

has been adopted by most other authorities in discipline. Its power lies in helping disputants reach agreements that satisfy both parties. When Samuel and Joaquin get in an angry scuffle, the teacher takes them aside and asks sincerely, "I wonder what we might do so you boys won't feel like fighting any more?" The discussion is aimed at finding a solution that prevents either boy from feeling he has been unjustly treated or has "lost" the dispute. No power is applied by the teacher; hence, egos are preserved and relations remain undamaged.

This no-lose approach contrasts with the more common procedure in which one side emerges as winner and the other as loser, sometimes with undesirable effects for both. For example, if Samuel and Joaquin scuffle and Samuel is ordered to apologize to Joaquin, the conflict may seem to have been resolved. It is not resolved properly, however, because Samuel feels wronged and humiliated and therefore declines to cooperate for a time with Joaquin or the teacher.

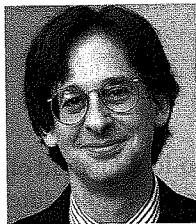
Part 3. Alfie Kohn BEYOND DISCIPLINE

Kohn on Classrooms as Communities

Kohn's main emphasis has been on developing caring, supportive classrooms in which students are able to pursue topics of interest in depth. For this to happen, students must be able to participate fully in class matters, including solving problems that affect all class members. Kohn has roundly criticized teaching and discipline that do things *to* students rather than *involving* students as partners in the process. Particularly scathing have been his attacks on discipline that involves reward and punishment. He says that not only does nothing of value come from such discipline, the process is actually counterproductive for two reasons: First, it produces side effects such as mistrust, avoidance, and working for rewards only. Second, it causes students to mistrust their own judgment and hinders their becoming caring and self-reliant.

Kohn's solution is to transform school and classrooms into **learning communities**. By *community* Kohn (2001) means

... a place in which students feel cared about and are encouraged to care about each other. They experience a sense of being valued and respected; the children matter to one another



About Alfie Kohn

Alfie Kohn, a former teacher, is now a full-time writer and lecturer. He has several influential books to his credit, including *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (1993) and *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community* (2001). He has appeared on well over 200 radio and television programs, including *Oprah* and the *Today* show, and speaks at major conferences across the nation. His website is www.alfiekohn.org.

and to the teacher. They have come to think in the plural: they feel connected to each other; they are part of an "us." And, as a result of all this, they feel safe in their classes, not only physically but emotionally. (pp. 101–102)

Kohn suggests some strategies to help teachers and schools move toward a greater sense of community. Among them are the following:

- *Building relationships between teachers and students.* Students behave more respectfully when important adults in their lives behave respectfully toward *them*. They are more likely to care about others if they know *they* are cared about. If their emotional needs are met, they show a tendency to help meet other people's needs rather than remaining preoccupied with themselves.
- *Enhancing connections among students.* Connections among students are established and enhanced through activities that involve interdependence. Familiar activities for enhancing connections include cooperative learning, getting-to-know-you activities, such as interviewing fellow students and introducing them to the class, and finding a partner to check opinions with on whatever is being discussed at the moment. Kohn also suggests using activities that promote **perspective taking**, in which students try to see situations from another person's point of view.
- *Classroom meetings.* Kohn says the overall best activity for involving the entire group is a class meeting (Chapter 6 explains how class meetings are structured and used). Kohn suggests holding class meetings at the beginning of the year to discuss questions such as, "What makes school awful sometimes? Try to remember an experience during a previous year when you hated school, when you felt bad about yourself, or about everyone else, and you couldn't wait for it to be over. What exactly was going on when you were feeling that way? How was the class set up?" Kohn says not enough teachers encourage this practice, particularly in elementary schools where an aggressively sunny outlook prevails.
- *Undertaking classwide and schoolwide activities.* To develop a sense of community, students need many opportunities for the whole class to collaborate on group endeavors. This might involve producing a class mural, producing a class newsletter or magazine, staging a performance, or doing some community service activity as a class.
- *Using academic instruction.* The quest for community is not separate from academic learning. Class meetings can be devoted to talking about how the next unit in history might be approached, or what the students thought was best and worst about the math test. Academic study pursued in cooperative groups enables students to make connections while learning from each other. Units of study in language arts and literature can be organized to promote reflection on helpfulness, fairness, and compassion.

The Trouble with Discipline for Compliance

Kohn is scornful about most approaches to discipline, but has nevertheless made significant contributions to discourse on the topic. As we have seen, he would have teachers

convert their classrooms into communities where students support each other and the teacher. He believes discipline becomes irrelevant if school is organized in accordance with **constructivist theory**, which holds that students cannot receive knowledge directly from teachers but must construct it from experience. Such instruction involves students so deeply in topics they consider important that there is little need for discipline of any sort.

