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TEACHING MY CHILD TO RESIST IN KINDERGARTEN

christine ferris

As a teacher, I always had a few kids in my class who would resist the classroom norms. They didn't want to do what everyone else did. They weren't necessarily confrontational; sometimes they would quietly go about building guns out of math manipulatives or drawing comics instead of writing a book report. Other children would loudly refuse to discuss their conflicts with other children and whack them instead. When I spoke with the parents of a child who was displaying resistant behavior in my class, sometimes it would also be clear that the parents were actually supporting their child's behavior. This baffled me. Why, I wondered, would you set your child up for conflict and problems in school?

Now I don't wonder anymore. Soon after my son, Owen, started kindergarten in our area's local public school, I not only supported his resistant behavior, I began teaching him new ways to resist the classroom norms. I was setting him up for failure in that class; I was undermining the teacher's authority; and if my child were still in that class, I'd do it again.

In the first week of kindergarten, Owen came home every day with a star cut out of construction paper that was his reward for doing a good job. As a Bank Street graduate and a veteran progressive educator, I'm not enamored of extrinsic reward systems. I think they undermine children's abilities to develop their own motivation. So right away, I began to chip away at the power that this reward system might have over my child. I told him that although I was glad that he liked his star, I didn't think it was very important. Indeed, it would be okay with me if he came home one day without a star. I then asked him how he would feel if he didn't get a star. A good problem solver, he said, "It would be okay because when I get home I can cut out my own star because we have lots of colored paper."

A few weeks into the school year, when the day came that he didn't get a star, he was devastated. He told me that he had to hold his breath so the whole school wouldn't hear him crying. I hugged him and reminded him that the star didn't matter to me. I did not ask him why he hadn't gotten one. I reminded him too that we could cut out our own star at home. He was soothed by this idea and the next time he didn't get a star he proudly announced to me that he hadn't gotten a star but that he wasn't upset about it.

Owen is a very quiet and agreeable child, who never had behavior problems in preschool and is eager to help around the house. He is also creative and enjoys making his own plans. The star reward system was applied to everyone in the class, regardless of his or her normal behavior. Most of the group got stars every day. In his four months at the school, Owen failed to get a star only on a handful of days. When I went to the parent conference, the only negative thing that the teacher told me about his behavior was that sometimes during long lessons on the carpet he leaned over to one side too much. I bring this up only because I felt the reward system was particularly inappropriate for my child, as he was generally well-behaved, and the missed star only made him feel unhappy. It certainly did not impact his behavior in class.

Owen's kindergarten class completed a great volume of worksheets each day, and the teacher sent home more each week for him to do as homework. Initially, I hounded him to finish his homework, but as the pile of worksheets grew into a stack and he began to complain about how boring they were, I stopped making him do them. Besides the fact that I am a believer in hands-on, interactive learning, the worksheets were often far below his capabilities (*e.g.*, working on the numbers one to five when he can count to 100), or developmentally inappropriate (*e.g.*, requiring him to practice printing upper and lower case letters on very small-lined paper). At first I played games with Owen that reinforced the same skills as the assigned worksheets. He would turn in the writing and drawing that he had done about patterns he'd found in our house, or how he'd sorted and graphed some of his toys. The teacher sent these back without comment. Then Owen stopped completing his worksheets in class. He would turn the paper over and draw a picture or a map on the back. The teacher would send them home with a note asking him to complete it for extra homework. I would talk with him about his interesting drawing and not send it back to school. Owen also complained that he never got to work with the other children, or even talk to his classmates except at recess. I set up some play dates to help him get to know his classmates, but I also encouraged him to talk in school, especially during "independent work time," when the children were supposed to be doing worksheets in silence while the teacher met with a small reading group in the back of the class. "Just whisper," I told him. I wondered how would these children ever would learn to work together in groups.

At this point you may be wondering why, as a Bank Street graduate, I sent my child to this school. I will say that the saddest part of this story to me is that the school is reputed to be one of the best in the area. We moved to the neighborhood just so our children could go there. It has a very active PTA; music, art, and science classes; and small class size. It doesn't adhere to a scripted, phonics-based language arts curriculum, as does most of Los Angeles. Its students had high test scores, but the school also had received distinguished school awards and blue ribbon awards for involving the parent community, having peer mediation training, and having highly trained teachers.

Knowing that a great public school is not necessarily a progressive one, I had talked with an acquaintance who was a progressive educator, herself. Her sons had attended the school, and she assured me that “It is a wonderful community.” I neglected to take into account that her sons had graduated from elementary school over five years ago, and that in the intervening five years, school “reform” in California had been relentlessly pressuring all schools to focus more on testing and scripted curriculums, and less on community building, developmentally appropriate practice, and experiential learning, while simultaneously stripping away school resources. I wasn’t expecting whole language and block building, but I had expected social interaction, community building, and some art. I also expected my bright, kind, quiet son to have some fun and success in kindergarten.

