
WWJD □ WHAT WOULD JIM DO? A COMPARISON OF JAMES DOBSON'S AND JIM FAY'S PHILOSOPHIES OF PARENTING

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INTRODUCTION

Jim Fay and James Dobson are two of America's most visible, popular, and influential "experts" on the topics of parenting and discipline for children. Dobson is widely known for the "pro-family" political activism of Focus on The Family, the organization he founded and currently directs. He first made a name for himself as a child psychologist, whose bestselling books *Dare to Discipline*, *The Strong-Willed Child*, and *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*, popularized the "biblically based" tough love approach to discipline. Dobson's Focus on The Family radio program is currently broadcast daily on over 1,600 stations.¹

Fay is the founder of the Love and Logic Institute and a popular speaker and author, whose books (most of which are co-authored) include *Teaching with Love and Logic*, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, and *From Innocence to Entitlement*. His Love and Logic program of classroom discipline has been adopted by hundreds of school districts throughout the United States.² While not taking any explicit religious stand, Fay has found a welcome audience among evangelical audiences and in Christian schools. Dobson, conversely, takes an explicitly Christian stand in his work and his views have had a wide-ranging impact—albeit indirectly—on public schools through the influence of his work on countless public school teachers and administrators.

The use of the phrase "parenting" in the title of this essay is intended to function in an inclusive fashion, covering the related notions of classroom discipline, classroom management, moral education, and child-rearing. Both Fay and Dobson often address these topics in such an overlapping manner. We approached this comparative study with a hypothesis of sorts, prompted by a conversation we had with Fay when he recently spoke at our university. Fay recalled that in the early 1980s the Christian publisher Navigator Press approached him to do a book on parenting. Fay asked the publisher, "Why do you want me to do a book on parenting when you have Dobson, who has done several books on the topic?" According to Fay, they replied, "Because Dobson tells the reader *what to think*, and your approach tells them *how to think*." So we sought to see if this distinction was borne out, and if so, to what degree, and in what ways.

Both Dobson and Fay begin books with an interpretive re-telling of the parenting dynamics in the story of Adam and Eve.³ We see in their contrasting interpretations the gist of each man's philosophy of parenting. In short, Dobson sees the myth as a tale of disobedient humans who must be punished for their

transgressions while for Fay, it is a tale about humans given an opportunity to make a decision. We will examine here three additional points of comparison between the two men’s philosophies: (1) power, authority, and control; (2) rules and consequences; and (3) conceptions of thinking.

DOBSON AND FAY ON POWER, AUTHORITY, AND CONTROL

According to Dobson, God invests parents with a position of authority and power over their children. The purpose of this authority is to uphold and sustain the divinely instituted moral order, and the moral order itself prescribes that the parents preserve and enforce the authoritative chain of command. Any willful defiance to parental authority must be met immediately, decisively, and confidently—namely by spanking. Power struggles will arise, and it is imperative that the parents win. Decisive victory by the parents is paramount in shaping the child’s will. When parents fail to prevail in these power struggles, their authority and leadership is diminished in the eyes of the children, and the parents are seen to be unworthy of allegiance, respect, and obedience. Moreover, when parents win the power struggle through the consistent and loving use of spanking, the child comes to “understand the purpose of the spanking, and appreciate the control it gives him over his own impulses.”⁴

According to Fay, however, the parents’ authority is derived primarily from their accrued knowledge and life experiences. Power struggles, which Fay also calls “control battles,” are to be avoided because they create stress, are destructive, hinder achievement, and result in dysfunctional behaviors. Power struggles put children in the position of reacting rather than thinking and strip them of control. Children who have no control over their lives will spend nearly all their time trying to get it. They exert themselves to regain the control they see slipping away. Children with some control over their lives, however, will spend little time trying to gain more. A little control goes a long way.⁵

Fay offers several techniques to avoid power struggles: asking questions, using *thinking* rather than *fighting* words, and employing self-enforcing statements.⁶ Central to these techniques is offering children a choice, a degree of control rather than commands telling them what to do. Choices change the entire complexion of the power struggle by putting the burden of decision making on the shoulders of the child. Kids are given options to ponder courses of action to choose. Choices create situations that help kids do exactly what we want them to do—think.⁷

DOBSON AND FAY ON RULES AND CONSEQUENCES

For Dobson, rules and boundaries need to be clearly defined and stated prior to enforcement: “The child should know what is and what is not acceptable behavior before he is held responsible for those rules”; “If you haven’t defined it, don’t enforce it.” When the boundaries are willfully transgressed, immediate punishment must follow. Immediacy reinforces the association between the child’s disobedience and the punishment. Secondly,

allowing time to elapse tends to create an increased level of parental frustration, which could result in displaced anger. The punishment—spanking—must be administered dispassionately, yet painfully to the child, or it will have no effect.⁸

