

# Unconditional Teaching (#)

## Unconditional Teaching

By Alfie Kohn

Has there even been a wider, or more offensive, gap between educational rhetoric and reality than that which defines the current accountability fad? The stirring sound bites waft through the air: higher expectations – world-class standards – raising the bar – no child left behind. Meanwhile, educators and students down on the ground are under excruciating pressure to improve test results, often at the expense of meaningful learning, and more low-income and minority students are dropping out.

Some of the results of that pressure are plainly visible to anyone who cares to look: You can see practice tests replacing student-designed projects, children appearing alternately anxious and bored, teachers quitting in disgust. But there are also subtler effects. The current version of school reform is changing what we value. If the sole goal is to raise achievement (in the narrowest sense of that word), then we may end up ignoring other kinds of learning beyond the academic. It's exceedingly difficult to teach the whole child when people are held accountable only for raising reading and math scores. Moreover, when some capabilities are privileged over others, and a broader approach to education is sacrificed, we begin to look at students differently. We come to lose sight of children "except as they distribute themselves across deciles" (Hogan, 1974, p. iii). That means that some kids – namely, the high scorers – are prized more than others by the adults. One Florida superintendent observed that "when a low-performing child walks into a classroom, instead of being seen as a challenge, or an opportunity for improvement, for the first time since I've been in education, teachers are seeing [him or her] as a liability" (Wilgoren, 2000). I've heard essentially the same rueful observation from teachers and administrators across the country.

### Debilitating Effects of Conditional Acceptance

A diminution in what we value, then, may affect whom we value. But the damage isn't limited to those students who fail to measure up – that is, by conventional standards. If some children matter more to us than others, then all children are valued only conditionally. Regardless of the criteria we happen to be using, or the number of students who meet those criteria, every student gets the message that our acceptance is never a sure thing. They learn that their worth hinges on their performance.

That's more than distasteful – it's debilitating. Psychological theorists and researchers (e.g., Deci and Ryan, 1995; Kernis, 2003) are coming to realize that the best predictor to mental health may not be one's level of self-esteem but the extent to which it fluctuates. The real problem isn't self-esteem that's too low ("I don't like myself very much") so much as self-esteem that's too contingent ("I like myself only when..."). Conversely, kids who have an underlying sense of their own value are more likely to see failure as a temporary setback, a problem to be solved. They're also less likely to be anxious or depressed (Chamberlain and Haaga, 2001).

In turn, the best predictor of whether children will be able to accept themselves as fundamentally valuable and capable is the extent to which they have been accepted unconditionally by others. As Carl Rogers (1959) argued half a century ago, those on the receiving end of conditional love – that is, affection based not on who they are but on what they do – come to disown the parts of themselves that aren't valued. Eventually they regard themselves as worthy only when they act (or think or feel) in specific ways.

In the course of researching a book on these issues, I discovered considerable empirical support for this theory. One summary of the research put it this way: "The more conditional the support [one experiences], the lower one's perceptions of overall worth as a person" (Harter, 1999; also see Assor et al., 2004). When children receive affection with strings attached, they do indeed tend to accept themselves only with strings attached. For example, investigators at the University of Denver (Harter et al., 1996) have shown that teenagers who feel they have to fulfill certain conditions in order to win their parents' approval often end up not liking themselves. That, in turn, may lead a given adolescent to construct a "false self" – in other words, to pretend to be the kind of person whom his or her parents will love. This desperate strategy to gain acceptance is often associated with depression, a sense of hopelessness, and a tendency to lose touch with one's true self. At some point, such teenagers may not even know who they really are because they've had to work so hard to become something they're not.

In short, unconditional acceptance is what kids require in order to flourish. And while it's most critical that they experience that kind of acceptance at home, what happens at school matters, too. "Unconditional parenting" (Kohn, 2005) is key, but what might be called "unconditional teaching" is also important. One study found that students who felt unconditionally accepted by their teachers were more likely to be genuinely interested in learning and to enjoy challenging academic tasks – as opposed to just doing things because they had to and preferring easier assignments at which they knew they would be successful (Makri-Botsari, 2001). To provide this unconditional support, we must actively oppose the policies that get in the way, such as those that encourage us to value children on the basis of their academic standing – or, worse, merely on the basis of their test scores. Although there are risks involved, there may well be a moral obligation to participate in organized, active resistance to destructive mandates. "Putting children first" is an empty slogan if we watch passively while our schools are turned into test-prep centers.

