

# HIGH NOON FOR HIGH STAKES



## Alfie Kohn at Middlebury College

by Ed Barna

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Alfie Kohn came to Middlebury College on April 3, 2001 at the invitation of the school's teaching training program, at a time when the system of nationwide standardized testing, passed later that year by Congress, was still a Republican agenda item. While in Middlebury, Kohn also met informally over lunch with area school administrators. Following an afternoon talk aimed at the would-be teachers, he gave a public lecture (and public discussion) in Mead Chapel, the college's largest space for public presentations.



When Alfie Kohn spoke at Middlebury College on the perils of punishment-and-reward teaching and high-stakes testing, his words echoed off more than the walls in the process of reaching me.

As a freelance newspaper reporter in a state small enough for a reporter to know many leading figures personally, I had followed debates over school funding, assessment, special education, curriculum revisions, bullying, and more. At one point, I even wrote a weekly education column for one daily paper, explaining trends, techniques, and terminology in the schools.

Before that, I had been a stay-at-home father, playing creativity games and singing folk songs and reading and philosophizing and fishing and meeting people of all ages with my pre-school son. Before that, as a young writer and the first park manager at Robert Frost Farm, in Derry, New Hampshire, I had been part of Poets-in-the-Schools, working in elementary and high schools during that successful program's formative and exploratory years.

Before that, at Harvard during the most confrontational years of the late Sixties, I had done the equivalent of an unofficial minor in developmental psychology, adding readings in people like Maslow, O'Neill, Laing, Watts, and Huxley to official offerings that emphasized more accepted theorists like Freud, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and Skinner. And there was (and is) Zen meditation, which, although it has never earned any credits, has been more educational than all else combined.

Before that, in small, rural Otter Valley Union High School, the tight schedule had made it unavoidable to have both my parents as teachers. In my mother's biology class, we followed prescribed worksheets and took

prescribed multiple choice tests. In my father's English classes — had him two years in a row — everyone knew it was possible to “get him going” telling stories or discussing things, and he hardly ever corrected my prose style in my writings. I averaged over 100 in my mother's class (there were extra credit questions) and won prizes in state science fairs, but it was my father's passion for literature and sense of life's meanings and mysteries that helped make me a poet.

Before that, had been graded school. Not elementary school, but graded school. No arts except band lessons. No guidance counselor. No special education. Only reading, writing, and arithmetic, at which I excelled, and a playground culture that glorified fighting, in which I was an outcast.

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So the ongoing tension between education's hard-liners and progressives was an old story to me, one that in college I could trace back even to the unending conflict in the Old Testament between those gravitating to the relaxed, sensual spirituality of the Fertile Crescent's agricultural tribes and the militaristic, exclusionary vehemence of the prophets intent on returning the Israelites to their basic, nomadic beliefs. What was new in the old debate was science, the testing and corroboration of ideas — a scientific fringe that had become an accepted institution and was now making steady progress in

resolving questions regarding the way humans functioned, or didn't. So I was keenly interested in finding out whether or not Kohn had anything beyond crafted anecdotes and tendentious rhetoric to back up a commitment to progressive education that was obvious even from the titles of his talks.

Indeed, he had plenty of findings to back up his fulminations. But in the end, I was just as impressed by his entire ... well, call it personal energy. Here was a man in his 40s, the author of eight books, a veteran of appearances on all sorts of TV and radio shows, a road warrior *Time* had called "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades and test scores" — and he looked like he was in his late 20s. The stress of public exposure that has whitened the hair of Presidents and brought music stars to early deaths from overdoses seemed to roll off him, or bypass him, or perhaps in Zen fashion go right through him. When he spoke about intrinsic motivation and education that follows true needs and interests, his body language and that indefinable essence some call "aura" spoke with him.

Nor was this the "charismatic" kind of energy that moves people to identify a movement with a messiah. In an age when totalitarianism's cult of personality seems to have been democratized as a culture of personalities (witness the way Warhol's 15 minutes remark has become eponymous), he didn't seem to care. It's hard to imagine either a think tank maven or movement heavy named "Alfie."

Perhaps that was one reason I hadn't previously heard of him. Others had: One Middlebury College teacher training student said she was delighted to have Kohn come and talk so personally to them, because in a few years he would probably be so famous that they couldn't get near him. An educational consultant and author of books on how to help children write poetry called him "the Thomas Jefferson of progressive education."

