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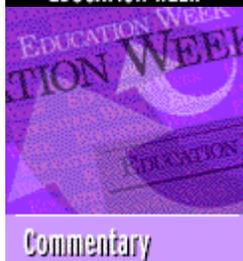
Beyond Discipline

By Alfie Kohn

Commentary

A few years ago, I received a letter from a woman who was working on a book about a progressive educator. She said she was considering devoting a chapter of her manuscript to a discussion of a program called Assertive Discipline, which was at best only indirectly related to her subject. But she knew my stomach reacted the same way hers did to the sight of marbles in a jar, or a hierarchical list of punishments on a classroom wall, and she wanted to know whether I thought she should bother with this digression.

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It didn't seem a particularly complicated question, and yet the more I thought about it, the more I found my response shifting. At first, I was simply going to say "Hell, yes! Help the hundreds of thousands of teachers who have been exposed to this program to reflect on how pernicious it really is." Assertive Discipline, after all, is essentially a collection of bribes and threats whose purpose is to enforce rules that the teacher alone devises and imposes. The point is to get the trains to run on time in the classroom, never mind whom they run over. Everything, including the feelings of students, must be sacrificed to the imperative of obedience:

"Whenever possible, simply ignore the covert hostility of a student. By ignoring the behavior, you will diffuse [sic] the situation. Remember, what you really want is for the student to comply with your request. Whether or not the student does it in an angry manner is not the issue." (*Lee Canter's Assertive Discipline*, 1992, page 180.)

As I prepared to write this to her, however, and as I recalled Lee Canter's disclaimer in the *Teachers College Record* several years ago that "there is nothing new about Assertive Discipline," that it is "simply a systematization" of common behavior-management strategies, I realized that it was too easy to single out one person as the Darth Vader of American education. At least Mr. Canter is candid about the authoritarian (and behaviorist) thrust of his methods. No one could possibly confuse his program for an attempt to engage students in ethical reflection, or to build caring relationships with them; teachers are urged simply to tell students "exactly what behavior is acceptable. ... No questions. No room for confusion."

But the same cannot be said of many other programs on the market that wrap themselves in words like "cooperative" and "dignity" and even

"love." While rejecting the most blatant forms of coercion, they, too, are ultimately about getting students to comply, and they, too, rely on carrots and sticks. These programs unhesitatingly recommend that we dangle rewards in front of students when they act the way we want: praise and privileges, stickers and stars, and other examples of what has been called "control through seduction."

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The groovier programs, following the lead of Rudolf Dreikurs, prefer not to talk about punishing students. Instead, punishment is repackaged as "logical consequences." The student is still forced to do something undesirable (or prevented from doing something desirable), but the tone of the interaction is supposed to be more reasonable and friendly, and the consequence itself must have some conceptual connection to the child's act: The punishment fits the crime. Thus:

- If a 2nd grade student is guilty of "talking out of turn, squirming, and so on," he might be ordered not only to leave the room but to spend time back in a kindergarten class. This is a "logical consequence," and therefore appropriate, as long as the teacher strikes the right tone by saying that she wonders whether the boy is "ready to continue in 2nd grade" and suggesting that therefore "it might be better for [him] to try and go back to kindergarten for a while." (R. Dreikurs and L. Grey, *Logical Consequences: A New Approach to Discipline* [New York: Plume, 1968/1993], pages 143-44.)

- If a student makes a spitball, the teacher should force him to make 500 more spitballs so that his throat becomes "increasingly parched." If a student tips her chair back, "she can be asked to stand for the rest of the period." (L. Albert, *A Teacher's Guide to Cooperative Discipline* [Circle Pines, Minn.: American Guidance Service, 1989], pages 34, 78.)

- "Each student who violates a rule [must] write his own name on the blackboard"--or, in another approach, must have his name written there by an elected class "sheriff" who is "responsible for keeping the behavioral records." (R.L. Curwin and A.N. Mendler, *Discipline with Dignity* [Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 1988], page 76.)

Is it more reasonable to make a child stand for the rest of the period than, say, for the rest of the week? Unquestionably. It is also more reasonable to paddle a child than to shoot him, but this does not offer much of an argument for paddling. Is there a connection between tipping back a chair and not being able to sit in it? Yes, but does it really matter to the child? The issue is not the specific features of the punitive response so much as the punishment itself: "You didn't do

what I wanted, so now I'm going to make something unpleasant happen to you." We would not expect the child to be less resentful (or less likely to retaliate) just because the teacher used what amounts to Punishment Lite.

