

“I Do it Better”

Working with the child who is always competing for attention

by Adele M. Brodtkin, Ph.D.

THE TEACHER’S STORY

As I opened the door to the playground, I heard Tucker call out, “Race ya to the swings!” Sam accepted the challenge, and the 4-year-olds were off and running. Tucker won, but he apparently wasn’t satisfied with this single victory. “I bet I can swing higher than you, Sam!” he said, challenging his friend to still another contest. Tucker’s short legs pumped as hard as they could, and he won again. Then on to the climbers, where Tucker announced he could climb higher than Bobby. By then, I was tired just from watching. Here it was, only late morning and Tucker had already built “the highest tower in the world” in the block corner, counted “higher than anyone” during snack, used “more colors” in his collage than any of the others at his table, and now he was conquering every corner of the playground!

When he first entered our program, I thought Tucker’s competitiveness might be just the result of being new here. He could have been worried about fitting in. But now, that’s certainly not an issue, and he’s still intent on being the best at everything. During group time, Tucker boasts about the things he has or about his big brother’s possessions and achievements. Then too, Tucker wants to be right and first all the time. He is disappointed whenever someone else gets chosen as line leader or snack helper. So far, the other children have been tolerant of his behavior. But I don’t think that’s likely to last—even with such an easy-going group.

I worry about Tucker’s relationships with his classmates. The odd thing is, there really is nothing for him to prove. He’s a very bright and capable child, which makes his behavior even more puzzling. So much so that, after today’s events, I decided to invite his parents in to talk. Maybe they can shed some light on what’s causing Tucker to drive himself so hard.

THE PARENT’S STORY

Sometimes I feel really sorry for Tucker. But I don’t know how to help him. He’s the younger of our two boys—and the healthy one. Our older son has had many health problems including chronic asthma. It’s pretty well under control now. But there have been occasions in Tucker’s lifetime when we all had to rush to the emergency room because Donny was struggling to breathe. Naturally, when things like that happen, our focus is on getting our sick child out of danger.

And I know we are very protective of Donny. We try to avoid exposing him to what would be ordinary everyday illnesses for a healthy child. Even a cold can end up being a serious problem. So we stay away from large, crowded events and activities in the winter, where we know there will be lots of coughing and sneezing children. Tucker sometimes pleads to go to a circus or fair that he hears about, but we have to say no.

Even though Donny misses lots of school, we always get great reports from his teachers about his academic progress and his popularity. We praise him for his achievements—perhaps more than we should within earshot of Tucker. It’s a tough call,

though, because we want both boys to feel good about themselves, and Tucker has no significant challenges. I realize now that he does seem to have an insatiable need to be recognized and praised. We get constant “Watch me!” and other attention-seeking behaviors. This makes me wonder if we have been short-changing him. I’m planning to have a conference with Tucker’s teacher to ask her advice about all of this.

#### DR BRODKIN’S ASSESSMENT

Three-and-a-half- to 5-year-olds frequently wrestle with feelings of jealousy and competition. But Tucker’s intense competitiveness is a bit beyond what we’d expect, even for a young child who has a chronically ill older brother.

#### WHAT THE TEACHER CAN DO

The best news is that the teacher and parents will be getting together on Tucker’s behalf. Hopefully, they can help him discover both the pleasure of being himself and the rewards of being a cooperative member of the group. For a while, some group-time activities might include reading and talking about stories of children or animals who feel small, but stand tall. Books like *Swimmy*, which portray the benefits of cooperation, are a good place to start. Tucker needs the teacher’s individual guidance and reassurance, as well. She should praise his accomplishments, of course, but also encourage and reward any cooperation and consideration of others’ needs. She should compliment him for applauding another child’s achievement or following another’s lead, however reluctantly. She can point out the loyal friends he has made in a relatively brief period of time. She can also remind him of how pleased everyone is to have him there, and repeatedly get the message across that, at school, everyone is equally special in his or her own way.

#### WHAT THE PARENTS CAN DO

Ultimately, Tucker will need to find his own areas of accomplishment and personal satisfaction. His parents can set the tone by finding some things to praise Tucker about every day. If he is kind to someone, they should acknowledge it in front of him. If a younger child in the neighborhood looks up to him, they should let him know that. They can verbally reward him for being Tucker, for accompanying them to some of his brother’s medical appointments or for helping in the workshop or garden. They can give him tasks that he can master, and compliment and thank him warmly for his help. In this way, they can begin to guide Tucker to measure himself only against himself. Another part of that effort involves tuning in to Tucker’s own interests. If, for example, trucks and big construction machines fascinate him, take him to see an area that you know is in the throes of construction traffic jams, allowing him to watch and comment on the goings on. Follow up with a trip to the public library to find books that will pick up where the real thing left off. In time, he may lose interest in construction and develop a passion for a certain activity. It could be almost anything. What matters is whether his parents pick up on those things that fascinate Tucker and offer him opportunities to pursue them. Hopefully, Tucker will conclude that getting attention from being sick or fragile is not enviable—being loved and valued for who you are is what matters most. ECT

When To Wonder

- If Tucker's need for attention leads him to be aggressive or destructive at home or in school.
- If Tucker becomes unabashedly hostile to his brother or another child, without provocation.
- If Tucker's capacity to focus and follow through on projects in school deteriorates.
- If Tucker shows other signs of emotional distress through regressions in behavior at meal times, rest times, and various interpersonal settings.

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