



**Episode #131:**

**Alfie Kohn On Why Children Thrive  
When We Practice Unconditional Parenting**

October 23, 2018

Debbie: Hi Alfie, welcome to the podcast.

Alfie: Glad to be here.

Debbie: I am thrilled to have you on the show. I probably reference your book, *Unconditional Parenting* at least once every 20 episodes or so. And it's just been an important part of my life and so I'm just excited to share your wisdom with my listeners and we have a lot of parents of younger kids, so this may be the first time that they're going to be hearing some of your parenting ideas. So I'm excited to dive right into it.

Alfie: All right, let's do that.

Debbie: Let's do it. So I want to talk about *Unconditional Parenting* first. That you, you've obviously written many books and we could probably talk for hours, but I wanted to hone in on what would be most useful for my audience. So the book *Unconditional Parenting*, I probably read it when my son, who's now 14, was six or seven. It was a game changer for me. It was one of those books that fundamentally changed how I parent. It just shifted everything for me. So I would love if you could just start by explaining what you mean by unconditional parenting and maybe even a little bit about what led to you writing that book.

Alfie: Well, I can try to summarize a whole book in a few sentences, but of course that's always a somewhat futile labor. Most parenting resources are premised on the idea that whatever the parent wants the kid to do that's legitimate and here are some practical tips for getting the child to comply. Uh, I begin from the premise that we need to think about our long-term goals for children, the kind of people we'd like them to become. And if we shift our focus in that way to the long term, then we have to ask questions such as what does this child need and how can I meet those needs? Which is a completely different question from how can I get my kid to do whatever I tell her. And what kids need among other things is not merely to be loved, not even loved a lot, but to be loved unconditionally, which means for who the child is, not for what the child does.

So there are no strings attached, and even when a kid screws up or falls short, the child never doubts, never is given a reason to doubt that we still care. Um, it's not just that we think that, it's that it looks that way from the child's perspective, which is a critical difference. And that notion of being loved no matter what turns out to be the exact opposite of what most parenting advice consists of, which gives children the message 'You have to jump through my hoops in order to get my acknowledgement, my attention, my approval, my care'. Um, for example, praising children 'good job, I really like the way you dot dot dot' sends the message that that love and excitement and enthusiasm has strings attached. It's only when you are well behaved or impressive in school or look pretty or sound smart or funny or whatever. It doesn't matter what the condition is. The point is that there are conditions attached.

So praise, like other forms of reward is a form of conditional parenting. And that's the exact opposite of what kids need in order to, um, to flourish. And the

flip side of, of positive reinforcement, that patronizing pat on the head, as if we were training a pet, is um a punishment. Where we deliberately make children unhappy in order to change their behavior and make them come around to do whatever it is we want. For example, forcibly isolating young children when they need us most. Of course that sounds unpleasant. So we prefer a euphemism like 'time out', which makes us feel better about making kids feel terrible. So in the book I try to talk about why we need to move away from reward and punishment and more importantly, why we need to shift not only the methods we use, our techniques, but far more radically and important to shift our focus to what children need and not on new slicker, jazzier ways to control them in order that we can help meet the very goals we ourselves have for our children in the long term. So that's the, that's the brief synopsis.

Debbie: That was a great summary and you know, I have so many questions and I definitely want to talk about rewards and punishments and get to that because especially for parents of differently wired kids, there's so much of that that is encouraged for us in terms of behavior modification. But before we talk about that, I just want to circle back to even just the issue of compliance. Again, you know, my audience is filled with parents who are raising kids who are some way neurologically atypical. And so that is something that is a huge issue for us because often our kids are wired in a way to not be compliant at all. And so that's kind of a first sign that our kid is moving through the world differently and it's a trigger for us as their parents. We feel like they are these flashing signals that, you know, you're not doing a good job as a parent. And I think one of the reasons I feel such a connection with your work is because that paradigm, that parenting paradigm, that compliance is what we're looking for, and we want these kids who are well behaved, and that's what we value. That hurts differently wired kids and their families even more because they're so far outside the norm.

