

# Competition is a double-edged sword for teenage girls

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Is being competitive a good or a bad thing when you're a teenager? Well, a bit of both actually: competing to win is detrimental to girls' social relationships and was linked to higher levels of depression, whereas this was much less the case for boys. However, competing to excel is beneficial to the well-being of both genders. A new study by Dr. David Hibbard from California State University and Dr. Duane Buhrmester from the University of Texas, US, finds that the influence of competitiveness on psychological well-being and social functioning in adolescents depends on both the type of competitiveness and the teenager's gender. Their findings are published in Springer's journal *Sex Roles*.

Competitiveness can be both a virtue and a vice. One person's win can be another person's loss and the drive to be better than others, when taken too far, can appear ruthless and selfish. Consequently, [competitiveness](#) may have social and emotional downsides and its effects are likely to differ for males and females. Indeed, research shows that competitiveness is rated both as more typical of adult males and as more desirable for males than for females.

To date, the implications of competitiveness for males and females during late adolescence - a time when high school seniors are looking to assert their identities for jobs that involve varying levels of ambition and competition, while at the same time working to establish close friendships and [romantic relationships](#) - have not been investigated fully.

Hibbard and Buhrmester's work looks at the effect of two types of competitiveness on teenagers' psychological well-being and social functioning in late adolescence: competing to win i.e. to dominate and outperform others; and competing to excel i.e. to perform well and surpass personal goals. A total of 110 twelfth-grade high school students from the Richardson Independent School District in Dallas, Texas, their best same gender friends and their parents completed questionnaires assessing a combination of competitiveness, gender-role orientation, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, loneliness, aggression, empathy, close relationship qualities, and school grades.

The authors found that teenage boys scored higher on 'competing to win' than girls but there were no gender differences for 'competing to excel' scores. For girls, competing to win was linked to higher levels of depression and loneliness and to fewer and less close [friendships](#). Competing to excel was linked to higher self-esteem and less depression for both genders, but was largely unrelated to social functioning.

Hibbard and Buhrmester conclude: "The overarching issue this study explored was whether competitiveness as a motivational orientation is good or bad for males and females. The findings clarify, to some degree, western cultures' 'ambivalence' about competitiveness. The view that competitiveness is the road to emotional well-being is supported to the extent that one is talking about competing to improve oneself or excel. On the other hand, if one is talking about competing to win or show dominance over others, then females seem to pay a socio-emotional price."

**More information:** Hibbard DR & Buhrmester D (2010). Competitiveness, gender, and adjustment among adolescents. *Sex Roles* DOI [10.1007/s11199-010-9809-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9809-z)

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