



# REWARDS NOT WORKING?

Education expert Alfie Kohn explains why incentives hurt kids and how teachers can break free of them. **By Jeanna Bryner**

**G**old stars, extra recess-time. Most of us would say that we use incentives to help kids stay on track in the classroom—and we give warnings and time-outs when they're not. There's no question it's hard keeping a class of 25 energetic eight-year-olds engaged and learning. But is this approach the only option? There's always the child who refuses to behave despite repeated loss of privileges, or the one who chooses a long book to read, saying, "I want to win more stickers."

Do rewards and punishments encourage learning? Author of *Beyond Discipline*, Alfie Kohn, says no. He spoke to *Instructor* about how teachers can give up "behavior management" and create a community of compassionate and invested learners in the process.

*Can you share your thoughts on classroom management as a teaching goal?*

It really is possible to have a successful classroom



## expert advice

without focusing on discipline or classroom management. Using rigid techniques to make kids behave properly rarely succeeds in creating an environment that fosters learning. I've seen so many wonderful classrooms that employ what I ultimately came to call the three Cs: content, choices, and community.

### *How do no-rewards classrooms work?*

First, what the teachers are asking of kids is reasonable and respectful. Second, the children are brought into the decision-making on things large and small. And most of all, these classrooms feel like caring places where everyone belongs.

We have to give up control and let children take charge of their learning. When kids are encouraged to work for grades, they become less interested in the learning itself—research clearly shows this. The more they're focused on getting an A or a sticker, the more they come to see the learning itself as a tedious prerequisite to that goody.

Getting rid of punishment and rewards is almost a requirement for helping kids to love reading, to get a kick out of solving problems, and to care about one another, even when there's no authority figure in the room.

### *Talk about the importance of giving children unconditional acceptance.*

Children need to feel loved and valued even when they aren't succeeding or behaving. When kids don't feel trusted and accepted, behavior problems become worse. The use of punishment, including time-out, sends a message to kids that they have to jump through our hoops for us to accept them.

In my book *Unconditional Parenting*, I mention Marilyn Watson, an educational psychologist who helps teachers transform their classrooms into caring communities. She argues that a teacher can make it clear that certain actions are wrong while still providing “a very deep kind of reassurance—the reassurance that she still cares about them and is not going to punish or desert them, even if they do something very bad.” Watson points out

that it's easier to maintain this stance, even with kids who are frequently insulting or aggressive, by keeping in mind why they're acting that way.

### *How should a teacher approach a difficult student?*

One teacher dealt with a particularly challenging student by telling him, “You know  
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## there are alternatives!

*Want to reduce your use of rewards and punishments? Here are some teacher tips.*

### **COMPETITION VS. COLLABORATION**

**Instead of...** giving a quiz on a story or chapter the class is reading, and handing out “no homework passes” for the top kids, **try...** collaborative small-group presentations. Invite each group to create a poster, a play, or a newscast that demonstrates what they have learned. Collaboration is more productive than competition.

### **DOING “TO” KIDS VS. DOING “WITH” KIDS**

**Instead of...** stapling your list of classroom rules on the bulletin board, and giving out time-outs and notes home for infractions, **try...** inviting students to come up with rules they think should be applied to the classroom. Write up a short set of reasonable classroom rules together.

### **TELLING VS. EXPLAINING**

**Instead of...** immediately sending a child who pushes another child to the office, **try...** sitting down with the child and asking why he pushed the other child. Explain why it isn't okay to hit even when you're angry or frustrated, then ask him to explain what you just said in his own words.

what? I really, really like you. You can keep doing all this stuff and it's not going to change my mind. It seems to me that you are trying to get me to dislike you, but it's not going to work. I'm not ever going to do that." She told me that it was soon after this conversation that his bad behavior started to decrease.

## *And involving kids in class decision-making helps?*

All people—including kids—ought to have some control over their own lives. It's important to experience a sense of autonomy, a feeling that we are the initiators of much of what we do. If expectations are imposed on kids without their consent or participation, then it's less likely they will develop any desire to fulfill those expectations. And when kids stop wanting to fulfill your expectations, that's when teachers feel compelled to trot out the bribes and threats. The problem isn't with kids. It's with the idea of doing things *to* them, rather than working *with* them to figure out together how we want our classroom to be.

Ask kids on a regular basis to reflect about their own experiences and to think about how to make the classroom a happier place.

## *So help kids express their feelings?*

Yes! For instance, teachers can invite kids to talk about why school sometimes stinks. Many teachers are afraid of asking a question like that. They only want to hear good news, which requires kids to hide their feelings—from friendship fears to learning difficulties. But if kids are given the freedom to talk about what they didn't like in years past, then the follow-up question can be: "What do you think we can do this year so all of that bad stuff doesn't happen?" That leads them to think about creating a different kind of classroom—a place that's alive and inviting, where kids are asking questions and helping one another to understand ideas from the inside out. That is true motivation.

## *How else can kids be involved?*

Consider bringing students in on deciding how the furniture will be arranged,

or how the walls will be decorated, or what you're going to read next, or what field trip to take. These are ways of showing kids respect, which has the additional advantage of helping them become more engaged.

## *What about classroom competition?*

The only thing worse than a reward is an award. A competition creates a situation where the number of rewards has been artificially limited so that "If I get one, you won't." Kids are taught that other people are obstacles to their success. It's virtually impossible to cultivate a caring community in the classroom if there are contests that set kids against each other.

## *What can teachers do instead?*

A better alternative is to frame things in terms of cooperation. The best teachers arrange their classroom so that children frequently learn from one another.

Studies have shown that children think more deeply when they put their heads together and jointly devise problem-solving strategies. But they also learn something that goes beyond academics: They learn to care about other people. Cooperation predisposes people to a benevolent view of others. It encourages trust, sensitivity, open communication, and ultimately helpfulness.

## *This is a grand goal for education.*

To do what I'm describing asks a lot more of us than just using rewards and consequences to get kids to do whatever we tell them. It's hard to give up some of our control, but it's terribly important if our long-term goal is for kids to be decent people who love learning. Kids learn to make decisions by making decisions, not by following directions. But no one can make the shift all at once. The idea is to keep moving forward to what I'm describing. We're all on a journey here. □



ALFIE KOHN IS THE AUTHOR OF *UNCONDITIONAL PARENTING* AND *BEYOND DISCIPLINE* AND MANY OTHER BOOKS. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT ALFIE KOHN AND TO READ MORE ARTICLES, GO ONLINE TO [WWW.ALFIEKOH.N.ORG](http://WWW.ALFIEKOH.N.ORG). TO SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THIS INTERVIEW, E-MAIL THE EDITORS AT [INSTRUCTOR@SCHOLASTIC.COM](mailto:INSTRUCTOR@SCHOLASTIC.COM).