Alfie: Yes, that's right. And that may help to explain why a truly manipulative approach, really like we're training pets, has come to be accepted by mainstream advisors where kids are concerned, uh, who are atypical as, as you put it. Stuff that we in many cases would never dream of doing to neuro typical kids, has come to be the standard recommendation for kids with, with autism and learning disabilities and, and all sorts of things. You know, my, my late friend, Herb Lovett, who I think of as one of my mentors when it comes to kids with special needs, he wrote two remarkable books I highly recommend. One's called *Cognitive Counseling and Persons with Special Needs* and the other's called *Simply Learning to Listen*. And Herb Lovett used to say, the only two problems with special education in this country is that it's not special and it sure as hell isn't education. Because the point is not to listen to and respond to what kids are telling us in different ways, not always verbally. The point is to coerce them into looking as normal as possible and meeting our expectations even if those make them very unhappy. And so we have to keep, whenever somebody says, if I can't bribe or threaten kids to get them to do what I want, well I hope you give me lots of practical suggestions for what I can do.

And of course I want to take a step back and ask what you can do in order to reach what goal. Because you know, in the United States over the last, I don't

know, half century, there has been a move away from some of the harshest and cruelest forms of, uh, of socializing of kids where, for example, using physical violence on them, spanking and slapping and so on, is, is gradually declining at least within certain subcultures, but only to be replaced by other forms of punishment and the flip side, reward. Jump through the hoops and here's the sticker, or the gold star or the candy bar, or the dollar or the grade or the pat on the head that I'll give you. So even though the techniques have shifted a bit, the fundamental question, what are we trying to get, has not.

Debbie: So, well then let's talk about rewards and bribes and punishments. And again, this is something I think as you said, is so relevant, especially for parents with atypical kids because so much of when we're discovering a kid is differently wired and it's about often school management, classroom management, getting kids to not take up as much teacher time or be more quote unquote normal to fit into this structure. So much of it is about behavior modification. I don't, I imagine most people listening have had reward charts. Um, I know my son in first grade, he got little things the teacher gave him, he'd stick them in his pocket and by the end of the day, if he had five, then you know that meant he had a successful day. And you know, I had just read Dan Pink's book *Drive*, about what really motivates people. And I was like, this is not, this doesn't feel good. And I would talk to therapists and they're like, yeah, but it works. This is what you gotta do with these kids. So I'm just wondering, can you address that? But also I would love if you could share what you know to be true about what the science says, what the research says about the true impact of rewards on kids.

Alfie: So, sure. Let's start with that last phrase 'but it works'. First of all our immediate response should be, works to get what? And the answer is, according to decades of research that I began exploring, um 25 years ago with my book *Punished by Rewards*, drawing on research that had appeared much earlier than that in some cases, is rewards like punishments can get you one thing and only one thing ever. And that is temporary compliance at an enormous cost. And that, even that temporary compliance is not guaranteed. And the same is true of punishment, which we prefer to call consequences, because we don't like to think of ourselves as punitive. But of course it's still a punishment. Um, punishments and rewards. If we say to kids, do this or here's what I'm going to do to you, or, in the case of rewards, do this, and you'll get that. In, the best scenario is, as long as kids think they're in danger of being punished or as long as they think there's a possibility they'll be rewarded, they may emit the behavior that the person with the power demands.

But no reward, no sticker, star chart, praise or threat of consequence can ever help children develop a commitment to good values or an interest in learning or a tendency to care about other people. In fact, with that last example, research shows that rewards have exactly the opposite effect. Children who are frequently rewarded or praised by their parents are less caring and helpful than other children, and the effect is most pronounced if you reward or praise them for being helpful or generous. 'Good job, I like the way you were so nice to Diane and you gave her some of your dessert.' Well, that child just became a little more selfish because by rewarding her for this, you made her less concerned about the

impact of her actions on other people and more focused on the question, what am I going to get for doing, you know, whatever it is.