Dobson is also a proponent of positive reinforcement for desirable behavior, thus exhibiting a thoroughly *behavioristic* orientation. While he favorably cites Edward Lee Thorndike's "law of reinforcement," Dobson rejects Skinnerian behaviorism because of its naturalistic underpinnings and its dismissal of the importance of *mind*. Rewards must be granted quickly and systematically; only behavior that demonstrates disciplined effort and genuine accomplishment earns rewards. Dobson argues that the law of reinforcement is consistent with human nature and with the way the "adult" world works. Specifically, rewards provide the motivational force that makes responsible effort worthwhile.⁹

Fay, by contrast, prefers that explicitly stated rules are kept to a minimum. He rejects the notion that consequences for rule infractions must be predetermined, uniformly applied, and rigidly enforced. Rather, an open-ended approach allows flexibility to deal with situational and personal variables. Rule-laden systems with formulaic consequences create what Fay calls "classroom lawyers" and "loophole artists," in search of the loophole in the rules to exempt them from the consequences. Furthermore, multiple rules become a time consuming burden for teachers to enforce and for students to adhere to.¹⁰

In stark contrast to Dobson, Fay claims it is a myth that consequences for rule infractions need to be enforced immediately. Fay asserts that there is no research that supports the necessity or effectiveness of administering consequences immediately. In fact, he thinks that waiting to impose consequences is often beneficial in that it provides children with opportunities to think about their actions.¹¹

Fay recognizes that the distinction between "natural" and "artificial" consequences is not sharp and fast, but rather occurs on a continuum: with consequences that occur as the direct or natural result of an action at one end, and externally imposed consequences, with little relation to the action, at the other. Those consequences toward the natural end of the continuum are preferred, because they more closely reflect the workings of the real world, and children can make the direct connection between behavior and consequences.¹²

DOBSON'S AND FAY'S CONCEPTIONS OF THINKING

With Dobson's writings we see a decidedly weaker emphasis on encouraging children's thinking processes. Dobson's penchant for clearly stated rules and the immediate imposition of consequences shows a greater concern for conditioned responses than carefully reasoned decisions. Consequently, when children's thought processes are referred to it is most often

in terms of their arriving at conclusions and realizations that are in line with the parent's dictates. For example: "I understand why I should be punished," "I realize that Mom and Dad are punishing me because they love me," and "I know this is what God wants me to do." Dobson places more emphasis on *what to think* than *how to think*.¹³ He gives an occasional nod to allowing children to reach their own decisions and reach their own conclusions; for example: when a child misses a school bus, let him or her walk a mile or two and enter school late, or when Janie carelessly loses lunch money, let her skip a meal. But ultimately he returns to the precedence of obedience and reveals his suspicion that children cannot be trusted to rely on their own judgment. A case in point: Dobson sites a United Press International (UPI) report about a 15 year-old girl who was blinded after staring at the sun during a solar eclipse. He recommends reading this story to 11 or 12 year olds as a cautionary tale, accompanied by the parents' presentation of a dilemma of sorts in order to drive home the moral of this story: "But the truth of the matter is only you can set your course and choose your pathway. You can accept what your eyes tell you, like the girl in the story, or you can believe what your Mother and I have said, and more important, what we read in God's Word."¹⁴

Fay's philosophy hinges on the power of a child to learn to think, decide, and reason. His writings reflect a respect for the child's ability to learn, provided the parent stays out of the learning process and does not intervene to solve the child's problems. Thinking happens when a child is allowed to make the connection (internalize) between his or her action and the resulting consequence. It is the parent's responsibility to provide guidance, but the thinking needs to be left to the child. Specifically, this guidance is provided in the form of questions that use *thinking* words. From an early age a parent offers options, in the form of questions: Would you rather carry your coat or wear it? Would you rather play nicely in front of the television or be noisy in your room? It is when they experience the consequence of their choices that learning takes place. Fay goes further to say that it is counterproductive to tell our children what to think. Parents provide guidance through questions, and it is then that our children do what we want them to do: think as much as possible.¹⁵

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is evident there are striking and important differences in these two parenting philosophies. It is likely here that we are preaching to the choir: the problems with Dobson's approach are apparent, and there are probably features of Fay's approach that readers find appealing or at least preferable to Dobson's. At this point, we will turn to the work of cognitive linguist George Lakoff in order to explain the popular appeal of Dobson's childrearing philosophy and its relation to conservative politics, to provide a framework of critique, and to lay the groundwork for the case that Fay's Love and Logic approach provides a promising and viable alternative to counter the widespread influence of Dobson and his fellow conservatives on our children's education.

