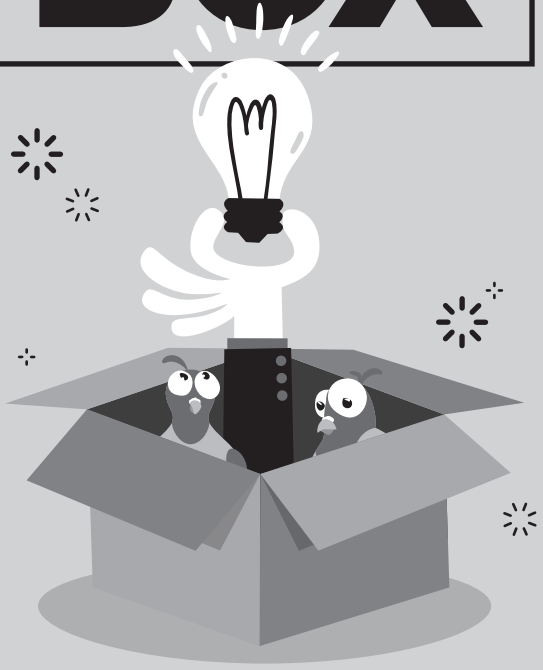
THINKING OUTSIDE THE PRIZE BOX

NAVIGATING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS IN TODAY'S CLASSROOM

Adam Holland, PhD

THINKING OUTSIDE THE PRIZE BOX



NAVIGATING CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS IN TODAY'S CLASSROOM

Gryphon House

Published by Gryphon House, Inc.
P. O. Box 10, Lewisville, NC 27023
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 [fax]

Visit us on the web at
www.gryphonhouse.com.

Library of Congress Control Number:
2024952716

BULK PURCHASE

Gryphon House books are available for special premiums and sales promotions as well as for fund-raising use. Special editions or book excerpts can also be created to specifications. For details, call 800.638.0928.

DISCLAIMER

Gryphon House, Inc., cannot be held responsible for damage, mishap, or injury incurred during the use of or because of activities in this book. Appropriate and reasonable caution and adult supervision of children involved in activities and corresponding to the age and capability of each child involved are recommended at all times. Do not leave children unattended at any time. Observe safety and caution at all times.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Eating an egg a day as a part of a healthy diet for healthy individuals is a reasonable thing to do.

—JO ANN CARSON, PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL NUTRITION
(*AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION NEWS*, 2018)

Egg yolk and red meat should be avoided . . . to prevent cardiovascular disease and stroke.

—DAVID SPENCE AND COLLEAGUES
(*THE JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION*, 2021)

When I was a child, no one spent too much time thinking about eggs. People ate what they ate, and that was that. But I remember a time when things began to change. Damning new evidence had appeared, suggesting that eggs were, in fact, killing us all. In a sick form of revenge for stealing their unfertilized cloaca fruits,* chickens were clogging our arteries with cholesterol, leading to heart attacks every year for millions of Americans. We had domesticated these dinosaur descendants, eating their wings as Super Bowl snacks. But chickens were playing the long game, filling the yolks of their eggs with cholesterol that would eventually destroy us.

Except then they weren't. It turned out that eggs were actually okay. Most of the cholesterol we were getting was created by our own bodies (betrayal!) when we ate

* Fun fact: Chickens, like all birds, do not have butts. They don't have genitalia. They just have one multipurpose hole called a *cloaca*, which handles the exit of pretty much anything that needs to exit their bodies.

foods like red meat. People could put away their nasty egg-white omelets and once again enjoy a real French omelet made from whole eggs the way that God intended. The chickens' master plan for our destruction was really not so bad after all. Except that it was. It turns out that much of our cholesterol is made by our own bodies, but that doesn't mean that we should be ingesting giant packets of the stuff in the form of egg yolks. Cholesterol is cholesterol, and in the United States, we eat so much that we can't afford to be adding more in any form. We should be avoiding sources of cholesterol to keep our hearts beating strongly through our retirements.

