

**The Trouble with Pure  
Freedom: A Case for Active  
Adult Involvement in  
Progressive Education**



## The Trouble with Pure Freedom A Case for Active Adult Involvement in Progressive Education

By Alfie Kohn

This transcript of Kohn's talk was published in *The Directory of Democratic Education, 2nd ed.*, edited by Dana M. Bennis and Isaac R. Graves. A video of the lecture is available here.

In his opening comments Kohn invited those in the alternative education movement to continue being thought of as "alternative."

... I would love nothing more than for the stuff I believe in to become the mainstream. Sort of like that old bumper sticker about dreaming of the day when bake sales have to be held to fund the military, while schools get hundreds of billions. Similarly, I dream of the day when people doing direct instruction and constant testing and punitive discipline become the alternative and have to hold small conferences in Troy, New York. But the question then becomes, what do we have in common? To the extent that we are all alternatives to the status quo at this point, what do we share other than a distaste for traditional kinds of instruction, control, testing and the like. We would not be the first group of people who are quite disparate except for what we don't like.

In what was, sadly, the final issue of a journal called *Paths of Learning*, Ron Miller said:

Nearly everyone is off in their own cozy little worlds. Homeschoolers hang out with each other. Montessorians read their own publications and go to their own conferences, the Waldorf movement inhabits its own tiny corner of the universe, charter and magnet school advocates think they've found the answer to the problems of education, those in democratic schools celebrate the freedom they enjoy in their minuscule enclaves, and progressive activists see all these groups as enemies against their struggle to save public schools. As a holistic thinker, I am convinced that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and that if these various movements and communities would come together, learn from each other, and appreciate each other's contributions to a movement for educational rights, we would have a political and cultural force that could seriously contest the reign of the educational empire.

I think Ron Miller for putting it so well, and I thank Jerry Mintz for putting this conference together.

Now, when I think about educational practices, the ones I like and the ones I don't like so much, I often think in terms of what the ultimate criterion is – the standard against which we measure what we are doing, or what other people are doing. I am interested primarily in what I think benefits children, what promotes their social, intellectual, and moral development. I'm also interested in furthering a democratic society: not just teaching kids how to live in one but increasingly how to create one where it doesn't really exist.

You may have noticed that most parenting books begin with the question, "How do we get kids to do what we want them to do?" And not surprisingly, many of the things they come up with don't even reach that rather un-ambitious goal. I'm interested in asking, "What do kids need, and how do we meet those needs?" There are some for whom the main goal is freedom, or autonomy, or liberty; they may even be guided primarily by an anti-government sensibility. And I want to suggest that there may be some light in between those two sets of goals, such that pursuing a consistent, one might even say fervent, desire to advance the cause of Freedom-with-a-capital-F may not be the same thing as figuring out what kids need and how we can meet those needs, or helping to further their intellectual, social, and moral development.

The possibility that autonomy or freedom may not be the only good is a particularly relevant challenge to post-1960s libertarians. For me, there are other goals even in a political or social framework, for example the idea of community. When autonomy is valued to the exclusion of other goals, we run into problems of different kinds. Today, my concern is primarily about what that means for kids, especially in an educational setting. The question I'd like to pose is whether authoritarians and educational libertarians may have a very curious and paradoxical connection that would discomfit them both – namely, a shared belief that all authority, all adult involvement in the lives or learning of kids, must be top-down, controlling, manipulative, and indeed autocratic. The two groups differ only on whether that's a good thing. For educational libertarians, adult involvement – especially when the adult takes the initiative to create with kids, or in some cases for kids, a curriculum, a set of principles, and other things that form brackets around education – must be bad. And therefore the only way to escape bad control is to keep the adults at the periphery of the picture for as much of the time as possible.

I don't share that view. While I'm not completely allergic to dichotomies, it strikes me as unhelpful to contrast a traditional, old school, punitive, autocratic approach with utter freedom. And so I want to talk for a bit about what I see as a third alternative, or a spectrum of alternatives. But I don't want to talk as long as I usually talk, in part because many of you are every bit as opinionated as I am. I would like to poke you and prod you and goose you a little bit, and then invite response so that most of the session is spent in conversation.

The question I want to pose is, "How can adults be involved in children's intellectual development, fostering their social and moral development, and fostering social change so that kids become critics of the status quo?" Let me say a little about each.

