, says the AFI's Auskick is a good

Finding a balance for kids to enjoy and be competitive at sport is tough.

JILL PENGELLEY reports.



years, with an increased focus on teams and sharing the credit, instead of highlighting individual success.

But he believes children are naturally competitive and when scores are not kept, the first question from children after a game is still: "Did we win?"

"Even if you just give them a ball to play with, they'll make up their own rules and compete," he says.

"I just think there needs to be a balance. To throw the baby out with the bath water and say they shouldn't compete is wrong."

"We think that kids should experience play for the sheer joy of play but we also think that competition is an important component as well because of the life lessons and skills that it presents to the kids.

"It's our view that kids naturally gravitate

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"If you play a game and you don't get to touch the ball, then that game is not going to be attractive," he says.

He says modified sports are those that engage children, help them to build skills and give them confidence to be involved, without an emphasis on winning.

For children who want to compete, the department's South Australian Primary Schools Amateur Sports Association organises competition in more than 25 sports.

University of South Australia health sciences Professor Tim Olds says physical education teachers are taught during their degree how to avoid competition.

"There's been a big push to adopt sports that aren't necessarily ranked, such as canoeing, surfing and bushwalking," he says. "This is particularly so in primary school."

Professor Olds says there is strong evidence that children who don't "match up" in competitive sport will drop out.

This means they are less likely to be active in their adult lives.

"Kids are building identity," he says.

"What sort of person am I? What am I good at that other kids aren't good at?"

"They want to hang their hat on things they're already good at."

Watching a child at little athletics run last, week after week, is painful.

"You just have to look at their faces and think this is not the right thing for this kid," Professor Olds says.

"It's not doing them any good. It can be crushing for them."

He says there is a good mix of modified sports that engage children, help them to build skills and give them confidence to be involved, without an emphasis on winning.

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"By the age of 9 or 10, they pretty much know how good they are," he says.

"The same if they're struggling at school,

already good. You've got to have a balance. You've got to have competition to encourage them to excel and kids should be rewarded



Mr Anderson says the problem is not with the competition but with the behaviour of some people involved.

Jeffrey Emmel, national executive director at the Australian Council for Health, Physical



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Education and Recreation, questions the value of serious competition in junior sport.

"Who does it become an event for? The parents," he says.

"Ten is about the age in most sports where kids start to develop a better sense of what competition is.

"Before that, kids are competing for what reasons?"

"It's always been a vexed question because many sports have maintained traditions that were developed by adults, with adult standards, and they weren't really developed for kids."

He says children should be having as much fun as they can while still learning the skills.

The state's largest swimming school operator, State Swim, has organised a racing carnival for Sunday which it says goes against the "sanitisation" of children's sport.

Chief executive officer Julie Stevens says State Swim originally shied away from grouping swimmers into "squads", preferring to call them teams because there was less at the Australian Council for Health, Physical



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