8.3 Beyond Bribes and Threats:

How Not to Get Control of the Classroom

Alfie Kohn

In an effort to clarify the basic assumptions that underlie our approaches to children, Alfie Kohn proposes a distinction between doing to and working with. A doing to approach involves the imposition of the adult will on the child; working with refers to good listening, responsive teaching, and a collaborative approach of community-building, choices, and a fresh view of the curriculum. Kohn exhorts teachers to improve their craft, moving from *doing to* to *working with.*

DOING TO VERSUS *WORKING WITH*

. . . One way of framing a discussion, is to distinguish between *doing to* and *working with,* two verb phrases that have some heuristic power, at least for me. I find them useful, that is, for sorting through different principles and practices. You decide, obviously, whether it is useful for yourself. The difference between *doing to* and *working with* is important if I am right in my central premise, which is that you can only help kids become independent and compassionate and morally responsible and all the rest of it by *working with them* as opposed to *doing to them.* If that's true, then we ought to be on the lookout for even subtle ways that we might be *doing things to* kids.

Let me offer you this little schema (see Figure 1), then I'm going to ask you to work with me to sort of fill in some of the concrete practices that exemplify these two things. The methods of *doing to* and *working with* are basically the topic for this morning. I'm going to go over them quickly now and then come back to them, focusing on the *doing to* methods now and the *working with* methods after our break.

Methods of Doing To

I propose three ways by which we might do *things to* children. The most obvious is *simple coercion:* We make them act the way we want. My favorite example in the typical elementary school is two kids who are talking to each other, arguing, missing out on what is going on in the rest of the room, perhaps creating a disturbance (at least in the teacher's mind) for those others who are present. So the teacher comes up and says, "You need to sit over there." (I'm always alert for phrases like "you need to," which typically say a lot more about the preferences of the speaker than the genuine needs of the listener.) What has happened as a result of this interaction? Has either child been led to think about how to sit next to somebody she doesn't like? No. Has either child been helped to think about how to solve the problem or negotiate a solution with somebody else? No. Has either child or anybody else within earshot been invited to think about how her behavior affects other people? No. What the children have learned is the message of power. "I have the power. They don't. So I can *make* them sit wherever I damn well please, for any reason or no reason." That is the message that coercion always teaches. It's just not always clear to us that what we're doing is, in fact, simple coercion to achieve some short-term goal.

Closely related to coercion is *punishment,* which I will define as doing something aversive or unpleasant with the express purpose of changing future behavior. I force you to do something you don't want to do, or I prevent you from doing something you *do* want to do in order that you will act differently later. I make you suffer to change what you do. Now you

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	Doing to	Working with
Methods	coercion punishment ("consequences") rewards ("positive reinforcement")	mutual problem solving; creation of caring community; choices; engaging curriculum
Focus	behavior	motives, values
Goal	compliance	intrinsic commitment to good values, moral sophistication; genuine concern & empathy for others; social skills problem-solving
Message	power	cooperate (as possible and desirable)
Climate	teacher firmly in control	"Control can't be the goal:" teacher as facilitator, guide, model, fellow learner; classroom belongs to all; unpredictability
View of conflict	distraction from the lesson to be elimi-ated efficiently	teachable moment; this *is* the lesson
Intellectual influences	F. W. Taylor (student as worker to be controlled), Skinner, Dreikurs	Dewey, Piaget
Academic counterpart	transmission/absorption: drill 'n' skill lectures.	constructivism
Telltale signs	teachers' demands (and definition of misbehavior) accepted uncritically; "discipline;" use of recipes; pseudochoice	emphasis on asking kids; student-to-student discussion

Figure 1
Doing to versus *working with.*

can call that punishment, you can call that "consequences," you can call it a Popsicle—it doesn't matter what euphemism you use.

If you want to know whether it's a punishment, don't read Montessori, don't listen to me; look in the child's eyes and you'll have your answer. These days in many schools, I hope not Montessori schools, to a significant extent, there is a movement toward doing the same thing but dressing it up and making it a little nicer. Hence, we insert the modifier *logical* before the euphemism *consequences* so as to pretend the child is not being punished. The whole procedure I like to refer to as "punishment lite," a slightly less unpleasant way of *doing things to* children. And if you'd like to get into this distinction and the specifics of what are offered as logical consequences in discipline manuals, and the work that I think is profoundly anti-child of Rudolf Dreikurs, who is passed off as being humanistic and democratic, I would be very interested in talking with you about this. But, for the time being, let us simply say that it doesn't matter what you call it; it has the same essential impact on the child and is based on the same set of principles about how to change what someone does, typically for the convenience of the person administering that "consequence." The fact that the punishment may fit the crime, or the tone of voice may be sweet, does not in any significant way alter what has happened during that exchange.

We love these euphemisms, don't we? In schools sometimes we don't call it *incarceration;* we call it *detention.* One of my personal favorites is the euphemism we give to forcible isolation of young children, and that is *time out,* which you may not know is originally short for "time out from positive reinforcement," and was developed as a means for suppressing certain behaviors in laboratory animals. That's the lineage of that term. There are many others, of course, and I'll come back to the arguments against this and try to put them in a way that might be useful for you to pass on to others, but I hardly think I need to persuade you of the problems of being punitive.

The third approach that's used for *doing things to* children is to offer them *rewards* when they do what we want. For so many parents and so many educators, it is extremely discomfiting to hear the message that rewards and punishments are not opposites. Yet that is what I would strongly argue; they are two

sides of the same coin. And that coin doesn't buy very much. Whether I say to you, "Do this or here's what I'm going to do to you," or I say, "Do this and you'll get that," I am engaged in pretty much the same kind of attempt to *do things to* children. It doesn't matter whether it's a bribe or a threat, a reward or a punishment, a carrot or a stick; it's the same idea. Of course, there are examples galore of how this is done in homes and in classrooms. Stickers and stars and extra recess, food, grades in many schools, money. There are parents who actually pay children for good grades, which is a reward for a reward. You can almost watch the interest in learning evaporate before your eyes—and we could go on.

One of the most controversial aspects of this argument is the realization that you might be offering to children what amounts to a *verbal* doggie biscuit—in effect, leaving home the stickers and avoiding the grades, but saying, "Good for you, Diana, I'm really proud of what you did just now," or, worse, saying in front of others, "I like the way Pat has done so many interesting things with her cylinders," or has shared her sandwich—which places another whole twist on it when it is done in front of others, and I'll come back to this.

Whether it's done verbally or tangibly, whether it is done through reward or punishment, we are still firmly on the *doing to* side of the ledger. Thus, if my premise is right, we are making it more difficult, making it less likely, for kids to become the kind of independent, responsible, compassionate life-long learners we want them to be. Something, then, has to give. Either you change your mind about that goal or you question the practice . . .

. . . The question is, "Do you never do this when you have problems with the way kids are acting?" A child who is hitting, a child who is acting out, being intrusive or obnoxious or aggressive, is a child who in many cases has already been over-controlled—though not always. In any case, the last thing that child needs is more control. What that child, in particular, needs is a more successful approach to *working with.* When I hear from people, "Oh, I've tried the *working with* stuff; it doesn't work," I think of the following analogy: "I type and I type and I type and I still can't produce a good novel. Clearly typing doesn't work." In other words, if the way we are trying to respectfully engage a child to solve a problem has not been successful, our only alternative, really, is to find another, better way of engaging with the child. It may be a different arena, it may be with a group versus one-on-one, it may be at the time versus later, it may involve or not involve the parent, it may involve more pointed and directed questioning by us, or a more non-directive approach. We may have to struggle for new techniques.

But what I think the research and our experience indicates pretty clearly is that the *doing to* approach never works, except to get one thing: temporary compliance. For that, punishments and rewards can be enormously effective. If I took a gun out of my pocket right now and said, "If I hear another comment or question, you will get shot," I think I would be successful in cutting off any further conversation. See, punishments or consequences work. Conversely, if I yanked out of my podium a stack of checks made payable to cash in the amount of $2,000, and said, "If you cross your legs for the remainder of this presentation, I will give you such a check," my guess is a lot of legs would be crossed in a hurry. I imagine anyone with two legs would cross one over another for two grand. You see, rewards work. But when anyone says, "Consequences or rewards work," even under specific conditions, I would encourage you to respond with two questions: "Work to do what, exactly?"—and here I'm suggesting that temporary compliance pretty much exhausts the effects—and, second, "At what cost?" I'll come back after I've gone through this list to talk about the cost and indicate with more urgency why we should never use these techniques, even with, or especially with, kids who are making life difficult for themselves, other kids, and us. Then we'll also talk more about the *working with.*

Methods of Working With

Basically, the methods that I'm putting on the other side of this ledger begin with what I've called *mutual problem-solving.* "That's easy to say," the understandable response from you is, "but how do I do it, especially when it hasn't been successful so far?" The commitment to seeing a problematic action as a problem to be solved, rather than an infraction to be punished, is a powerful predictor of a successful classroom and a successful kind of interaction with kids. Notice it is not just a problem to be observed. Notice it is not an error to be fixed. It is a problem to be solved, which often indicates that we cannot predict what is the right way to do it in advance. Nor can we impose, in effect, but it does require an active role for the adult, in *working with. Working with* is not the same thing as *doing for; working with* is not the same thing as just observing. It is active, but it is at the same time responsive and reciprocal, respectful and collaborative.

