

Noncompliant-the podcast
Transcript

“Punishments and rewards can get one thing, under certain conditions – temporary compliance” Interview with Alfie Kohn

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Transcribed by Julie-Ann Lee

(Theme song - soft piano music)

Anne: Today’s guest is an expert on the problem of compliance training and rewards based systems in the schools, the work world and in the family. His many books include the classics, *Punished by Rewards*, and *Beyond Discipline: From Compliance to Community*, in which he explores alternatives to our merit based approach at work and school. He has also critically examined the influence of Behaviourism on our education system, and done amazing work on the power of cooperative learning, altruism and empathy...**Alfie Kohn**.

Hi there, Alfie!

Alfie: Hello there!

Anne: So, there’s a great quote that popped up in my newsfeed today. It’s by **Katrina Gutleben**, she says, “Learning can only happen when a child is interested. If he’s not interested it’s like throwing marshmallows at his head and calling it eating.” How much of the school day, in America for example, is spent just throwing marshmallows at kids’ heads?

Alfie: Oh, a fair amount, unfortunately, and strapping them down as well and then monitoring them to make sure they are within the target range of the marshmallows-

Anne: (laughs)

Alfie: -which now can be done much more efficiently with various forms of technology. And then of course, we give them a reward if marshmallows enter an orifice. So, it’s not pleasant. There are happy exceptions. There are places where teachers understand that what makes the most sense is to focus on learning rather than just teaching, and to begin by asking more than telling, and to focus more on understanding than on the memorization effects and practice by rote of skills. But those places are still the exception rather than the rule despite decades of experience and research showing that a ‘doing to’ approach to education simply isn’t as effective, let alone as respectful as a ‘working with’ approach.

Anne: That's the amazing part of it that when you mention despite *all* the research, it persists. Like, you wrote in the *Harvard Business Review* that "By and large, rewards succeed at securing one thing only, temporary compliance," and there's a lot of research to back this up. In your book you give for example, the example of special education where research shows that **behaviourist approaches** really objectify and stifle the students and can...lead to poor outcomes. And this is true in the mainstream classroom as well. I just don't understand why despite it being wrong and ineffective, why does behaviourism or **operant conditioning** – why does this persist in these settings?

Why are we still focussed in our schools on reward and punishment?

Alfie: Yeah, that's a question I've been grappling with for a long time and have invited people in my lectures and workshops to grapple with along with me. I think one answer to that is to acknowledge that punishments and rewards are not entirely ineffective. They can get one thing under certain conditions and that one thing is **temporary compliance**, and that means a lot to people with more power. Punishments and rewards – and it's important to add the 'and rewards' part, are basically strategies by which those with more power can compel those with less power to do whatever they want. That is, whatever the powerful people want. And, if I make the punishment severe enough and the likelihood of it's being imposed great enough, I can make you do stuff.

Similarly, if I make the reward, large and luscious enough, and the probability of your getting it high enough, again, I can get temporary compliance but at a significant **cost**. The cost is sometimes hidden, which is to say there's only a dotted line connecting the use of the punishments and rewards with the unfavourable long-term outcome. Whereas, I can see very clearly that, you know, I was able to make you do stuff right now. So, the costs are hidden and the "effectiveness" is apparent, thus I am likely to continue doing it indefinitely. So, that's one answer to the question of why it persists.

Another is that rewards and punishments keep those people in power comfortably in power. This happens in families, in classrooms and in workplaces where the main effect of bribes and threats is to cement the authority of the person who gets to hand them out, and decide under what conditions they are given.

Another answer is that it's all a lot of us know. Many teachers, parents and managers were themselves raised, taught and managed primarily with carrots and sticks, and that seems an appropriate thing to do, particularly if you haven't had any guidance in what it means to teach or raise children, or manage employees any other way, so everything else...If somebody comes along and like me and says this doesn't make sense – they say 'well nice in theory, but it's the only thing that works' because it's literally the only thing to which they've been exposed and they dismiss as unrealistic or impractical or utopian what I'm calling a 'working with' approach.

And so, people may not do it just because they want to stay in power. They may do it because they don't know what the hell else to do.

[6:00]

Anne: I think so. Definitely. And, I want to get back to what you'd mentioned earlier – the happier exceptions and the 'work with' approach and how that's being applied, but right now staying focussed on this idea of behaviourism and operant conditioning, and like you said...adults using it to cement their authority over children, and feeling like they have to cement their authority over children because of the way they were raised, or for other various reasons that you outlined, and possibly an insecurity as well. And then, it's baked into the whole history of child rearing books and psychology and everything.

