

Alfie Kohn – Lectures

ON BRIBING STUDENTS TO LEARN: Second Thoughts About A's, Praise, Stickers, and Contests

Teachers are often encouraged to rely on rewards rather than punishments, but research suggests that carrots can be just as counterproductive as sticks. Both are forms of manipulation, and neither can produce anything beyond temporary compliance. In fact, as Alfie Kohn, author of *PUNISHED BY REWARDS*, will argue, students who see themselves as doing an assignment in order to receive a gold star, an A, or an award are actually less likely to develop an interest in the subject matter or to challenge themselves to do their best. By the same token, stickers, popcorn parties, and even praise give students no reason to act responsibly when there is no longer a goody to be gained for doing so. For students to become lifelong learners and good people, we need to work *with* them rather than using techniques like rewards and punishments, which merely do things *to* them.

THE CASE AGAINST COMPETITION

The race to be Number One has been described as America's state religion. We have been trained not only to compete frantically, but to believe in the value of beating people -- and to help our children become winners. Research and experience, however, demonstrate that competition is actually destructive to self-esteem, poisonous to relationships, and counterproductive in terms of learning. Spelling bees, awards assemblies, competitive sports, and even informal contests at home teach children to regard other people as potential obstacles to their own success. The result is that everyone ultimately loses in the desperate race to win. Alfie Kohn, author of *NO CONTEST: The Case Against Competition*, describes the hidden costs of turning the school into a place for triumph. The problem, he argues, is not just that competition is overdone or badly handled; rather, the very win/lose structure itself has damaging consequences for how children come to see themselves, each other, and the act of learning. The alternative is not merely the absence of competition but the construction of caring communities in which people help each other to succeed.

CHOICES FOR CHILDREN: From Coercion to Community

If we want students to take responsibility for their behavior and learning, it is up to us to give them responsibilities. Children learn to make good decisions by having the chance to decide about what happens to them every day -- not by following someone else's directions. Research shows unequivocally that students learn more effectively and care more about what they are learning when they have some say about what is going on. (By contrast, students, like adults, suffer from burnout when they feel powerless.) Alfie Kohn describes the whys and the hows of bringing students into the process of making decisions about everything from how their classroom will be decorated to how their learning will be assessed. Also included is a discussion of limits on children's right to choose and teachers' use of "pseudochoice" to perpetuate their own control.

Alfie Kohn – Lectures

PERFORMANCE VS. LEARNING: The Costs of Overemphasizing Achievement

Educational researchers have discovered that there is a significant difference between getting students to think about their performance (that is, how well they are doing) and getting them to think about the learning itself (*what* they are doing). These orientations often pull in opposite directions, which means that too much emphasis on performance can reduce students' interest in learning – and cause them to avoid challenging tasks. When the point is to prove how smart you are, to get a good grade or a high test score, there is less inclination to engage deeply with ideas, to explore and discover. Thus, as Alfie Kohn argues, the problem with standardized testing is not only how bad the tests themselves are, but also how much attention is paid to the results. Even new, “authentic” assessments may backfire if students are constantly led to ask, “How am I doing?” Getting students to become preoccupied with achievement or “quality” may paradoxically undermine this very goal because of what happens to their motivation in the process.

THE DEADLY EFFECTS OF “TOUGHER STANDARDS”: Challenging High-Stakes Testing and Other Impediments to Excellence

The main effect “of the drive for so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think,” said John Holt in 1959. Today, an ill-informed version of school reform has been embraced by politicians, corporate executives, and journalists, all demanding “accountability,” which turns out to be a euphemism for more control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms. The results: superb educators get tired or fired, and the intellectual life is squeezed out of schools as they are turned into giant test-prep centers. This session explains the difference between authentic challenge and a mindless “harder is better” mentality, as well as the difference between standards as guidelines for better teaching and standards as rigid (and often ridiculous) lists of facts students must know. The latter is described in this session not as a reality to be coped with but as a political movement that can be opposed – by people who understand how learning actually takes place.

FROM DEGRADING TO DE-GRADING: Basic Questions About Assessment

Research has found three consistent effects of traditional grades: students think less creatively, lose interest in what they’re learning, and avoid challenging tasks. Thus, rather than trying to improve techniques for grading, we should be looking for alternatives – and rather than complaining that too many students are getting A’s, we should be worried that too many students think that getting A’s is the point of school. Ultimately, though, *why* we evaluate students is at least as important as *how* we do so. Even alternative assessment may fall short if the point is to sort students or “motivate” them to get a particular rating. Alfie Kohn discusses how feedback can be constructive and informational, part of a learner-centered environment, as well as strategies by which teachers can minimize the harms of traditional grading while it still exists.

Alfie Kohn – Lectures

TEACHING CHILDREN TO CARE

We can't blame "human nature" when children act aggressively or selfishly; extensive research has shown that these qualities are no more natural than the impulse toward empathy or generosity. But how do we nourish those positive inclinations and help children to act on their capacity to care? Alfie Kohn, author of *THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF HUMAN NATURE*, discusses the roots of prosocial attitudes and actions, and invites educators to think about what promotes children's concern about others' well-being. He urges activities (and a curriculum) that enhance understanding of how others see the world, as well as a commitment to replace isolation and competition with a feeling of community in the classroom and school.

HOW NOT TO TEACH VALUES: A Critical Look at Character Education

The desire to help students become not only good learners but good people has led to a variety of school programs classified as moral, values, or character education. But apart from disagreement about which values to emphasize -- obedience or skepticism? patriotism or compassion? -- there lurk fundamental questions about the whole enterprise. Alfie Kohn, author of *BEYOND DISCIPLINE*, raises concerns about relying on rewards or value-of-the-week programs; more important, he challenges the idea that admirable traits can be transmitted *to* children or instilled *in* them. He argues instead for a model in which students actively construct moral meaning.

OVERHAULING THE TRANSMISSION MODEL

Students are not receptacles to be filled with knowledge, or clay to be molded. They, like all of us, are active meaning-makers. The implication, as one educator put it, is that teaching is mostly listening, and learning is mostly telling – a dictum that requires us to rethink the use of lectures, worksheets, textbooks, and, for that matter, our preconceptions about what makes a good teacher (particularly at the high school level). This presentation by Alfie Kohn, author of *WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A CLASSROOM*, explains why the traditional "bunch o' facts" model of instruction, with its emphasis on memorizing right answers and practicing skills, is virtually guaranteed to fail. Participants are invited to consider how teachers of all ages and all subjects can become more successful at helping students make sense of ideas for themselves – and with each other.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION AND ITS VICTIMS: Grades, Textbooks, and Other Impediments to Learning

The traditional paradigm of schooling includes four sets of assumptions: (1) Students are passive receptacles into which facts and skills are "poured." (2) Teachers make virtually all the decisions about what is to be learned in the classroom. (3) Students learn individually, and sometimes are even set against each other in competitions. (4) Extrinsic motivators, such as grades and other rewards, are used to induce students to learn. The available research indicates that students are less likely to thrive intellectually – to become lifelong learners – when these four premises guide what happens in schools. Alfie Kohn explains why each is flawed and describes the alternative.