But that's just about solving problems that have already happened. What we're interested in, I think,

is preventing most problems from occurring in the first place, and let us not forget, the way most discipline programs forget, that we want to do more than just prevent problems; we want affirmatively to help kids become independent, responsible, caring, and so on. And that requires what I call the *three Cs.* Those three Cs, which will form the backbone of what we talk about after the break, are *community, choices,* and *curriculum.*

The creation of a *caring community*—not a bunch of self-sufficient, independent young people in a room, but rather transforming what that room is, so that it is experienced virtually all the time as a community of learners—requires structuring interdependence instead of getting carried away with self-sufficiency, self-discipline, self-esteem, and otherwise relentlessly promoting the idea of individuals only accidentally connected to others.

The idea of *choices* says that it is important for us to recognize autonomy and support the capacity of kids to make decisions about the things that affect them. But that does not mean autonomy in the sense of privacy. Even here we may be talking about a community making decisions together, so that the idea of choices does not necessarily mean just solitary children figuring out what they want to work on at a given moment. But again, when you combine the idea of choices and community, you get—well, what you get is democracy.

The third C, which can never be far from our minds, is the *curriculum,* which is to say: What are the tasks? How engaging are they? To what extent are they experienced as worth doing? Because even if you are talking or thinking just about kids' social and moral development, even if the topic today and tomorrow is just discipline, how can it be far from your mind that if kids do not find meaning and purpose in what it is they are being asked to do, they are going to act out and cause a problem? Very rare is the classroom management seminar or the book on discipline that says when kids are off-task we should ask, "What's the task?" Instead, the presumption is always, "Whatever the adult wants kids to do, here are some tricks for getting them to do it."

There was a period in my life when I was teaching older kids and I had a big discipline problem. At least that's how I experienced it at the time. Those kids must have gotten together at night to figure out how to make my life a living hell, because they could not have been that good spontaneously. Had anyone asked me, "What do you need, Alfie?"—which no one did, incidentally—I would have said, "I need better techniques of discipline." It took me years to figure out that I had misdiagnosed the problem. These kids were not deliberately trying to make me miserable; they were trying to make the time pass faster. When I look back at the kinds of tasks I was giving them to do—I remember in particular a unit that might as well have been called "Our Friend the Adverb"—I cannot blame them. The real problem lay not with them but with me—specifically, with what I was giving them to do and with my mistaken assumptions about learning and what a good teacher was. It took me a long time to figure that out, and you can see why that is not as popular a message for educators as the packaged programs and catalogued advice for how to make kids buckle down and "get to work."

Focus of Doing To Versus Working With

I want to continue, with your indulgence, to think about this *doing to* and *working with* distinction in different ways. So far, I've only mentioned the *methods* of each approach. But what is the *focus* of each approach? I'm glad you asked. The focus of a *doing to* classroom is *behavior.* The focus of a *doing to* family is behavior. In a *working with* environment, it is the *motives,* the *values,* the why behind the behavior. Whenever I hear an educator or a parent say, "I've got to do something about this kids behavior," I know we're in trouble because when that's the focus, I can predict what the methods are going to be: some variant of bribes and threats—excuse me, "positive reinforcement" and "logical consequences."

What I care about is not just *what* the child is doing but *why.* A lot of folks have recalled a man named Burrhus Frederic Skinner. You know of whom I speak—a man who did his research with rodents and pigeons and wrote most of his books about people—that B. F. Skinner? We recall him chiefly in terms of the doggie biscuits that are offered, the reinforcers used to shape behavior. But it's not the use of the reinforcer that defines a behaviorist. It's the assumption that all there is, or all that's worth talking about, is measurable, observable behavior. And there are a lot of pop behaviorists running around, regardless of whether they use stickers or pizza parties or praise to control children. To the extent that a directress, a mom, or a dad is focusing on just what the child is doing and how to change that, B. F. Skinner feels right at home. The use of the doggie biscuits or the threats will tend to follow, not because of an *a priori* commitment to those techniques, but because of the start, because of the presumption that behavior is what we're supposed to be focused on.

I don't care about behavior, except insofar as it tells me who this child is. Let me give you a very

homey example. This child just gave half her sandwich to the kid sitting next to her. This *other* kid just gave half *her* sandwich to the kid sitting next to *her.* Are you pleased? Me, I don't know yet. Couldn't say yes or no. I want to know why. Well, as it turns out, *this* kid did it hoping that the adult nearby would slather her with praise: "Good for you, Debbie. I really appreciate your sharing like that. I'm so proud of you." *This* child did it without knowing or caring whether an adult saw it. *She* did it because she was afraid that if she hadn't done it, the other child would be hungry. Now which of those two motives do you see as better and more worth supporting? Second, which of those two motives do you think praise is likely to promote and sustain?

As soon as you look underneath observable behavior, you recognize why positive reinforcement may not be so positive, and why a *working with* set of methods is going to be necessary—because you are not just concerned about behavior. And in *working with* environments, people look deeper than that.

Goals of Doing To Versus Working With

The goal in a *doing to* classroom is getting *compliance.* Now don't feel obliged to copy down all of the items in *the working with* set; that's just an example. Use, if you like, the long-term goals that you just shouted out a few minutes ago. What I've put on this list as a *working with* set of goals includes an *intrinsic commitment to good values, moral sophistication, genuine concern and empathy for others, social skills, problem-solving*—these are not controversial in their own right. How many educators or parents would say nix to those? What interests me is what an observer would conclude are the real goals in a classroom. In many classrooms, even those of teachers who say they're looking for kids to become responsible and caring and independent and all the rest of it, the real goal apparently is just to get kids to do what they are told. Sometimes what they're told is great stuff. That's where it becomes even more challenging for us to move beyond compliance. I have seen programs, for example, where I love the goals, where the objectives have to do with being caring and creating a safe environment and figuring stuff out and trying many different, new activities and tasks and materials. But if our basic goal is just to get them to comply with even very desirable, even lofty and ambitious objectives, it is still not about these things on the *working with* side. We have to look at the extent to which we then use subtler methods of *doing to* to get kids basically to obey.

Message of Doing To Versus Working With

In a *doing to* classroom the message is *power,* as I said before with respect to coercion in particular. "I have the power, so I can make you do whatever I want." In a *working with* environment, the message is that *cooperation—among* kids, among adults, or between kids and adults—genuine cooperation is both possible and desirable. That's the message that seeps into the air in a genuinely *working with* environment.

Climate of Doing To Versus Working With

In a *doing to* classroom, the climate is that the *teacher is firmly in control.* In a *working with* place, the first slogan is, *"Control can't be the goal."* In a *working with* environment, the teacher is a facilitator, a guide, sure, I'd add observer, a model, a fellow learner. In a *working with* environment, the classroom belongs to everyone and is somewhat unpredictable. There are various ways that we satisfy our need for predictability, for knowing what's going to happen at a particular time. Some environments do it in a more sophisticated way, some in a rather crude and primitive way. In any case, we're doing it more because of *our* needs, sometimes, to know exactly what will happen. Young children, I know, are comforted by ritual and some degree of predictability. I think often we overdo this and provide them with not just structure, which is useful, but control, which may not be, sometimes over-determining what they do, or with whom, or when, or how.

