

Part 2. Thomas Gordon DISCIPLINE THROUGH INNER SELF-CONTROL

Gordon on Influence Techniques and Helping Skills

Gordon believed classroom discipline is best accomplished by helping students acquire an inner sense of **self-control**. He insisted that teachers can no longer rely on the traditional intervention techniques of power-based authority, reward and punishment, and win-lose conflict resolution. About reward and punishment, Gordon (1989) wrote:

Using rewards to try to control children's behavior is so common that its effectiveness is rarely questioned. . . . the fact that rewards are used so often and unsuccessfully by so many teachers and parents proves they don't work very well. . . . (pp. 37-38)

Gordon urged teachers to replace reward and punishment with **noncontrolling methods**, such as modifying the environment to reduce student misbehavior; sending I-messages that do not set off coping mechanisms in response to power; practicing the no-lose method of conflict resolution; acknowledging feelings and perceptions; actively listening to students; and avoiding roadblocks to communication, such as giving orders, warning, preaching, advising, lecturing, criticizing, name-calling, analyzing, praising, reassuring, questioning, and withdrawing.

The development of student self-control is possible in the classroom, but only if teachers give up their "controlling" power over students. As Gordon (1989) put it:

You acquire more influence with young people when you give up using your power to control them . . . [and] the more you use power to control people, the less real influence you'll have over their lives. (p. 7)



About Thomas Gordon

Clinical psychologist Thomas Gordon (1918-2002) was founder and, until his death, head of Gordon Training International, one of the largest human relations training organizations in the world. He was a pioneer in the teaching of human relations skills and conflict resolution to parents, teachers, youth, and managers of organizations. Well over two million people have taken advantage of his training programs worldwide. Gordon authored a number of books, including *Parent Effectiveness Training* (1970), *Teacher Effectiveness Training* (1974), *Leader Effectiveness Training* (1977), and *Discipline That Works: Promoting Self-Discipline in Children* (1989). In 1999 Gordon received the American Psychological Foundation's Gold Medal Award for Enduring Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest. Gordon Training International can be contacted at www.gordontraining.com.

However, permissiveness in dealing with students is just as bad as authoritarianism. The desired middle ground is reached when teachers help students make positive decisions, become more self-reliant, and take control of their own behavior.

I-Messages and You-Messages

Gordon strongly believed that teacher effectiveness is greatly enhanced when teachers use I-messages rather than you-messages for expressing their needs and feelings to students. **I-messages** state how teachers personally think or feel about situations and behavior. The following is an example of an I-message: "I am having trouble concentrating because there is so much noise in the room."

You-messages, on the other hand, are statements of blame leveled at students' behavior. They activate students' coping mechanisms (flee, fight, submit), with counterproductive results. This is an example of a you-message: "You girls are making too much noise. You need to quiet down."

Gordon's Plan for Discipline

Gordon's plan for classroom discipline involves six major elements: (1) influence rather than control, (2) preventive skills, (3) determining **who owns the problem**, (4) confrontive skills, (5) helping skills, and (6) no-lose conflict resolution. These elements, their functions, and their implementation are explained in the following paragraphs.

Influence Rather than Control

The more you try to control students, the less you are able to exert **positive influence** on them. Control activates students' **coping mechanisms**, which are: *fighting* (combating the person with whom they have the conflict), *taking flight* (trying to escape the situation), and *submitting* (giving in to the other person). Coping mechanisms cut off communication and willingness to cooperate. Teachers should use noncontrolling methods to influence student behavior. Presently we will see how this is done.

Preventive Skills

Teachers can do three things to prevent most discipline problems: Use preventive I-messages, set rules collaboratively with students, and use participative management. **Preventive I-messages** influence students' future actions. Unenlightened teachers might say, "You didn't show the level of responsibility I hoped for yesterday. You are going to have to do better than that today." This message is ineffective because it carries blame. A more effective message would be: "We are now ready to work in our new groups. I need to feel sure that I have helped everyone remember to do their part responsibly." **Collaborative rule setting** means students and teachers collaborate in deciding how they will conduct themselves in the classroom and in formulating a set of rules for class behavior. **Participatory classroom management** refers to teachers

sharing power with students in making decisions about class matters such as rules, room arrangement, seating, preferred activities, and the like. This style of management motivates students, gives them greater confidence and self-esteem, and encourages them to take risks and behave responsibly.