In trying to answer the woman who was considering a chapter about Lee Canter, I came to conclude that the problem is not just with his program but with the use of rewards and punishments per se, regardless of what they are called or how they are embel-lished. Even when children are "successfully" reinforced or consequenced into compliance, they will likely feel no commitment to what they are doing, no deep understanding of the act and its rationale, no sense of themselves as the kind of people who would want to act this way in the future. They have been led to concentrate on the consequences of their actions to themselves, and someone with this frame of reference bears little resemblance to the kind of person we dream of seeing each of our students become.

Gradually, though, I began to wonder whether even this was the last word. Rewards and punishments are instruments for controlling people, and the real problem, I began to suspect, was the belief that the teacher should be in control of the classroom. If all these discipline programs disappeared tomorrow, a new one would pop up like the next Kleenex in the box if teachers were determined (or pressured) to remain in control and needed methods for making sure that happened.

This recognition offered a fresh way of looking at my own experiences as a classroom teacher, and at what I had seen in countless classrooms over the last few years. Students are far less likely to act aggressively, intrusively, or obnoxiously in places where the teacher is not concerned with being in charge--and, indeed, is not particularly interested in classroom-management techniques. I realized that the discipline problems I had experienced with some of my own classes were not a function of children who were insufficiently controlled but of a curriculum that was insufficiently engaging. (The students weren't trying to make my life miserable; they were trying to make the time pass faster.) It occurred to me that books on discipline almost never raise the possibility that when a student doesn't do what he is told, the problem may be with what he has been told to do--or to learn.

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Of course, none of this would make sense to someone who believed the only alternative to control was chaos. Even if such a teacher found continuing problems in a strictly controlled classroom--especially when she was absent--that might lead her to blame the students and to answer with more discipline, tougher consequences, tighter regulation. And the

worse things got, the more "unrealistic" it would seem to her to give up control, the less likely that she would consider bringing the students in on the process of thinking about the kind of classroom that *they* would like to have, and how to make that happen.

No wonder the advice of Rudolf Dreikurs and his followers often seems interchangeable with that of Lee Canter. For example, if a student argues with anything we say, Mr. Dreikurs advises us to do the following: "First, you simply reply, 'You may have a point.' Second, you do whatever *you* think is right." (R. Dreikurs and P. Cassel, *Discipline Without Tears* [New York: Plume, 1972/1991], page 69.) No wonder Mr. Canter recommends Mr. Dreikurs' work and quotes from it. Mr. Dreikurs may have talked about democracy, but what he apparently meant was the use of meetings and other "modern" techniques to get students to do what they are told: "It is autocratic to force, but democratic to induce compliance," he and his colleagues wrote. (R. Dreikurs et al., *Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom,* 2d ed. [New York: HarperCollins, 1982], page 67.)

Classroom-management programs invariably urge teachers to begin the year by taking control and laying out their expectations for student behavior--along with what will be done to those who disobey. But no child ever became more likely to think for herself, or to care about others, in such an environment. To "manage" students' behavior, to make them do what we say, doesn't promote community or compassion, responsibility or reflection. The only way to reach those goals is to give up some control, tofacilitate the tricky, noisy, maddening, unpredictable process whereby students work together to decide what respect means or how to be fair.

Of course, you can get a child to recite "We should keep our hands and feet to ourselves" by repeating this enough times or posting it on the wall, just as you can get him to recite "To divide by a fraction, turn it upside down and multiply." You can get a child to stop slugging someone else (at least, in your presence) by threatening to punish him if he continues, just as you can get him to pick out the topic sentence of a paragraph. But the first examples in each pair don't suggest someone who is developing socially or morally, any more than the latter examples suggest someone who is developing intellectually.

To help students become ethical people, as opposed to people who merely do what they are told, we cannot merely tell them what to do. We have to help them figure out--for themselves and with each other-- how one ought to act. That's why dropping the tools of traditional discipline, like rewards and consequences, is only the beginning. It's even more crucial that we overcome a preoccupation with getting compliance and instead involve students in devising and justifying ethical principles.

And that's why I suggested to my correspondent that a critique of Assertive Discipline made a lot of sense--as long as it was more than a

critique of Assertive Discipline.

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On the Web

See "Punished by Rewards? A Conversation with Alfie Kohn," from *Educational Leadership,* published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Read a review of Alfie Kohn's book Punished by Rewards on the Alliance for Parental Involvement in Education's Web site.

Order "Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community," by Alfie Kohn from the ASCD.

"Student Discipline Policies" examines issues and challenges related to school discipline policies. "School Discipline" looks at the goals of school discipline and provides an analysis of disciplinary and behavioral problems. Both digests are made available by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.

See a table that summarizes several models of discipline including "Discipline with Dignity," "Cooperative Discipline," and "Stress-Free Discipline." Part of "The Metamorphosis of Classroom Management," by Fran Mayeski from the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) Web site.

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