The real problem is the idea of using rewards and punishments. Actually, though, rewards and punishments are not the problem either, which is a curious thing to say when you've written a 400-page book about rewards and punishments. I have come to realize, and I continue to believe strongly, that the rewards and punishments are just the techniques that flow logically and inexorably from the belief that the adult should be in control of the classroom. And as long as that belief is there, all rewards and punishments could disappear and new ones would pop up like new Kleenexes in the box. I, as a teacher, had unthinkingly accepted what I was told, in no uncertain terms, was my responsibility in the class, which is to have control of the classroom. After all, the alternative to control is chaos. We're all taught that, as if those are the only two possibilities. "Control and chaos," I thought, "where have I heard that before?" And then I remembered: *Get Smart!*

Where I'd really heard that before was from the mouths of dictators through history who have argued, in effect, if I am not in control of this environment there will be bloody anarchy, wild chaos, and so

on. It's for your own good that I make all the decisions. When we, from our comfortable vantage point in contemporary America, look over or back at tyrants who have made that claim, our response is, "Hey buddy, you're forgetting a third alternative here. We call it *dem-oc-racy.*" How come we forget that possibility when we look inside classrooms?

I'm not arguing that a 40-year-old and a bunch of 3-year-olds have the same vote, the same voice, the same talents, the same agenda, and are in all respects interchangeable. I don't know anyone who believes that. But I do believe that even with very young children, it behooves us, if we're really looking at those long-term goals, to rethink the idea of control and think about bringing even young children, but especially older children, into the process of making decisions, constructing meaning, and solving problems together. That may mean that the adult provides guidance that the children require, and nurturance, observation, support, limits, and structure. But it does not necessarily mean that we are "in control of the room." Indeed, one might argue that children cannot become responsible members of a democratic society, or agitators to create a democratic society as the case may be, unless from a very young age they have been in an environment where the adult has deliberately and carefully given up some authority to shrewdly, to carefully share the control and create a very different kind of environment than is true of the typical preschool, 9 to 12, high school, or other environment, in which we find ourselves, where pretty soon we learn to take being controlled for granted.

If punishments or rewards are as destructive as I'm going to argue they are, why would they be so popular? One reason is that they work—in the extremely circumscribed sense of getting temporary compliance. And often, we don't know what else *to* do. They are convenient in a convenient society. Also, they are familiar to us. They are the way that most of us *were* raised and taught. One might also say that they are easy. To do the *working with* stuff, to give up control, to create a caring community, to devise an engaging curriculum, this takes time, it takes skill, it takes care, it takes courage because we have to give up the control to which we've become accustomed. But to say, "Do this because I'm the mom," or "I don't care what you think," or "I'll give you an ice cream cone if you do it," takes no time, no care, no skill, no talent, and, above all, no courage. Guess which approach is more popular. That's an argument about the difficulty of moving to *working with,* not an argument about the desirability of continuing to *do to.* . . .

View of Conflict in Doing To Versus Working With. The view of conflict in a *doing to* approach is that conflict is a *distraction from the lesson* and should be ended as swiftly as possible. Conflict is, in this view, rather like dandruff. The only question is how you get rid of it. In a *working with* environment, conflict, putting aside of course the kind that leads to kids getting hurt, is a *teachable moment.* Some kinds of conflict are devoutly to be wished. I know some teachers of young children who deliberately have fewer materials around than there are kids to use them, in the hope that this will provide a kind of conflict that will help children think through issues in a way they wouldn't have otherwise. That's just one example. When kids are arguing about something, and seem unhappy, this is a moment that we should not lose. We should not, I would argue, prepare an environment so carefully as to preclude such conflict from arising because lessons then might be lost that would only happen if we had this conflict. I worry when I walk into a classroom where things are going a little too smoothly . . .

Academic Counterparts of Doing To Versus Working With. The academic counterpart to a *doing to* approach—and here I think I'm speaking especially to those of you who teach 6 to 9 or 9 to 12 or 6 to 50 or whatever—is a *transmission* approach to curriculum, the kind of "*drill and skill*" where you're just supposed to memorize a bunch of facts—more importantly, the idea that the teacher, the directress, whoever, has a bunch of facts and skills that are imparted to or poured into the passive receptacle of the student. Lectures, worksheets, basals, primers, dittos, that sort of thing, are the hallmarks of a *doing to* approach.

A *working with* approach, in the social and moral domain, is consistent with an approach known as *constructivism,* which is not a method of teaching. If you want to be strict about it, there's no such thing as a constructivist classroom. Constructivism is not a prescription; it's a description of how people learn, and it says, in effect, that people don't learn by being filled with or—now I will push my luck further—absorbing things that come from elsewhere, but by actively making meaning around ideas, whether the idea has to do with fractions, written expression, or fairness.

What's interesting to me about this logical matchup is how many classrooms I've been in where there's a disconnect again. I have been in schools where the curriculum is incredibly engaging, where there are projects, where there are hands-on lessons all the way up through high school (though rarely), where kids

are not using textbooks except as references like dictionaries, but instead figuring out together and giving meaning to ideas. It's an exciting intellectual atmosphere to be part of. And then you look beyond the academic curriculum, and you find the teacher runs the whole show. The rules are up there that the teacher alone devised for everyone to follow. There's not only praise but public praise to control children, consequences for misbehavior, and all of the rest of it.

Conversely, I have seen classrooms and schools that are devoted to a *working with* approach where there are democratic class meetings and circle times and—heaven knows, not all class meetings are done in a way that *is working with.* I have seen class meetings and circle times where the teacher drives the entire conversation, another major opportunity missed. But I'm talking about classrooms where problems are really solved together by a community of learners. Then you look at the curriculum, and you see SRA Reading Series, you see "Circle the vowel," you see "Read Chapter 9 and answer the even-numbered questions." You see relatively little in terms of deep understanding of ideas, but instead a superficial acquisition of facts and skills very useful for standardized test-taking but not for deep learning.

What those two crosses tell me—that is, a constructivist curriculum with a *doing to* environment, and a *working with* environment connecting to a transmission/superficial curriculum—what this teaches me is humility, because of how incredibly hard it is to do both the constructivist curriculum and the *working with* approach . . .

THE CASE AGAINST PUNISHMENT

Let's go back now, if we can, to the case against punishment—or "consequences." That punishment isn't terribly effective should be clear from the fact that the same kids are punished over and over again without apparent benefit. At some point a bright six-year-old can figure it out: "Duh! Maybe the problem isn't with the kid, but with the act of punishing." We've had research for more than half a century indicating that children who are raised in homes with traditional discipline, where severe punishments are meted out for breaking the rules, tend to be more aggressive and obnoxious than their peers when they're away from home. The implication, of course, is that punishment isn't just ineffective, but actually counterproductive.

Why should this be? First, punishment, or the threat of punishment, ticks people off. It makes people mad, fills them with rage and defiance and a desire to get even. Second, it ruptures the relationship between the person giving and the person getting the punishment. If you come to be seen as someone who imposes "consequences," the kid is going to be about as happy to see you coming as you or I would be to see a police car in our rearview mirror. This compromises the all-important caring alliance between adult and child. Third, punishment focuses attention on avoiding the punishment itself—not on the behavior, much less the reason for the behavior. If I say to you, "Hey! I don't want to catch you doing that again!," your reaction is likely to be, "OK. Next time you won't catch me." That's a perfectly logical response to the perfect illogic of punitive consequences.

Fourth, punishment gets people to think almost exclusively about their own self-interest. Whenever we talk about "consequences," we mean the consequences to the person who did something wrong. Consider the resigned, even sullen question that a child is led to ask in a punitive environment: "What do they want me to do—and what happens to me if I don't do it?" Contrast that with the sort of questions we'd like kids to think about:

"What kind of person do I want be?" or, better yet, "What kind of classroom (or school) do we want to create?" The use of consequences—"logical" or otherwise—actively distracts kids from thinking in those terms.

Go back to that question and let's italicize two words this time: "What do they want me to do—and what happens *to me* if I don't do it?" This is the lowest level of moral development, and any time we threaten punitive consequences for misbehavior, we help to arrest kids at that level.

Speaking of arrest, I'm reminded of a common objection to this argument. People sometimes say, "Well, that sounds nice in theory—although I find that such individuals rarely even like the theory—" . . . but in the Real World, there are consequences to be paid. If a kid grows up and robs a bank, assuming he's caught, he'll be thrown in jail. Kids have to learn that now." Do you see the fatal flaw in the logic here? We want kids not to rob banks because they know it's wrong. No "consequence" ever taught right and wrong, only self-interest. Now, it doesn't put kids at a disadvantage for them to become more morally sophisticated and concerned about the impact of their action on others; they're not going to rob banks either, but they won't rob banks even if they think they can get away with it. If you saturate a child in an environment of so-called logical consequences, that child, if he grows up and thinks he can get away with

robbing a bank, has a green light to do so, because there will be no consequence, and that's what you've told him is the reason not to do it. That's not an academic argument. You could fill this room with real bank robbers and wife batterers, and I guarantee you that the great majority of them were consequenced plenty when they were kids.

