

September 7, 2018

Welcome, brent_mckim
MY ACCOUNT | SUBSCRIBE | LOGOUT

Get 2-Week FREE Trial >>
Sign Up for FREE E-Newsletters

Browse archived issues | Current Issue

TOPICS | BLOGS | REPORTS & DATA | EVENTS | OPINION | VIDEO GALLERY | JOBS



Download your resource on
E-RATE



EDUCATION WEEK
Subscribe Now.
Complete, go-everywhere access.



COMMENTARY

Students Aren't Lab Rats. Stop Treating Them Like They Are



—Richard Mia for Education Week

Scientists have moved on from behaviorism. Why haven't educators?

By Alfie Kohn

September 4, 2018

Plenty of policies and programs limit our ability to do right by children. But perhaps the most restrictive virtual straitjacket that educators face is behaviorism—a psychological theory that would have us focus exclusively on what can be seen and measured, that ignores or dismisses inner experience, and reduces wholes to parts. It also suggests that everything people do can be explained as a quest for reinforcement—and, by implication, that we can control others by rewarding them selectively.

Allow me, then, to propose this rule of thumb: *The value of any book, article, or presentation intended for teachers (or parents) is inversely related to the number of times the word "behavior" appears in it.* The more our attention is fixed on the surface, the more we slight students' underlying motives, values, and needs.

It's been decades since academic psychology took seriously the orthodox behaviorism of the psychologists John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner, which by now has shrunk to a cult-like clan of "behavior analysts." But, alas, its reductionist influence lives on—in classroom (and schoolwide) management programs like PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) and Class Dojo, in scripted curricula and the reduction of children's learning to "data," in grades and rubrics, in so-called competency- and proficiency-based approaches to instruction, in standardized assessments, in reading incentives and merit pay for teachers.

Printer-Friendly
Email Article
Reprints
Comments
Tweet
Share 11



FROM EDUCATION WEEK PRESS

Explore 21 Trends impacting education and our future.
"Masterfully give[s] us a glimpse of the future."
JACK JENNINGS
FOUNDER, CENTER ON EDUCATION POLICY
21 TRENDS in the 21st Century
Out of the Trenches and into the Future
By Gary Marx

EDUCATION WEEK EVENTS

Strategies to Accelerate Success for English-Language Learners
SPONSOR WEBINAR OCT. 11, 2:00 P.M. EASTERN
REGISTER NOW.

Content Provided by: Voyager Sopris Learning

Gateways to STEM Education
FREE ONLINE EVENT OCT. 23, 1:00 P.M. EASTERN
REGISTER NOW.

MOST POPULAR STORIES

- | Viewed | Emailed | Recommended | Commented |
|--------|---------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. | | | |
| 2. | | | |
| 3. | | | |
| 4. | | | |
| 5. | | | |

SPONSOR WHITEPAPERS

- Teaching Comes First—A New Vision for Assessment
- ESSA: An Opportunity for American Educators
- The EdTech Efficacy Handbook
- Getting Real About Career Readiness
- Identify What's Most Important to Teach
- The Nonnegotiable Attributes of Effective Feedback
- How to Build a 36-Week Character Education Curriculum

Some of these variants are marketed as new innovations. But if competence or proficiency is still defined as the mastery of discrete skills or bits of knowledge, it reflects the same Skinnerian model that was developed on rodents and pigeons. Similarly, grades are no less destructive just because they are "standards based." Formative assessment can be as reductive as summative tests, particularly if it's done continuously. Reward programs are controlling and counterproductive even when they show up on a screen.

In finalizing a newly updated edition of my book *Punished by Rewards*, I sorted through scores of recent studies on these subjects. I was struck by how research continues to find that the best predictor of excellence is intrinsic motivation (finding a task valuable in its own right)—and that this interest is reliably undermined by *extrinsic* motivation (doing something to get a reward). New experiments confirm that children tend to become less concerned about others once they've been rewarded for helping or sharing. Likewise, paying students for better grades or test scores is rarely effective, never mind that the goal is utterly misconceived.

Over and over, researchers continue to find—in schools, families, and workplaces—that people who are rewarded tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Often, too, they end up not doing it as well as those who weren't treated like bundles of behaviors to be managed and manipulated.

But the enduring lesson for educators isn't just that "positive reinforcement" turns out to be anything but positive. It also concerns the conceptual dead end of behaviorism more generally. Every day, and with every child, we need to keep in mind that behaviors are just the protruding tip of the proverbial iceberg. What matters more than "what?" or "how much?" is "how come?"

A few illustrations:

- The best predictor of how well students will fare in school later may not be how well they fared in school earlier. It's why they think they've done as well as they have. The key is not measurable achievement, in other words, but how students experience and explain their success or failure.
- Someone preoccupied with behavior may say "grit" or self-discipline is desirable without bothering to consider the child's possible motives. Does she love what she's doing—or keep at it because of a desperate need to prove her competence? Whether persistence is constructive depends, among other things, on whether it's animated by passion or compulsion.
- New research confirms that financial incentives fail over the long haul to get people to lose weight, quit smoking, or use the gym. Partly that's because what matters is under the surface. So, too, for students who eat too much or too little, or who struggle with substance abuse. "How do we get a young person to change his behavior?" is a shallow and unproductive question. Try: "Who is this kid? What needs or fears might explain what he's doing?"
- Behaviorists may monitor whether kids' eyes are on the teacher, but this means very little. More than 30 years ago, two University of Wisconsin researchers videotaped elementary math students, then interviewed them later and assessed their understanding of the lessons. Whether students had appeared engaged was unrelated to what they had been thinking about—and the latter better predicted achievement. A student might look like she's paying close attention while she is actually preoccupied with her performance.