He spoke to three audiences that day. Over lunch, he talked with the Addison Central Supervisory Union's administrators and teachers, in a session closed to the press by the school district for the sake of a frank discussion. Later, Kohn e-mailed that the talks, starting with grades and then ranging widely based on questions, had gone well. Before his second talk, titled like his 1993 book *Punished By Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*, an area school administrator who had previously been with Addison Central told me he had seen Kohn twice at conferences. He remarked, "He's that good a speaker.... You can't leave without thinking about things he's said." Perhaps it wasn't any accident that soon after that free-ranging luncheon, Addison Central (Middlebury Union High School) teacher Michele Forman was chosen as the nation's Teacher of the Year.

In the afternoon, Kohn surprised me with another facet of his life's work: Prowess as a standup comic. Without

making any phony attempts to slot in jokes and stories, he kept everyone's attention in part through a seemingly endless fund of witty and often self-deprecating remarks. Memories of high school debating came back: The very best debaters were like this, relaxed and affable and devastatingly funny when that was the best way of swaying audience and judges. Not that he lacked evidence and argumentation. On the debating circuit, this guy would have been a royal pain to encounter.

He immediately picked up on the fact that a lot of his listeners were students in the college's education program, there on assignment, twisting their tails by suggesting they do papers about the irony of being required to go to a lecture about giving students choices. From what followed, it would have been possible to compile a set of "Kohn's greatest hits" quotes, which certainly would have included the epigram "Punishments and rewards are two sides of the same coin — and a coin that doesn't buy very much."

### ***Punishments and rewards are two sides of the same coin—and a coin that doesn't buy very much.***

"We do not have the idea; it has us," Kohn said, starting with the way behaviorist concepts originated with Boris Friedrich Skinner had become so intertwined with many people's thinking in this country that they were no longer seen as theories. "The one who did all his research with rodents and pigeons, and wrote all his books about people — that B. F. Skinner." Kohn recalled taking a college Intro. to Psych. course from a Skinnerian, in which he was required to do an experiment getting a rat (starved to 80 percent of its normal body weight) to push a lever to get food. He almost flunked the course, he said, because he wrote his report from the rat's point of view.

Less well known, but one of the most replicated and corroborated findings in social psychology, is the way rewards fail to improve performance, Kohn went on. It was "contrary to hypothesis" in the first experiments. It was "counter-intuitive" to many people. But with groups of girls, boys, men, and women, it had been shown that, when given a complex task like solving a puzzle, the group promised a reward for doing so underperformed those who were simply requested to attempt the task.

The first such studies in the early 1960s, doctoral dissertations published in the same journal, one involving kids and one involving adults, met with "widespread apathy," he recalled. But when similar findings were reported in journals in the early 1970s, "social psychologists began to sit up and take notice." Janet Spence, at one point president of the American Psychological Association, wrote that "Rewards have effects that interfere with performance, for reasons we are only beginning to understand."

Those reasons, Kohn said, are as important as the general findings. But rather than go into a lecture about them, he had the audience break into whatever groupings they wanted to discuss and brainstorm and report back their ideas.

Living close to Middlebury College, I had reported on lectures there by all sorts of authorities, experts, and envisionaries. But this part of Kohn's talks didn't make it into any papers, because it just didn't fit the journalistic preconceptions. I couldn't give my considered opinion, which was that I had never seen anyone succeed as well in getting an audience involved in mutual brainstorming.

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When the group as a whole reconvened, we found that the theory that came out again and again in different forms, from undergraduates, teachers, and others, had to do with what Kohn later summed up as "intrinsic motivation": Motivation from within the individual, as opposed to "extrinsic" motivation, which is motivation coming from without, that is, motivation coming from sources external to the individual. "You're thinking of the end product, not of what you're doing," was one audience remark. Another was, "At the subconscious level, it's telling you that your behavior is not pleasurable in and of itself." Another: "If they have to bribe me to do this, it must be something I don't want to do."

This discussion was awakening old memories. Back before my child was born (pre-1980) and I was outvoted 2-1, my preference was not to have a TV in the house, as was the case when I was growing up (probably another factor in my becoming a writer). Friends told me there were great TV programs on, like Sesame Street. I watched it, and felt it was taking away from the inherent magic of words and books, jazzing things up in a way that would make it difficult for kids to learn later.

