

# Do Our Expectations of Kids Aim Too High or Too Low?

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## Do Our Expectations of Kids Aim Too High or Too Low?

By Alfie Kohn

*“Old-school” parenting and teaching are often distinguished by a failure to understand what children are capable of doing or understanding, or to provide the support they need and the respect they deserve. But does that mean kids are being underestimated – or overestimated? The answer is less straightforward, and more interesting, than you might think.*

*Let’s back up for a minute. My premise is that it makes sense to adopt what might be called a “working with” – as opposed to a “doing to” – approach with children. That means relying on love and reason, seeing kids as more than bundles of behaviors to be managed and manipulated, and treating troublesome actions as problems to be solved (or, if you like, teachable moments) rather than as infractions to be punished.*

*Traditionalists, however, raise this objection: Because young children aren’t yet able to reason or understand long-term consequences, we need to tell them what to do and employ rewards or punishments to make sure they’re properly socialized. In effect, children’s developmental limitations are invoked to justify a “doing to” prescription. But the irony here is that many developmental psychologists and educators with a keen understanding of how kids’*

capabilities change as they grow tend to reject that prescription.

The developmentalists' argument (which is mine as well) runs as follows: No child is too young to be treated with respect. A child's point of view should be taken seriously and his or her choices honored when possible. Sure, the immaturity of young children may require more patience from us. Yes, they may need more protection and monitoring, more structure and instruction. But none of this justifies a reliance on control and a predominant focus on eliciting mindless obedience. Working-with parenting and teaching of very young children may be challenging, but it's not unrealistic. (I've offered practical suggestions for how it can be done and so have many others, including infant and toddler experts like Magda Gerber and Alicia Lieberman.)

In fact, we can go a step further: Our treatment of little children has an impact on how they develop. Imposing our will on them (on the basis of their immaturity) makes it less likely they'll acquire the very social and moral dispositions whose absence we've used to justify such treatment. If we want them to consider the needs and viewpoints of others, we have to guide them gently to do so. If we want them to rely on cooperation rather than power, we have to set that example in how we deal with them. By contrast, offering rewards for compliance or punishments for noncompliance makes it increasingly difficult to promote other-oriented reasoning and empathy. Just because it takes time to reach these goals doesn't mean we should head off in the wrong direction.

An attempt to justify a "doing to" approach on the grounds that children are too young to be "worked with" is ironic for another reason, too. Parents and teachers who punish children are likely to overestimate the capabilities of little kids – that is, to overlook their developmental constraints. They either don't understand or simply deny the fact that kids below a certain age can't be expected to eat neatly or keep quiet in a public place or always tell the truth. Young children don't yet possess the skills that would make it sensible to hold them accountable for their behavior as we do an adult or even an older child.

A pair of **studies** by researchers at the University of Texas and New York University confirmed that parents who “attribute greater competence and responsibility to misbehaving children” are more likely to get upset with them, to condemn and punish them. Such parents become frustrated by what they see as inappropriate behavior, and they respond, in effect, by cracking down on little kids for being little kids – something that can be heartbreaking to watch. By contrast, parents who understand children’s developmental limitations tend to prefer “calm explanation and reasoning” in response to the same actions.

So which is it? Are “doing to” parents apt to overestimate or underestimate their children? Are they able to rationalize their old-school discipline either way? Or are they somehow guilty of doing both at once?

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A similar over/under dilemma shows up in classrooms. It makes its presence felt, first, with standardized testing. Most teachers can readily name several students whom they know to be impressive thinkers but who just don’t score well on these tests. Press further, and teachers may then think of others in their classes who are great at taking tests but whose proficiency at critical and creative thought is nothing to write home about. Test results therefore overstate the actual capabilities of some kids while understating those of others – probably because tests tend to measure the least important kinds of thinking. Indeed, several **studies** have found that higher scores on various tests are significantly correlated with shallower approaches to learning.

Or consider conventional ways of teaching math. On the one hand, children’s capacity to invent solutions is routinely minimized by teaching them (and even requiring them to use) specific procedures. On the other hand, children are often taught concepts that are beyond their developmental capabilities to understand, as if sufficient practice will make these concepts comprehensible to them through sheer repetition. Students end up making nonsensical errors

*because they really don't – and, at a certain age, can't – grasp concepts such as place value.[1]*

*The tendency to underestimate kids – to overlook their often remarkable observations and solutions – is a common complaint of progressive educators and those who support a more child-centered approach to schooling. We don't give kids their due! But the tendency to overestimate them, which extends well beyond math, is also worth our attention. Just as a punitive parent may ignore the limits of a toddler's capacity for remembering, deferring gratification, or dealing with frustration, so an Old School teacher may, in the name of "rigor" or "holding students to high standards," harbor unrealistic beliefs about what young children are able to master. Pushing a five year old to spell correctly, for example, reflects a failure to understand the predictable and appropriate way that children gradually come to master language, and it has the effect of turning writing into an unpleasant experience.*

*Lilian Katz, an influential early-childhood educator, has a brilliantly simple way of parsing this whole issue. She says we overestimate young children academically while underestimating them intellectually. I find the distinction between academic and intellectual useful by itself: It captures how so much of schooling is focused on facts-and-skills-based achievement that's overrated and doesn't really deserve to be called "intellectual" (even when that word is used in such a way that it can be applied to preschoolers). But by taking the additional step of applying this distinction to the question I've been discussing here, Katz offers an interesting solution to the riddle of how traditionalism seems to overestimate and underestimate children at the same time.*

*The difference between academic and intellectual is less relevant to parenting practices, of course. But there, too, kids are often misunderstood in two directions at once. When we pay close attention to children – what they are and aren't capable of, what they need rather than just what we want from them – we're likely to assess their capabilities in such a way that we can avoid expecting too much, on the one hand, or selling them short, on the other.*

## NOTE

1. See, for example, Constance Kamii's excellent book *Young Children Reinvent Arithmetic* (which focuses on first grade) and her two sequels, both titled *Young Children Continue to Reinvent Arithmetic*, one focusing on second grade and the other on third grade, all published by Teachers College Press. She and other constructivists describe why (and how) to avoid overwhelming children with concepts they can't yet make sense of, while also giving them a chance to show what they can do, mathematically speaking. The prescription that follows isn't just a matter of adjusting one's teaching style – consistent with those insipid reminders offered to teachers that they should, for example, be encouraging but maintain high expectations. Rather, it's a matter of changing the basic pedagogical structure: moving away from having kids memorize rules and then apply them to practice problems on worksheets – a process that, particularly in the primary grades, tends to inhibit thinking – in favor of creating opportunities to collaborate in coming to understand mathematical principles from the inside out. (I describe some of these issues in "What Works Better Than Traditional Math Instruction," which is an excerpt of *The Schools Our Children Deserve*.)

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