"With every child, we need to keep in mind that behaviors are just the protruding tip of the proverbial iceberg."

[What Does Evidence-Based Really Mean Under ESSA?](#)

[Guide to Choosing Digital Content and Curriculum](#)

[The First 20 Days of Personalized Learning](#)

[Educators Believe Educational Technology Can Personalize Learning](#)

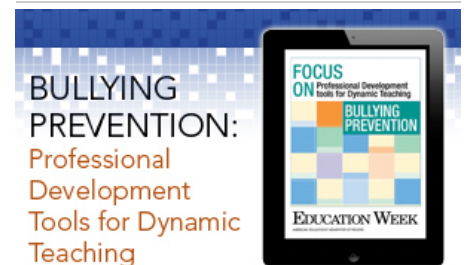
[Get More from a Score: One Test, Many Measures](#)

[The New Mindframe on Assessment](#)

[A Practical Guide to "Evidence-Based" under ESSA](#)

[4 ways your peers are getting the most from digital books](#)

[SEE MORE Whitepapers >](#)



Education Week Press e-books now available



President

Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Chief Financial Officer, Alexandria City Public Schools

Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates, Alexandria, Virginia

Drafting / Architecture / 3D Prototyping

Garinger High School, Charlotte, North Carolina

Director of System Level Partnerships

Teaching Matters, New York City, New York

Superintendent, Birmingham Public Schools

Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates, Beverly Hills, Michigan

[MORE EDUCATION JOBS >>](#)

[POST A JOB >>](#)

MORE OPINION

Keep up with the latest in education opinion.

Follow *Education Week* Commentary on Facebook.

[Follow Commentary here.](#)

As the researchers concluded, "Behavioral measures, such as observations of on-task behavior ('time on task'), convey limited information about classroom learning."

- In 2006, Suniya Luthar at Teachers College, Columbia University, and her colleagues set out to determine whether affluent kids are stressed out because they're overscheduled. They found that a high number of extracurriculars—the measurable behavior—**was not itself a significant risk factor for anxiety, substance abuse, or depression**. What mattered was how students thought their parents felt about what they were doing.

These examples could be multiplied indefinitely—and of course they apply to parenting as well as teaching. What matters isn't whether a child says "I'm sorry" after hurting someone, but whether she actually feels remorse. If not, then insisting she apologize just teaches insincerity. It applies to adults, too. For example, a 2005 study showed that **sacrificing for one's spouse doesn't predict the relationship's length or quality**. Rather, the relevant variable is the *reason* people do so.

It's time we outgrew this limited and limiting psychological theory. That means attending less to students' behaviors and more to the students themselves.

Alfie Kohn, who frequently speaks to and works with educators, is the author of 14 books, including the 25th anniversary edition of Punished by Rewards, which was released last month. His website is www.alfiekohn.org.

Follow the Education Week Commentary section on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). [Sign up](#) to get the latest Education Week Commentaries in your email inbox.

Vol. 38, Issue 03, Page 36

Published in Print: September 5, 2018, as **It's About More Than Just Behavior**

RELATED STORIES

- "[Students Thrive When They See Purpose in Their Learning](#)," January 17, 2018.
- "[Small 'Nudges' Can Push Students in the Right Direction](#)," October 17, 2017.

RELATED OPINION

- "[Do This and You'll Get That: A Bad Way to Defend Good Programs](#)," September 30, 2015.
- "[The Value of Negative Learning](#)," September 16, 2009.
- "[Schooling Beyond Measure](#)," September 19, 2012.



Notice: We recently upgraded our comments. (Learn more [here](#).) If you are logged in as a subscriber or registered user and already have a Display Name on edweek.org, you can post comments. If you do not already have a Display Name, please create one [here](#).

Greater gains. Gigantic grins.

i-Ready Instruction leads to remarkable gains for diverse populations of students.



ESSA Level 3 ✓



i-Ready

Learn more

1 Comment Education Week

brent_mckim

Recommend Share

Sort by Oldest



Join the discussion...



Dr. Hank Schlinger · 2 days ago

Alfie Kohn continues to do battle with the behaviorist windmills of his imagination. And he continues, despite research and logical, scientific arguments to the contrary, to promote the vague, unscientific concept of intrinsic motivation. His arguments, and the research that purportedly support them, have been logically and scientifically rebutted. Moreover, various curricula and educational approaches based on a scientific understanding of, yes, behavior (e.g., Direct Instruction, Precision Teaching, etc.), have demonstrated superiority over traditional approaches based on vague, abstract concepts such as intrinsic motivation. Alfie Kohn needs some good cognitive behavioral therapy to rid him of the behaviorist demons that reside only in his head and that cause him to do a disservice to parents and teachers alike. I can recommend a good therapist.

Reply Share

Subscribe Disqus' Privacy PolicyPrivacy PolicyPrivacy

Ground Rules for Posting

We encourage lively debate, but please be respectful of others. Profanity and personal attacks are prohibited. By commenting, you are agreeing to abide by our user agreement. All comments are public.

Back to Top

ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

- Register or Subscribe
Online Account
Print Subscription
Manage E-Newsletters/ Preferences
Group Subscription

CONTACT US

- Help/ FAQ
Customer Service
Editor Feedback
Letters to the Editor

POLICIES

- User Agreement
Privacy
Reprints

ADVERTISE WITH US

- Display Advertising
Recruitment Advertising

EPE INFO

- About Us
Staff
Work@EPE
Mission and History

EDUCATION WEEK PUBLICATIONS

- Education Week
Teacher
Digital Directions
Market Brief
TopSchoolJobs