Owen became increasingly uncooperative and moody at home and would sometimes hide or cry when it was time to go to school, and I became increasingly desperate to find another option for my child. I began by meeting with the principal, in hopes that we had a particularly traditional teacher and that Owen could switch to another class. I’d had a positive interaction with her in the first week of school when the school secretary told us that we couldn’t ride our bikes to school because it wasn’t allowed for kindergartners. When I explained that I, of course, rode with him, she remained adamant that it was school policy that K through second graders couldn’t ride bikes to school. In another lesson on resistance, Owen and I wrote a letter to the principal asking for an explanation of this policy, and requesting permission to ride our bikes despite the policy. The principal had agreed to meet with us both, and said that of course we could ride bikes to school. She even tried to arrange a way for us to park the bikes on campus without irritating the school secretary. I had been heartened by her direct response, and the fact that she had included Owen in the meeting. It made me think that perhaps the problems I was noticing in Owen’s class were really problems with one particular teacher, rather than the school as a whole. When I asked the principal about the possibility of Owen’s changing classes, she quickly offered to give me a tour of the school to show me some of the classrooms she felt were the most successful. We viewed room after room of children silently working alone on worksheets and walls posted with identical “artwork.” I went home and cried and started looking for alternatives: independent schools, charter schools, home-schooling—anything but this.

Owen’s final lesson in resistance came just before we pulled him out in December, when he came home with a lollipop in his backpack. I asked him where he got it and he explained that in addition to the stars, the teacher was now awarding table points for groups of kids who were the quietest, and that whichever table had the most points by the end of the week got to have candy. I asked him if the other groups got candy and he said no. I asked him if that felt fair to him and he said no. I spoke with his teacher saying I felt using candy as a reward was problematic because of the epidemic of eating disorders, childhood diabetes, and childhood

obesity. I told her that as a family we felt that candy should not be given as a reward, and that I hoped she would consider using other types of rewards. She agreed to use stickers instead, and I thought we'd resolved it.

Two weeks later, Owen came out of class crying. Everyone at his table had gotten candy and he'd gotten a very small, smiley-face sticker instead. Outraged, I took him by the hand and marched into the class demanding an explanation. Although we had been working at cross-purposes for months, the teacher and I had not had an outright confrontation before. She defended herself saying that I had wanted him to get a sticker instead of candy. I was shocked to realize that consciously or not, she had, in fact, punished my child for my "interference" by giving him such a clearly unequal reward compared with those of his peers. She then said she didn't think we should be having this conversation in front of my child. If I had cared at all at that point about upholding her authority in the eyes of my child, I would have agreed with her. Instead, I was happy to let Owen know just how wrong I thought she was.

What lessons did I, as an educator, learn from this experience? What was I teaching my child when I encouraged him to resist the cultural norms of his school and then took him out of it altogether? Wouldn't it have been a better lesson if I'd gotten involved in the PTA, or worked with the teachers to help change the school? It would have been, if I'd believed that change there was possible. The school still has an excellent reputation in the community, and most of the parents are quite happy with it. The prevailing wisdom is that because the students get high test scores, the school must be doing something right. The suburban community in which the school is located is conservative, and the school philosophy is a good match for many of the families there. It was not such a good match for our family. Instead, we have found a new public charter school with a strong progressive philosophy. We are moving again so our children can attend it. There, we can join with others who are resisting the cultural norms to create a positive and vibrant place for our children. Helping to build this new school is a much healthier way for our family to resist. But we also learned some important lessons at our first school.

I learned that it is a painful experience to be on the outside of the value system of a school. When our dissatisfaction with the school philosophy became evident, we were quietly shunned by most of the other families in the class. The teacher invited the principal to our parent-teacher conference, because, I am sure, she feared I would verbally attack her. I had become the parent I had most disliked working with as a teacher. Suddenly, I had an understanding of the position of these "difficult" parents. The school's values were so far from my values as a parent, that I could not support my child in conforming to the classroom norms without seriously compromising myself as a parent.

Surely, in every school community, whatever its underlying philosophy, there are families who find that the school does not support their family values, whether

they are conservative Christians, or African-Americans, or recent immigrants, or liberal-white-middle-class families such as my own. I cannot speak for other families about why a progressive school might feel alienating, but I do know families who have felt that when I was their child's teacher. These families would be guarded in their interactions, listen to my suggestions, and respond without committing to try any of them. And of course, they ignored the notes I sent home—the same way I had ignored my son's teacher's notes about making him complete the worksheets he had left unfinished in class. I do know that it is painful and ultimately untenable to place your child in a position where you must choose between helping your child to succeed in school and raising your child in a way that reflects your deepest-held beliefs about what is best for him or her. And I don't think any family should be stuck with that.

As an educator, I have clear ideas about what I consider to be best practice, and before becoming a parent, I advocated that all schools should be reformed to reflect my progressive educational philosophy. Now it seems much less clear to me. While I do believe that there are certain values that should never be sanctioned by the educational system—such as white supremacy, for instance—I am not as confident that my educational philosophy is appropriate for all children and their families. At the same time I realize that families may not understand the long-term ramifications of different educational practices, or even what alternatives there might be to traditional curriculums. Perhaps more opportunities for dialogue and true shared decision-making between parents and teachers would result in schools that could better support children and families. Meanwhile, as a society, we are continuing down the path of standardized testing, prescribed curricula, and less local control, resulting in a monolithic sameness in public schools. Given our country's diversity, this means that more and more families are caught in schools that don't reflect their value systems. While charter schools, independent schools, and home schooling are viable alternatives for some, many families don't have these options available. I am sure that this absence of choice is damaging for the children, the parents, the teachers, and the schools.

My own child now eagerly attends Valley Community Charter School. He has a great appreciation for the opportunities he has there to make choices, to build with blocks, to write his own stories, to play and work with other children. He knows it is a special gift to be here in a way my second child will probably take for granted. He also knows that not every adult is right, that not everyone shares our value system, that being different isn't easy, and that when you stand up for what you believe in, you don't always prevail. In the end, it wasn't part of the state-prescribed curriculum, but it was experiential learning.

Endnotes

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