I'll start with the intellectual kind and begin with a story. [Kohn describes a first-grade math lesson which the teacher presents in such a way that the children must play an active role in inventing, rather than merely absorbing and applying, the concept of standard units of measurement. This is described in his book *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, pp. 134-35. He then asks the audience what they noticed about the lesson. Responses include "They keep going." "It was experiential." "Student-led pace."] The teacher did not direct and control them. The lesson was collaborative; it was not each kid learning separately. Much of the learning was not just active but also interactive, which points up the critical role of peer learning as opposed to each kid's being on his or her own. The kids were engaged from the beginning because of the task that the teacher chose, the way she set it up to invite them in, in a way that would pique their curiosity, and of course she did not control the discussion. The learning was experiential, but it was more than that. It was not just hands-on; it was *minds-on*. And that is a notion that often eludes even some teachers who pride themselves on their non-traditional approaches. There was something genuinely, richly challenging, engaging, generative about the kinds of things that went on here.

Now when I describe this lesson to most groups of educators, my primary objective is to invite them to think about how the best learning requires that the teacher be a lot less controlling than most teachers are, to give the kids the opportunity to take the lead and grapple with the questions not only at their own pace but in their own way. But for some of you I have a different objective, and that is to emphasize the critical role played by an active adult in framing the lesson. The extent to which learning is deep and rich often requires adults to be involved from the beginning in taking the initiative. When is it too much initiative? At what point does the teacher crowd out the kids' ability to explore things in their own way? That is the art. But if we focus only on kids' freedom, we miss out not merely on community as a potential objective but also on some critical intellectual development.

Notice what this teacher did: The kids thought they had solved the problem, and twice she said "terrific, but," and then she threw what Eleanor Duckworth memorably called a "monkey-wrench" into their ideas. She artfully complicated their thinking in a way that wouldn't have happened if she wasn't involved. She pushed them to think more deeply, to reflect at greater length about the respects in which their solution might not have gone far enough. Carolyn Edwards, another constructivist thinker, once said we shouldn't just be "facilitating" kids' learning. That word originally meant "to make easy," as in *facile*. Rather, she says, we need to stimulate and guide and support their learning "by making problems more complex, involving, and arousing." So the kind of intellectual development that seems ideal requires – among other things such as freedom from standardized curricula and tests – a bunch of kids learning together and a teacher who helps to set up and complicate the curriculum.

That's intellectual development. Now let me suggest that something analogous is true with respect to social and moral development. Leaving kids on their own to figure out how to get along with other people can be problematic. I have seen examples where teachers simply say, "Now that you are free to explore what you will, you will probably want to find somebody else to explore with you." But that doesn't always happen, and lots of kids miss out on critical social and moral development if there is no structure that provides collaboration as a default condition of learning.

Here I must digress only for a moment to point out the important distinction between control and structure. Again, the people who tend to conflate those two are often either authoritarian types who claim they are giving kids structure but are really controlling the hell out of them, or extreme freedom folks who also assume the two are the same and therefore if we don't want to control kids we must provide no structure either. The third alternative, more consistent with the progressive education tradition of Dewey and Piaget and Bruner, suggests that in many respects, kids, especially little kids and especially kids of a certain personality and disposition, do thrive best within certain forms of structure – though not with control.

Now some teachers might say to their students, "Why don't we do this activity in our groups?" and then remind them to "cooperate" – which, not surprisingly, they often forget to do. Well, it's not that they forget; it's that no one helped to provide them with a way of thinking about what cooperation means and doesn't mean, or even, dare I say it, some lessons to help them acquire the skills necessary to listen carefully, to make eye contact, to disagree without putting people down, to figure out how sometimes it's appropriate to argue, as opposed to staying silent or being nasty. Kids sometimes don't collaborate in a way that's healthy because they need some adult involvement to make that happen.

A different example: I have seen teachers who asked their students to generate some rules for the classroom and are very proud that they asked the kids to do so. Their next question is, "What do you think we should do when people don't follow our rules?" I don't know if you've ever been in such a classroom, but trust me, kids can be very unhelpful in challenging oppressive institutions and deeply held assumptions about rewards and punishment, about learning and motivation, about the nature of schools and human beings. All of which requires an amazingly artful structure, knowing when to shut up and when to speak out. Some kids, when left to their own devices, will naturally respond with harsh consequences because after having been taught that when you do something bad, something bad has to be done to you, they'll then use their imaginations to come up with really ingenious ways of applying that principle. The role for the adult is to help kids think beyond what they've already been exposed to. Thus, a teacher might begin the year by saying to a class, "If, sometime this year, you did something you weren't proud of, something that really hurt someone else, what do you think we as a community could do to help you?" – and then really invite them to reflect on the significance of this question as an alternative to dreaming up punitive consequences.