In his book *Moral Politics*, Lakoff distinguishes between liberal and conservative thinking on the basis of two familial metaphoric models with conservatives operating from what he calls a *strict father* model, and liberals operating from a *nurturant parent* model. Lakoff refers to Dobson as the country's most influential spokesman for conservative family values among conservative Christians and cites Dobson as the exemplar of the *strict parent* model.¹⁶

In Lakoff's discussion of this model he cites numerous other conservative Christian child-rearing manuals and concludes that Dobson is the most moderate figure. Lakoff attributes Dobson's "moderation" to his familiarity with the psychological research he uses "not to reevaluate his general claims, which come from his interpretation of the Bible but only to rein in some of the most obviously dangerous impulses of strict fathers. Yet in the overall context of his work, such passages tend to get lost."¹⁷ Indeed, Dobson himself distains the value of scientific research on childrearing, writing, "I don't believe the scientific community is the best source of information on proper parenting techniques." Dobson reasons that parent-child interaction is so complex that it "defies rigorous scrutiny." He concludes, "The best source of guidance for parents can be found in the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian ethic, which originated with the Creator and has been handed down from generation to generation from the time of Christ."¹⁸

Among Lakoff's strongest criticisms of Dobson is that psychological and social research conclusively refutes *strict parent* morality in each of its tenets and applications.¹⁹ In spite of its deficiencies, Lakoff offers an explanation for the influence and power of conservatism. In short, Lakoff argues that conservatives have been more successful than liberals at connecting with Americans' cognitive unconscious to support their ideals. He writes,

Over the past thirty years, conservatives have poured billions of dollars into their think tanks. Well-supported conservative intellectuals have done their job. They have articulated the system of moral and family values that unifies conservatives; they have created appropriate language for their vision; they have disseminated it throughout the media; and they have developed a coherent political program to fit their values.²⁰

Today we are faced with the growing consolidation of conservative power.²¹ Their influence on legal and policy decisions affecting the content, standards, and funding for educational programs and research presents a daunting challenge and very real dangers.²² The stakes are indeed high. Central to these decisions are philosophical and axiological conceptions and commitments. We agree with Lakoff, who concludes that "raising children to become responsible empathic adults should be the most central of all issues to bring progressives together."²³

As part of my professorial responsibilities at Southeastern Oklahoma State University, I (Fridley) direct an organization comprised of public school districts in southern Oklahoma and northern Texas. Each year we hold two professional development programs in which he brings in some of the nation's best-known educational speakers. The three most popular speakers have been Fay, Harry Wong (on classroom procedures), and Ruby Payne (on the effects of poverty on students). In each case these speakers are largely a-religious and apolitical.²⁴ Specifically, in regard to Fay, it is encouraging to see the degree of popularity and acceptance he enjoys among the predominantly Christian, conservative educators in our region. It gives us hope and cause to suspect that one avenue to address the pressing concerns that Lakoff calls to our attention is a positive and informed philosophy of parenting that is grounded in research and the experiences of educators and parents.

While Fay does not explicitly cite research nor write in a formal scholarly manner, his approach is consistent with and is clearly informed by educational theory and psychological research. Examples that come to mind are William Glasser's concept of "lead teacher" and his choice theory;²⁵ and Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky's work and its subsequent development in *constructivist* educational theory that holds the child as an active participant in the learning process.²⁶ The power to formulate one's course in life is central in A.H. Maslow's positive theory of motivation.²⁷ Therefore, a child's need for self-control and self-determination is essential. Thus Fay proposes that providing children the opportunity to think and to ponder their next move is essential to their development. There is a significant degree of consistency between Fay's position and the nurturant parent model. Moreover, Fay's Love and Logic avoids most of the problematic extremes of Dobson's philosophy and practice.

When I (Fridley) discuss the issue of corporal punishment with my classes, it is not unusual for students to ask, "If you don't use spanking, then what do you use?" Granted, this expresses a rather naive understanding of the gamut of options available. Yet the impulse, the desire, if you will, for choices and alternatives is an essential element in the quest for understanding. Offering children choices is at the heart of Fay's Love and Logic approach. Our hunch is that parents and educators are also hungry for viable alternatives and workable options. The Love and Logic approach provides such a choice, and philosophers of education possess the tools and expertise to contribute to and build upon this project.

NOTES

1. For information on Dobson's Focus on the Family organization, see its website, <http://focusonthefamily.com/>. See also James Dobson, *Dare to Discipline: A Psychologist Offers Urgent Advice to Parents and Teachers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1970); James Dobson, *The New Dare to Discipline* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992); James Dobson, *The Strong-Willed*
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Child: Birth Through Adolescence (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1978); and James Dobson, *Parenting Isn't for Cowards* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah Publishers, 1987).