I will grant that Sesame Street is great television, for adults who can see all the wit and humor behind the animations and puppets. But from what I have since learned from the present debates over heroin treatment, about the way that drug destroys a person's ability to appreciate life's simpler pleasures by upping the thresholds in the brain's pleasure centers, I would maintain that for kids with normal households, the program has been a Faustian bargain.

When everyone else was done, Kohn went on with his analysis, pointing out other reasons that rewards, like the severe punishments handed out in much of American traditional family life, were not just useless, but were actually counterproductive.

There was a control issue lurking. The bigger the reward, the more any accomplishment becomes associated with the reward-giver, not the person earning it. "Human beings do not like being controlled," Kohn said. Students will say to themselves, in effect, "The person giving this reward is trying to manipulate me. I'm not in the driver's seat." And thus performance begins to suffer.

The effects of rewards on relationships were often devastating. "There's a lot of research showing that the most effective classrooms are those where kids are constantly learning with and from each other," Kohn said. But grades and goodies pitted one person against another, especially in those worst-case-scenario classrooms where "grading on the curve" meant that only a few would rise to the top. (Kohn's hit list: "The best word for this is 'immoral.'") The outcome of this system was described by educational researcher Philip Jackson, who said: "The central lesson of American elementary schools is how to be alone in crowds."

"Then people get to the workplace and managers complain that they can't work together," he said. Whether in the classroom or in the workplace, such a focus on evaluations and consequent rewards makes it very difficult for a student or worker to raise a hand and say, "I just don't get it" — especially if that person has been doing well.

Boy did that analysis hit home. After I had arrived in the town where I grew up in second grade, I rather quickly shot to the head of the class, earning, along with my excellent grades, all of the other kids' resentment. I never knew what a real friend was until I was in college, where all the old stereotypes got erased. Meanwhile, there were many times during my high school years, especially during my physics and math classes, when I felt that some fundamental, basic understanding was missing, and that I was just going through the motions without really knowing why. Probably lots of my classmates felt that way ALL the time. It was a nagging, gnawing feeling of phoniness, of massive cheating, that helped contribute to the gut knot of unbreakable anxiety that clenched into place every morning and, like the isolation, didn't go away until I was in college.

Kohn went on to talk about the third great detriment of relying on rewards: The way it kept teachers from looking into the causes of why things weren't going well. He took an example from his own life, one involving his toddler daughter ("It was much simpler when I didn't have a kid of my own," he averred.) Why wouldn't she stay in bed and go to sleep at bedtime?

Another audience brainstorming session turned up a host of possible reasons, the point being that the solu-

tion would be far different if the cause had to do with the daughter's being able to hear interesting things going on elsewhere in the house, or with her being worried about monsters under the bed, or with her having eaten too much. The behavior was a symptom, an epiphenomenon ("I had to use that word," Kohn joked), but to Skinner and all his unwitting followers, only the behavior counts. "If you can't see it, it doesn't exist," was the Skinnerian credo.

But what alternatives exist to using praise or disapproval to manipulate? "Say nothing" is a real alternative, Kohn pointed out. Pay attention: "You climbed the stairs! You did it!" Ask questions: "Why did you put these in your painting? You've never done that before." Show the effects of what the child has done, giving true feedback, not evaluation: Help with envisioning other possibilities, ways to go on from there, expanding on what happened.

"What these kids don't need is judgment, even positive judgment," Kohn said. About his daughter, he said, "I don't want her to become a praise junkie, which is the usual effect of marinating people in praise."

## ***Classroom management should never be taught as a separate subject.***

That last phrase called to mind some of the kids I had had to cope with when I was teaching one summer at a camp for the gifted, the same sorts of kids who had made my life as a substitute elementary teacher miserable a decade before. The bright-eyed, outspoken, Mickey-Mouse-grinning, how-can-I-helpers, irrepressible fountains of unfounded self-esteem, were a far greater challenge than plain old bad actors. Indeed, they seemed to have suffered some kind of terrible damage to their senses of self all the more dangerous for its being cloaked in reputations as Good Kids. Now, a decade later, Kohn was giving me a new context for this observation and for many others. He also dished out some good satire, such as summarizing the "Gooood BOY!" type rewards as "Here's a verbal doggie biscuit!"

He pointed out a fourth drawback to such short-term incentives: "when people do something to get a reward, they tend to avoid unnecessary risks." Like the rat in the Skinner maze trying to get its food, they will do the same thing over and over rather than explore and experiment. No way to grow.

Made me think of my own knowledge of computers, limited by constant freelance deadline pressure. Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will keep word-processing, because that's all I really know how to do.