If you asked each kid to reflect on how people could help her if she totally lost her temper, the next step then is an opportunity for her to reflect on what if someone else lost his temper. How could we help that kid? Having been invited to think about how punishment ain't going to help me, she begins to wonder why we would use it on anyone. And now the kids are beginning to construct an alternative to what they've been exposed to for years. Now they're thinking beyond consequences.

If a teacher asks a minimal question – "What should happen to people who don't follow our rules?" – you're in a "doing to" environment, and you're going to get "doing to" back in spades. The teacher has to become more involved, not less, but more involved in the direction of promoting and sparking kids to reconstruct the way we've been doing it. To challenge widespread and deeply held assumptions about rewards and punishment, about learning and motivation, about the nature of schools and human beings. All of which requires an amazingly artful structure, knowing when to shut up and when to speak out.

Again, there is no formula for all of this. But it's all about building a sense of concern for others, the teacher in many cases suggesting activities that will develop an organic sense of community in the room. That teacher must play a role that goes far beyond being a passive observer. Observing is great, especially when it is observation in the service of kids' needs, as opposed to observation in the service of more ingenious control, as is the case with mainstream classroom management programs. But observation isn't enough for social and moral development – unless you believe, consciously or unconsciously, that human beings are like acorns that need only a bit of water and sunshine and they will grow into oaks all on their own. We get to very basic questions that go beyond classroom arrangements here, questions about what is required for optimal development and what optimal development consists in.

My third issue, beyond intellectual and social/moral development, is the question of helping kids to become questioners and challengers of the status quo. I worked a long time ago at a school in a very conservative community, and I was very young and very keen on establishing myself as the rebel. On the first day of school I wore a yellow button on my shirt that said, "Question Authority." The kids literally didn't understand the concept. They misread the syntax of it – kids were asking me, "Who made you the question authority?"

That's what we're up against. Given that we do not raise and teach kids in a vacuum, it falls to us if we are interested in challenging oppressive institutions and social mores to help this process in important ways. Because if the adult is not involved in promoting and actively fostering that disposition to question and challenge – and helping to teach the skills to bring it off – not much of that is likely to happen. And here is where we come across one of the most fascinating paradoxes of all. Adults may stand back, committed to being respectful of kids' autonomy, but the kids have already absorbed and internalized the norms of this society and are not even aware of the extent to which this is true.

Here, a sentence for me that stood out like a jewel, is from a book I hope many of you know: *Schooling in Capitalist America* by Sam Bowles and Herbert Gintis: "Of course, education can recognize the sanctity of the individual's experience, but it cannot leave it intact." Let me give you a couple of examples. By the time they're in second or third grade, most kids, if told that the class had the opportunity to decide what field trip to take, what snack to have, what book to read next, or what to put on the walls, would almost instantly suggest that they vote. Voting, for me, as for political theorist Benjamin Barber, is "perhaps the least important act in a real democracy." Voting is what I like to call "adversarial majoritarianism." It's not about real democracy; it's just about winning and losing. "How many want to go to the museum for our field trip? OK, thirteen. How many want to go to the zoo? Eleven. Right. We'll go to the museum."

Excuse me, but no real democracy happened here. The best thing that can be said about this exercise is that it didn't take long. Well, maybe that's not fair. At least the teacher didn't decide unilaterally. But now you've got 11 kids going to a place they expressly preferred not to go, and you have 24 kids who never had to listen to one another, never had to do the hard, messy, improvisational work of forging a consensus, hashing out a compromise, imagining the perspective of other people to try to imagine how they look at the world, learning what they find so damned interesting about a stupid museum. You don't get the guts of democracy when you just vote and the majority wins. The question then interestingly becomes, what can be done in order for the adults to introduce a concept of say, consensus building, to which the kids otherwise would never have been exposed and which would never have occurred to them? If you simply follow the kids, they are not only less likely to grow intellectually and grow morally, but less likely to challenge the things in our society that live inside us.

Another, closely related example is competition itself. You get really little American kids at recess, one of the few places in most schools where they have a little autonomy, and they will often play competitive games. Why? Because they have thoughtfully arrived at the conclusion that the best way to have fun is to sort themselves into winners and losers, and that recreation requires people to try to defeat each other? No! Because they've probably never been introduced to cooperative games.

Terry Orlick of the University of Ottawa did just that, exposing a bunch of kids to those games as well as to traditional sports. The result was that two thirds of the boys and all of the girls preferred the cooperative games when they were given a choice. The decision to play win/lose activities can't be considered an informed one until the adult helps children to see that there is an alternative – and that's something that people in our culture may live their whole lives without realizing. That's why lots of people stare at me blankly and ask, "How could you play a game without winners or losers?"