This is an argument for moral sophistication. Are there people in our society who basically just do the right thing or avoid doing the wrong thing because they're afraid they're going to get caught and punished? Sure. Are those the kind of people we want our kids to grow up to be? If so, then use lots of consequences.

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST REWARDS

The flip side of all of these arguments against punishment is the argument against rewards. Let me start with the research. Two questions: Do rewards change behavior? Do rewards improve performance?

First question: Do rewards change behavior? The answer is, yes, they often can, for as long as the reward keeps coming and not a minute afterward. If you're lucky, behavior will typically revert to what it was before the rewards were used. If you are not lucky, which is most of the time, the behavior will get worse than it was before the rewards started. This rebound effect is found by any number of studies collecting dust on library shelves. Example: Programs to help adults quit smoking have found that if they are paid a reward, a financial incentive for quitting, they will tend to go back to smoking faster than people in other kinds of programs, and also faster than people in the control group—that is, people who are not in any program. You see what that means? The reward, like punishments, was not just ineffective, but counterproductive. It was worse than doing nothing. Example: Two recent studies—and this example may be more relevant to you, unless you're trying to quit smoking at the moment—two studies, one at Arizona State University, and one at the University of Toronto, have found that children who are frequently rewarded or praised are somewhat less generous than their peers. The effect is most pronounced when they are rewarded or praised for being generous. Are you surprised, or does it make sense to you? Present this to a parent who is using reward systems, or slathering kids with praise, and ask why this might be. What the child, it will eventually occur to us, is being led to think about is, "What am I supposed to do and what do I get for doing it?" It's just the flip side of the punishment question. It's also about self-interest. All rewards are about self-interest. It just becomes amusingly paradoxical when the rewards are given for generosity. You can buy the behavior of sharing a sandwich or taking a turn or cooperating with other kids as long as the reward is offered for that. But when the reward is no longer there, the kid is less generous than when she started.

What about the second question: Do rewards improve the quality of performance on various tasks? The answer there, in a nutshell, is that it depends on the task. If you're looking for short-term performance on relatively mindless tasks, like how many envelopes can you lick in an hour, you can get people to lick more envelopes if you give them a reward for doing it. But research has shown that when the tasks require higher-order thinking, problem solving, or some degree of creativity, people who are offered nothing for doing the task tend to do it better than people who are offered a reward, either for doing the task or for doing it well. When those first studies showed that in the early 1960s, they carried the telltale phrase in the results section, "Contrary to hypothesis." Whenever you see that phrase, wake up. It means that even the researcher didn't see this coming, and, more remarkably, admitted it.

There have been at least a couple dozen studies now showing that this is true, with males and females, adults and children, a range of tasks, and every reward that experimenters could think to give. And over and over again—Janet Spence put it best (she later became president of the American Psychological Association). Back in 1971 she wrote that rewards "have effects that interfere with performance in ways that we are only beginning to understand." It's been a quarter of a century since she wrote that, and the 39 people who follow this line of research have some good ideas as to why this happens.

Meanwhile, parents, teachers, and managers continue to dangle goodies in front of people, assuming it will make them work harder, work better, or become better people. The evidence mounts that it's not just ineffective but it moves us in the wrong direction.

WHY REWARDS FAIL

How come? Very quickly, let me suggest a couple of possible reasons. . . .

Rewards Punish

The first reason that rewards don't work very well is because they punish. The paradox is intentional.

They're not just different ways of getting to behavior. In the long run, the reward is punitive. Why? My favorite phrase on this topic comes from two of my mentors in this field: Ed Deci and Rich Ryan at the University of Rochester in New York, who've done a lot of the research. The following phrase leapt off of the page and imprinted itself on my brain: Rewards are just "control through seduction" (1985, p. 70). That's absolutely right. To understand why rewards fail, you have to understand the difference between the goodie itself and using the goodie as a reward. You want to give kids a popcorn party on Friday? I have no objection to that. That sounds like fun. What I hope you would never do is say, "*If you're good this week* . . . or "*If* . . . anything, "*we will have a popcorn party.*" The popcorn is not the problem. It's using the popcorn as a reward. What makes a reward a reward? In one word, contingency. In a more down-to-earth phrase, "Do this and you'll get that."

Now you start to see why praise might be a problem. There is nothing wrong, heaven knows, with love and support and attention and acknowledgment. There is a lot wrong with saying, "Jump through my hoops and only then will you get that stuff. Only when you *share,* only when you *comply,* only when you do what I think is a good job, only when you live up to my expectations will I marinate you in praise and approval." It's not the expressions of love that are problematic; it's the conditionality of them. What kids, especially kids from troubled homes, need is unconditional love and support. Praise is not just different from that. Praise is the opposite of that.

"Do this and you'll get that." Ultimately, that feels punitive. Analogously, I don't have problem with money. As long as it doesn't eclipse other values in your life, money is great. I have a big problem with merit pay, pay for performance, incentive plans, bonuses, and commissions. It's not an argument against compensation; it's an argument against using compensation as a doggie biscuit, which is what the vast majority of American companies do. Just like the popcorn. They punish because they're controlling, and, more concretely, they punish because sometimes kids expect to get a reward and don't get it. That happens invariably in reward systems. Tell me how the kid feels after that, what's the difference between that and punishment.

Rewards Rupture Relationships

Second reason: Rewards fail because of what they do to relationships, beginning with the relationships among the kids themselves. Now I'm going to come back to what I take to be the importance of those relationships among kids, how critical it is to create a caring community and pay attention to how kids feel about each other and learn with and from each other. But assuming I don't have to convince you of that, the next step is to realize how rewards, at best, divert our attention from sustaining those relationships and, at worst, actually undermine them, because now kids are not thinking about *us;* they're thinking about what *I* can get.

Do we solve this problem by giving a group reward? No, we create new problems. If we all do *X,* only then will all of us get *Y.* This is an ugly form of peer pressure we are trying to create, causing kids to become our accomplices in control of each other, which is the very opposite of community. The Geneva Convention forbids collective punishment; I think it's time we take a hard look at collective reward.

The other kind of reward that really makes things worse is when it's done publicly, especially in the case of praise, and I'll come back to that in a moment. There is one way to take a bad thing and make it much worse. You're going to have to bring me back sometime for me to talk about this because I have no time right now. But if you were determined to destroy community, if that was your mischievous Satanic goal, to rip out by its roots any sense of safety or connection among kids, then you would probably want to use the most destructive form of rewards known to humankind: competition. The only thing worse than a reward is an award, which means that the number of them has been artificially limited, so my chance of getting one is reduced or even eliminated if she gets one. So now it's not just a sticker when you do *X;* it's a sticker or whatever (praise, recognition, you name it) for the *best* in this category, for the one who does the most. Pick your superlative. Now the message that everybody present learns can be summarized in a single sentence: Other people are potential obstacles to my success. That is the message in every awards assembly, every classroom graded on a curve, every spelling bee, and every time things like this: "OK, kids, who can get into their pajamas fastest? This is not innocuous. This is creating a world view of artificial scarcity and turning other people, even one's own siblings, not into potential collaborators but into potential rivals. Little by little, with phrases like that and by turning the playing field into a battlefield after school, we create people who do not want to succeed but want to triumph over others. It's

not about learning, much less caring. It's about victory. The disadvantages of that I have chronicled in another book (*No Contest: The Case against Competition*, 1992), with respect to one's own psychological development, with respect to relationships, and even, surprisingly, with respect to the quality of one's work or learning.

But, if you say, "I don't believe in competition. I want to give every child a sticker," I would suggest that you've taken a giant step forward but might have further to go, because while you've eliminated the competitive twist, you are still offering what psychologists call an extrinsic motivator, such that the point is the sticker—better than limiting the number available, but not as good as moving away from the reward and punishment approach altogether.

There is, however, another relationship to attend to, and that is between the student and the teacher, the directress, the administrator, the parent, the adult. I said before that if you offer consequences, the child is about as happy to see you coming as you and I would be to see a police car, How, then, does the child view us if we are offering rewards, even praise? I would argue that we then become, in effect, giant goodie dispensers on legs. This is not any closer to the caring alliance I spoke of before as so critical. There is still a gap, a gulf that is opened between us and the kid. We give the punishment or the reward; they get it from us. That's not *working with;* it's still *doing to.* It's just that we can't always see it; we don't always notice it for what it is. . . .