You quoted **Bruno Bettelheim** who says, "When our words are not enough the threat of the withdrawal of our love and affection is the only sound method to impress on the child that he had better conform to our request." That – hearing that, that's very chilling to hear, but it's really what's at the core of the 'time out' and a lot of the other parenting strategies that you can even read just in a magazine you pick up at the grocery store.

Alfie: Right! Yeah, absolutely. And by the way, it's maybe not so surprising to evaluate that quotation in light of what we know about Bettelheim's abusive practices. The premise of his comment of course, is that the child's conformity, mindless obedience to whatever the parent demands is not to be questioned. He's just saying, if you can't get it with words, you're gonna have to bring out the big guns. And so, I'm not just interested in questioning what I think of as disrespectful, and sometimes even abusive, or at least manipulative methods, although I spent a lot of words arguing that it's all of those things – disrespectful, and manipulative on the one hand and counterproductive, *not just ineffective* in the long run, on the other hand.

I want to push the critique to asking about the **goal**, not just the method. So, you know in the United States over the last few generations, for the most part, children are not treated with the same kind of crude, often physically abusive strategies – spanking is not as common as it used to be, though still around to be sure. But if we now offer a colourful dinosaur sticker to a child (deliberately exaggerated) 'Good job, I really like the way you...' instead of swatting the kid, it certainly is progress in terms of the method, but if the goal is still compliance, and if that is always the parent's goal to impose our will rather than try to ask the question, 'What does my kid need and how can I meet those needs?' then we haven't made as much progress as we'd like to think.

Anne: I think we can see a living example of what you just outlined almost as like a continuum of these ideas within the special education system, because you have very extreme examples. For example, in Ontario, the **Ontario Human Rights Commission** just came out with a report a few months ago stating that the special education classroom in Ontario hasn't changed essentially in 30 years. So, when you come here you're almost in a time machine in our special ed classrooms.

There's examples in the US too, obviously the most notorious being the **Judge Rotenberg Center**, where autistic kids are still receiving electroshocks as aversives, or punishments. But, then you go further along the continuum, and we're looking at **ABA** therapy where they say, 'well some of it's not so bad.' That's what you hear a lot of, right? You can walk into an ABA centre and you'll hear a lot of people saying, 'Good boy, good boy' to these kids and giving the supposed positive reinforcements but they're still

taking away often a beloved object: 'You can have this, if you do that,' right, something that's extremely...the kid has just a heart connection to, right.

The problem that autistic adults who've been through ABA have identified through this whole continuum from the electroshocks to the M&M rewards, is that this focus on complete compliance creates a lot of **problems** later on in life. For example bodily autonomy or understanding how to say 'No,' or even understand consent and self-determination. Getting out into the real world and maneuvering in the real world as an adult is really complicated when you've been conditioned like this as a child.

[10:56]

Alfie: Yes, that makes perfect sense to me because psychologists talk about **autonomy support**, more broadly, not just within special education. And autonomy here doesn't mean individualism, it means the capacity to have some say over the things that happen to you and an approach to many things in life from health care and education to what goes on in workplaces and especially for parents autonomy support means helping kids to have some say to feel themselves as origins rather than pawns in their lives as one researcher put it, and that's a critical goal –to help kids be decision makers. And you know, the way you learn to make good decisions is by making decisions-

Anne: Right.

Alfie: -not by following directions, so the problem with ABA, again is, just to echo what I said a moment ago more broadly, is not just with the method, but with the goal. It shouldn't surprise anyone that these kids are, when they grow up, struggling to try to figure out how to make decisions and be appropriately assertive and advocate for themselves and so on, because ABA techniques will inevitably backfire but particularly prove unequal to the task of raising someone with a moderate degree of independence because the whole point of rewards, the whole precondition for the *temporary* effective use of rewards is the opposite of independence, it's **dependence**. You're dependent on this person to give you the points, or the 'good job,' or the tangible symbolic whatever the reward might be.

And, it's really important to, to acknowledge, I think, that rewards and punishments are not two different strategies, like 'well, we've tried one, now we have to move to the other' or 'what do I do now?' I hear this sometimes, 'we've tried both punishments and rewards, nothing works!' You know, you've tried one thing, and I call it a 'doing to' approach, but you know, you can call it whatever you want. Rewards and punishments are not opposites, they are **two sides of the same coin**, and the point is that, that coin doesn't buy very much. Whether I'm telling you 'do this or here's what I'm going to do to you' to make you suffer, which we don't like to call punishment, of course, because that makes us feel bad.

Anne: Right.