We're trained along those lines from our earliest days. The first game I ever learned featured *n* children scrambling for *n-1* chairs when the music stopped. A prototype of artificial scarcity. Orlick suggests that we play cooperative musical chairs instead, where you take away a chair in each round, but now the objective is for all the kids to fit on a diminishing number of seats. So at the end you have 7 or 8 kids, all still in the game, mostly giggling, trying to figure out how they can all squish themselves onto one chair. Everybody has a good time.

But a seven year old's probably not going to come up with that on his own, especially when every televised reality show is all about beating other people; when every field you drive by in your home town consists exclusively of games where each group of children is working to defeat the other. And it runs as a thread through our economic system and our political system and, god knows, our schools, with awards assemblies and spelling bees.

The paradox, again, is quite simply that a stringently hands-off, follow-the-child approach may be insufficiently radical if we're committed to creating a more just society. I wrote an article recently called "Challenging Students . . . And How to Have More of Them" in which I gave a bunch of examples of the kinds of things that people can do to promote a posture of questioning authority, especially in a classroom context. For example, progressive educators have long talked about learning by doing, experiential education, as opposed to just sitting there passively listening. But I don't see much talk about *teaching* by doing, in which the teacher actually demonstrates stuff. That is beginning to make its presence felt in the teaching of writing, where some of the gurus urge us to write in front of kids. Show them rough drafts, show them the process – on a blackboard or overhead projector – so they can see you compose things and scratch stuff out because it was not what you intended; they can see you move sentences around and try again.

The main justification that's offered for doing this is that kids learn to write better that way. OK, I'll buy that. A few people even mention something that you rarely see in the educational literature: It helps them want to write; it promotes a disposition and not merely a skill. But I have another reason: When you teach by doing you make yourself vulnerable, you teach kids that writing, especially good writing, does not drop down from the heavens fully formed. This empowers kids to challenge the stuff they're reading. Some teachers deliberately ask kids to rewrite stuff in the published books they'd been assigned to read, especially stuff they didn't like that much.

We all have our little language pet peeves, those of us who are teachers. Mine is the use of "they" to refer to a single author. Not because it's grammatically incorrect, but because "they" obscures the fact that the book was written by a person with a point of view, a bias, and sometimes a propensity to make mistakes. "They say on page 276. . ." – No, it's not "them!" It's, I don't know, "Bill Schwartz." Who is Bill Schwartz? What else has he written? How can we learn to talk back to the book? One way is by demystifying the process of writing so kids can see how it's done, as a way to help them want to question what they're presented with.

The same is true in mathematics and science. Typically, teaching by doing in math consists of a teacher working through some problem, step by step, or a science teacher demonstrating an experiment, knowing exactly what the results are going to be. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about where the teachers actually tackle problems, or attempt experiments, when they are not sure how it's going to work out. And they model for the kids that iffy proposition of how real scientists do real science. Again, the underlying message is always: We adults don't always know what's going on; we don't always know how to do it.

With morality, too, we adults might have to do more than just set an example for kids. We might need to take kids "back to back" so they can see what we do, and what we think, when we're faced with a moral dilemma. Anybody can say, "Be honest" or "Be kind," but what do you do when telling someone the truth will hurt her feelings? We need to help kids see how we wrestle with real problems, to demystify the process of ethical judgment, the process of writing, the process of thinking about mathematical and scientific truths.

John Holt put it very well, as he often did: "We adults so often present ourselves to children as if we were gods – all-knowing, all-powerful, always rational, always just, always right. This is worse than any lie we can tell about ourselves. So to contradict this, when I am trying to do something I am no good at, I do it in front of students so they can see me struggling with it."

You can see why most adults don't do that. Precisely what makes it so powerful is what makes it so scary for us – to be vulnerable. But again it's not just an accidental witnessing of something when they happen to be around us. One must contrive it to some extent, yet without its becoming too contrived, if that doesn't seem contradictory.

The challenge here, I've been arguing, is to ask basic questions: What do we think learning is about? What do we think human beings are like? And what are our goals? If our goals involve intellectual development and social development and helping kids to question the world as it is presented to them, then I think we are obliged to reject the traditional autocratic approach that is so depressingly pervasive in our society, but also to reject its mirror opposite of pure freedom where the adult merely observes or follows. Instead, we need to do the much harder work of figuring out how to bring kids along, when to follow and when to lead, when to tell and when to ask and when to shut up.

And that's all I'm going to say, so now you say.

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