

# ladder of doom **or** unconditional love?

By Yvonne Walus\*

Do you control your child's behaviour through a series of rewards and punishments? Unconditional parenting takes a more child-centred approach where empathy, unconditional love and giving your child options can promote greater harmony in your household.

## picture this

It's drizzling and your daughter is planning to walk to school.

"Put on your raincoat," you tell her.  
"I don't need it."  
"Please, honey."  
"No way."

When it comes to disciplining defiant children, a myriad of options awaits us: time-out, star charts, privilege removal, a serious talking to ...

Actually, there are only two solutions: make the kids do your bidding, or offer them unconditional support.

## solution 1 the ladder of certain doom

"Ladder of Doom" was made popular by the renowned child psychologist Nigel Latta (him of the Politically Incorrect Parenting Show). The disciplining technique is as cool as its name. It's like a star chart in reverse: you create a ladder with the child's bedtime at the top and mark time intervals of 15 minutes at every rung going down. Each time the child misbehaves, the marker moves down a rung. The child has to go to bed at the time indicated, even if that's straight after school. The marker can move up the ladder for good behaviour – if you like, you can create jobs for the child to perform in order to earn the time back.

Brilliant? You bet. I've successfully used the Ladder of Doom type of techniques to make the children do as they're told. I'm also a big believer in praise and rewards: star charts, Ladders of Gladness, spot prizes for good behaviour or just because gifts are my way of telling them I love them.

## solution 2 unconditional parenting

When I stumbled upon a library DVD titled Unconditional Parenting, though, I discovered a brand new philosophy. Alfie Kohn is the author of Unconditional Parenting (in book and DVD format). His theory is that parents should work with children to instill self-discipline, rather than do things to children in order to control their behaviour. So far, so good. Diane Levy promotes the idea of self-discipline and yet

she's a proponent of good old time-out. Nothing outrageous there.

So there I was, reading along and nodding my head, when I got to the section about punishment ... er ... consequences ... and rewards. Alfie Kohn rejects consequences for unacceptable behaviour and, equally, he rejects rewards for desirable behaviour. Say what??? Positive reinforcement may be wrong? But that's the cornerstone of the way I parent!

"Rewards, like punishments," Kohn claims, "are extremely effective at getting us one thing and one thing only: temporary obedience." Where they apparently fall short is teaching children how to become decent human beings. He refers back to studies showing that "rewards are strikingly ineffective at producing lasting change in attitudes or behaviours". Like training animals, rewards and punishments teach your children that if they do as they're told, they'll get a treat. The danger being, they might only conform if there's a treat in sight.

Furthermore, Kohn argues against any parenting practice that teaches children they have to earn parental approval. Children have the right, he says, to be loved unconditionally by their parents. They need to know they will be accepted and cherished even if they mess up.

So, is he saying we should let children do what they want? "No," Kohn replies. "Kids don't need us to back off and let them do whatever they want, any more than they need us to control them. That's a false

dichotomy, and I reject both options. The real alternative to doing things to kids is to work with them."

How? His book has examples on how to help kids feel unconditionally loved even when we have to say no to them, how to get in the habit of imagining the way our words and actions appear from the child's point of view, and how to give kids more opportunities to make good choices.

For example, in the raincoat scenario above, Alfie would try to determine the cause of the child's reaction. Let's say the girl doesn't want to wear her raincoat because it's getting too small and looks hideous. The dad, on the other hand, wants to make sure she doesn't get soaked because the last time she walked in the rain without appropriate gear, she ended up with pneumonia. Instead of having a big battle of wills and ordering his daughter to do as she's told, Alfie would brainstorm possible solutions with her:

- Wear her semi-waterproof jacket.
- Use an umbrella.
- Accept a lift from Dad on his way to work.
- Borrow her sister's raincoat.

Alfie emphasises how important it is to involve the children in the decision-making. "If a child is doing something that disturbs others," he says, "then sitting down with her later and asking, What do you think we can do to solve this problem? will likely be more effective than bribes or threats. It also helps a child learn how to solve problems, and teaches that her ideas and feelings are important."

## parents say

- Whichever method we choose, it's important to stick to it exclusively. My own children, of course, would prefer it if we used the mix-and-match approach: they'd like us to say yes to "no consequences", and no to "no rewards". (Auckland mum)
- Always present a united front to the children, so they don't go behind one parent's back to the other. (Auckland dad)
- Just take away their electronics for a day. If you like, you can still tell them you love them. (Auckland dad)
- Give a warning. At the first sight of unacceptable behaviour, tell the children to quit it. Too often parents take the bad behaviour, and take it, and take it some more, until suddenly they can't take it any more and overreact. (Wellington granny)
- You know, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. No matter which discipline method you choose, when they grow up, they'll blame you for everything from burnt toast to being unemployed. So why worry? (Christchurch mum)
- What's the problem? You're the parent. Make them listen. (About-to-become-a-mum-and-realise-it's-not-as-easy-as-that, Hamilton.)

## conclusion

Most of us have been brought up on time-out, Ladders of Doom, and rewards for good behaviour. Alfie Kohn's philosophy makes sense, but it's also a lot harder to implement than a star chart.

Imagine this scenario: You ask your son to leave your iPhone alone. He complies, but when you look again, the phone's gone.

"Did you take it?" you ask your boy.  
"Yep."  
"Okay, good, he didn't lie. "Where is it?"  
"Not telling."

What would Alfie Kohn do? Empathise with the child. Try to read the behaviour for clues as to what's actually going on: all misbehaviour from your child is a cry for help. If you address the underlying need, you'll change the behaviour ... Ah, here's one I can relate to: accept the child's feelings, limit the behaviour.

In other words, "I can see you're trying to get my attention. Now go to your room. Your bedtime is 4pm today and you can forget that iPad for Christmas!"

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