Rewards Ignore Reasons

The third reason that I think rewards have this effect is because rewards ignore the reasons why something happened. Another way of putting that is, rewards tend to focus on behavior, which, as I pointed out before, is a hallmark of a *doing to* environment. You want to solve a problem, you have to know what caused it. You've got a kid in your class who's hitting somebody else? You are not going to begin to make headway until you have some inkling as to why. Then, as best as you can, though it's not always due to factors within your control, but as best as you can, you address the source of the problem. If you don't address the source of the problem, it's not going to work.

Quick story: A woman saw a lecture of mine on videotape and wrote me a letter. "Dear Mr. Kohn, you have taken away all my tricks and techniques"—her phrase, which is an apt one. "So what am I supposed to do," she continued, (reading between the lines here, ". . . Mr. Smarty Pants") "with my little girl, whom I put to bed at night: 'O.K., sweetie, you've got a big day tomorrow." Always a big day tomorrow, never a small or insignificant day. "I love you. See you in the morning." Closes the bedroom door; bang, two minutes later the kid is out of the room: "I can't sleep." Put the kid back to bed: "OK, honey, see you *in the morning,*" close the door again; bam, she's back out of bed again. "What am I supposed to do?" the woman asked.

Well, if you go to the parenting section of Barnes & Noble, or, better yet, an independent bookstore, you will find advice that typically comes in two flavors: threat and bribe. Sometimes, if you spend your money wisely, you can get both in the same book. "Young lady, if you are not back *in* that bed before I count to three, you can forget about that trip to the zoo we talked about." Flip side: "Honey, if you are in bed all night for the next four nights, I'll buy you that giant teddy bear we saw in the toy store window." Notice how fundamentally similar these two approaches really are: two ways of manipulating behavior.

What did I say as an alternative? I said, "Frankly, I would not have the audacity to prescribe a solution unless I had at least some inkling of why your kid—this week—is not staying in bed." There are many possible reasons why this is true, are there not? Like what? Fear: There are monsters in the closet. What else? She had a nap, or maybe she's just not tired because her bedtime is too early. Why else? It's fun to watch mom get so weirded out; she's getting a response from that. What else? Something is going on in the child's life that she has to rehearse, and it's hard to sleep when that's going on, just went on, or is about to go on. What else? Maybe I just want to spend more time with mom. I don't get to see her that often. Or maybe, I can just hear what's going on in the rest of the house. Is anybody here too old to remember how the most exciting stuff happened after we were put to sleep?

My point in this story is a very, very elementary one, yet we tend to forget it. The point of this story is that each of those possible explanations for the problem calls for a completely different course of action. Do you agree with me? Would you try to deal with it the same way if the kid was up because she wasn't tired as opposed to she was up because she had a big event coming up tomorrow or was afraid of monsters? Of course not. But every time we use a reward—here's what you'll get if you comply—or a consequence—here's what will happen to you if you

don't—we pretend that the reasons are irrelevant. Here's what I'll give you if the problem magically goes away by itself. I don't know why it's happening; I don't care. Big surprise: In the long run this is not very effective. That's the sense of the argument, and you can use your own examples from a school setting of why a reward for good behavior, including praise, or a consequence for doing something wrong, would be expected to be similarly ineffective because *it* gets nowhere near where the trouble is. It's a one-size-fits-all solution. Many of us know that's a lie in clothing. It's also a lie in behavior.

Rewards Reduce Risk-Taking

The next one, I think, really helps to explain the surprising research showing that performance tends to decline when people are offered rewards for doing a task. B.F. Skinner is dead, but his rats live on. On the sixth floor of William James Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, not far from where I live, imagine, if you will, a rat placed in a maze. The rat can smell the brie over here (this is Cambridge, after all). Does the rat pause to reflect on the architecture of the maze? I don't think so. Does the rat say to itself, "You know, I smell the cheese over this way, but I wonder what would happen if I took a chance and went over that way instead. Maybe there'll be a shortcut." Does the rat do that? No indeed. The rat goes in the most obvious, stereotypical, tried-and-true direction as fast as its little legs will carry it toward its breakfast—the reward.

People will do that, too, if you offer them rewards, even verbal rewards. When the reward is the point, people tend not to take unnecessary risks, tend not to play hunches that might not pay off, tend not to play with possibilities or look outside of the task for things that might or might not be useful for solving it. Do you know what I've just described? We have a word in English for this: creativity. I've just given you a working definition of the term. That's what rewards reliably kill—not the wrong kind of rewards, not the wrong amount of rewards, but the very idea of rewards. When you say to people, "Do this and you'll get that," people understandably focus on trying to get the "that" as quickly as they can and with as few risks as possible. That is a mindset that is inimical to creativity and innovation. That helps to explain what the research indisputably finds. Particularly on creative tasks, people don't do as well when you offer them a reward for doing it successfully.

Rewards Undermine Intrinsic Motivation

One more reason: Rewards undermine intrinsic motivation . . .

TWO MYTHS ABOUT MOTIVATION

Two myths about motivation: One myth is that you can motivate other people. I'm sorry; you can't do it. Any time you're offered a seminar or a book or article called "How to Motivate Your Students," you should run screaming in the other direction. All you can do is create a curriculum (that is, a set of tasks or activities), a climate, a relationship, a system, a structure, a culture that allows and encourages kids to act on what motivates them. I say that's all you can do; I say that laughingly—that's a lifetime's work at getting better at how to do those things. It's a lot harder than saying, "I'm gonna motivate you."

You can make people do things. That's what coercion and punishment and rewards are all about. But you can't make them *want* to do things. Does that make sense? Even if you thought it were possible, it's not necessary, given that people are all motivated. I've never met a child who was not motivated. I've met plenty of children who are not motivated to work on *this activity*, to play with *this object*, to work *here, now*, or to sit down and shut up. The problem may be with the environment or the task or the request. It may not be, but that's worth thinking about at least . . .

Finally, even if you thought it were possible or necessary, it's not desirable. Think about how presumptuous it is to say, "I'm going to motivate my kids. I'm going to make them want to do this." Extremely problematic.

Now we get to the other myth, which is going to lead us back to where we started. It took me a number of years to figure out what's up here, and I think that it captures, in rather swift strokes, a problem that explains why we persist in this country in doing things that are so counterproductive. The myth is that there is a thing called motivation—one thing. It can go up, it can come down; you can have a lot of it, you can have a little of it. Imagine a hydraulic lift: more motivation, less motivation. Well, we naturally want kids to have more motivation. So we give them the stickers and the stars, the recess, the popcorn, the payments, and the praise; we give them all the goodies, all the doggy biscuits, verbal or otherwise, because that will make their motivation go up. To read. To share. To think about math. To clean their room. Whatever.

And isn't more motivation what we want? If this were true, it would make perfect sense to follow the Pizza Hut® executives with a program like "Book It!," where kids are essentially bribed with pepperoni instead of doggy biscuits for reading books. And badges.

There's a collective classroom version of this, too, where it just gets worse and worse. Do I have an objection to pizza? No, I do not. Do I have an objection to using pizza as a reward? God, yes. My late friend John Nicholls, originally from New Zealand, who was a very gifted and caring educational psychologist, talked to me about this program some years ago. I said, "John, you're one of the experts in the field. What's the effect of a program like Pizza Hut®'s 'Book It!'?" And he said, "Well, the likely effect, mate, is a lot of fat kids who don't like to read."

But it makes perfect sense to use As and pizza and all of the rest of it to "motivate" kids if this myth were reality, because then you would make them more motivated. Here's the problem: There are different *kinds* of motivation. It's not just one entity that rises or falls. We should never be asking, "How motivated are the students?" We should be asking *how* they are motivated. Just transposing those words changes everything. In other words, to put it plainly, it's not the amount of motivation that matters; it's the kind.

How many of you are already familiar with the words *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* and know what they mean? Intrinsic motivation is a fancy term that means you love what you're doing for its own sake. Extrinsic motivation means you do one thing so that something else will happen. You read a book so you get a pizza. You learn some science fact to please the teacher.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Even this dichotomy is limited, as almost all dichotomies are, but it's a heck of a lot better at explaining the world than the idea of a single entity called motivation. I will make three comments about extrinsic motivation, starting with the most obvious one. It's different from intrinsic. This should not he controversial, and indeed it is not except for a small band of cultist orthodox Skinnerian radical behaviorists in large midwestern state universities. For most people, the idea that intrinsic and extrinsic are different and they both exist makes sense.