Taking a stand against oppressive policies that are imposed from outside our schools may well be a necessary component of unconditional teaching, but it's not sufficient. Even if we succeeded in eliminating external pressures related to standards and testing, it's possible that some of our own practices also lead children to believe that we accept them only conditionally. Sometimes that acceptance seems to depend on their doing well and sometimes it depends on their being good. Let's look at each of these in turn.

### Acceptance Based on Performance

All of us want our students to be successful learners, but there is a thin line that separates valuing excellence (a good thing) from leading students to believe that they matter only to the extent they meet our standards (not a good thing). Some people elevate abstractions like Achievement or Excellence above the needs of flesh-and-blood children. Thus, by steering extra resources to, or heaping public recognition on, students who succeed, we're not only ignoring the counterproductive effects of extrinsic motivators (Kohn, 1993), but possibly sending a message to all students – those who have been recognized and those who, conspicuously, have not – that only those who do well count.

Nel Noddings (1992) made a similar point in discussing the kind of teacher who pushes students relentlessly but also praises those who manage to live up to his high expectations ("You are the best!"). Such instructors are often admired for being both demanding and encouraging. However, if "You are the best!" just means "You can do A.P. calculus," then this suggests that only those who master differential equations are "the best." Surely, says Noddings, "a student should not have to succeed at A.P. calculus to gain a math teacher's respect."

Or consider those educators, particularly in the arts, whose professional pride is invested in the occasional graduate who goes on to distinguish herself as a well-known novelist or violinist. There is a big difference between trying to help as many students as possible cultivate a love of, and some competence at, one's field and trying to sift through many hundreds of students in search of the very few who will later become famous. The latter suggests a profoundly antidemocratic sensibility, one that sees education as being about winning and selecting rather than providing something of value for everyone. And, again, all students realize that they matter to such a teacher only if they measure up.

My point is not that we shouldn't value, or even celebrate, accomplishment. But paradoxically, unconditional teaching is more likely to create the conditions for children to excel. Those who know they're valued irrespective of their accomplishments often end up accomplishing quite a lot. It's the experience of being accepted without conditions that helps people develop a healthy confidence in themselves, a belief that it's safe to take risks and try new things.

### Acceptance Based on Obedience

Sometimes the conditions placed on acceptance have more to do with compliance than with success. A case in point: temporarily ejecting a student from a class activity – or even from school – for misbehaving. This practice is sometimes rationalized on the grounds that it isn't fair to the others if one student is allowed to act badly. But those other students, the ones in whose name we are allegedly taking this action, are being told, in effect, that everyone is part of this community only conditionally. That creates an uneasy, uncertain, and ultimately unsafe climate.

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (1995) ask us to put ourselves in the place of a child who has been subjected to the punishment known euphemistically as time-out: "As an adult you can imagine how resentful and humiliated you would feel if someone forced you into isolation for something you said or did." For a child, however, it is even worse, since she may come to believe "that there is something so wrong with her that she has to be removed from society."

Those who seem to accept students conditionally – requiring them to act in a particular way in order to be valued, or even in order to be allowed to stay – often see themselves as trying to reinforce or eliminate specific student behaviors. What they often don't see is that traditional classroom management techniques, along with the narrow emphasis on observable behaviors that underlies those techniques, make it very difficult to attend to the person who engages in those behaviors. In fact, I would propose the following rule of thumb: the value of a book about dealing with children is inversely proportional to the number of times it contains the word *behavior*. When our primary focus is on discrete behaviors, we end up ignoring the whole child.

That doesn't mean exemplary educators who avoid time-outs, detentions, and other punishments are simply ignoring misbehavior. The real alternative to making children suffer for their offenses (or dangling goodies in front of them for doing what they're told) is to work with them to solve problems. A "working with" approach (Child Development Project, 1996; DeVries and Zan, 1994; Kohn, 1996) asks more of the teacher than does a "doing to" approach, but it's a good deal more effective because even if the latter succeeds in imposing order temporarily, it does so by undermining students' moral development, compromising the relationship between teacher and students, and making it more difficult to establish a supportive environment for learning. In sum, giving the impression that we value children only when they're good doesn't promote goodness any more than giving the impression that we value children only when they succeed promotes success.