Except that eggs contain lots of good stuff, too. They're high in proteins that can help us stay full, reducing the likelihood that we overeat. Eating eggs early in the day results in fewer total calories consumed, which can lead to weight loss. Because obesity is tied to numerous causes of death that go far beyond just heart disease, the benefits of eggs outweigh the costs. We should all be eating them regularly, with gusto. Or should we? It's so hard to know.

STANDING IN THE CORNER

When I was a child, in addition to not thinking too much about eggs, I spent a lot of time in the corner. Not by choice, mind you. It was the place where my teachers often seemed to feel most comfortable with me. One minute, I would be enjoying life as a five-year-old. The next minute, for reasons that I often did not entirely understand, my teacher would be furiously standing over me, demanding that I go stand in the corner.

The walls of my preschool and, later, elementary school were made of cinder blocks. I don't remember many of the deeds that led to me occupying those corners, but I have clear memories of being so bored that I would trace the seams between the blocks with my eyes or my finger, pretending that they were rivers. I would spend my hours creating little maps, guiding expeditions through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered. Sometimes, after fifteen minutes or so, I'd be released from my adventures, allowed to return to the activities beyond my little corner. Other times, I would spend so much time in the corner that I would fall asleep. For reasons I still don't understand, this seemed to infuriate my teachers even more.

Occasionally, I would have the opportunity to bypass the corner altogether. Instead, I would be sent straight to Ms. Johnson's office. She was the director of the childcare

center I attended. I had mixed feelings about her. She was often quite kind to me, but she was also a snitch. Upon arriving in her office, I always found her tattling to my mom about something I had done. She had never learned an important lesson that I imparted to my own classes once I became a teacher: Snitches get stitches.*

Things continued in this vein until second grade, when my teacher persuaded my parents to have me evaluated by a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist diagnosed me with attention deficit disorder (ADD). Although one of the most common diagnoses for children now, ADD (or ADHD as it began to be called in 1987) was rare enough in the mid-80s that my parents had never heard of it. Nor had they ever heard of Ritalin, the medicine the doctor prescribed for me.

My mom often describes the day I was diagnosed as one of the best days of her life. For years, she had been convinced that she was a bad mom. She was told that she should do a better job controlling me. Other times, it was simply implied that my challenging behavior was a result of her and my dad's poor parenting. The diagnosis suggested something else: that I was the way I was because of my weird brain. I think this also helped her reframe her reaction to my constant negative school reports. She went from feeling like I wasn't trying to understanding that I was trying my best, but my best was quite different from the "best" that her friends' children were capable of.

Most of the teachers I know went into education because of their positive experiences in classrooms. They were often the sweet little girls who could self-regulate through three-hour whole-group lessons. They got gold stars and pats on the head. Teachers loved them, and they loved teachers. When it came time to choose a career, they chose teaching because they wanted to become the teachers that they themselves had loved as children.

Not me. I became a teacher because I was treated so badly as a child. For circumstances beyond my control, I was hit, excluded, and yelled at. I was stigmatized as a troublemaker, my name passing from one teacher to another as one you didn't want in your classroom. I was "the bad kid in class." I became a teacher to provide a place where children like this were cared for and understood, where they could be held to high standards and taught, free from stigma and marginalization.

In the interest of being completely honest, I will tell you that I failed in this task my first year teaching. My preservice training had overwritten my original motivations and plans. As I was taught, so did I teach. I remember being intent on showing the

* The origin of this quote is debated, but I suspect it was originally coined by Brené Brown.

other teachers that I, even as a first-year teacher, would have full control over my class.* To that end, I saw success in straight lines and quiet mouths.

I would not remember my original motivation until my second year teaching, when I observed a teacher named Kim Hughes, who was the demonstration preschool teacher in my county. At this point in my career, I have observed more than one thousand classrooms, but Kim remains at the top of the list as the best teacher I have ever witnessed. She was effortless in her interactions with children, but everything ran smoothly. It was clear that she loved the children, and they loved her, and even though there were no stickers or card charts or clips or time-outs, everything still somehow went right. That classroom visit showed me how far I had to go to become an effective teacher. It also showed me that much of what I had learned about how to manage a classroom would have to be unlearned.