That's the criterion for getting the reward. See, when we do things like star charts and stickers and praise or various consequences, what we're mostly teaching children is, I have the power to make you do whatever I decide unilaterally. You have less power, you are dependent on me and so I can reward you for obedience. So when people say this stuff works, not only does it not work over the long haul because it's focused only on the behavior you can see and measure, the stuff on the surface, but it actually undermines children's commitment to the thing we're trying to get. And it's not just true of generosity, which research shows subsides or declines when kids are rewarded or given positive reinforcement for helping. It's true for all sorts of things.

If you want to destroy children's interest in reading, the fastest way to do that is to give them a prize when they read a book. Now they've learned that reading is obviously something I wouldn't want to do, that's why they have to bribe me to do it. If I paid you to quit smoking or lose weight or go to the gym, I will actually reduce your intrinsic motivation to do those things. And now you're less likely to quit smoking, lose weight, go to the gym, as soon as the rewards stop because I haven't worked with you. I have done something to you. And unfortunately, kids who are who are not neuro typical, kids who have special challenges to face, are those we are most likely to do things to rather than to work with. And you can't listen to people who simply brush that off and say that's necessary with those kids. All human beings flourish when we greet them as human beings, when we respond to what they're telling us, when we reach out to them in whatever way we can, which in some cases can take a lot of time and patience to be sure, when we do less talking and more listening and when our goal is not mere obedience, but something more ambitious than that.

So, much of my work with teachers and with parents is about that shift from doing to, to working with and what's, the critical light bulb, it takes awhile to go off for some people, is that rewards and praise are just as much a doing to approach as punishment.

Debbie: Well, I really appreciate you know just sharing about how that does undermine what we're trying to do here and I think what you're saying is that we're always after the quick fix, right? We want, this behavior has to stop now, we need things to get better now. And as you said, it does take a lot of time and patience and I think that's where we run into trouble. And you know, I think by time and patience we're not talking a couple of weeks, we're talking years and years and years, right? Of consistency and listening and communication. Is that...?

Alfie: Yeah, but there's no substitute for that and in fact it's not as if we've got something that while imperfect at least gets the job done faster. When we use rewards and punishments we're not getting the job done. What's, what's happening there is we're just adding more time because we're killing the intrinsic motivation that we're trying to promote. So it's not like, well, we'll reward them for now to jumpstart what we're looking for, and then when an intrinsic motivation kicks in, then we can fade out the rewards. That's highly

unrealistic. As soon as you offer a reward to a child for doing something you've made your job as a parent tougher because the kid now has that much less in terms of an authentic commitment to doing it. You have responded with a form of control. And you know, guess what, people don't really like to be controlled. And so there tends to be that that reactivity, there tends to be that loss of intrinsic motivation and there tends to be that response to the conditionality of the response. The ways in which we're saying to kids, I don't love you for who you are, I just get excited about you when you do what I demand. You know so much of this too is focused on the the misconception that we need to focus on kids' behavior.

I, my rule of thumb is if, if there was ever something named after me called Kohn's Law, which of course there never will be, but if there were, this is what it would be: the value of a resource for parents is inversely proportional to the number of times it contains the word behavior. When you have books or articles or podcasts or seminars that talk about, a lot about kids' behavior, it's time to run the other way. Because when it, when you're focused on behavior, you're not focused on the values and motives and needs that underpin behavior. You're not focused on the child anymore, only on what the child does at the surface so you're not getting, besides being disrespectful, you're not getting to the source of whatever the problem is. That's why anyone who, you know, that the central etiology that gets in the way of doing right by children, is behaviorism and the people who want you to become an accountant, keeping track of of kids', kids' actions and then giving them doggie biscuits when you like those actions.

Debbie: Yeah I mean, I think, you know you use the word respect. That is again, another thing that I find your approach so respectful to our kids and I think that's so important because, and I want to talk about this, this unconditional love aspect, because so many of our kids also are repeatedly getting the message that there is something wrong with who they inherently are. You know, that's just, it's being reinforced by other kids in school, by teachers, by coaches who don't get them and often by us as their parents. So can you talk about that difference between, you know, unconditional love and, and us just saying we love them. Like what is that experience like for our kids?

