

“...And I Turned Out Just Fine!”

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“. . . And *I* Turned Out Just Fine!”

By Alfie Kohn

If you're going to question people's thinking, it's helpful to give them a couple of options: a gentle challenge in case they're easily unsettled and a more pointed challenge for those who don't mind really digging into their assumptions. Consider, for example, an announcement that a school's test scores rose last year. The moderate response to this would be: "So what?" (That result isn't meaningful because there are plenty of ways to raise scores without improving learning.) The radical response is: "Uh-oh." (That result may actually be bad news because training students to take tests more successfully often comes at the expense of high-quality teaching.)

Today I'd like to explore two comparable ways of responding to a claim that's commonly – and somewhat defensively – offered when evidence is brought to bear against mainstream approaches to education or parenting: "Well, *I* [experienced the practices you're challenging] and I turned out fine!" Sometimes the practices in question comprise traditional schooling – tests, grades, homework, competition, an emphasis on memorizing facts and practicing skills, a teacher- rather than student-centered classroom, and so on. At other times the issue is an approach

to discipline (at school or at home) that relies on punishments or rewards to elicit obedience.

The point of insisting “I turned out fine,” of course, is to deflect the original critique. There’s no need to grapple with the possibility that Old School methods are damaging if you can just assert (based on an n of 1) that there’s no reason to rethink the use of worksheets or behavior charts or spankings: They were used on me and, well, look at how successful I am!

Perhaps our initial response should be to ask what constitutes success. On what basis, exactly, does the speaker believe that he or she was unharmed and therefore that there’s nothing to worry about? If “I turned out fine” (after a dozen or more years of textbooks, quizzes, contests, and report cards) means “I make a lot of money and live in a big house,” it’s worth making that explicit so we can address whether we really want to use wealth as the primary yardstick for evaluating a life. Alternatively, if “I turned out fine” after being bribed or threatened to do what I was told means “I’ve yet to be institutionalized,” then we might ask whether the bar for success has been set a bit low.

So. Once we’re clear on the meaning of “okay” or “fine” or “successful,” we can answer the claim itself in two ways. The moderate response is to take the speaker’s word for it that he or she has indeed turned out as well as advertised. But is this true *because of* or *in spite of* having been subjected to grades and tests, or punishments and rewards, or whatever? My guess, based on the available research, is that the happy outcome occurred in spite of those practices.[1] If I’m right, and if our goal is to maximize the chance that our own children or students are able to flourish, it would seem to make sense to choose another path. After all, some people smoke three packs of cigarettes a day and live into their nineties. But that’s because they beat the odds – and we want better odds for our kids.

The radical response, on the other hand, is to call the happy ending into question. (Even radicals can be diplomatic, though. I recommend expanding the scope to inquire into how well “we” turned out rather than mercilessly dissecting the life of this particular person.) Thus, if traditional education was successful, we would expect to find a population capable of thinking critically about the claims offered by its leaders and by corporate marketers. We might also expect most people to read widely and deeply for pleasure, to get a kick out of playing with words, numbers, and ideas. Is that what we find?

As for the effects of traditional discipline, with its emphasis on positive reinforcement for compliance (and punitive “consequences” for noncompliance), well, let’s consider how well most people have turned out, psychologically speaking. Are we perhaps less sure of ourselves than we would like to be, or too full of ourselves? Are we habitually mistrustful or misused in relationships? Given to depression or defensiveness? Pop psych books and TV talk shows are too simplistic in connecting such characteristics to the way we were treated as children, but it would be equally simplistic to deny that there is any connection, to insist that we’re just fine and therefore that whatever our parents and teachers did to us must have worked. How many people, to cite just one specific example, fail to derive satisfaction and pride from their own accomplishments until someone vested with greater authority praises them? That’s precisely the distressing legacy we would expect of an individual who, as a child, was controlled with expressions of contingent approval (“Good job!”).

In short, whether you choose a moderate or radical rejoinder, a self-satisfied declaration that anything we experienced as kids must have succeeded is a lot less persuasive than it may seem at first hearing. We can’t so easily escape our obligation to carefully examine the impact of pervasive

parenting and education practices.

NOTE

1. I've reviewed that research elsewhere – in such books as *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, *Punished by Rewards*, *Unconditional Parenting*, and *Beyond Discipline*.

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