The fifth reason, the one the attendees had started with, was summed up as follows: "They're not focusing on the

task; they're focusing on the reward." The reality, shown in the workplace as well as in the schools, is that "the people who do the work extremely well are the ones who get a kick out of it."

"It's the kind of motivation, not the amount, that counts," Kohn said — referring to intrinsic versus extrinsic. "If you ever see a seminar on how to increase motivation, you should run in the other direction." He recalled a moment 20 years before when, as a ninth-grade teacher, he realized that his problems with "classroom discipline" couldn't be solved on those terms. If he had been forced to sit through "Meet Mr. Semicolon" and "Our Friend the Adverb," he would have been a troublemaker just like some of his students. "Classroom management should never be taught as a separate subject," he said.

One more experiment, from his home town of Cambridge: Having three groups try a cultured milk drink called kefir for the first time. One group was just given the kefir, another was praised for drinking it, and the third was given a financial reward for trying it. Which group gave the drink the best evaluation?

The financial reward group. "YES, rewards can buy temporary compliance," Kohn said. But a week later, the first group liked it as much or better, the second no longer wanted to try it, and the third said they couldn't stand the stuff. The sad thing, he said, is that so many people go through their childhood and adult years chasing rewards; then, "pretty soon you wake up and you're middle-aged, and you wonder what happened to your life."

"We need an engaging curriculum, a warm and personal curriculum, a caring curriculum, a growing kid curriculum," Kohn said, as time ran out and he had to wind up. Such a curriculum contrasts with the sort that Americans are increasingly getting; the latter was the subject of his evening talk and discussion, which focused on the perils of high-stakes testing.

This time, Kohn wasn't there just to analyze and discuss, but to sound an alarm as well. "I want to convince you of the urgency of the situation we face," he said. He called on his listeners to "double your activity against this juggernaut," because "we are facing an educational emergency in this country."

He noted that politicians, business leaders, and others who have little experience with education are saying that schools can be rated based on their test scores and that teachers' and administrators' careers ought to depend on those results. Legislatures are making school funding contingent on performance, as measured by the tests.

So naturally, people end up teaching to the test. Rewards and punishments work very well, in the short term. But education that grows to a complete understanding, and inspires a desire for more learning, suffers terribly, he said.

Kohn said that one of the best teaching ideas he ever saw involved getting each student in the class to

research some ordinary, taken-for-granted thing about her or his own community and then present her/his findings to everyone else. Baking, for instance: Just how did a baker go about making bread?

It's gone, he said. "Baking wasn't on the test."

In talking about standards, people often fail to distinguish between two kinds, which might be called "horizontal" and "vertical," Kohn said. An example of horizontal standards — a successful example — might be the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics saying in 1959 that a math curriculum should emphasize conceptual understanding and problem-solving, not memorized procedures and isolated facts. "I'm not necessarily opposed to everything that goes by the name of standards," Kohn said.

But the standards that are all the rage, at least among politicians and businesses seeking better-trained employees, are "vertical," he said. They push for higher scores, more achievement, things that on the surface seem reasonable for those who want schools to provide quality educations. Starting in 1983, when *A Nation At Risk* assailed schools (based on what is now known to be misleading information, Kohn contended), there has been a push for "accountability" and "raising the bar."

However, that approach is based on flawed assumptions about how children learn and how well current methods work, Kohn said. He quoted a Harvey Daniels summary of the prevailing attitude toward school improvement: "What we're doing is okay; we just need to do it harder, longer, stronger, louder, meaner, and we'll have a better country." But as early as 1964, education author and eventual home schooling proponent, John Holt was warning us that the main effect the push for so-called higher standards was that "children are too busy to think."

Kohn mentioned Susan Ohanian's work, which brought to mind a story I had done on that Vermont-based national activist's attempt to help an alternative school in Birmingham, Alabama. It seems that the regular high school bounced a large number of its students, mostly black, for supposed infractions of the law, just before test time — to raise the school's average, many suspected.

One caring teacher started an alternative facility for these kids, which used a different approach and did very well; then he got bounced from his job. Ohanian was trying to organize a book drive to help the private school. I remember listening to her and thinking, "Weren't high stakes where they burned witches?"