Second, I'm saying intrinsic is better, or if you like, extrinsic is worse. No artificial inducement can possibly be as powerful as helping people to find what they're doing intrinsically meaningful. Do you buy that? Also, I hope not too controversial. But here's the punch line: It's not just that extrinsic motivators—rewards—aren't as good as intrinsic motivation; the point is that they are likely to *undermine* intrinsic motivation. That takes us back, for those of you taking careful notes, to the last reason, number five, on why rewards fail: A good part of the reason that performance declines when you offer rewards is that interest declines. Or, to use my visual aids, imagine two lifts, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I am suggesting not merely that they operate independently and that there are two; I am suggesting, on the basis of more than 70 studies—this is one of the most thoroughly researched findings in the field of social psychology—that as extrinsic goes up intrinsic tends to go down. Not all the time—there are no universals in human behavior. Let me summarize the 70 studies in one sentence, a feat never before attempted in Georgia: *The more you reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.*

No wonder kids who are praised or given other positive reinforcers for helping or caring tend to become less helpful and caring. No wonder people who are paid for quitting smoking are less likely to stay off the cigarettes. No wonder we find study after study showing that people offered an opportunity to get a reward will then be less interested in the original task when the experiment is over. To illustrate this, I used to describe one of the early experiments that appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Deci, 1971). But I find people are more interested, for some reason, in my Oprah story. . . .

A year ago January, I got the call that every author dreams of getting. Authors go to sleep murmuring Oprah's name. "Hello," said the woman, "I'm a producer with the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and we'd like you to come on our show." "Yess!" But it turns out they did not want me to speak about competition or rewards, the subject of the two books of mine that are somewhat better known. This producer had somehow gotten hold of another book I had written back in 1990, called *The Brighter Side of Human Nature*, a book about altruism, which has sold dozens of copies. They were doing a show called "The Kindness of Strangers," in which they were planning to bring on various people who had done amazing things for folks they didn't even know, or who had been the beneficiaries of remarkable acts of kindness. Then they brought me on as the so-called "expert" to talk for about five minutes about why people help and when they don't and how to raise caring children.

Being, as you may already guess, a somewhat mischievous, even perverse, fellow, I came at it the other way in trying to summarize three books in about five minutes. I said, "What if we wanted kids to grow up uncaring and unconcerned about others? How would we do that?" I said, "The first thing we would do is emphasize competition because there's plenty of research to show that the more kids are led to become winners, the more we emphasize the importance of being number one—at school, at home, at play, anywhere—the less sensitive they become to other people's needs, the less likely to imagine how the world looks from another person's point of view." In fact, one study even showed (though I didn't say this on the air because I didn't have time) that you can predict how uncaring a child is from looking at how competitive the parent is. You don't even have to directly expose the child to a competitive activity; just being around somebody who needs to win is enough to reduce the child's concern about other people's well-being.

The second way I said we could make sure to undermine kids' interest in and concern about others is to reward or praise them when they show that interest. Then I proceeded to mention the studies I mentioned to you before. I have to give this woman credit. I had never before seen this show. But I have to give her credit. She was wandering around with her microphone and her jaw sort of dropped when I said these things. And Oprah said (we're on a first-name basis now, of course, because there are no last names on television), "That's really interesting. Isn't that interesting?" And her audience, which will do anything she says, nodded: Yes, that was in fact interesting. She said, "I'm going to have to think about that." And I give her credit. Here she had heard something she had never heard before that was counterintuitive and challenged the American way, and instead of laughing it off or ridiculing it, the way many interviewers have, I have experienced, she said, "I'm going to have to think about this." Anyway, it was a great experience.

Nine months later, almost exactly a year ago, in October of 1996, I got a call from the same producer, who said, "We would like you to come back on the show, this time to talk about the rewards piece. . . . We want to do one thing different this time. We're going to do one of the experiments you describe in your book about rewards, videotape it, and show it, and then ask you to comment on it." And I thought, "Oh my God, this cannot turn out well. These are TV producers. What do they know about replicating a methodologically rigorous study?" What I said was, "Great idea!" No, I didn't. You know me too well already. I raised objections to it, but frankly they were not asking my opinion; they were informing me of their plans. Happily, as it turned out, they had checked with Ed Deci at Rochester and ended up doing it very well.

So here's what they did, which is the reason I tell this whole story. They brought in 20 children, one at a time, and pretended that they were from a toy company. . . . They brought them into an office and said, "We are from a toy company, and we are planning to introduce some new puzzles which we would like you to evaluate for us." Half the kids, 10 of them individually, were simply asked that: "Could you evaluate these for us? Are they hard or easy, fun or boring?" The other 10 were given the same instructions, with one change: "For every puzzle you evaluate for us, we will reward you with five dollars," which they then conspicuously put on the table right next to the kid.

After they had evaluated the puzzle and been rewarded or not, each child was then left alone in the room for a few minutes under some pretext: "I have to do something else for a few minutes." This, of course, was the whole point of the study because a hidden video camera was taping them. What they found was the following: Of the 10 kids who had just been asked to evaluate the puzzle, all 10 spent at least some time playing with the puzzle after they thought the experiment was over. Of the 10 kids who were rewarded, 9 out of the 10 did not touch the puzzle again. Boy, was I relieved. But given dozens of studies predicting this I was not surprised. Even a brief exposure to a reward (and it does not have to be money) is enough to kill the interest in the task or action itself. You see why I feel so strongly about this?

Substitute for puzzles anything you want kids to do. Or, more importantly, things that you want kids to *want* to do. For example, I don't like the idea of giving kids stickers, stars, or M&Ms to potty train them. I think it's manipulative. I think it often is done because the parent is in a hurry and before the child is able to do it effectively. In order to be potty trained, a child needs to have certain language abilities to be able to talk about the prediction of a coming poop, needs to have sphincter control; certain things have to be in place. But, having said all of that, I don't get all that excited about it. I don't get that upset about people who use rewards to potty train children. Why? Because I am not concerned that kids develop

a lifelong love of defecation. I am, however, concerned that kids develop a lifelong love of reading or art or generosity. The rule of thumb is that the more you want kids to *want* to do something, the more you would avoid rewards at all costs because of what they do to intrinsic motivation.

Praise as Extrinsic Motivation

I tossed out the provocative example: "I like the way Melinda is sitting, all nice and quiet and ready to start." I have multiple objections to this practice. Does this hit close to home? Does it really? That's interesting. I did not know that. Here we have one of the strongest features, in my view, of the tradition of Montessori, talking about the destructive and needless use of rewards, and yet we have the practice of rewards, even of this kind, which creates a kind of interesting incongruity in its own right, does it not?

Why do I not like this? First of all, I'm not doing Melinda any favors. You can imagine some of the other kids later: "Miss Nice and Quiet. Dork!" Second, and related to the first, is that what I have done in this classroom is created a competition for nicest, quietest child. The rest of you, besides Melinda, just lost. This is one of the subtle ways that even teachers who would never have a spelling bee, who would never rank-order children on some list (who's done better on something than someone else), teachers who would stop teaching before they would do something that destructive, nevertheless are creating an environment that is really about winning—not about learning, God knows not about caring.

The third reason I don't like this: I am pretending to talk to Melinda, but I am actually *using* Melinda to manipulate the behavior of the other people in the room. And that is just not a respectful way to treat people of any age. If you have done this, it is not because you are a disrespectful or stupid person. My guess is that you simply haven't thought of it this way before. That's why I invite you to think about it this way now. Look at it from the child's point of view.

All three of those disadvantages occur because of the fact that this is not just a reward; it's a public reward. If you find it too difficult to think about what I say concerning praise—you're willing to think about some of this other stuff, but praise is just too deeply in-grained—at least stop doing it in public. Public praise is not about helping children at all. It is about control. If you have to praise, for God's sake do it in private . . .

. . . Assertive Discipline uses public praise as its number one technique. Praise every child every day. That's the poster from Assertive Discipline. So if you have the same reaction in the pit of your stomach that I have in mine to Assertive Discipline, yet you think positive reinforcement is an unalloyed good, I invite you to reconcile that conflict. What's going on here? Who is this really for? I have to tell you that of all of the things I teach about, this is the hardest part for me to put into practice in my own life, because when I don't praise it feels weird to me sometimes. It feels sterile or chilly as though I'm withholding something. I came to realize that I'm doing it more because I have to say it than because the kid needs to hear it. Whenever that's true, boy is it time to rethink our practices.

There's one more little piece of this. Even if I do it in private (none of you can hear this): "Melinda, I really liked the way you came right back from lunch and started to work right away." What is the most important word in that sentence? "I." Even if it works, the way many bribes and threats can work to get temporary compliance, all it has worked to do is to get her more dependent on me. It is not merely a missed opportunity to help her think about the kind of person she wants to be; it is an active way of taking her away from thinking about that and getting her focused on my face.