EGGS PART 2: THE CLOACA STRIKES BACK

This brings us back to eggs. Should we eat them? Should we not? It turns out that it's complicated. As I began to dive into understanding classroom management and challenging behavior, I found these topics to be complicated as well. One source would say one thing. The next one I read would completely contradict the first. I would attend professional development at school that told me to do XYZ, only to attend a different district-sponsored professional development at another school and have them tell me that XYZ would surely lead to the children's imminent destruction. As with the poultry ova conundrum, it's complicated.

Throughout my teaching career, I continued to search desperately for answers, and over time, I found them. I also decided that there was limited utility in following the advice of eighteen different conflicting sources, so I began to experiment in my classroom. I would try different approaches, collect data, and see what stuck. I would steal the best practices of teachers I admired and adapt those practices to work with my own style of teaching. By the time I left the classroom to go back to school for my PhD, my classroom really was one where all children, especially the squirrelly ones like young Adam, could thrive.

---

* My undergraduate degree was in elementary education. My first year in the classroom, I taught first grade. Then, I moved down to kindergarten, where I spent most of my teaching career. It was while I was teaching kindergarten that I returned to school for my master's degree in early childhood. After spending the next few years in kindergarten at a Reggio-inspired childcare center, and later in working with three-year-olds in an inclusive setting, I returned to school full-time on a fellowship to pursue my PhD. That is how I ended up where I am today, working at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC).

My doctoral program was where I started to understand the complex nature of challenging behaviors. As I read books and journal articles on theory and practice, light bulbs would often go on. I would finally understand why a certain practice worked or didn't work; why one approach insisted that I use it while another insisted that the other one would prove ruinous. I began to see the nuance. Sometimes, one practice might work well in the short term according to a particular framework, but another framework might show how that same practice could lead to long-term harms. Other times, a practice's benefits might outweigh the costs for some children but not for others. Because it's difficult to encapsulate that sort of nuance in a handy teacher's guide, that information is rarely included. Program creators will abandon gray accuracy in favor of less accurate black-and-white thinking, preferring "good enough" over a search for perfection. (Unfortunately, "good enough practice" doesn't roll off the tongue like "best practice," so everything just gets labeled as the latter.)

So, the first point of this book is to start untangling all of this a bit. We're going to talk about classroom practices in a way that hopefully contextualizes them and allows you to see clearly the costs and benefits so you can make informed decisions about when, where, and how to apply them. Eggs aren't good or bad. They probably shouldn't be the only thing you eat, but they have a role in a balanced diet. The different tools we have to address challenging behavior are similar. It's rarely this or that. It's *when* should I use this, or *with whom* should I use that. I'm going to assume that, if you're reading this, you are a professional who takes your own development as a teacher or administrator seriously, so while there are lots of ideas in this book, I will rarely tell you, "Do this exactly like this, or the children will revolt."

The second point of this book is to try to go beyond education theory. We will certainly bring in education theory perspectives, but I often worry that we are a little too siloed and insular in how we think about what we do in the classroom. After finishing my PhD, I have been fortunate to work with colleagues from many backgrounds outside the field of education: sociologists and economists, social psychologists and social workers. Over the years, their ideas have illuminated even more about why certain things in my classroom worked. They have also led to new ideas, which I have been able to try out secondhand as I coach teachers in implementing them.

In each chapter, I will present you with a new framework or theory. (Who wouldn't want to read about theory!?) Then, we'll explore how that theory plays out in the classroom, using it to understand why children act the way they do or why our actions affect them in a particular way. My hope is that these new lenses will allow you to see your classroom just a little bit differently. That way, when you're presented with a

new challenge, and I'm not standing beside you telling you exactly what to do, you'll already understand how to adapt and solve the problem it presents.