Kohn is deeply troubled by the notion that schooling is usually structured to force, or at least entice, **compliant behavior** from students. Kohn often begins workshops by asking teachers, "What are your long-term goals for the students you work with? What would you like them to be—to be like—long after they've left you?" (2001, p. 60). Teachers say they want their students to be caring, happy, responsible, curious, and creative, a conclusion that, according to Kohn (2001)

... is unsettling because it exposes a yawning chasm between what we want and what we are doing, between how we would like students to turn out and how our classrooms and schools actually work. We want children to continue reading and thinking after school has ended, yet we focus their attention on grades, which have been shown to reduce interest in learning. We want them to be critical thinkers, yet we feed them predigested facts and discrete skills—partly because of pressure from various constituencies to pump up standardized test scores. We act as though our goal is short-term retention of right answers rather than genuine understanding. (p. 61)

Kohn points out that even when students are rewarded into compliance, they usually feel no commitment to what they are doing, no genuine understanding of the act or why they are doing it, and no sense that they are becoming people who *want* to act this way in the future. In addition, classroom rules are self-defeating because they cause students to look for ways of subverting the rules and cast teachers as police who feel obliged to take action when students break the rules. Kohn (2001) concludes that the entire process of behavior management works against what we hope to achieve:

The more we "manage" students' behavior and try to make them do what we say, the more difficult it is for them to become morally sophisticated people who think for themselves and care about others. (p. 62)

Kohn says that if compliance is *not* what teachers are looking for in the long run, then we are faced with a basic conflict between our ultimate goals for learners and the methods we are using to achieve those goals. One or the other, Kohn asserts, has to give.

The Classroom Management We Need

If we give up reward and punishment as means of ensuring desired behavior, then what are we left with? Most people ask, "Aren't there times when we simply need students to do what we tell them?" Kohn suggests that teachers think carefully about how often "students need to do what the teacher tells them." He notes that the number of such occasions varies widely from one teacher to another, which suggests that the need for student

compliance is seated in the teacher's personality. He says teachers ought to examine their preferences and bring them to a conscious level. If one teacher needs more student compliance than another, however, is that teacher entitled to use a coercive discipline program to meet his or her particular needs?

When reflecting on this point, many teachers are inclined to ask whether the abandonment of compliance suggests that anything goes, and that students don't have to comply with expectations of participation and learning. Can they be allowed, for example, to ignore assignments, shout obscenities, and create havoc?

Kohn does not answer this question directly, contending that it misses the point. He says the question isn't whether it's all right for students to act in those ways, but rather, if they are likely to do so if their teacher does not demand control and compliance, but instead emphasizes a curriculum that appeals to students. Teachers do not have to choose between chaos on the one hand and being a strong boss on the other. There is a third, better option, which is to work with students in creating a democratic community where students comply with teacher expectations when it is truly necessary for them to do so, as when personal abuse, safety, or legal matters are concerned.

Most teachers feel it is necessary to place structure and limits on student behavior if the class is to function efficiently. Kohn presents criteria for assessing the defensibility of structure and limits.

- *Purpose.* A restriction is legitimate to the extent its objective is to protect students from harm, as opposed to imposing order for its own sake.
- *Restrictiveness.* The less restrictive a structure or limit, the better. It is more difficult to justify a demand for silence than for quiet voices.
- *Flexibility.* Although some structure is helpful, one must always be ready to modify the structure in accordance with student needs.
- *Developmental appropriateness.* Kohn uses the example that although we need to make sure that young children are dressed for winter weather, it is better to let older students decide on such matters for themselves.
- *Presentation style.* The way in which restrictions are presented makes a big difference in how students accept them. If they are suggested respectfully, students are more accepting than if the restrictions sound like orders.
- *Student involvement.* Most importantly, it is student input that makes structure acceptable. When concerns arise, the teacher can ask students, "What do you think we can do to solve this problem?"

The Trouble with Today's Teaching

Kohn thinks traditional instruction is falling well short of the mark it could be reaching. By *traditional instruction*, he means the type in which the teacher selects the curriculum; does the planning; delivers the lessons through lecture, demonstration, guided discussion, reading assignments, worksheets and homework; and tests students to evaluate their progress. That kind of instruction emphasizes helping students reach

certain specific objectives—information and skills that students can demonstrate behaviorally. But it gives little attention to exploring ideas, seeking new solutions, looking for meaning or connections, or attempting to gain deeper understanding of the phenomena involved. Students remain relatively passive during traditional instruction. They listen, read assignments, answer questions when called on, and complete worksheets. There is little give and take. Instruction and learning are deemed successful to the extent that students show on tests they have reached most of the stated objectives.

