

# BRINGING AN OLD IDEA OF A.S. NEILL'S BACK TO LIFE: REWARDING BAD BEHAVIOR TO CURE IT

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Some of you who know about Summerhill might remember that A.S. Neill, Summerhill's founder, used to reward kids who stole. He believed that those children were really, unconsciously, trying to get love through this behavior. By satisfying the unconscious need, by rewarding it and thus showing his approval/love, he observed that children soon lost interest in this behavior.

As an educator and psychotherapist, I have never used rewards and punishments because I believe that they are tools that adults use to control and manipulate children, they do not consider what the child is needing underneath the behavior, they do not support the development of problem-solving skills, and because they destroy intrinsic motivation.

Nevertheless, this idea of Neill's stuck with me because it turns the whole notion of rewards and punishments on it's head. By approving of something that most people would punish, he was interested in something of way more importance than simply getting compliance and obedience. He was interested in children feeling good about themselves. He knew that when children were happy, they behaved well.

Currently, I am working as a therapist in some inner-city schools in Los Angeles. Having come from a background of working in a nice, mostly white, middle-class, free, alternative school, and a mostly white, middle-class therapy private practice, this was quite a culture shock! I had never been in a school that felt like a prison, with police and security guards everywhere, where children get barked orders at, are talked down to constantly, and where adult verbal and emotional abuse of power is the norm. I get the sense that most, if not all, of the students that I see, have never been listened to with respect and empathy, ever. Which is sad, yet it also makes the work so meaningful.

This was the context within which I started working with a 12-year old African-American boy. Marcus (not his real name) was diagnosed with ADHD and also, according to his teachers and father, is a compulsive liar. He lived with his mother until 3 years ago, when he was removed from the home, due to neglect. When his older brother got killed accidentally in a gang shooting when Marcus was five, his mother was too grief-stricken to adequately care for him. She was subsequently diagnosed with schizophrenia and placed in a psychiatric institution. Marcus lives mostly with his aunt now, but sees his father regularly. While living with his mother, Marcus told me that "she lied all the time about everything". That, to him, was normal.

I had never worked with a compulsive liar (as far as I know), and was feeling a little

unsure as to how to proceed. I had worked with children and adolescents who sometimes lied because they were too afraid to be honest because of the consequences. But never a compulsive liar, who seemed to lie as a reflex, even when there would be no negative consequence to telling the truth. (One teacher told me that he told Marcus to take his hood off his head and Marcus insisted that it was off, when it clearly wasn't.) I did not want to make him feel bad, not trusted, or guilty, since he was already receiving enough of that, and clearly did not need more of it. Still, I wanted to bring his awareness to this behavior because it was clearly impacting his relationships with the adults in his life, and leaving him feeling angry and isolated.

I'm not sure why this idea of rewarding Marcus for his lying came to me, but for some reason, I felt he would be responsive to it. I had been working with him twice a week, for approximately a month, when I decided to approach him with my idea. I was curious as to how he would react. I told him that I would like to check in with him periodically during our sessions to see if he had told me any lies, and that every time he admitted to one, I would give him some chocolate or gum. A look of disbelief came over him, but his eyes grew big. He clearly seemed intrigued by the idea and agreed to try it. I suggested using a gesture, perhaps my putting my hand out (as if for chocolate), instead of asking he had lied about anything (because of the negative connotation of the word), and he would put his hand out if he had become aware of a lie he had told. He liked this idea. I then proceeded to give it a try. I put my hand out and said, "Anything so far?" To which he replied, "I can't tell you because we only just started this. It's from now on, not from 10 minutes ago." He smiled and I smiled. I said, "You're absolutely right. My mistake. It's from now on."

From that moment on, I sensed that he has become more present in our sessions. He has taken this plan very seriously. When I put my hand out, he gets quiet and reflective for a moment, and thinks back to the last 5, 10 or 15 minutes. Sometimes, he says, "No, nothing". Other times he will say something like, "Oh yeah, I didn't tell you the whole truth when my aunt said I stole her necklace. I didn't steal it, but I saw it under her lamp, but I didn't tell her." Somehow, my giving him chocolate allows him to feel safe enough with me to share his deeper feelings of anger toward his aunt, and longing for his mother, that he could not do before we started this plan. It is as if he seems to feel that not only am I accepting of his lies, but on a deeper level, I am accepting of him as a person. He is eager to show me the good grades he has gotten, tell me about the music he likes, and have me watch him play his favorite video game. Sometimes he visits me at lunch to see if I have any extra chocolate. He is slowly letting me in to his world and allowing me to get close to him, in a way that hopefully, will allow him as he gets older, to start doing with other people too.

I never would have guessed that this one intervention, could be so powerful. In today's world, where children are mostly medicated and/or punished for behavioral difficulties, it is wonderfully refreshing to have other, significantly more humane methods of reaching children. Thanks Neill, for being the innovator that you were and showing us how love, acceptance and approval really can and do work.