During this journey, we'll electrocute pigeons in boxes,* explore how to put down rebellions, and dupe gullible Harvard students in the library. We'll explore our own brains, take a tennis lesson, discover why we're living in the golden age of colonoscopies, and discuss how to get people to invest in their 401(k)s. After exploring the origins and initial frameworks of these theories, we'll then apply them to classroom practice so you can feel confident using them in your own space with your own students.

GOING FOR A RUN

My first hope is that these new ways of seeing and thinking will open new ways for you to be with children. The word *motivate* comes from the Latin word for "to move," and a lot of what we talk about will focus on motivating kids. If we can't move kids, we can't teach them or effectively run a classroom. When we learn to move them, we become more effective teachers, which lets us be better at our jobs. That is, by the time children leave our classrooms, they will be further along in their developmental progression when we truly understand the sorts of topics we will talk about in this book.

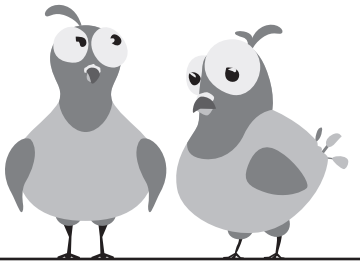
This is not, however, all about the children. Teaching is a hard job, no matter what. I've worked in lots of fields, ranging from construction to restaurants to my current work as a researcher and implementation specialist at a major public university. Of all the things I've done, teaching is by far the most difficult. It is physically and mentally demanding in ways that other jobs cannot touch. (I suspect that those working in the medical field could give us a run for our money, but I have never worked in a hospital.) To be clear, nothing in this book is going to change that. However, as I began learning about the topics we will discuss in this book and applying them in my own kindergarten and preschool classrooms, this learning marked a turning point for me. Before, teaching had felt like walking into a windowless room to run on a treadmill. I would spend the day running faster and faster and faster just to keep up with the children. By the end of the day, I would be exhausted and disheartened, as I realized all that effort didn't move me forward a single inch. After, teaching felt more like going for a run on a nice spring day by a river. I would be exhausted at the end of the

* No pigeons were harmed in the writing of this book.

day, yes, but I would also feel like I had gone somewhere and seen some interesting things, like I had made some progress and moved forward. Teaching, I learned, can be incredibly fulfilling, even as I still found myself tired and full of questions more often than not.

My hope is that this book will do for you what the ideas in it did for me: lead you to a teaching practice that is effective and meaningful. No matter where you are in your teaching journey, we all deserve that, so buckle up and enjoy the ride. I am looking forward to this journey that we will take together.

—Adam



CHAPTER 1: CRAMMING PIGEONS INTO BOXES

The Ethics of Behaviorism

The most important human endeavor
is the striving for morality in our actions.
Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it.
Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN,
PHYSICIST

I took my first psychology course when I was a sophomore in college. Of all the things I learned, the one that sticks out the most is operant conditioning. The gist of the theory is that in the 1930s, a guy named B. F. Skinner* (1938) crammed a bunch of pigeons into boxes. On one side of the box was a green button. If the pigeon pushed the green button, a food pellet would be dispensed. On the other side of the box was a red button. If the pigeon pushed the red button, the box would be briefly electrocuted. After only a short time in the box, the pigeon would begin to repetitively press the green button and not so much as stray onto the side of the box with the red button.

Skinner theorized that to increase a behavior, you reward it, and to decrease a behavior, you punish it. This seems obvious now, but at the time, the idea was quite remarkable. Since Skinner's original intuitive leap, the theory has been broadly expanded. We now understand that consequences (rewards and punishments) are an incredibly powerful way to shape people's behavior. To this end, the theory has been fleshed out with numerous corollaries and sub-theories now accompanying it. The one that really sticks out from my psychology class was the power of intermittent rewards. That is, when rewards are only given occasionally and at random intervals, the desired behavior can be increased accordingly (Dragoi and Staddon, 1999). The picture in my psychology book featured a couple of women who looked like they were a combined four hundred years old, puffing on Virginia Slims, cranking down the handles of slot machines in an old-school Vegas casino.