Alfie: I think you're right that they get that, they internalize that message, often lifelong. And that's not just kids who you described as being wired differently, that's all, all people who are raised with, with rewards and punishments, with conditional parenting. This is why it's critical to realize that it's not just criticism that makes kids feel like they're not okay as they are. It's praise. Praise says when you do this, I will say good job, you know, way to go, high five, fist bump, big smile, hug and so on. It's when you put those strings on it, what kids need is to know that they're loved for no damn good reason, just for who they are. And so in my book *Unconditional Parenting* I talk about ways by which we can make sure that kids get this message that they never have to earn our love. And you know, when you put that in isolation, everybody nods and says, yeah, that sounds nice, but this means throwing out 98 percent of the advice that we're given which is precisely about making kids earn what they experience as our love and care and approval.

And that doesn't mean that we can't guide them, uh, which we must. That's part of a parent's job. It, it doesn't mean that we can't express concern about unacceptable actions, but we respond to it by helping them to, to look at the impact of their actions on other people, not shifting what they do in order to avoid getting our anger or in order to get our, our approval. So when we put conditions on our love and acceptance, you have to do this for me to be pleased with you, kids internalize that, those conditions, as Carl Rogers taught us many decades ago. And now you never really think um you're okay, except when you meet these certain standards and that conditionality is, I mean, what we're looking for is not just high self esteem. It's unconditional self esteem where even when you're really having trouble with stuff and you run into problems in your life and you do things you're not proud of, there's still that core of faith in yourself and your own, your own competence. That's what we chip away at unwittingly every time we say, good job, I liked that you did whatever, and the kid learns I guess I'm only good when I keep doing whatever.

Debbie: So I want to talk about this a little bit more, this idea of praise because for those of us who don't use timeouts or behavioral plans with rewards, et cetera, I think those of us who have moved past that, many of us are still using quote unquote positive reinforcement. Right? And I've heard so many times from people, especially with atypical kids who have these lagging skills, they need a lot more reinforcement than a typical kid. So I hear what you're saying about not praising them, I really liked the way you did this, and so I'm listening to that like, hmm, that's what I've been doing. Just calling attention to things like that and so, but I understand it's still important to talk about those things. How do you do that in a way that isn't connected or attached to a sense of worth or or love?

Alfie: First, we might be talking about it more often than we need to. Sometimes we may just want to watch. Maybe we feel this compulsion to stick our nose in and offer some sort of intervention when it isn't really necessary. So that's step one. Step two is sometimes when we think we do need to say something, we can simply describe what it is that we saw without a judgment attached because that's what praise is. Praise isn't about encouragement. There are many loving and authentic ways to encourage children, you know, just by listening to them and loving them. But, but when we praise them, we're judging them. We're saying you have met my standards. I approve. And judgment is not really what facilitates growth. You know, it doesn't for us as adults and it doesn't for, for children. So sometimes we can just say, I noticed that you did such and such, to help the child reflect on having done it and maybe why he or she did it or didn't do something.

And then the, the other thing we can do instead of praise, again, praise like rewards and other rewards and punishments is a doing to approach. So part of a working with approach is to ask questions. How come you did that? Why did you decide to do that? I mean that's with all sorts, I remember when my daughter was drawing like crazy, you know, when she was quite young. You know I wouldn't, the last thing I want to do is steal her pleasure and pride in what she's done by telling her in effect that she has to look to me to decide that what she's done is, is good or impressive or nice. Instead I would say things like, well you,

you put toes on on those, on those animals. I don't think you did that last week. How did you decide to put toes on? That pulls her into her drawing instead of praise, which pulls her out of the drawing and into my face to see if I approve. Um, or I could ask how come you decided to let Frank play with your toy? I know you like that toy a lot. That helps the child to construct a sense of himself as a person who wants to make other people happy. As opposed to praise, which just leads the kid to think about how do I make mommy or daddy happy? So I talked more about this of course in the books and alternatives to it. But um, and I realize that with, with kids who are less verbal and kids who struggle to make sense of social interactions, um, there's no getting around the fact, there is no shortcut to the fact, that it does take more time and patience. But the shortcut of bribes and threats doesn't get us anywhere near where we want to go. It just makes the job harder.

