

My Son is Not a Dog By Marvin Berkowitz, Ph.D.

It was early in my career when I first had to confront the idea of how we think about kids. As an undergraduate at the University of Buffalo over 40 years ago, I took Willis Overton's developmental psychology class, which focused on a chapter he was writing with Hayne Reese on what they called "models of man." It essentially explored the assumptions about fundamental human nature implicit in the leading psychological theories of the day. And it starkly contrasted a behaviorist (mechanistic) approach from a constructivist (organismic) approach. The former sees the person as a recipient of external inputs (experience) that accrue molecularly. People are not initiators of interactions nor interpreters of experience, merely the passive recipients of and responders to what the world does to us. And development happens smoothly as these bits of experience add up, much like the formation of a stalactite in a cave. It is largely a mechanical cause and effect process. The great thinkers in this tradition are B.F. Skinner and Ivan Pavlov.

Quite differently, the constructivist approach sees the child as an innate meaning maker. Even the newborn infant interprets experience. And initiates interactions with the world simply to help make sense of it. We develop not in straight lines but in spurts and steps and in stages that may be more different in kind than in amount. We are innate scientists trying to make sense of a complex world. The great thinker in this tradition is Jean Piaget.

So which are we? What is our true nature? moreWell we are both, as they both tap into some fundamental truths about how we function. We are both impacted by experience and seek out experience and interpret it.

This may seem abstract, but it is of critical importance to understanding kids and to raising and educating them. What the mechanistic model does is reduce the human being to what he or she shares with most organisms. Behaviorist principles apply not just to humans; hence the title of Skinner's famous book *The Behavior of Organisms*. All organisms. Constructivism, on the other hand, describes characteristics of humans that are largely specific to our species. Planaria worms and gerbils do not interpret the world and project meaning onto it, at least not in any systematic and profound way.

So as educators, how do we want to treat children? Do we want to treat them as we would our pets? Or as we ourselves would want to be treated? Do we want to think of them as animals to be shaped and trained by behaviorist principles (reward and punishment)? Or do we want to think of them as co-authors of their own unique journeys to maturity? Clearly (I assume), I support the latter. After all, one of the great principles of ethics is respect for personhood. Respect for *all* persons...even little ones. Another great ethical principle is reciprocity, as in the Golden Rule; i.e., treat others (even little others) as you would want to be treated.

Yet in character education (as a microcosm of education more broadly), we routinely enact strategies that are far more resonant with behaviorism than with constructivism. We resort over and over again to behaviorist principles. We routinely give rewards for good character/behavior and punishments for undesirable character/behavior. We routinely convene entire school bodies to watch the conferral of rewards (our “character assemblies”) and shout them to the heavens (or at least as far as our PA systems will broadcast). This is precisely how I train my dog...with praise, reprimands, and rewards.

The difference is that my dog has very limited capacity to understand language, so I can't negotiate, explain, or even collaboratively solve with him. My son and nearly every one of your students can, however. You wouldn't think that judging by the popularity of Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS), a program that has been strongly supported by the US Department of Education and hence many state DOEs. It began as a more humane way to improve the behavior of severely cognitively impaired children, who have very limited cognitive and linguistic capacities to access for behavior management. Hence, language and logical reasoning are less valuable as mediators of development and behavior change. Then the Special Education world decided to apply it to many more diagnostic categories, including those for whom cognition and language were more than ample to support non-behaviorist approaches. And then someone in the US government decided to transform it into a school-wide model for ALL children in ALL schools. And a model that was designed for highly limited-capacity children became the blueprint for all children.

So what do we know from research about what works for kids?

- Punishment is a very ineffective behavior management technique. There is, for example, much evidence that school suspensions are not helpful. In a large two-nation study, Hemphill et al. (2006) concluded that “school suspensions may increase the likelihood of future antisocial behavior” (p. 736).
- Material rewards for “good behavior” tend to impede the internalization of character and values (intrinsic motivation). In a meta-analysis of the research in the field, Deci, Koestner and Ryan (1999) conclude that rewards (especially for engaging in or completing desirable behaviors) can indeed be effective in controlling behavior but the collateral damage is that it reduces intrinsic motivation to continue to do such behaviors. And the effects were much more negative for children than for college students.
- Children who feel connected to school and adults and who feel empowered to help create and manage their education perform better academically and show greater character development (see Streight, 2013 for an overview). The former Child Development Project, now Caring School Community, has decades of evidence for this in action in schools (collaborativeclassroom.org).

I have to admit that I am cheating here. I have set up a false dichotomy. As Self-Determination Theory has elegantly proposed, this is more of a continuum. On one end (the bad end) is a priori contingent material rewards; i.e., you know in advance that there is a deal – you will get a thing if you do a certain behavior. On the other end are completely non-material, non-contingent, and a posteriori natural consequences; i.e., you learn that you feel good about yourself after having engaged in service to another person. But there is a middle ground; in fact lots of middle ground; for example, public praise or private affirmation.

A good guide is to do the following:

- Stop the material rewards. Give them away. One exemplary principal donated all the trinkets in the school she had just taken over to a children's hospital.
- Shift to praise.
- And make it a posteriori. No a priori deals or expectations; just caught in the moment of doing good.
- Ditch the audiences. Make the praise private. Just a hand on the shoulder, and an affirming statement without witnesses. Or positive office referrals, positive notes home, or affirming calls to parents.
- And lots of opportunities to serve others, so the intrinsic value can be discovered...by the little meaning makers that constructivism tells us kids are.

I could go on and on with reasons for treating students as people and not as animals to be trained. If you want powerful diatribes on this topic, take a look at Alfie Kohn's *[Punished by Rewards](#)* or my book *[You Can't Teach Through a Rat](#)*. For now, simply ask yourself the question: do you treat students like people or like your dog? Do you enact strategies designed for lower species of mammals or which respect the dignity and intelligence and autonomy of all humans? I know my answer. I love my son and I love my dog...but they are not the same.

Deci, E.L., Koestner, R., & Ryan, R.M. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 125, 627-668.

Hemphill, S.A., Toumbourou, J.W., Herrenkohl, T.I., McMorris, B. J., & Catalano, R.F. (2006). The effect of school suspension and arrests on subsequent adolescent antisocial behavior in Australia and the United States. Journal of Adolescent Health, 39, 736-744.

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