Alfie: So, we use a euphemism like, 'consequences' – something like that. Or, instead of calling it forcible isolation, we call it 'time out' because that's intended to make us feel better about making children feel horrible. [When] we do these particular strategies to kids and it inevitably backfires, and if we shift to instead of saying 'do this or here's what I'm going to do to you,' we say 'do this and you'll get that' – It's really just a variation of the same thing. It's still about **control** and it may be a sugar-coated control

because we marinate kids in praise, but it's still not a respectful way for one human being to treat another, and it's still extremely unlikely to lead to the kind of long-term goals that I think most of us want for our kids and for our students.

[14:51]

Anne: And the long-term goals are really key when we look at ABA and how things are going. This idea that punishment and praise really being two sides of the same coin. One thing you've shown is that with schools overemphasizing praise is that it strengthens the child's dependence on adult approval and then you talk a bit...you cite that study by **Avi Assor** about how it impacts young people as they grow up and enter adulthood. I thought that was really interesting.

Alfie: Yeah, Assor and a number of his colleagues in the US and Israel and in Belgium had done a number of studies actually that have shown that...well, I should back up for a second here... So I wrote a book 25 years ago called *Punished by Rewards* that talks about the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. So, if you asked me 'how am I supposed to motivate kids?' --especially kids wired differently, kids struggling to conform to mainstream expectations of conduct, my answer is, 'I don't care how motivated your kids are. What I care about is how your kids are motivated.'

There's an enormous difference between **intrinsic** motivation which means doing something that you find personally satisfying and **extrinsic** motivation which means you do one thing so something else happens...like you sit in a particular way, or stop rocking 'because I told you to and then you get to have something that provides you with comfort, and you only get to have it then,' or you know, whatever it is you share, you take turns and so on, in order to get praise or a reward. So, lots and lots of research has shown and continues to show that extrinsic motivators – rewards aren't just different, and aren't just worse than intrinsic motivation, they tend to undermine intrinsic motivation.

So if I had to summarize that whole book in a sentence, it would be '**The more you reward people for doing something, the less interest they will come to have in whatever they had to do to get the reward.**'

I continued in this vein for a long time, talking about this issue, and then I began to realize, because of some of the research you've just alluded to, that there's another whole layer of problems with things like rewards and praise, and conversely punishments like time out, which is that what people need is not just to be loved, but to be **loved unconditionally**, which means for who they are, not for what they do.

And rewards aren't just extrinsic inducements that kill intrinsic motivation, rewards are often experienced as **conditional affection** which means, 'I'm going to give you acknowledgement, attention, approval, excitement, love only with strings attached. You have to earn the affection.' And that turns out to be profoundly destructive in a psychological sense. You might even say the very opposite of what kids need to flourish, and yet, that conditionality – that idea of it turning into an economic transaction, 'you only get this stuffed animal, this book, this toy, whatever you value, you have to earn it by your actions' – this is at the core of operant conditioning.

This is ...the engine of this kind of **Skinnerian control** that's at the core of ABA and of so many recommended parenting and teaching techniques. You don't get the high five, the fist bump, the hug, the smile; you don't get to feel good about yourself; you don't get anything until you have obeyed the

person with more power. And what that teaches people is 'I'm only valuable because I'm only valued when I do what this person is telling me to,' and that should be chilling to anyone.

So don't ever listen to someone say with ABA or **PBIS** (which is another big class- school based Skinnerian approach), or with any of these strategies, techniques, these programs say 'Oh, well your criticisms are just when it's not *done right*'- It's not being implemented when it's done right. 'Oh, you know we're getting better.'" No. At the very *conceptual core* of these is conditional approval and affection. 'Do this and you'll get that.' And not only does it undermine intrinsic interest in the 'this,' it also leads to psychological difficulties because it's a form of psychological control and what we need instead...what all kids need is to know [is] that '**I'm a good person even when I fall short or screw up.**'

[20:34]

Anne: That's right, and what you see with ABA, which is what we've just been speaking about, really one of the devastating effects of it is that you're really not supposed to ever say 'No' when you're in ABA and you only really get rewarded for saying 'Yes' and for kind of enduring. So, what happens to a person when they grow up and they don't really know how to say no, and they've been taught not to listen to the signals in their body that are saying no? That makes people very **vulnerable** to abuse and vulnerable in many ways in their life, and this is what we hear from people who've come out of ABA and are speaking against ABA.

