Carrots or Sticks?  
Alfie Kohn on  
Rewards and Punishment

Former teacher Alfie Kohn is an outspoken critic of schools' and society's focus on grades and test scores. Kohn shared his views on classroom rewards and punishment and talked about how teachers can encourage intrinsic motivation. He also tackled the tough topics -- standards, accountability, and high-stakes testing.

Described by *Time* magazine as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades [and] test scores," **Alfie Kohn** is a former teacher who has written eight books on education and human behavior. He has written for most of the leading education periodicals, including five cover articles for *Phi Delta Kappan*. A collection of Kohn's articles have been published under the title *What to Look for in a Classroom... and Other Essays*.

Kohn has appeared on the television program *Oprah* and speaks regularly at national conferences. Kohn shared with Education World his thoughts about classroom rewards, punishment, and praise. He also explained that he believes the call for tougher educational standards is changing schools into "test-prep centers" and that "accountability" is measuring what matters least.

**Education World:** You suggest that using rewards can be harmful to student motivation, even more harmful than using punishment. Why and how are these tools detrimental?

**Kohn:** To start with, let's be clear that rewards and punishments are not opposites. They're mirror images of each other, two ways of doing things to students -- as opposed to working with them. One says to kids, "Do this ... or here's what I'm going to do to you." The other says, "Do this ... and you'll get that." The first approach, which these days we prefer to describe euphemistically as "consequences," leads kids to ask this question: "What do they want me to do, and what happens to me if I don't do it?" The second approach ("positive reinforcement") leads to this question: "What do they want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?" Neither question is anything like what we want kids to be asking, such as "What kind of person do I want to be?"

Both carrots and sticks can be effective at getting one thing and only one thing: temporary compliance. Unfortunately, neither of these "doing to" strategies can ever help students develop a commitment to the value of what they're doing. In fact, one of the most thoroughly replicated findings in the field of social psychology is that the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they come to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. For example, research shows that students who are given grades (rewarded with A's) become less interested in whatever they're learning than those who are given no grades at all. Another pair of studies demonstrated that children who are frequently rewarded or praised tend to be somewhat less generous and helpful than other kids are. And no wonder: By being treated like pets, offered the equivalent of doggie biscuits for doing good things, they've learned that the only reason to act that way is because they'll get something out of it. When there's no one around to reward them, they no longer have any reason to help.

**EW:** Don't rewards motivate *some* students?
**Kohn:** Depends which kind of motivation you're talking about. Motivation isn't a single entity such that you can have a lot of it or a little of it. Psychologists distinguish between *intrinsic motivation*, which means you do something because you really like doing it, and *extrinsic motivation*, in which you do something in order to get a sticker or an A or a pizza or a "Good job!" These two kinds of motivation tend to be inversely related, so more of the latter may mean less of the former. The relevant question therefore isn't "How motivated are my students?" It's "How are my students motivated?" In other words, it's the type of motivation that counts, not the amount. The type created by the use of rewards is not only less effective but also erodes the kind we really want to promote.

**EW:** Is there a place for praise in the classroom?

**Kohn:** There's a place for unconditional love and support and attention and encouragement. That's what kids need. There's also a place for feedback: providing kids with information about their accomplishments -- when they need it. But praise is different from either of these things. First, it's conditional: It says I'll give you attention and support only when you please me, when you meet my standards, when you jump through my hoops. Second, it's not feedback; it's judgment. And kids don't need, or thrive on, constant judgment, even if it's in the form of "Good job!" That tends to create praise junkies, who quickly grow to be dependent on someone else to evaluate what they've done. Instead, why not (1) describe what kids have done rather than judging it and (2) ask questions to help kids reflect. (Four words to help you become a better teacher or parent: Talk less, ask more.) The knee-jerk tendency to praise reflects what we need to say more than what kids really need to hear.

**EW:** How can teachers provide a safe and an active learning environment without the use of rewards or punishment?

**Kohn:** I'd turn the question around and ask how in the world we could ever provide a safe learning environment if kids *are* being rewarded or punished. Now that's unrealistic! In the absence of excessive control, however, we have the chance to create warm, respectful relationships with students, to help them construct a caring community in the classroom where they come to be concerned about one another, and to bring them in on making decisions about many different aspects of school life, including the kind of classroom they want to have and how we can work together to create it. That may sound a bit utopian to teachers who are accustomed to making almost all the decisions -- and managing kids' behaviors with bribes and threats. All I can say is that I frequently visit real classrooms where it really works, where teachers "work with" kids rather than "doing to" them. I'm blown away each time by how much more appealing and engaging these places are, compared to classrooms where the teacher is putting kids' names on a board; forcibly isolating those who misbehave, which we euphemistically call "time out"; promising treats for kids who are obedient; or saying "I like the way Fred sat right down and opened his math book."

**EW:** How can teachers nurture intrinsic motivation in their students?

**Kohn:** The real question is how we can avoid killing the intrinsic motivation, the desire to learn and explore, that all kids start out with. Of course, many kids aren't interested in filling out worksheets consisting of naked numbers or isolated sentences. Who can blame them? When a kid doesn't seem "motivated," the problem is often with the task rather than with the child. When kids are able to cooperate with one another to design projects and explore questions that genuinely interest them, then the teacher is tapping and deepening the motivation they began with. If kids are curious about how fast they're growing, that's the basis for a math adventure that matters to them. But if the question is "Which is bigger, 3/7 or 7/11?" then the correct answer is "Who cares?" Facts and skills are fine ... in a context and for a purpose. But facts and skills taught in a back-to-basics classroom -- to prepare for a test, perhaps -- are enough to kill anyone's natural joy in learning.

**EW:** You think the push for tougher standards is misguided. Why do you feel that way?
Kohn: In the name of "raising standards" and "accountability," I fear that we're squeezing the intellectual life out of classrooms and turning schools into giant test-prep centers. Standards are fine as long as (a) they're not so specific as to demand a "bunch o' facts" approach to instruction, (b) they're informed by a desire to deepen and enrich learning rather than simply intensifying whatever we're doing now, (c) they're developed in large part by the teachers themselves rather than imposed on teachers from above, (d) they allow for differences among kids and schools rather than assuming that one size fits all, and (e) they're not driven by, or attached to, standardized tests, much less high-stakes tests. What passes for "raising standards" these days violates every one of these conditions and, not surprisingly, has been rammed into classrooms by politicians and corporate executives who understand very little about how kids learn and are primarily interested in getting tough with teachers and students.

EW: What about "accountability" in education? Who should be held accountable, and how should success be measured?

Kohn: Let's remember that the sudden, fierce demands for accountability didn't come out of thin air. The famous "Nation at Risk" report released by the Reagan Administration in 1983 was part of a concerted campaign -- based on exaggerated and often downright misleading evidence -- to stir up widespread concerns about our schools and, consequently, demands for more testing. More to the point, endorsing the idea of accountability is quite different from holding students and teachers accountable specifically for raising test scores. We need to help people see that the first doesn't entail the second. You want real accountability? Don't waste time with standardized tests, which (a) measure what matters least and (b) actually tell us more about how affluent the community is than how good the teachers or students are. Invite parents and other members of the community to visit the schools, watch the learning happening, and get a sense for what's really going on.