Some little kids act out worse when you praise them. Have you ever seen that? Why would that happen if praise was so great? I think there are several reasons. I will mention one. On some level, the child knows that the big "thumbs up" signals the possibility of a "thumbs down" tomorrow. To put it differently, the most striking feature of a positive judgment is not the fact that it's positive but the fact that it's a judgment. People, even very short people, do not like to be judged. Some of those kids act out to reclaim some of their autonomy when they've been praised, and I say, "Go, kid!"

Other kids, especially girls in our culture, and especially younger children, will light up with delight when you praise them. They will sparkle and shine and try to figure out how they can get that same reaction from you tomorrow. Those are the kids I'm worried about. It's still *doing* to—even if it's private, even if it's verbal, even if there's no punishment, even if there's no competition. But move in stages here. You can't give up the praise, at least give up the public praise. You can't give up the praise at all, at least give up the stickers. You can't give up the rewards, at least move away from the consequences. You can't do

any of that but you're willing to do a little more *working with*, do that. Ride my train as far as you can and get off when you have to. It's not all or nothing.

Alternatives to Praise

. . . A child gives a sandwich away; what's the alternative to praise if that's problematic? Must there be sullen silence? No. This is another one of these false dichotomies: Either you slather them with praise or you just scowl at them. Hardly the case. "What else could you say?" is an interesting question. First of all, the assumption that you must say something and give positive reinforcement when a child does something nice, when you think about it, is predicated on a deeply pessimistic view of children. Positive reinforcement at its core says that kids would never help and do nice things unless they were praised or rewarded for it. Fortunately, as I reviewed in that unpopular book, there is a great deal of research showing that cynicism is not realism and that in fact it is as "natural" to help as it is for us to just look out for number one or to hurt. That does not mean that adults do not play a useful role in helping to nurture and support the helpful part because the hurtful part is there, too. I am not Carl Rogers—I am not Mr. Rogers, more to the point. I do not think that our true nature is exclusively or overwhelmingly pro-social. I merely argue that the antisocial stuff is no more true, no closer to the core than the desire to help.

A lot of the time our felt need to intervene, to reinforce a nice thing may not even be necessary at all when you take a more benign, and I believe more accurate, view of children. But here's something you could say, for example, if you felt it was appropriate to do so:

(She just gave Lynn half of her sandwich.) "Look at Lynn's face. Looks like she's smiling now. Seems like she's pretty happy with this sandwich she's getting to eat because you gave it to her. What do you think?" That's not praise. You're not saying, "*I'm* so proud of you. I approve of what you've done. You've met *my* standards." What you're doing is merely helping her experience information. You are helping her to observe, if you like. She is gathering data about the effects of her actions on other people, which is a vote of confidence in children, saying, in effect, that when they are able to attend to the effects of their actions for good or ill, they are going to want to pick good. There is good reason to expect that that is true when they've been in this kind of environment.

The flip side of this is what Martin Hoffman calls inductive discipline (Hoffman and Saltzstein, 1967). If a kid pushes another kid off of the chair and makes him cry, we don't merely observe, but neither do we get across the message, "No! We don't do that!" ("What do you mean, we don't do that? We just did this!") It's not merely that this is a bad thing to do that is unacceptable that you want to get across. What you want to get across is *why* it's unacceptable. That's the key; that's the gist of the communication that's critical. It's not bad because I say so, it's not bad because it breaks my rule, it's not bad because I'll stop caring about you or punish you; *it's bad because of how it made the other kid feel.* In a nonhumiliating, nonthreatening way, we want to help gently direct the kid's attention to the way this kid feels who's on the floor. With very young children, an analogy to an experience that they've had might be useful. "Remember when you were running and you fell down the stairs last week and you hurt your leg? That's the way Zachary feels right now. I don't think we want to make people feel that way. What do you think you could do now to make him feel better?" So it's turned into a positive, and the kid is empowered by being able to choose a method for helping to reach that goal. You are shaping, you are directing, you are playing an active role, but you are not controlling, unless you choose to define the word very broadly. . . .

. . . If an older child does something that you think is terrific, sometimes I would bite my tongue, but I wouldn't get all tongue-tied and nervous and flustered: "Oh, oh, I said I liked that—oh no; I'm ruining this kid for life." But I think there are two things you can do in response. One is to simply describe what you see. Take a drawing. "I notice you put the moon all the way on the left side instead of the middle. You use a lot of purple." A lot of this comes from Haim Ginott, and, I must say, to some extent, even from Rudolf Dreikurs (this is one of the things that I like that he says, to avoid traditional praise). The other thing is to ask questions, not just how does it make you feel, which can become an affectation very quickly, like, "I'm hearing from you that you're . . . " I have this image in my head of a child who's crying a lot and going, "I hear you saying, 'Aaaaahh.' Do I have that right?" The questions you can ask, though, can deal with what the child has done. "You use a lot of purple. Is that your favorite color?" "Why did you pick this part for the moon?" "What was the most fun about this?" These are responses—the pure description and the questions—that are likely to get kids interested in art. "That's so great! What a terrific artist you are!" is

a response likely to diminish the child's interest in art and increase his or her dependence on your judgment of it. So we can describe and we can ask.

If you are giving positive responses, at least they should be private and at least they should be noncompetitive. I would never say, "You're the best one in here." And they should not be global kinds of praise—"You're a great artist." If you have to offer an evaluative response, it should be something like, "This is very impressive, the way you've managed to do *this*," so it's pretty specific—if you *have* to. And also, you should do it in a way that's not gimmicky, that's at least authentic. At least it reflects a genuine excitement on your part as opposed to "catch kids doing something right and give them recognition for it," which is inauthentic by definition because you've determined to do that before you've even set foot in the classroom. And you can tell partly that it's fake because of tones of voice. Three-year-olds *can* smell a rat here.

But even if you do it with a clear conscience and for pure motives, there could still be a problem, so you have to look not only at your motives—are you praising the kid for cleaning up *in order* to get the classroom clean? Is it for you? But even if your motives are pure, you also have to look at the effect. It doesn't take a genius to realize that if the kid is coming up to you, saying, "Is this good?" or is looking at you for approval, you've got a problem. One of the reasons we fail to notice and act on this is because, on some level, for many of us, it makes us feel good; it makes us feel kind of powerful to have a whole bunch of people depending on what we think. We have to introspect to see if that's really true for us. Or they will like us because we're giving them this verbal candy. Or it gets compliance. The "I like the way" is *real* phony when it's done this way: "I like the waaaaaaayyyyyyy . . . " No, you don't like the way. That's a lie. You are saying, "Scramble to be the first one to comply and I will single out one of you as an example to the rest."

But I would say here are two quick criteria for, if you're giving positive responses, whether they are constructive or destructive. I'm not going to give you a script to read; that's disrespectful to you and you should be wary of anybody who does that, which is to say virtually every classroom management consultant. First criterion I would suggest is, are your comments helping kids feel more autonomous, more self-determining, more empowered—or the opposite? Are you helping them to feel like they made a choice, or are you getting them more hooked on what you say? And the second criterion is, are your comments helping the kids become more intrinsically motivated, that is, more engaged in the task or more committed to the action itself—as opposed to less interested in what the child is doing and seeing it only as a prerequisite for getting that approval? If you can satisfy both of those criteria, that kids are becoming more intrinsically motivated and more autonomous, with the way that you're framing a response, then I think you're doing something right . . .

CONCRETE PRACTICES FOR *WORKING WITH* IN THE CLASSROOM

. . . I heard a second-grade teacher, a teacher of seven-year-olds, tell me a story about how, in the spring, the kids were late coming back from recess, and they were all talking amongst themselves, very animatedly, and she walked over and said, "What's going on?" They said, "We had a problem during recess, so we had a meeting to fix it," which they proceeded to do to their own satisfaction while she finished her coffee. And the point I make about this story is that it's not that these kids dropped down from some teacher heaven. She worked damn hard to get them to that point. Part of it is by letting them own their own problems and solve them, but also by emphasizing the social nature of the solution and of the learning.