Debbie: Yeah because, can you just talk about what you see as our goals for these kids?

Alfie: Well, when I start, when I do a workshop for parents, I begin by asking, nevermind what my goals are, what are your goals? How do you want your kid to turn out? What do you hope your child will be like years from now? And I ask everybody to think about that for a bit and then I ask them to tell me. I just go around the room and ask, do you have an adjective for me? And I've been doing this a long time and I've done it all over the world and I've done it with typical and atypical kids, with younger and older kids, with parents and teachers, in urban and rural areas and so on, and I get the same bloody list more or less everywhere I go. Every time I ask that question. Like literally like 80 percent of the items on any list are on every list. People say, well, in the long run, I want my child to be happy, to be ethical, to be successful, to be responsible, caring, compassionate, lifelong learner, creative, curious.

These are the terms that come up over and over again, and so I then spend the rest of my time with them saying typical advice you're getting as parents and teachers at best is irrelevant to those goals and at worst is making it less likely that those goals will be reached. And basically that's what I do for a living, including working with teachers, in talking about academic education. What I do with people is say to them, you say you want this, so how come you're doing that? When that turns out to be conventional mainstream practices that according to research undermine the very things you say you want. Nevermind what I want for kids. You don't help kids to be caring and ethical by using power over them to focus on behaviors of which you approve. That's not ethical. You know you don't, you don't help kids in schools to become better thinkers who get a kick out of playing with ideas by giving them grades. You do exactly the opposite because grades kill interest in learning and so on.

Debbie: Again, I'm just remembering when I first read your book, I think Asher like I said, was six or seven and I had this conversation with my husband who, we were doing a lot of correcting, you know, at the dinner table and do this and I just, I turned to Derin and I'm like, why does that matter? Like, who cares if he does that, you know, it was so freeing really to just start really questioning, why. Why is this an issue? Why is this something that matters to us? And you know, I think you talking about looking at the future and that's something we talk a lot about

here on Tilt, is the importance of zooming out and looking at our ultimate goals because that's what we're, we're raising human beings. You know, as Dr Ross Greene says, we're not, we're not raising kids, we're raising these awesome autonomous self actualized adults that we want to, to be launching into the world. So...

Alfie: So why are we treating them like pets?

Debbie: Exactly.

Alfie: Who are not human beings at all. And maybe part of the answer to your question of why do we feel this need to constantly correct them, is that we are afraid of being judged by other people. That's why you have you ever seen a, a parent, you know, with a little baby in a stroller and somebody gives them a little toy and you say, can you say thank you? No, the child is too young to say thank you. And if the child doesn't feel any gratitude, when you tell kids they have to say thank you or I'm sorry, you're just teaching them to be insincere. But in any case, the reason we say that is because we're talking through the kid to say to the other adult, I know how to be a good parent. And so we worry more about how we'll be judged for the way our children act than we are worried about what the kid needs, what's in the kid's best interest and so on.

And one of the things that's really in the kid's best interest and that's so critical is, is our relationship. That your child needs to know that he or she has in you a caring ally, someone in whom he or she can trust. Someone who's always there, someone who whose love is unconditional. And that relationship is really frayed, at best, unravels when we use either punishment, which we call consequences, because now the kid is about as happy to see us coming as you or I would be to see a police car in our rear view mirror, or when we offer rewards for acceptable behavior because now we're not a caring ally, either. We're a goody dispenser on legs and the point again is just to please the person with the goodies, which is to say the person with power. So I can imagine that constantly correcting me at the dinner table is a great way first of all, for me to lose my appetite and hate family dinners because they're now unpleasant. But also it's a stage on which we are watching the dissolution of the parent-child relationship.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean that relationship piece. And I, I appreciate you talking about the judging too. That's something that again, a lot of the families in my community, that's a big issue because our kids are not fitting into the box and our kids are the problem kids often in classrooms. So I do think it's so important that our kids know that we have their back, you know, that they're our priority and that's something, it's a work in progress, right? For us to stop caring what other people think and, and really create that allyship with our, with our kids. So, you know, I'm imagining there's a lot of listeners who are thinking, oh crap, like I'm down, I went down the wrong road here or I've made some, been doing some accidental parenting and I'd like to kind of back up the truck a little bit. Do you have any words of advice, maybe one or two things parents listening can start doing in their lives if they want to get rid of rewards or try to start implementing some of these ideas in their family?

