

DROWNING

in

our
AWARDS



1ST PLACE
FOR
BEING THERE

THE REVELATION STAFF

At the age of seven, you go to every one of your pee-wee soccer or tee-ball practices. You try your hardest, even if that means you end up swinging the bat and spinning in a circle, never once

making contact with the ball. Your team loses all but one game, and then, at the end of the season all the kids and their parents go to Chuck-E-Cheese's for a pizza party and awards ceremony. Every single one of you gets a trophy, but for what? For losing? "Good job! You were bad at the sport, but you showed up! AWESOME!" Your parents paid for you to live in this false reality where everyone is great at what they're doing, even if they really aren't.

What is now embodied in society's love for gold stars and 1st place trophies, started in the 1980s as a shift in the way child-rearing was conducted. Parents had been using punishments in order to get them to behave the way in which they wanted their kids to behave, but now it seems that parents generally reward good behavior and do not necessarily punish for bad behavior. This reward system was seen as a way to foster positive parenting; parenting became defined by focusing on rewarding positive behaviors in order to increase them, but, obviously, this is a slippery slope.

"The 'trophy' phenomenon started with good intentions, the idea was to help everyone feel successful," Upper School Counselor Lauren Powell said. "The problem is it went too far. Hard work is actually the thing that makes people feel best. Too much praise can turn people into 'approval junkies,' and in the end, it erodes real self-evaluations, self-reliance, and ultimately self-esteem."

Alfie Kohn, a well-known scholar who studies the effects of society's reward craze, wrote a journal article about his findings for ERIC Digest. Kohn found that people who were rewarded for positive behaviors stopped performing such behaviors once rewards were taken out of the picture, proving that society's obsession with trophies and praise leads us to only do things because we will get something out of it, and when all is said and done, this makes us really lazy.

"Studies have shown that people offered a reward generally choose the easiest possible task," Kohn wrote. "In the absence of rewards, by contrast, children are inclined to pick tasks that are just beyond their current level of ability."

Kohn shows us that, when we are offered tangible rewards for our accomplishments, we start to do what is easiest; we get lazy because we know that we can complete the easy task and, therefore, get that prize we crave, as opposed to trying to get better at what we do and expanding our minds by attempting what we once assumed to be beyond our intellectual capabilities.

Additionally, when we connect our accomplishments to praise, it actually can harm our self-esteem, linking it to something tangible. Outside of the world of education, most of the time, you won't be given anything for your accomplishments. No surgeon gets a trophy for performing open-heart surgery, but at that point, we will probably be so used to getting some sort of praise for doing anything that this will hurt us.

"Excessive praise also makes students dependent on public praise and recognition for self-esteem, thus making them feel that they themselves have no control over how they feel about themselves," English Teacher Ruth Holmes said. "Self-esteem and self-worth should not be dependent on external accolade."

Nancy Armour, in an article for USA Today entitled "Armour: James Harrison is right, you shouldn't get prize for showing up," writes about how studies have indicated that millennials, the first generation to be subject to this type of excessive praise, are stressed and depressed, and now they are having to deal with how harsh the real world really can be, for which they weren't prepared.

In an Instagram comment about how he returned his sons' participation trophies, Pittsburgh Steelers Linebacker James Harrison wrote that while he is "very proud of [his] boys... [he's] not about to raise two boys to be men by making them believe that they are entitled to something just because they tried their best."

In the real world, you can pour your heart and soul into something and not get it, and giving children participation awards leaves them unprepared for that harsh reality. It leaves kids believing that you can succeed by doing little to nothing, by being alive. Rather than being praised for being a part of something, children need to be praised for working hard at what they are a part of, for doing what they can, but kids should not be convinced that they will win just because they try.

"Hard work and effort should be what is praised, not the final outcome," Learning Facilitator Lynda Morse said. "Children will naturally feel good about themselves when they understand what actions they took to reach a goal, or not [reach it] but take ownership of what they need to do differently next time to change the outcome."

We praise the outcome of situations, honor those who have made good grades in a class throughout the year at Awards Day, and host banquets at the end of a sport's season. Ceremonies like these seem to be a great way to reward adolescents for everything they have achieved throughout their time, but really, they praise the outcome. They tell the child that they did a good job, not that they put in a lot of hard work and effort in order to make something happen. They tell kids that, whether or not they try, there will be a ceremony at the end where you get an award because that's what you do at the end. We are telling kids that participation is good, teamwork is good, but effort and progression don't matter because they're already great.

