

Discipline Is The Problem — Not The Solution

By Alfie Kohn

When things in my classroom hit bottom, there were days when I was convinced that the kids stayed up nights plotting ways to make my life miserable. It was only later that I realized their disruptions were basically just intended to make the time pass faster.

And it was later still before I could admit that I didn't blame them. The problem wasn't with the students — it was my curriculum and my reliance on textbooks, worksheets, and a diet of disconnected facts and skills. Did I really expect my students to be eager to learn about "Our Friend the Adverb"? Given these types of assignments, it would have been amazing if they hadn't acted up.

Of course, most articles on disciplining students would brush aside such reflections. Instead, they'd remind me that it's my right to demand that the students act "appropriately" — which is to say, do whatever I tell them. They'd offer an assortment of tricks to get the students to comply with my wishes. In fact, the whole field of classroom management amounts to techniques for manipulating students' behavior.

This is awfully convenient for teachers because it takes for granted that the fault lies completely with the children. But consider:

- * Maybe when there's a problem, we should focus not only on the child who doesn't do what he's asked, but also on what he's being asked to do (and how reasonable it is).
- * Maybe when a student is off task, the right question to ask isn't "How do I get him back on?" but "What's the task?"
- * Maybe when a student does something inappropriate, we should look at the climate of the classroom that we have helped to create.

Working with students to build a safe, caring community takes time, patience, and skill. It's no surprise, then, that discipline programs fall back on what's easy: punishments ("consequences") and rewards.

Do they work? Yes and no. Threats and bribes can buy a short-term change in behavior, but they can never help kids develop a commitment to positive values. In a consequence-based classroom, students are led to ask, "What does she want me to do, and what happens to me if I don't do it?" In a reward-based classroom, they're led to ask, "What does she want me to do, and what do I get for doing it?"

Notice how similar these two questions are. Rewards and punishments are really two sides of the same coin. And notice how different either one is from what we'd like children to be thinking about: "What kind of person do I want to be?" or "What kind of classroom do we want to have?"

To help kids engage in such reflection, we have to work with them rather than doing things to them. We have to bring them in on the process of making decisions about their learning and their lives together in the classroom. Children learn to make good choices by having the chance to choose, not by following directions.

Suppose it's been taking a long time for your class to get settled after returning from lunch. What are your options? You could threaten to take away a privilege or humiliate the slowest kids. You could dangle the equivalent of a doggie biscuit in front of the class if things improve tomorrow. Or you could set up one child as an example to manipulate the behavior of everyone else ("I like the way Doreen is taking her seat so quickly!").

All of these "doing to" strategies are about demanding obedience, not about helping kids think their way through a problem — or pondering why what's happening might even be a problem in the first place. As a result, the need for discipline and control never ends.

But what if you engaged the students in thinking for themselves?: How long is it taking us to get settled? Why? What can we do about that? This approach saves time in the long run, reduces the number of problems, and ultimately gets kids started thinking their way through their problems.

Each time I visit such a classroom, where the teacher is more interested in creating a democratic community than in maintaining her position of authority, I'm convinced all over again that moving away from consequences and rewards isn't just realistic — it's the best way to help kids grow into good learners and good people.

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