



# Column: Hey teachers, please stop using behavior charts. Here's why

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My daughter started fifth grade this month with a wonderful new teacher and, to my delight, the absence of one of the most annoyingly ubiquitous “tools” in modern classrooms today: the behavior chart.

You know what I’m talking about, right? Those color-coded charts, using cards or clothes pins or Popsicle sticks to represent each child in the class. If students are “good,” they get rewarded with a good color. If they’re “bad,” they’re punished with a bad color — which often accompanies some type of actual consequence.

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“Pull your card,” is a common refrain in these classrooms. “Change your color” is another. The daughter of a friend has a teacher who tells disrupting students to “clip yourself down.”

The rationale for these charts is as obvious as it is understandable: Teachers have one of the hardest jobs on the planet. Put a group of high-maintenance, chronic “misbehavers” in their classrooms, and what the heck are they supposed to do? They have to do something, right? And behavior charts are certainly kinder than the ruler-to-the-hands or dunce-in-the-corner tactics used in our grandparents’ and great-grandparents’ age.

And yet.

Fellow parent David Martin’s daughter was in kindergarten when she was first exposed to a color chart. For the first few days she stayed on the “good colors,” but still found herself preoccupied with the students who were not. “She saw how reputations of children were being shaped as a result of what colors they typically landed on,” Martin recalled to me. “She felt empathy for them but helpless to do anything for them.

Each day, Martin said, his daughter’s anxiety grew. Within the month, she was “begging us to tape her mouth shut to prevent a possible slip-up that could result in her clip being moved down.” And then it happened: The teacher moved the girl’s color from green down to yellow.

Martin’s daughter came home and told her parents she wanted to kill herself. She was 5.

Yes, charts may be better than physical punishment, but that’s far from good enough. It’s high time behavior charts themselves got moved down to “a bad color” and expelled from schools altogether.

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I’m not the first to suggest outlawing these things. According to countless child psychologists and the country’s most respected parenting experts, the function of “rewards” in child-rearing is drastically misguided. Though reward systems may sometimes appear to work in the short-term — and who, among us, hasn’t used a reward or two to coax our kids to try something new? — rewards are as detrimental as punishments when used regularly. The damage they inflict over the long-term has been proven time and again.

Here are seven reasons teachers need to trash the behavior charts.

## 1. They're demeaning.

Rewards are for training pets, not people. You give your dog a command, he obeys, you offer praise. Why? Because dogs have small brains. They can think, of course, but they can't reason or talk or make rational decisions, which means we humans are left to communicate with them in relatively primitive ways.

Elementary school kids, on the other hand, can read, write, reason and think highly complex thoughts. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, authors of one of the bestselling parenting books of all time, "How to Talk to So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk," are heavily anti-praise. Treating kids like people who want to do the right thing, rather than animals in need of training, they say, is key to relationship-building, and relationship-building is the only way to bring about lasting change. In short, rewards charts underestimate children's abilities — and, I would argue, their humanity.

## 2. They're shaming.

Behavior charts are not private matters between teachers and students; they are public reminders that your teacher thinks you are inadequate. Humiliating kids should never be accepted, much less condoned, in any school.

## 3. They make teachers a figure of judgment, not empathy.

Treating behavior as "good" or "bad" is part of an antiquated paradigm that doesn't take into consideration a child's temperament, developmental stage or emotional needs. When a child disrupts class in some way, there is a reason for that. Maybe the kid is hungry or didn't get enough sleep. Maybe the kid is being left out on the playground or having a hard time at home. Maybe he is having learning difficulties, or maybe he's just suffering from a little thing called JUST BEING A KID.

Similarly, children who play the role of teacher's pet may be acting that way because they are scared, or insecure, or perpetually subordinated at home. Now, I get it: Teachers don't have time to sit and empathize with every child's back story; they have two dozen other kids to look after. But just because a child's behavior isn't permitted doesn't necessarily make the behavior bad, and just because a child is doing what you want doesn't necessarily make the behavior healthy. So let's stop being so judgey, yeah?

