

Alfie Kohn – Talks for Parents

THE CASE AGAINST COMPETITION: How All Our Kids Lose in the Race to Win

The race to be Number One has been described as America's state religion. We have been trained not only to compete frantically, but to believe in the value of beating people -- and to help our children become winners. Research and experience, however, demonstrate that competition is actually destructive to self-esteem, poisonous to relationships, and counterproductive in terms of learning. Spelling bees, awards assemblies, competitive sports, and even informal contests at home teach children to regard other people as potential obstacles to their own success. The result is that everyone ultimately loses in the desperate race to win.

Alfie Kohn, author of *NO CONTEST*, describes the hidden costs of turning the school, the playing field, and the family into places for triumph. The problem, he argues, is not just that competition is overdone or badly handled; rather, the very win/lose structure itself has damaging consequences for how children come to see themselves, each other, and the act of learning. The alternative is not merely the absence of competition but the construction of caring communities in which people help each other to succeed.

ON BRIBING STUDENTS TO LEARN: Second Thoughts About A's, Praise, Stickers, and Contests

Do rewards motivate students? The more important question is: What *kind* of motivation do rewards create? The answer is: Precisely the wrong kind. As Alfie Kohn, author of *PUNISHED BY REWARDS*, will argue, children who see themselves as doing an assignment in order to receive a gold star, an A, or some sort of recognition are actually less likely to develop an interest in the subject matter or to challenge themselves to do their best. Indeed, research shows that students led to focus on grades are apt to think less creatively and to prefer the easiest possible task – an unfortunate but perfectly logical consequence of an environment where the point is to get an A rather than to challenge oneself. Thus, paying children for good grades – in effect, offering a reward for a reward – is almost guaranteed to be counterproductive. Kohn helps parents understand the outdated assumptions about motivation that lead smart, well-meaning people to resort to such tactics – and offers ways that they can work with teachers to eliminate artificial inducements and help children become skillful and enthusiastic learners.

BEYOND CARROTS AND STICKS

Advice for raising children typically comes in two flavors: threats (known euphemistically as “consequences”) and bribes (“positive reinforcement”). Either we make kids suffer to teach them a lesson, or we dangle goodies in front of them if they do what we say. Rewards and punishments are two sides of the same coin, and unfortunately, neither can buy anything more than temporary obedience. Manipulating children's behavior – by means of time-outs, contrived praise, privileges offered and privileges taken away – can never help them to reflect on the kind of people they want to be. Instead of encouraging kids to take responsibility for their actions, it makes them dependent on rewards and punishments. Rather than promoting generosity and compassion, it leads them to focus on the consequence to themselves of pleasing the adult.

This presentation, by one of the country's leading critics of traditional discipline, will show why carrots and sticks are not only ineffective but actually counterproductive over the long haul. To raise children who are good learners and good people requires us to abandon strategies that do things *to* kids, in favor of an approach in which we work *with* them.