Another point to consider: It isn't as though the tests are always realistic assessments of what students have learned from the curriculum, Kohn said. Typically, they are made artificially difficult so that not too many students get everything right. Probably many English teachers couldn't pass the math part of the New York or Massachusetts test without lots of preparation, he said



— and "many state legislators couldn't pass ANY of the tests." He drew applause when he suggested that legislators' taking the tests be made a condition of their mandating them.

There are "five fatal flaws" in the tougher standards movement, Kohn said. First, the tougher standards activists get motivation wrong. Recapping some of what he had said in the afternoon, he went over the research showing the ill effects of having students focus on how they are doing rather than on what they are doing, and the way an emphasis on scores limits students' willingness to experiment and be challenged.

The tougher standards advocates get teaching wrong, too, Kohn said. Most of them want a "basic skills" approach that pours a body of knowledge down a student's throat, he said — an approach that might be considered outdated except that there has never been a time when it worked all that well. "The problem with standards is that they're standardized," he said.

Third, the standards movement gets evaluation wrong, he said. For one thing, some students test well. Those who don't test well get systematically underrated. And when the schools try to remedy this ostensible problem with simulated test-taking sessions, they steal time from real education.

The worst tests are the "norm-referenced" exams, on which any question that is answered by too many students gets taken off the test, replaced by another question that, the test givers hope, will not be answered correctly by so many students. The idea is for there always to be only a few top scores — which has the effect of making many hard-working students feel worse about themselves than they should feel.

Fourth, the movement gets school reform wrong. It's coercive, and unnecessarily specific about what should be taught. "Accountability" usually turns out to be a code for tighter control over what happens in classrooms

## ***The problem with standards is they're standardized.***

by people who are not in classrooms," Kohn said, a danger that "has approximately the same effect on learning that a noose has on breathing."

Finally, the idea that harder is better leads to putting too much emphasis on a single criterion of difficulty, Kohn said. It's like saying, "if something isn't working very well, then insisting on more of the same will surely solve the problem."

"We have to join forces to oppose this monster," Kohn said, detailing ways that people could reach boards of education, legislators, school administrators, and others in relevant positions of authority. "Together we can make a difference."

I hope he's right. I remember when I was in school, compiling a record that by all the usual standards was outstanding. I longed for the chance to be trusted, to be given the time to just learn what I decided I needed to learn, at my own pace, and with my own digressions. Try as I might, I found that I could earn grades, credits, degrees — but not trust. In the end, I learned, school was something that happened to you because you were young. It was like having your body go through all those changes, or being bullied on the playground: It was something you suffered because you were small, that's

all. And the only cure for it was to get older, put up with it, do your time. Then, finally, like not being spanked any more, the school would have its last shot at you and at last finally you would be TOO OLD for it.

But that's just the point. By then you are too old. Had it not been for the Sixties, which took me outside of my own culture both through science and spirituality, I would not have been educated at all, in any meaningful sense. Kohn was continuing the heritage of that era, and I was grateful to him.

I think my mother would have been critical of Kohn's approach as it related to lower-income schools, like the junior high where she taught in Miami just before she retired. In fact, during the question-answer sessions, the one strong critic of Kohn's views was a former Boston University professor who insisted that in the chaotic environments experienced by many inner-city kids, a structured school experience was very helpful. Mom got a special award at such a school, applauded by all those tough black dudes carrying sharpened Afro combs, for how well she reached those students. Like being their tough Mama, she told me — "I come to this classroom to teach math, and you are here to learn, so no nonsense."

Yes, to learn, but in a way that only emphasized Kohn's main points. When situations have not reached the point of breaking down, and the subject matter is not that clear-cut, that is NOT the approach to take — indeed, continuing along that path may bring on the breakdown.

When the dust had settled, what Kohn made me want to do most was read John Dewey, finally — a fellow Vermonter he mentioned more than once during the day's speaking engagements. I know Dewey believed in learning from experience, an idea he derived from his understanding of the way the Vermont agricultural way of life was an education in itself — sort of like Dorothy Canfield Fisher's book about the spoiled city girl who goes to a farm and finds herself unexpectedly growing up. John Dewey, forbearer of today's progressive educators. Never got to read him in any of my courses or outside of them.

It wasn't on any test.

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*Editor's Note:* In the Winter 2000 issue of *Paths*, we published an interview with Alfie Kohn, conducted by Ron Miller, our Executive Editor. The interview is online at <[www.great-ideas.org/Kohn.htm](http://www.great-ideas.org/Kohn.htm)>. See page 46 for additional resources on Alfie Kohn.

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