

Why Lots of Love (or Motivation) Isn't Enough

April 23, 2016

Why Lots of Love (or Motivation) Isn't Enough

By Alfie Kohn

I get a kick out of spotting invisible threads that connect disparate theories and lines of research. Sometimes I'll even notice a pattern (after the fact) in my own essays about different topics – which can be gratifying until I realize that the common denominator is embarrassingly simple.

One observation I've offered in various contexts is that "how much" tends to matter less than "what kind." That's something I've written about in four very different domains. My only defense against the reply "Well, duh. Who says otherwise?" is: "No one says otherwise, but most of us tend to act as if it weren't true." Let me explain.

1. Motivation. *After I published a thick book about the damaging effects of rewards, I realized that a lot of the research I had cited could be summarized in a few straightforward sentences: Without really thinking about it, we tend to assume there's something called "motivation" – a single entity of which someone can have a lot or a little. When we deal with people who have less power than we do, we're often tempted to offer them rewards for acting the way we want because we figure this will increase their level of motivation to do so.*

If we ignore the moral implications of treating others this way, rewarding them might be justified in practical terms. . . . that is, if the underlying model of motivation were accurate. Unfortunately, it isn't. In reality, there are qualitatively different kinds of motivation, and the kind is more important than the amount. What matters is whether one is intrinsically motivated to engage in an activity (which means one finds it valuable or satisfying in its own right) or extrinsically motivated (which means that doing it produces a result outside of the task, such as a reward).

Even impressive levels of extrinsic motivation don't bode well for meaningful goals. In fact, as scores of studies have shown, rewards tend to reduce people's intrinsic motivation. You get a prize for reading a book (or for being helpful) and you tend to find reading (or helpfulness) itself less appealing in the future. Thus, what matters isn't how motivated someone is, but how someone is motivated. The common but mistaken assumption that motivation comes in only one flavor helps to explain why rewards remain popular despite all the harm they do.

Many teachers, I find, are familiar with the modifiers "intrinsic" and "extrinsic," yet they continue to talk about "how motivated" a student is or how to "motivate" kids in general. By overlooking the critical difference between types of motivation, they contribute to a serious problem. Only extrinsic motivation can be increased from the outside, so that's what schools focus on (with grades, points, awards, praise, and the like) – often at the expense of children's interest in learning.

2. Love. *Let's consider a very different example of the same general principle. Many of us who are parents take comfort from the idea that what kids really need – maybe all they need – is our love. The implication is that love is a substance we can supply in greater or lesser quantities – greater, of course, being preferable.*

But again, this assumption turns out to be fatally simplistic since there are actually different ways of loving a child, and these ways aren't equally desirable. The psychoanalyst Alice Miller observed

that it's possible to love a child "passionately – but not in the way he needs to be loved." If she's right, the relevant question isn't just whether, or even how much, we love our kids. It also matters how we love them. Once that's understood, we could pretty quickly come up with a list of different types of parental love along with opinions about which are better.

I tend to focus on the distinction between loving kids for what they do and loving them for who they are. The first kind is conditional, which means children must earn our acceptance – by acting in ways we deem appropriate or performing up to our standards. The second kind of love is unconditional: It doesn't hinge on how they act, whether they're successful or well-behaved or anything else. And it's the latter, according to a growing body of research, that children really need – from their **parents** and even from their **teachers**. Unfortunately, it's also the opposite of what most parenting and classroom management resources are selling. Positive reinforcement for good behavior, just like "time out" for bad behavior, exemplifies conditional acceptance.

3. Self-esteem. Conservatives have been sneering at what they call the "self-esteem movement" for decades, but considerable research confirms that how people regard themselves is indeed a powerful predictor of various psychological outcomes – and that higher self-esteem is better than lower. Over the last few years, however, a number of psychologists have shown that what matters about self-esteem isn't just how much of it one has but how stable it is. If your confidence in yourself is fragile, the result may be anger or depression. And even if your self-esteem is generally high, you may struggle with self-doubt or become defensive if that positive view isn't sufficiently secure.

The crucial determinant of stability, in turn, seems to be unconditionality. A solid core of belief in yourself, an abiding sense that you're competent and worthwhile – even when you screw up or fall short – creates a more reliable (and healthier) form of self-esteem. Conversely, if you think well of yourself only to the extent that you're successful or attractive or appreciated by others

– if you regard self-esteem as something that's perpetually in doubt
– then you're in for trouble, psychologically speaking. Low self-esteem ("I don't feel very good about myself") is bad enough; self-esteem that's contingent ("I feel good about myself only when...") is even more worrisome.[1]

It's a neat parallel: The level of esteem one has for oneself, just like the amount of love children receive from their parents, doesn't tell the whole story. Actually, it's more than a parallel because these lines intersect. Being accepted unconditionally is what allows children to accept themselves unconditionally. Or to put it the other way around, conditional acceptance predicts conditional self-acceptance – and poorer psychological health.

4. Internalization. Many people with an interest in child development – even if they're aware of the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation – like to say that kids should be helped to internalize good values or behaviors. But how exactly does that process play out? On the one hand, kids may swallow whole (or "introject") an adult's rule or standard so that it seems to control them from the inside: They do what they've been told because they'll feel guilty if they don't. On the other hand, internalization can happen more authentically, so the behavior has been fully integrated into their value structure. It feels chosen.[2]

In short, internalization can take place in very different ways. Which means, once again, that what counts isn't just whether (or the extent to which) kids are doing it, but how.

When adults control children, they end up promoting an introjected style that often results in learning that's rigid, superficial, and ultimately less successful. Many older students have very effectively internalized a compulsion to do well in school. On the outside they look like admirably dedicated students, but they may have mortgaged their present lives to the future: noses to the grindstone, perseverant to a fault, stressed to the max. High school is just preparation for college, college is just an occasion for collecting credentials for whatever comes next. Such students

may be skilled test-takers and grade grubbers and gratification delayers, but they're often motivated by a perpetual need to feel better about themselves rather than by anything resembling curiosity.

True, these students no longer require carrots or sticks. They don't need discipline because they're self-disciplined. . . in a way that's disturbing. Their motivation is internal, but it sure as hell isn't intrinsic. And that key distinction would go unnoticed if we had just asked whether they had internalized certain values rather than inquired about the nature of that internalization.

*

If we know better, why do so many of us act as if things like love, motivation, self-esteem, and internalization come in only one variety? Might we focus on how much of "it" someone has because of our culture's preoccupation with **quantification** and data?[3] Or is it just that we've never been invited to consider the practical ramifications of the fact that none of these concepts is actually unitary?

NOTES

1. For an extended discussion of this point and the supporting research, see chapter 6 ("The Attack on Self-Esteem") of my book *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*.

2. I rely here on the theory and research of Edward Deci, Richard Ryan, and their many colleagues and former students. For a list of publications on this topic, see <http://ow.ly/4n12A9>.

3. In all four examples I've offered here, my argument is that it's not enough to ask "How much?" because the more meaningful question is "What kind?" But some practices may be inherently problematic, such that even the latter question takes too much for granted. In such cases, the more pertinent question is "Should we be doing this at all?" One example that comes to mind is **homework**. To say "It's not enough to reduce the amount; we need better homework" may be a step in the right direction, but it's still unsatisfactory if there's something problematic about the whole idea of making students work a second shift when they get home from

school.

To be notified whenever a new article or blog is posted on this site, please enter your e-mail address at www.alfiekohn.org/sign-up.