Casinos may use the principle to lead people to hand over their hard-earned money, but I could list many other examples in which rewards and punishments have been used to shape people's behavior in positive ways. One of my friends works for a company that offers a prize each January, drawn at random, for employees who increase their 401(k) savings rate. The promise of a reward drives him and many of his colleagues to be more prepared for their retirement each year. I also frequently see police officers using radar to monitor car speeds on my way home. The threat of punishment in the form of a ticket keeps motorists driving more safely.

Since its inception in the early 1930s, behaviorism has steadily grown to become the dominant way that Americans understand motivation. We see it everywhere, from incentive packages in corporate America to punishments in our justice system to potty-training methods. In classrooms, punishments may range from being sent to the principal's office to detention to threats that one's relatives will

* For the record, Skinner looks exactly like you would think a psychology professor in the 1930s would: He's a white guy who wore horn-rimmed glasses and had a forehead large enough that you could project a movie onto it.

be called. Rewards may include the classic treasure box, verbal praise ("I like the way Dr. Holland is writing."), or [fill in the name of your school mascot] bucks. Some systems combine rewards and punishments. For example, children have clips with their names on them that can be moved up or down a stoplight or colored strip, depending on whether they are "good" or "bad."

For the record, all decisions we make in the classroom come with costs and benefits. If we teach children something in whole group, everyone gains from that instruction (a benefit!). However, it is difficult to effectively differentiate instruction in whole-group settings without some members of the class becoming bored, which in turn can lead to challenging behavior (a cost!). There is no One Practice to Rule Them All—no perfect way of doing things. Rather, it is our job as educators to maximize the benefits while minimizing the costs. To do so, we must have a strong understanding of those costs and benefits so we might choose intentionally what we wish to accomplish.

The benefits of behaviorism tend to be fairly well understood by the average American. Yet, we sometimes struggle as a society to understand the costs, so it's largely the costs that I want to discuss here. In this chapter, I will briefly discuss some ethical considerations that make using behaviorism in the classroom problematic. In the next chapter, I will introduce a more recent theory of motivation, self-determination theory (SDT), and use it to point out some of the efficacy downsides to behaviorism.

ETHICS VERSUS EFFICACY

When we talk about *ethics*, we are talking about what is morally right or wrong. In general, I think the field of education does a poor job separating the two. For example, many play advocates in the field feel that children have a moral right to play when they are young and should not be subjected to the drudgery of forced work at three or four years old. However, when they argue with policy makers and those seeking to push an academic curriculum down into preschools, they immediately move to an argument about *efficacy*: "Play is a phenomenal way to build language skills!" "Play teaches children how to work with others and builds social skills." "Play increases children's IQs!" These are all statements that appeal to the effectiveness of play in promoting other skills (and all are on shaky ground, research-wise; see Lillard et al., 2013 for a review). However, these individuals could

EDU044000

BREAK FREE
from the Behavior Battles

Tired of keeping up with behavior charts and doling out rewards and punishments that never seem to work? Ready to ditch the "good job" stickers and the dreaded time-out spot? *Thinking Outside the Prize Box* offers a fresh, research-based approach to supporting children and fostering positive classroom behavior.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

- Why traditional challenging-behavior management doesn't result in long-term change
- How relatedness, autonomy, and competence are keys in addressing challenging behavior
- Ways to build a classroom community in which children are excited to explore and learn
- Strategies to understand and address challenging behaviors without resorting to intimidation

Discover how to transform your classroom into a place where children thrive and where you can teach with joy and confidence. With Adam Holland's trademark humor, hilarious real-world examples, and actionable advice, *Thinking Outside the Prize Box* will have you chuckling as you learn effective ways to create the classroom community you've always hoped for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Adam Holland, PhD, is a former elementary teacher and current technical assistance specialist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG) at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Holland is an educational consultant, an adjunct faculty member at UNC–Chapel Hill's School of Education, and research director at the Abecedarian Education Foundation.

Gryphon House
www.gryphonhouse.com

GH16237 $29.95
ISBN 9781636501628
52995 >