



Alfie Kohn

Fear of Spoiling:

Rethinking Common Assumptions About Kids and Parenting

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All the research about effective parenting teaches us that loved, empowered kids are in the best position to deal constructively with unloving, disempowering circumstances. - Alfie Kohn

Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. The author of eleven [books](#) and scores of [articles](#), Kohn's criticisms of competition and rewards have been widely discussed and debated, and he has been described in *Time* magazine as "perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades [and] test scores."

Kohn's latest book, [The Myth of the Spoiled Child](#), is not about how to parent. Rather it is an examination of the traditionalist roots of attitudes about children that our culture has come to accept. We have been encouraged to worry: Are we being firm enough with our children? Are we too involved in their lives? Do kids today feel too good about themselves? Those questions, according to Kohn, are largely misconceived. They distract us from the shifts we ought to be considering. The sensible alternative to over-parenting is not less parenting, but better parenting. The alternative to permissiveness is not to be more controlling but more responsive. And the alternative to narcissism is not conformity but reflective rebelliousness.

Complaints about pushover parents and coddled kids are hardly new, he shows, and there is no evidence that either phenomenon is especially widespread today – let alone more common than in previous generations. Moreover, new research reveals that helicopter parenting is quite rare and, surprisingly, may do more good than harm when it does occur. The major threat to healthy child development, Kohn argues, is posed by parenting that is too controlling rather than too indulgent.

CULTURAL ASSUMPTION 1: Children who are successful ought to be rewarded for it – if they are not, then they will lose motivation to be successful. Also, the ones who are not successful should not even be acknowledged.

According to Kohn, the widely held belief that humans are motivated by the prospect of receiving rewards is based, it turns out, on an antiquated version of psychology constructed largely on experiments with lab animals. More recent research demonstrates that different kinds of motivation exist, which behave differently and have different sources. "Extrinsic" motivation refers to an outcome outside of the task in which one is engaged; one might be induced to read, for example, to get a prize or someone's approval. It is all about the reward. "Intrinsic" motivation, on the other hand, means wanting to do something for its own sake – to read just to acquire information or because it is exciting to see what direction the story might take. Thus, what matters is not how motivated people are, but how people are motivated. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are inversely related. Scores of studies show that the more you reward people for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward. Incentives, in other words, are actually corrosive.

CULTURAL ASSUMPTION 2: Not only do we have to make sure that kids succeed, we have to make sure they are motivated to beat everyone else.

Competition has been described as America's state religion and is an arrangement in which people are pitted against one another at work, at play, and even at home. An entire body of research suggests that competition is uniquely counterproductive. Typically, its effect is to undermine self-confidence, relationships, empathy and the inclination to help, intrinsic motivation, and perhaps most surprisingly, excellence. When we set children against one another in contests – from spelling bees to awards assemblies to science 'fairs' (that are really contests), from prizes to the best painting or the most books read – we teach them to confuse excellence with winning, as if their only way to do something well is to outdo others. We invite them to see their peers not as potential friends or collaborators, but as obstacles to their own success. Quite predictably, researchers have found that competition undermines achievement. Kohn point out that here in Silicon Valley, the most insightful companies

understand this mindset and do not set up their employees against each other. It does damage to their productivity AND is damaging to their mental health.

CULTURAL ASSUMPTION 3: Kids need to fail. The best way to get children ready for the painful things that may happen to them later in life is to make sure they experience plenty of pain while they're young.

Kohn captures a mindset that is widely accepted and applied with this acronym BGUTI (rhymes with duty): Better Get Used To It. BGUTI actually takes two forms. The positive version holds that it is beneficial for children to have unpleasant experiences of the type they will presumably encounter later. The negative version says that the absence of unpleasant experiences – or the presence of experiences that are ‘unrealistically’ supportive or reassuring – is harmful. Thus, if children are spared from having to do things that cause them anxiety, or are permitted to revise and resubmit a school assignment without penalty, a typical response is “That is not how things work in the real world!” Underlying such a comment is the assumption that life is pretty unpleasant and that childhood is mostly about preparation for what comes later. According to Kohn: From a developmental perspective, BGUTI is flat-out wrong. People do not get better at coping with unhappiness because they were deliberately made unhappy when they were young. On the contrary, what best prepares children to deal with the challenges of the real world is to experience success and joy, to feel supported and respected, to receive loving guidance and unconditional care and the chance to have a say about what happens to them.

Kohn's Recipe For Reflective Rebelliousness: Most of us as parents are subject to powerful social pressures to make our children conform, play it safe, and get ahead. It takes courage on our part to encourage our children to be courageous. Perhaps the kid who objects to spending his after-school hours filling out more worksheets and slogging through textbooks will grow up to do great things, but his sibling who passively follows directions sure makes our lives easier. According to Kohn, “I think our challenge as parents is to rise about that preference for the child of least resistance and to think beyond short-term success as a criterion – particularly if success is defined by conventional and insipid standards. Don't we want our kids to be inspiring rather than spend their lives just collecting tokens (grades, money, approval)? Don't we want them to think in the plural rather than focusing only on what will benefit them personally? Don't we want them to appraise traditions with fresh eyes and raise questions about what seems silly or self-defeating or oppressive, rather than doing what has always been done just because it's always been done?”

Three fundamental components of Kohn's ambitious agenda:

- To support kids' inclination to care and develop a 'prosocial' orientation;
- To support their self-confidence and assertiveness;
- To help them embrace the value of skepticism and nonconformity.

Kohn encourages parents to adopt 'deep modeling'. Deep modeling supplements showing with telling – setting an example for children, but also trying to be explicit about what we are doing and why we are doing it. We can let our children know how we think and feel our way through real-world ethical conundrums by describing the factors we consider in making decisions: previous experience, the principles from which we are operating, and the thoughts and emotions that we take into account. From watching and listening to us, kids not only learn more about how we try to live a moral life; they also figure out that morality is rarely cut-and-dried. Deep modeling might be thought of as a way of taking children 'backstage' in the way that teachers actually solve problems – in front of students – freely making mistakes and thinking aloud about how to correct them. Kids are thereby able to experience what happens before (or behind or beneath) the ethical decisions that adults make – someone who is imperfect and often uncertain, struggling to figure stuff out – or do the right thing and make his or her way in the world. It shows them how to question and encourages them to do so.

Since many of our children's values and attitudes are formed by the mass media, every parent ought to offer an informal multiyear course in media literacy. We may not be able to say 'Don't watch,' but we can watch with them and show them how to view critically, how to recognize propaganda tricks used to sell them stuff they don't need, how to identify hidden values and defuse attempts to manipulate them.

Last, we need to recognize that our children may decide not to respond to a given situation the same way we would, and that is something we have to respect. Any list of long-term goals for our children we formulate should include a meta-goal: We want them to be thoughtful enough to formulate meaningful goals for themselves. And whatever they come up with ultimately must supersede our goals for them.