Kohn (1999, p. 28) says such instruction counterproductively puts emphasis on *how well* students are doing rather than *on what* they are doing. Instruction concerned with *how well* tends to focus on outcomes that are shallow, relatively insignificant, and of little interest or relevance to learners. Students come to think of correct answers and good grades as the major goals of learning. They rarely experience the satisfaction of exploring in depth a topic of interest and exchanging their views and insights with others. Kohn says an impressive and growing body of research shows that the traditional approach undermines student interest in learning, makes failure seem overwhelming, does not encourage students to challenge themselves, reduces the quality of learning (that is, it has little depth or relevance), and causes students to think of how smart they are instead of how hard they are trying.

He goes on to say that students taught in this way develop a poor attitude toward learning. They think of learning as getting the work done rather than something they could be excited about exploring. Once they have done the “stuff,” they quickly forget much of it as they move on to learn more new stuff. They strive to get the right answer, and when they do not, or if they don’t make top scores on the test, they experience a sense of failure that is out of place in genuine learning, in which making mistakes is the rule rather than the exception. They never have reason to challenge themselves intellectually. The overall result is that although students seem to be learning well, they are actually doing poorly because they are not thinking widely and exploring ideas thoughtfully.

How Instruction Should Be Done

Kohn argues for instruction that is notably different from traditional teaching. He says, first, that students should be taken seriously, meaning that teachers must honor them as individuals and seek to determine what they need and enjoy. Enlightened teachers recognize that students must construct knowledge and skills out of the experiences provided in school. These teachers look for students’ interests, continually try to imagine how things look from the child’s point of view, and try to figure out what lies behind the child’s questions and mistakes. Such teachers know that knowledge cannot be absorbed from the teacher, so they lead students to explore topics, grapple with them, and make sense of them. They provide challenges and emphasize that making mistakes is an important part of learning.

How do teachers help students move into deeper levels of thinking? Kohn says the best way is by asking them for examples or asking the question, “How do we know that?” This helps students maintain a critical mind, a healthy skepticism, a need for evidence, a

willingness to hear different points of view, and a desire to see how things are connected. It encourages them to appraise the importance of what they are learning and to explore how it can be useful in their lives.

Kohn argues for a curriculum that allows students to be purposefully active most of the time, rather than passive. He says the way to bring that about is to “. . . start *not* with facts to be learned or disciplines to be mastered, but with questions to be answered” (1999, p. 145). He says these questions should not lead students to correct answers, but make students pause, wonder, and reflect. Kohn gives examples of what he means in questions such as, “How could you improve the human hand?” and “Why were America’s founding fathers so afraid of democracy?” (1999, p. 146).

Kohn urges educators to remember three key facts about teaching: (1) Students learn most avidly and have their best ideas when they get to choose which questions they want to explore; (2) all of us tend to be happiest and most effective when we have some say about what we are doing; and (3) when students have no choice and control over learning, their achievement drops. Given these facts and the difference they make in learning, Kohn finds it astonishing that present-day instruction ignores them.

It is unnerving to most teachers, at least at first, to try to organize instruction in accordance with Kohn’s suggestions. Kohn, however, says it is breathtaking to be involved in learning in which students have a say in the curriculum and can decide what they will do, when, where, with whom, and toward what end. Kohn points out that this approach must be adjusted to the maturity levels of students, but he maintains it is a rule of thumb that “the more students’ questions and decisions drive the lesson, the more likely [it is] that real learning will occur” (1999, p. 151). The best teachers, he insists, are those who ask themselves, “Is this a decision I must make on my own, or can I involve students in it?”



KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS EMPHASIZED IN THIS CHAPTER

Glasser’s Choice Theory

student needs
basic needs
basic student needs
Choice Theory
quality curriculum
quality learning
quality education
quality teaching
SIR
boss teachers
lead teachers
quality schoolwork
seven deadly habits
connecting habits

Gordon’s Student Self-Control

self-control
noncontrolling methods
I-messages
you-messages
who owns the problem
positive influence
coping mechanisms
preventive I-messages
collaborative rule setting
participatory classroom
management
misbehavior
passive listening
door openers

active listening
communication roadblocks
no-lose method of conflict
resolution

Kohn’s Beyond Discipline

learning communities
perspective taking
constructivist theory
compliant behavior