That's why one of the Cs for me is the idea of community and collaboration. "What can *we* do?" should be part of each class. Not just you and you and you and you and you, the way cooperative learning is sometimes offered—a technique you haul off the shelf: "Pair up and do this project." Or, if the kid wants to, you could let the other kid help. But rather structuring the opportunity for interdependence, creating through class meetings opportunities to share stuff—albeit not with what Lilian Katz calls "bring and brag," which we know as show and tell. And where kids are constantly working on stuff together, a class mural, a class song, a class name or logo, an opportunity to learn about each other at every opportunity and to think about choices and autonomy as something that is done collectively, not just individually. This is critical. Research has shown that the more kids experience their schools and classes as caring communities, the more excited they are about the academic learning and the more helpful they are toward each other.

I have been to a non-Montessori free school for older kids, where it is basically completely up to the kids to decide what to learn and whether to learn—completely free. People ask me about this school and a similar version of it that's very famous in England

called Summerhill, "You talk about choice and not controlling kids; you must love this." I say, "No thank you. This is a bunch of self-interested individuals who don't have anything to do with each other. You need the autonomy, but, equally important, you need the community." And especially with young children, that takes a lot of skillful intervention, not merely passive observation, to help kids feel part of a caring community.

And I have seen, in Montessori classrooms, kids do stuff where, personally, I would have stepped in, and they just let it go—stuff that was hurtful to somebody else—making fun of the way a young kid was pronouncing something, a teacher who asks a question of the whole group, and somebody says, "Oh, that's easy." I would stop the whole lesson right there. Let's talk about how that makes people feel. But do it in a way where you're not humiliating the kid who said it, or bring it up later in a more generalized sense; but you're looking at opportunities, constantly, to figure out how we can help us feel connected to each other: related instead of isolated, part of an *us*, not just kids pursuing individualized lessons. Of course, we have to respond in an individualized way to the needs and talents and interests and skill level of each child, but that's just, for me, the surface part of what has to be a caring community, in deciding what goes on the walls, in deciding how the furniture's going to be arranged, in deciding how to cut up this cake, which is an academic lesson at the same time, in deciding what to do when a substitute comes, in deciding if we're going to take a field trip and what we should do, in deciding what the alternative is to lining up. This is an opportunity for *us* to figure out stuff.

I saw a kindergarten class once where—this was in Missouri—at the class meeting, the kids brought up something that had happened with Legos (substitute, if you would, another set of materials), where one kid was copycatting another kid's design, and it was really ticking this girl off. And so they had a discussion together—not inaction on the teacher's part, not taking over and making the problem go *away for* them—but, "Wow, what a teachable moment," she said, "for a class meeting. Let's talk about that. Is that a legitimate complaint?" She didn't put it that way. In fact, what developed in this meeting of five-year-olds is that a very sophisticated sort of meta-issue began to emerge, which was whether it was fair to have a rule that was applied only to people for whom it was relevant. In other words, you can't copycat people who don't like being copycatted, but it's OK for people who don't mind. Or did you have to have a one-size-fits-all rule for the whole class? With the teacher's skillful intervention, that began to emerge and the kids began to grapple with this in a way they never would have if the teacher had just left it alone and said, "Solve your own problems," and certainly if the teacher had just come in and said, "Hey, it bothers her. Don't do that." Because they did it as a community.

I was in a classroom of seven-year-olds where they had a class meeting to solve problems where the teacher was not even playing an active role. She had so empowered and skilled them, by this point, which took a lot of doing that I didn't get to watch, that there was a facilitator of the meeting, and it was a seven-year-old. And another seven-year-old was laboriously writing down on a flip chart what had happened, thus making it into a language lesson as well. While I was there, this meeting went on two hours, and the kids were rapt. And if the teacher, who was sitting among them—they were sprawled wherever they found things comfortable—if that teacher had gotten up and gone out of the room, you know what would have happened? Absolutely nothing. It would have continued in exactly the same way.

By the way, the teacher who needs control and uses consequences, you know what happens when that teacher leaves the room? Ka-boom! Then when the teacher comes back and sees what has happened, or, God forbid, is absent for a whole day and learns what has happened, what goes through that teacher's mind, that *doing-to* teacher? Does the teacher say, "Huh. I'm going to have to rethink this control approach?" No, what the teacher says is, "See? See what these kids are like?" And it's a beautiful self-fulfilling prophecy that she never changes. The more her *doing-to* approach elicits rebellion as kids desperately try to reclaim their autonomy, the more she thinks that's the way kids are. I heard a teacher of very little kids outside once. She didn't even know me, but she was apologizing to me, walking by with her kids, because the kids had the nerve to be kids. They were laughing and whooping it up. She said to me, "Give'em an inch, they'll take a mile." And I thought, "This is mostly true of kids who have only been given inches in their lives." This is not a statement about human nature but about the harms of over-control.

But in this second-grade class, the kids were into this. One kid came up, when it was her turn to speak, and talked about how they were playing a game out

at recess called Foursquare, and other kids kept taking the ball away from her. She was recognized by her peer, who was the facilitator, and she came and sat in a big chair and told her problem. And then the facilitator said—and this rotates among all the kids, that is, the role of facilitator—"Thank you. Does anybody have any ideas?" And then the recorder wrote down the various ideas, that ranged from "go tell a grownup" to "find another game" to "talk about it in another class meeting," whatever. And then, again, this interesting meta-issue developed, this time without the teacher's help, analogous to the kindergarten meeting that I had seen, where here the question was, "Do we all have to accept this one solution as the best one, either by voting or consensus?" By the way, I'm not big on voting, which I think has very little to do with democracy. It's adversarial majoritarianism. It does not engage people in what they have to do to listen to each other and take each other's perspectives and hash out a consensus. Anyway, the issue that arose from this was, "Do we have to all decide together what the best solution is, or is it just up to her, the kid who is affected, to decide which of these she wants to apply?" Very interesting discussion. But if the teacher runs the circle time, if every question or response is coming from the teacher, then it's not an opportunity for choice or real community-building . . .

I want to tell you a quick story. A teacher of eight-year-olds told me this story. She said, "You talk about giving kids choices. This one example I wanted to do a long time ago, and it took me a lot of years before I worked up the guts to do it. Very simple. I'm not talking curriculum. Every year, they showed up in the room. I had already designed it. I'd already put up the bulletin boards, the stuff on the walls. I said, 'It's *our* room, boys and girls,' but I was lying. In the most concrete sense, it was *my* room. So I wanted to let them design the whole room. But I didn't have the guts. I thought, Well, what will the parents think, dropping their kids off? 'My God, doesn't she even care?' All the other rooms are brightly festooned with color"—albeit commercially printed posters—at least until high school, when, apparently, the physical environment ceases to matter.

But finally, one summer, she says, "This is the year. If the parents don't understand, if the principal doesn't get it, I'll explain it." And the room, the walls were completely bare, and the first thing they did, the first week, after learning each other's names, was "How do we want *our* classroom to look?" And she said there was an amazing difference that year, in how the kids felt about it.

But an interesting postscript to this story: They decided together to put blue construction paper up over here on this wall and then to put up the projects or the papers that they were individually proudest of. I don't have to tell you it wasn't just the error-free papers, you know; it was, rather, an idea of "what *I'm* proudest of." It's about learning, where errors are not to be avoided but to be celebrated, including by the teacher, for telling us something about how the child is learning, let alone cases where we impose the notion of error where it's not clear there is a right and wrong anyway. But put that aside. They decided which of their projects they were proudest of, individually, on top of the collective decision to use the wall that way in the first place.

But wait a minute. Back up. They said blue construction paper. They wanted to put it up themselves. But to put it up so it looked halfway decent, they had to measure it. And to measure it, they needed to know fractions. This was the world's fastest and most effective fraction lesson in history. Why? Because they didn't learn fractions just because it was on someone's lesson plan or in someone's book, on some curriculum mandate, or the next chapter in a text. They learned fractions because *they needed fractions* to do something they cared about, and they would not have even had that opportunity had they not had a democratic class meeting about something apparently irrelevant like how do we want to decorate our room. For me, that captures the three Cs.

If you have heard me talk this morning about something that you do, and I have spoken of it critically, and it has flashed through your mind even briefly, "Uh oh. Does this mean I'm a poor educator?," then even to think about that for *a* moment, I would say, suggests that you're probably *a* terrific educator. The people I worry about are those who say, "Ah, that's unrealistic," which is the way people say, "I can't listen to this. It's too threatening." People who are willing to say, "Gulp. Now I'm going to have to rethink some of the things I've been doing, reconsider some of my practices and premises," that's at the top of my list for what makes a terrific educator or a terrific parent. Don't try to do it alone. If you're going to make changes of the magnitude suggested here, get some moral support, have some meetings, have some lunches and dinners and drinks, and work it out with other folks so you get better at your craft, at moving from *doing to* to *working with*. Thanks so much.

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