Discipline and Who Owns the Problem

Gordon (1976) explained that **misbehavior** is behavior that "produces *undesirable consequences for the adult*" (p. 107, italics added). In the classroom, it is the teacher who usually experiences and is made uncomfortable by the "badness" in student behavior. Because the effect is experienced mainly by the teacher, the teacher is said to own the problem. At other times, students may own the problem. For example, when Kyla feels the other girls in the class have slighted her, she becomes upset and morose, but when only Kyla is affected, she owns the problem, not the teacher or other students. This differentiation is important in Gordon's plan because discipline techniques (confrontive skills and helping skills) are applied in accordance with who owns the problem.

Confrontive Skills

When the *teacher owns the problem* (is upset by student behavior), he or she employs confrontive discipline skills, from among the following:

1. *Modifying the physical environment (rather than the student)*. Teachers can often eliminate or minimize behavior problems by enriching the environment or minimizing its distractions. They might play quiet background music during certain activities, enrich the room with learning centers and colorful posters, and display student murals about the topic being studied. If these effects are too distracting for some students, teachers can provide an area without displays or have study carrels for students who sometimes need a more subdued atmosphere.

2. *Sending I-messages regularly*. When teachers are upset, they should express their feelings through I-messages instead of through scolding. Complete I-messages communicate three things that do not activate students' coping mechanisms: (1) the behavior that is presenting a problem for the teacher, (2) what the teacher is feeling about the behavior, and (3) why the behavior is causing a problem. For example, Mrs. Watson might say, "When class rules are broken, as they are now, I feel upset because that keeps us from getting our work done, and because it shows a lack of consideration for others." Or, "When I have to wait too long for quiet and readiness, I have to rush through the directions, and then I have to spend more time repeating myself because the directions are not clear. Do you have any suggestions that might help me with this problem?" As we have seen, I-messages contrast with you-messages that carry heavy judgments and put-downs, evident in statement such as, "You've been very careless with this work" or "You shouldn't tattle like that" or "Can't you follow a simple direction?"

3. *Shifting gears*. Sometimes teachers' I-messages provoke defensive responses from students. When this happens, it is important that the teacher listen sensitively to the

resistance and change from a sending/assertive posture to a posture of listening/understanding, a change that causes students to react more positively. Gordon calls this change shifting gears. When Mr. Johnson sends a confrontive I-message to Marcos about his irregular attendance, such as "I am very bothered, Marcos, when any of my students miss class," Marcos heatedly responds, "School is not the only thing. I have responsibilities at home. I can't help missing class sometimes." Shifting gears, Mr. Johnson replies, "It sounds like you have some difficult things to deal with outside of school. Is there anything I can do to help?"

Helping Skills

When *the student owns the problem*, teachers are advised to use two main helping skills: listening and avoiding communication roadblocks. Listening skills enable teachers to acknowledge students' concerns without trying to solve them. Gordon described four kinds of listening skills—*passive listening*, *acknowledgment responses*, *door openers*, and *active listening*. **Passive listening** consists of little more than attentive silence, but is often enough to encourage students to talk about what is bothering them. The teacher shows attention through posture, proximity, eye contact, and alertness. Mr. Aragon demonstrates this skill when he sits down beside Julian as the boy begins to speak of difficulties at home. *Acknowledgment responses* can be verbal ("uh-huh," "I see") or nonverbal (nods, smiles and frowns, and other body movements). They demonstrate the teacher's interest and attention. **Door openers** invite students to discuss their problems. When the student needs encouragement, the teacher may say, "Would you like to talk about it?" or "It sounds like you have something to say about that." These comments are nonjudgmental and open ended, and because they are nonthreatening, they invite the student to talk. Sensing that Eduardo is distressed about the math assignment, Mr. Sutton says, "I think there might be something bothering you about this assignment, Eduardo. Would you like to talk about it?" **Active listening** is a process of mirroring back what students are saying. It confirms that the teacher is attentive and understands the student's message. No judgment or evaluation is made. The teacher might say, "You've been late to class this week because you've been working the closing shift at the restaurant, and that makes you so tired you sleep through your alarm."