Alfie: Uh, sure. Um, the first thing is not to be too critical of yourself if you have been swept along with the behaviorist tide in our, in our culture by using rewards and punishments, and if they're, if you're saying, oh crap, I've done it wrong, then I have terrific faith in you because that's on the top at the top of my list for what makes a great parent is someone willing to gulp and say, oh boy, maybe maybe I can be doing it better. The people I worry about are those who scowl and fold their arms and dismiss what the research is saying. Oh, well that's not gonna work with my kid or that sounds good in theory, people who say that don't actually like the theory either, I've found. They find some way to dismiss stuff.

In effect what they're saying is they're putting their hands over their ears and going, 'la, la, la, la, la, I can't hear this'. So if you're saying, wow, this is disorienting, this is a challenge, that's the first step to making a shift. The second thing to do is to talk with others which is you know, a service that your conversations are providing. But also if you're lucky enough to have a co-parent to be learning about this working with approach together so that you can sort of keep an eye on each other. And if not then other parents in the community where you can say, oh my God, I felt myself slipping into the usual patronizing pat on the head 'good job', you know which once you start focusing on how manipulative and insincere it is, it's starts to feel like listening to fingernails running down a blackboard. But I don't know what to do with my kid who...and then you get moral support and maybe practical guidance from others who are also struggling with this. Because all of us, including me as a parent of two children, all of us are on a journey here.

Nobody's got it down. You can't get it down. I mean you can only continue to reflect and try to improve and remind yourself of of what we're looking for in the long run. In, in *Unconditional Parenting* I offer some more specific ideas for what it means to give kids more say about their lives because kids learn how to make good decisions by making decisions not by following directions. But what I don't do in the book, but I don't feel I can do, is offer some sort of a recipe. When your child does this, here are the three steps to take. I mean that manages to be insulting to you and your child at the same time because you really can't do that. I get emails almost every day from parents and teachers saying, what do I do with my kid who...and I say, I'd love to help, but I've never met you or your child.

I don't know enough about the people involved or the situation to provide any advice beyond the sort of broad guidelines I've already tried to offer in my written work and in my lectures. And you should mistrust anyone who doesn't know you and doesn't have compunctions about offering specific, here's what you do instead. The doing to approach, the rewards and punishments, are so popular, first because they keep us comfortably in control, but second because they purport to be a one size fits all easy solution to all problems with all people. So we hungrily grasp at them and that's, you've been sold the bill of goods here. The doing to I can explain in 10 seconds. The working with is a lifetime of trying to figure out how to flesh out these concepts and put them into practice in our own families.

Debbie: I love that. Yeah. I talk a lot about becoming fluent in our kids' language and I think that it is and it's a journey. It's, it's continual it doesn't ever end. Our kids are always changing, we're changing and I really appreciate your perspective and everything that you shared today. I think it's so insightful and really will resonate with the Tilt community. So, um, listeners, I just want to let you know that I will have links to Alfie's website and all of his books, which I encourage you to check out, on the show notes page for this. So Alfie, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

Alfie: My pleasure. I appreciate your interest.

**RESOURCES MENTIONED:**

- [Alfie Kohn's website](#)
- [\*Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason\*](#) by Alfie Kohn
- [\*Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes\*](#) by Alfie Kohn
- [\*The Myth of the Spoiled Child: Coddled Kids, Helicopter Parents, and Other Phony Crises\*](#) by Alfie Kohn