

# Competitive Kids

*College admissions game starts early*

by HILARY LEVEY FRIEDMAN

When I first met Nasir he was finishing up kindergarten in a traditional classroom. He was preparing to spend the summer studying at a chess camp, and at home, before entering a 1st-grade classroom for gifted students. Nasir's chess teachers told me that they saw something very special in him

and predicted he could make a splash on the national chess scene.

Less than a year later he did just that, winning the national chess championship for all kindergartners and 1st graders with a perfect score. He helped lead his school's team to a top-10 finish, celebrating with three other classmates. The following year, Nasir's parents moved him to a private school with a strong chess team.

What motivates young children and their parents to devote time and resources to competitive activities? While conducting research for a book, *Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture*, I spent time with about 95 families with elementary-school-age children who are involved in competitive chess, dance, or soccer.

Even though all of the *Playing to Win* kids are in elementary school, much of the focus of their young lives is on a goal as much as a decade into the future: college admissions. One father, who did not attend college himself, told me about his motivation for his 3rd-grade daughter's participation in competitive chess: "Well, if this helps her get into Harvard..."

Another mother said that her son's achievements "might help him stand out and get into a good school."

When I asked her to define a "good school," she replied, "Ivy League or equivalent, like Stanford"—though she had not attended any of those colleges.

When it comes to college admissions, families know that grades and test scores are important. The families I studied, however, seemed to focus at least as much effort on extracurricular achievement as on academics. Among the 95 families, there were some whose children had stopped competing, although only one family had an older child who had stopped because of a negative impact on her grades. Even though the connection between pursuits like travel soccer and Little League and admission at an elite school is far from guaranteed, many parents are willing to hedge their bets. They are savvier than ever, investing both time and money so that their children get specialized instruction.



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For many kids, extracurricular life is focused on athletics. A 2005 *New York Times* article on the growing popularity of lacrosse explained, "Families see lacrosse as an opportunity for their sons and daughters to shine in the equally competitive arenas of college admissions and athletic scholarships." One parent is quoted in the article as saying, "From what I hear on the coaches' side in Division III [lacrosse participation is] worth a couple hundred points on the SAT."

All of the *Playing to Win* parents were realistic about their children's very slim chances of earning a scholarship to a top school. They are looking for what lacrosse is thought to provide: an admissions boost. Athletic promise can confer an admissions advantage or scholarship money, and high-level participation in activities like chess and dance can also provide a leg up. The impact of accomplishments in sports is thought strongest at Ivy League schools, which don't award athletic scholarships, and at small liberal arts colleges, where sometimes more than half of the students are collegiate athletes.

While it's unclear how much competitive activity while kids are very young matters, parents *believe* participation is crucial to future success and act accordingly. And it is entirely possible that kids who are competitively involved while still in grade school may develop the skills and the mentality to achieve at a high level as they age (I call this Competitive Kid Capital).

It would be a mistake to imagine that parents of young kids fixate on college admissions offices every Saturday out on the soccer field. But they do seem to expect that early grooming in the tournaments of sports or dance or chess will produce in their child the track record of success they need to ensure that thick admissions envelope when the time comes.

*Hilary Levey Friedman is a sociologist who studies childhood, competition, and beauty. Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture is her first book.*