## 4. They encourage extrinsic motivation and corrode self-esteem.

Grading children's behavior on a daily basis — whether it be through behavior charts or a new and increasingly popular phone app called "Class Dojo" — shows kids that the approval of others is what matters. It becomes all about what the child "gets" from the teacher rather than what the child "gets" from himself. It doesn't matter if the child is proud of herself for keeping her impulse-control issues in check that day; what matters is what the teacher thinks.

This is classic self-esteem-killing stuff, people. Rudolf Dreikers, an Austrian psychiatrist and educator, wrote about what he called "the fallacy of punishment and reward" in his 1964 book, "Children: The Challenge." "The system of rewarding children for good behavior is as detrimental to their outlook as the system of punishment," he said. "The same lack of respect is shown." And that's not all, says Dr. Laura Markham, creator of Aha Parenting. In her book, *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids*, Markham writes: "It's also well established that giving kids rewards robs them of the inherent pleasure of their achievements."

## 5. They're hypocritical.

If kids are put in the position of being their very best selves every moment of every day, why aren't teachers and administrators (and parents, for that matter) held to the same standard? What happens when a teacher comes to school in a bad mood? What happens when she snaps at a kid, or blames the wrong person for a misdeed, or forgets to give out an assignment?

Kids often are concerned about fairness, and, as a society, we encourage kids to stand up for equality and human rights. Yet here is a situation where teachers are constantly being asked to judge children, and no process exists by which the children are able to make their own opinions known. Where are the teachers' behavior charts?

## 6. They waste valuable class time.

I knew a teacher who, whenever a child would begin acting up in class, would walk slowly over to the child and stand behind him while continuing to teach. The child instinctively knew to settle down, and the teacher didn't miss a beat. Now contrast that with a class where a teacher is regularly interrupting her own teaching so she can tell kids to make a trip to the behavior chart. Not only is the teacher losing valuable instruction time, but all the children in the class are losing valuable learning time. By the same token, why would we ask a child who is doing well in class to make a chart run when a simple smile or a "thank you" would mean so much more?

## 7. They don't work.

Rewards and punishments rarely change behavior. Not only do kids "outgrow" the rewards being offered, meaning the rewards must get increasingly bigger to make an impact, but kids don't end up wanting to change; they simply end up wanting their rewards. "Redirecting Children's Behavior" author Kathryn Kvols, founder of the International Network for Children and Families, writes: "If the person giving the reward is not around, the child has no motivation to internally behave as you want her to."

In other words, as soon as the class gets a substitute teacher who doesn't use the behavior chart, all bets are off. Alfie Kohn, a scholar, educator and author of "Punished by Rewards," argues parents and teachers need to keep in mind the long-term goal of helping kids grow into responsible and caring people rather than the short-term goal of obedience. When faced with a "misbehaving" kid, the question he asks is: "What do kids need — and how do we meet those needs?"

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I can hear a lot of educators saying: "What else are teachers supposed to do to keep order in their classrooms?" As though behavior charts are somehow necessary. They're not. There are plenty of alternatives to behavior charts — far more effective and far less damaging — if only educators (and parents) took the time to explore and use them.

Martin, the father I talked about earlier, did try to get his daughter's school to do away with the behavior charts — as did I, incidentally. Both of us were met with inaction. For Martin, though, the stakes were higher. Faced with a seemingly suicidal child, he and his wife decided to homeschool. Three years later, and his daughter is doing great.

Teaching is a hard, thankless job, and most teachers deserve to be sainted for the patience they show their students. I have nothing but admiration for the vast majority of them. But — like a swat on the hand — the kind of behavior charts used in most classrooms are antiquated and hurtful, and they need to go.

By — **Wendy Thomas Russell**

Wendy Thomas Russell is an award-winning journalist, parenting columnist and co-author of the forthcoming book "ParentShift: A Guide to Raising Children Without Punishments, Rewards & Other Gimmicks." She lives in Long Beach, California, with her husband and daughter.