2. For information on Fay's Love and Logic Institute, see its website, <http://www.loveandlogic.com/>. See also Jim Fay and David Funk, *Teaching with Love and Logic: Taking Control of the Classroom* (Golden, Colo.: Love and Logic Press, 1995); Jim Fay and Foster Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic: Teaching Children Responsibility* (Colorado Springs: Pinion Press, 1990); Jim Fay and Dawn Billings, *From Innocence to Entitlement: A Love and Logic Cure for the Tragedy of Entitlement* (Golden, Colo.: Love and Logic Press, 2005).

3. Dobson, *Strong-Willed Child*, 17–18, and Fay and Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, 26–27.

4. Dobson, *Strong-Willed Child*, 38.

5. Fay and Funk, *Teaching with Love and Logic*, 139–40.

6. *Ibid.*, 146–72.

7. Fay and Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, 61.

8. Dobson, *Strong-Willed Child*, 31 and 47.

9. Dobson, *New Dare to Discipline*, 79–80 and 88.

10. Fay and Funk, *Teaching with Love and Logic*, 12.

11. *Ibid.*, 16–18 and 44.

12. Fay and Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, 91.

13. The initial hypothesis that Dobson teaches children *what* to think and Fay teaches children and parents *how* to think was borne out time and again in this comparative study. This matter has been discussed in several books on moral education and educational ethics in terms of the *content* and *processes* of ethical thinking. See for example, Roger Straughan, *Can We Teach Children to Be Good: Basic Issues in Moral, Personal and Social Education* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1988), and to a lesser extent the distinction made between *consequentialist* and *non-consequentialist* approaches to ethics in Kenneth A. Strike and Jonas F. Soltis, *The Ethics of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

14. Dobson, *Strong-Willed Child*, 64.

15. Fay and Cline, *Parenting with Love and Logic*, 14.

16. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 182.

17. *Ibid.*, 348.

18. Dobson, *New Dare to Discipline*, 16.

19. While the bulk of Lakoff's book is spent describing the differences between conservative and liberal models of thinking, he devotes a closing portion of the book to setting forth "non-ideological reasons" for why the nurturant parent model is superior to the strict father model. Lakoff notes the voluminous research on the effects of strict father parenting and acknowledges the impossibility of surveying "anywhere near all of it." However, he does give the reader examples of scholarship on parenting that refutes the strict father model. These include references to attachment theory, socialization research, "mainstream childrearing manuals," and research on the harm and dangers of spanking. Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 349-365.

20. *Ibid.*, x.

21. It remains to be seen whether the Democrats' strong showing in the 2006 midterm elections marks a turning point in the growth of conservative political influence over public and educational policy.

22. Lakoff argues that given the paucity of credible research to support conservative approaches to parenting, Christian family values spokespeople such as Dobson, by default, "are defining the conservative position for the current debate about child rearing as well as legislation incorporating their approach" (*Moral Politics*, 339). Examples of conservative influence on public policy and legislation cited by Lakoff include: "pushing hard to stop the funding of social workers who investigate child abuse," "crusading against all efforts to ban the corporal punishment of children," and attempting "to get funds taken away from child protection services such as social workers investigating child abuse" (*Ibid.*, 348).

23. *Ibid.*, 426.

24. It is not our intention here to define what does or does not constitute the political realm. While acknowledging that there are political dimensions for any educational or parenting program, these individuals are labeled "apolitical" because the focus of their work is primarily on what goes on in the classroom rather than larger social, economic, and political concerns. Moreover this raises an interesting question of whether such "apolitical" programs might, in the long run, actually have more influence on the political realm than would overt and intentional political action. That, though, is a question that cannot be explored here. We should add that Ruby Payne's program has been the focus of criticism in a recent series of articles in the *Teachers College Record*. Specifically, her "apolitical" approach of concentrating on the effects of poverty on students' behavior while ignoring larger socioeconomic conditions betrays a "conservative bias" by failing to address these conditions. See Paul Gorski, "The Classist Underpinnings of Ruby Payne's Framework," *Teachers College Record*, February 9, 2006; and Jennifer C. Ng and John L. Rury, "Poverty and

Education: A Critical Analysis of the Ruby Payne Phenomenon,” *Teachers College Record*, July 18, 2006. For Payne’s response see Ruby K. Payne, “A Response to the Classist Underpinnings of Ruby Payne’s Framework,” *Teachers College Record*, July 14, 2006, and Ruby K. Payne, “A Response to Poverty and Education: A Critical Analysis of the Ruby Payne Phenomenon,” *Teachers College Record*, July 18, 2006.

25. William Glasser, *Choice Theory in the Classroom* (Los Angeles: William Glasser Institute, 1998).

26. As discussed in Howard A. Ozmon and Samuel M. Craver, *Philosophical Foundations of Education*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill, 1999), 232–34.

27. A.H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 80–106.