Avoiding communication roadblocks is a major requirement in communicating effectively with students. Gordon went to some lengths to help teachers recognize and avoid the following **communication roadblocks**: giving orders, warning, preaching, advising, lecturing, criticizing, name calling, analyzing, praising, reassuring, questioning, and withdrawing. At Del's middle school, for example, all students are required to take physical education. Del, who is very self-conscious about his weight, detests physical education and has been offering various excuses for not participating.

When *giving orders*, a teacher says to Del, "You might as well stop complaining about things you can't control. Go ahead and get ready now." A more effective response might be, "Do you see any way I might be able to make this easier for you?"

When *warning*, the teacher threatens Del, "That's enough. Change into your PE clothes now, or I'll have you running laps." A more effective response might be, "I can see this matter is bothering you a great deal. Would you like to discuss it after school?"

When *preaching*, the teacher reminds Del of "shoulds" and "oughts": "You should try to get yourself in shape." "You ought to know that exercise is important." A more effective response might be "Some people like to exercise, and others don't, but everyone needs it. How do you think we might help you get the exercise you need?"

When *advising*, the teacher offers Del suggestions or gives solutions: "If you feel you can't keep up with the others, try setting your own personal goal and work to meet it." A more effective response might be "Sometimes even good athletes don't like PE classes. Have you heard any of them discuss their feelings?"

When *lecturing*, the teacher presents logical facts to counter Del's resistance: "I can assure you that if you develop a habit for exercise now, you will be pleased and will carry it with you for the rest of your life." A more effective response might be "Sometimes it is certainly tempting to stop exercising and just sit out the class. If you do, what effect do you think it might have on your health?"

When *criticizing*, the teacher points out Del's faults and inadequacies: "I can't believe you just said that. That's nothing but excuse making." A more effective response might be "I think I'm beginning to understand what you are saying. Could you tell me a bit more about that?"

When *name calling*, the teacher labels or makes fun of Del: "I might expect third graders to argue about dressing out for PE, but aren't you a bit large for third grade?" A more effective response might be "Frankly, I haven't fully understood why you are reluctant. Can you help me understand a bit better?"

When *analyzing*, the teacher diagnoses or interprets Del's behavior: "What you are really saying is that you are afraid others will laugh about your weight." A more effective response might be "Go ahead with that thought. Can you explain it further?"

When *praising*, the teacher uses positive statements and praise to encourage Del: "You have above-average coordination. You'll handle yourself well out there." A more effective response might be "I understand your concern. What might I do to make physical education more pleasant for you?"

When *reassuring*, the teacher tries to make Del feel better by offering sympathy and support: "I know how you feel. Remember, there are a lot of boys just like you. You will forget your concerns after a while." A more effective response might be "Have you known other students with concerns like yours? How did they deal with them?"

When *questioning*, the teacher probes and questions Del for more facts: "What exactly are you afraid of? What do you think is going to happen?" A more effective response might be, "We often anticipate the worst, don't we? Have you had other experiences like this that troubled you?"

When *withdrawing*, the teacher changes the subject in order to avoid Del's concerns: "Whose team do you want to be on?" A more effective response might be "Do you think this matter might be bothering others, too? Do you think I should talk to the class about it, or should we keep it between us?"

No-Lose Conflict Resolution

One of Gordon's greatest contributions to discipline is his concept of the **no-lose method of conflict resolution**, which is now often called win-win conflict resolution. This procedure

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.