The interesting thing about ABA is that in the surveys, over and over again we see surveys of autistic people that ask 'do you approve or oppose ABA' and it's always like 97 or 98% of **autistic people oppose ABA**, so you've got the community that it's supposed to be serving – complete opposition to it, and not just because ABA is not effective, because that's a question they like to ask about ABA – 'well, you know we can prove that it's effective' or 'oh, here's a study that proves ABA is not effective.' This gets back to the two questions that you ask in your book *Punished by Rewards*, you gotta ask yourself first of all, is it effective? – that's a question to ask about something, but the second question is equally or more important to me – is it right? Is it right to be doing this? And that's the question that people seem less comfortable with a lot of the time. At least people outside of the autistic community or the children's rights community.

Alfie: Right, although what you've just said in terms of long-term effects calls into question of whether it's even effective, at least in any meaningful long-term deep sense. Remember ABA – the B stands for **behaviour**. What drives this is not what's in the best interest of this person, let alone what this person's needs and motives and values are, but only behaviour. ABA grows out of the tradition that was developed on laboratory animals where you are only interested in actions you can see and measure. I have this rule of thumb that for any community, not just people with autism, or other people who are identified as having 'special needs,' but for any, you know, for a group of teachers or parents that the value of any resource offered to you is inversely proportional to the number of times you see or hear the word *behaviour*.

Anne: Mm-hmm.

Alfie: As soon as people frame it in terms of the behaviour, *all is lost* because you're only looking at the stuff at the surface that's **observable**, and you're invariably going to end up with some version of reward

or punishment because that's how you extinguish or reinforce behaviours, but that means we're not looking at the *reasons* for the behaviours or the person who engages in them. So, it's not just 'is this right?' – you know, does it have side effects, but is it likely even to be meaningfully effective and the answer is typically no.

And you know when you said a moment ago that it seems paradoxical that the people with autism in surveys look back and say 'no, I didn't like it, it wasn't good for me' and yet here we are still doing it, ignoring the people it's supposed to be serving. I'm not sure your premise is right, I'm not sure ABA is meant to serve the people it's being used on. I think it's being meant to serve other social forces and institutions who are uncomfortable with people with autism: with them stimming, with them doing things that we regard as strange and unsettling. It's meant to make them **conform** for the comfort and convenience of those around them, and if I'm right about this – I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm right, there's no paradox.

The fact that people with autism hate what was done to them with ABA was never meaningful, because it wasn't for them in the first place! The fact that they regard it as negative, you know that doesn't matter. I mean, that's not...they're the *instruments*. They're not ultimately the constituency we are respectfully consulting about 'what do you need?' If we were interested in that we'd be going in a whole different direction.

[25:23]

Anne: The happy exceptions: I wanted to ask you about that because there certainly are happy exceptions and good opportunities and examples where people and schools are working beyond, working more towards what you call the 'work with' approach, rather than the reward-punishment double sided coin. Can you give some good examples of that?

Alfie: I can't give specifics because there's too many kind of categories of example: particular schools, particular individuals, particular books that have explored this sort of thing, people who've spoken out. It depends on which category you mean, but I devote a good half of all my books to trying to figure out (without giving recipes) what it means in broad strokes to do it differently, to *work with* even though I can't say, when someone does this, you should do that.

People who say 'Tell me exactly how I'm supposed to solve this problem' with somebody you've never met, I back away from doing that, but I will in conclusion mention the work of one writer who has influenced me, especially around people with special needs and that's the late, **Herb Lovett**. He wrote a book called *Cognitive Counselling in Persons with Special Needs*, and then another book with the much more concise title, *Learning to Listen*. ...They're not sort of full scale critiques of ABA or Behaviourism, or of anything else in the way that I do it. It's basically about reframing what we're trying to do: what it means to try to understand the person you're 'working with' and in effect, answering the question.

As I said a minute ago, what does this person need? And how can I meet those needs? If you start with that question, it will lead you in a very different path than if you start with the question, 'How can I get you to conform to societal expectations?' or 'How can I get you to comply with what I'm telling you to

do?' The question that initiates the interaction is as important as the answers given to that question, and right now, with ABA, I think we're asking the wrong question.

Anne: Alfie Kohn, thank you so much for taking the time to talk today, it was very interesting.

Alfie: My pleasure, I appreciate your interest in my work.

Anne: Thanks.

(Theme song – soft piano music)

Anne: We were speaking with author, Alfie Kohn. He spoke to us from Boston. You've been listening to Noncompliant. I'm your host, **Anne Borden King**. Noncompliant was recorded at DB Audio and MCS Recording Studios. Various episodes were engineered by Dave Boire, Nathan Gravette and TJ Liebgott. Thanks to our engineers and thanks for listening.