

The Grass Moment

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Helping Kids to Become Reflective Rebels

By Alfie Kohn

*For the last several years I've been hacking away at a tangle of deeply conservative beliefs about children and parenting that have somehow come to be accepted as the conventional wisdom in our culture: that parents are too permissive and yet, at the same time, too protective; that young people suffer from inflated self-esteem and a sense of entitlement; that this spoiled and narcissistic generation needs more "grit," self-discipline, and experience with frustration and failure. (The result of my debunking efforts, *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*, was published last year and is available at a bookstore near you.)[1]*

No evidence supports the contention that most kids are coddled and consequently self-centered, let alone that this is true of more kids today than it was in decades past. (Adults have grumbled about young people in pretty much the same way for – well, approximately forever.) But assume for a moment that today's grumblers were right. How would we raise and teach children if our priority was to make sure they weren't self-centered? What might help them acquire the inclination to look beyond themselves?

The answer, I think, is to help them become people who are not only empathic and compassionate but skeptical and courageous. It's one thing to offer a kind word or a dollar to an individual in distress; it's something else to address the systemic causes of that distress. The latter requires a willingness to question authority and challenge unjust features of the status quo – to stand up to power. In short, the real alternative to egocentricity is what might be called reflective rebelliousness.

I've noticed that the adults most likely to complain that today's youngsters are overindulged and underdisciplined are particularly resistant to this prescription. They're more apt to want kids to be well-behaved – even though it should be obvious that one can be polite, dutiful . . . and completely indifferent to the needs of others. Whether or not it's stated explicitly, compliance remains the central goal of most classroom management programs, character education initiatives, and parenting resources. Sure, we stress the virtues of independent thinking and assertiveness, but mostly in the context of getting kids to resist peer pressure. If a child has the temerity to resist unreasonable rules and demands imposed by adults, well, then, bring on the "consequences" (read: punishments) to "hold them accountable for their behavior." [2]

Suppose a school principal announces that, because of a recent outbreak of graffiti in the school bathrooms (involving spray-painted assertions regarding certain features of the principal's own anatomy), no student will be permitted to use the bathroom unless accompanied by a teacher. What interests me is figuring out how we can teach (or raise) the kind of children whose first and last response to this directive is not likely to be, "Well, like it or not, that's the rule now, so there's nothing we can do."

The alternative involves two steps. First, a student must question the inevitability and desirability of this decree,

at least within her own mind: Was that a reasonable thing for the principal to do? Was the point really to “protect student safety”? How else might the problem have been addressed? What are the implications of requiring students to be escorted to the bathroom?

Any of these questions may lead the student to decide that the new policy is unacceptable – even if other people appear to be accepting it (or at least not doing anything about it). That decision is connected to a more general recognition that policies, laws, and social norms aren’t just “a part of life”; they can be called into question. I call this the *Grass Moment*, based on a *Far Side* cartoon in which several cows in a pasture are grazing contentedly until one of them suddenly lifts its head and says, “Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We’ve been eating grass!”

The second step is for the student – ideally after conversations with others – to consider what sort of action to take. What can we do besides grumble? Well, we could find a sympathetic teacher, organize a larger group of kids, or rally the parents. We could start a petition, meet with the principal, complain to the school board, or write a letter to the newspaper. We could amend the existing graffiti (“. . . and he doesn’t just have one; he is one”), arrange a tinkle-in at the principal’s office, or show up outside his house at night with loud music and a megaphone (“No pees for us, no peace for you”). The possibilities are limited only by one’s imagination. And, well, by the law.

We may approve of some of these responses more than others, but all of them, as well as the process of choosing among them, reflect a disposition for skepticism and critical thinking, a disinclination to take things at face value, an insistence on asking why things are the way they are and whether that’s the way they should be, a willingness to stand up for a principle (and, in this case, against a principal).

Elsewhere I've suggested some concrete strategies by which teachers[3] and parents[4] can promote these attributes so that children are more likely to grow into reflective rebels. But first we need to commit ourselves to this goal, which means that we ourselves must be rebels – against the dominant tendency to focus on producing children who do whatever they're told.

NOTES

1. I'm kidding, of course. There are no longer any bookstores near you.

2. Conversely, we tend to rely on rewards and recognition to reinforce conformity. What is so offensive about Skinnerian programs like PBIS or Class Dojo isn't just their methods, which amount to extended exercises in manipulation, but their goal, which is to elicit mindless obedience.

3. "Challenging Students . . . And How to Have More of Them," Phi Delta Kappan, November 2004.

4. The Myth of the Spoiled Child: Challenging the Conventional Wisdom about Children and Parenting (Da Capo Press, 2014), chapter 8.

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