

Back to school, back: Protecting children from the silent competition

When schools reopen, something else quietly returns with the children to the classroom. It does not appear on timetables or school circulars, yet it shapes how children see themselves, how they learn, and how confident they feel in the weeks ahead. It is comparison.

The first days of a new term are filled with reunions and stories. Children talk about where they went for the holidays, what they received, which schoolmate transferred, and who now wears a new uniform. Parents exchange pleasantries on reporting day, sometimes laced with subtle pride or quiet anxiety.

Teachers resume lessons, often unaware of the invisible emotional contest already underway among learners. Primary schools are resuming after PLE [Primary Leaving Examination] results, and children will be comparing how their friends and their school performed with other schools. This may have an emotional toll on candidates, and the outcome could encourage or discourage them.

For many children, the new term begins not with curiosity about learning, but with an unspoken ranking of self-worth. A child who feels "behind" at the beginning of the term may disengage long before the first test is given. Some are worried about the previous comments, and they are not sure how their peers or teachers will be commenting about them in this new term.

Children are still forming their identity. They borrow cues from adults, peers, and systems around them to understand their value. When achievement, appearance, or background becomes the dominant measure,



children quickly learn to define themselves in relation to others rather than through their own growth.

A child who feels less capable may withdraw or act out. Another who feels superior may fear losing their position. In both cases, learning becomes emotional rather than exploratory. This is where your words of encouragement will always be vital.

Parents often contribute to this silent competition without intending to. A comment like "Your cousin is doing very well in her school" or "That child is already reading ahead" may be meant as motivation, but to a child, it can sound like a judgment. Even praise can become harmful when it is comparative or the tone seems judgmental. When children feel valued only when they outperform others, success becomes fragile and

anxiety-driven. They stop learning for understanding and start learning for approval.

Schools, too, sometimes reinforce comparison without realising it. Public ranking, constant emphasis on class position, and early labelling of "weak" or "strong" learners can create lasting impressions. In some schools, they have streams according to children's academic performance. The ones in streams labelled as for weak performers may always have a silent but strong feeling of less-value academically.

Expecting uniform confidence and performance ignores the realities of childhood. Education should be a space where differences are recognised without being turned into disadvantages.

Reporting day offers parents a rare opportunity to shape the term positively. Instead of focus-

ing only on grades and rankings, parents can ask about a child's adjustment, confidence, and learning habits. Asking teachers how a child can be supported, rather than how they compare with others, sends a powerful message. It tells the child that school is a partnership, not a performance arena.

Teachers play a critical role in the early weeks. Emphasising belonging, collaboration, and effort helps children feel safe enough to engage. Group learning, recognition of diverse strengths, and avoiding premature academic labelling can transform classroom culture. Children learn best when they feel seen and valued, not measured against others.

Comparison does not stop at the school gate. Social media, even among younger learners, amplifies curated success and unrealistic standards. Children absorb these messages quickly. Helping children develop emotional awareness and self-worth equips them to resist harmful comparison. Teaching them that growth looks different for everyone is not lowering standards; it is building resilience.

As parents and educators, we must ask ourselves what kind of success we want for our children. Is it the short-lived triumph of being ahead of others, or the lasting confidence of knowing who they are and what they can become?

A child whose worth is not tied to comparison is more likely to persevere, innovate, and contribute meaningfully to society.

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