In an illuminating passage from her recent book *Learning to Trust* (2003), Marilyn Watson explained that a teacher can make it clear to students that certain actions are unacceptable while still providing "a very deep kind of reassurance – the reassurance that she still care[s] about them and [is] not going to punish or desert them, even if they do something very bad." This posture allows "their best motives to surface," thus giving "space and support for them to reflect and to autonomously engage in the moral act of restitution" – that is, to figure out how to make things right after doing something wrong. "If we want our students to trust that we care for them," she concludes, "then we need to display our affection without demanding that they behave or perform in certain ways in return. It's not that we don't want and expect certain behaviors; we do. But our concern or affection does not depend on it."

This is the heart of unconditional teaching, and Watson points out that it's easier to maintain this stance, even with kids who are frequently insulting or aggressive, if we keep in mind why they're acting that way.

The idea is for the teacher to think about what these students need (emotionally speaking) and probably haven't received. That way, she can see "the vulnerable child behind the bothersome or menacing exterior." The popular view is that children who misbehave are just "testing limits" – a phrase often used as a justification for imposing more limits, or punishments. But perhaps such children are testing something else entirely: the unconditionality of our care for them. Perhaps they're acting in unacceptable ways to see if we'll stop accepting them.

Thus, one teacher (quoted in Watson, 2003) dealt with a particularly challenging child by sitting down with him and saying, "You know what? I really, really like you. You can keep doing all this stuff and it's not going to change my mind. It seems to me that you are trying to get me to dislike you, but it's not going to work. I'm not ever going to do that." This teacher added: "It was soon after that, and I'm not saying immediately, that his disruptive behaviors started to decrease." The moral here is that unconditional acceptance is not only something all children deserve; it's also a powerfully effective way to help them become better people. It's more useful, practically speaking, than any "behavior management" plan could ever be.

### Providing Unconditional Acceptance

Teaching in this way is not just a matter of how we respond to children after they do something wrong, of course. It's about the countless gestures that let them know we're glad to see them, that we trust and respect them, that we care what happens to them. It's about the real (and unconditional) respect we show by asking all students what they think about how things are going, and how we might do things differently, not the selective reinforcement we offer to some students when they please us.

Unconditional teachers are not afraid to be themselves with students – to act like real human beings rather than crisply controlling authority figures. Their classrooms have an appealing informality about them. They may bring in occasional treats for their students – all their students – for no particular reason. They may write notes to children, have lunch with them, respond from the heart to their journal entries. Such teachers listen carefully to what kids say and remember details about their lives: "Hey, Joanie. You said on Friday that your Mom might take you to the fair over the weekend. Did you go? Was it fun?"

It's not possible to like all one's students equally well, but unconditional teachers try hard not to play favorites. More than that, they do their best to find something appealing about each child and respond accordingly. They make it clear that, while there are certain expectations in the classroom – expectations that, ideally, the students themselves have helped to suggest – the teacher's basic affection need not be earned. Caring that has to be earned isn't real caring at all.

Accepting students for who they are – as opposed to for what they do – is integrally related to the idea of teaching the whole child. That connection is worth highlighting because the phrase "whole child" is sometimes interpreted to mean "more than academics," which suggests a fragmented education. The point isn't just to meet a student's emotional needs with this activity, her physical needs with that activity, her social needs with something else, and so on. Rather, it is an integrated self to whom we respond. It is a whole person whom we value. And to do so in any way that matters is to accept children unconditionally, even (perhaps especially) when they screw up or fall short.

It isn't easy to create these sorts of relationships when there's no time to know each student. Huge classes, huge schools, and short periods are impediments to more than academic achievement. That's why, once again, unconditional teachers understand the need to work for systemic change – for example, pressing for the demise of the factory-like American high school model, an impediment to good teaching if ever there was one. But in the meantime, within whatever structures we work, we need to think about whether our posture toward students really provides them with as much of the unconditional acceptance they need as possible. Imagine that your students are invited to respond to a questionnaire several years after leaving the school. They're asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree – and how strongly – with statements such as: "Even when I wasn't proud of how I acted, even when I didn't do the homework, even when I got low test scores or didn't seem interested in what was being taught, I knew that [insert your name here] still cared about me."

How would you like your students to answer that sort of question? How do you think they will answer it?

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