

T.E.T.—TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS TRAINING

by Dr. Thomas Gordon

Wyden, 1974, \$9.95

Reviewed by Kim Marshall

Compare these two ways of handling Eddie, who is staring out the window of his second grade classroom on the first day of school.

Teacher: What are you doing, Eddie?

Eddie: Nothing. (Pause) Do we have to go to school all day?

Teacher: Certainly we go all day. You went all day last year. Whatever made you think we didn't have to go all day?

Teacher: What are you doing, Eddie?

Eddie: Nothing. (Pause) Do we have to go to school all day?

Teacher: You really wish you were out there instead of sitting here in the classroom.

Eddie: Uh-huh. There's nothing to do in here. You just have to sit in a seat all day and do papers and read.

Teacher: You miss being able to play outside like you did all summer.

Eddie: Yes. Playing games and swimming and climbing trees.

Teacher: That was fun, so it's hard to give all that up and come back to school again.

Eddie: Yes. I hope summer comes back soon.

Teacher: You're really looking forward to next summer.

Eddie: Yes, when next summer comes I can do what I want to do.

The second teacher used "active listening," one of a number of intriguing suggestions in Thomas Gordon's new book. Like Haim Ginott, Gordon has moved on from a book about parent-child relationships (*Parent Effectiveness Training*) to write about the interactions of students and teachers, and like Ginott, he presents deceptively simple methods for handling conflict and crisis in the classroom. (I say "deceptively" because they sound easy but take a lot of practice and mistake-making and thought to internalize.) *Teacher Effectiveness Training* draws heavily on the methods used and the experience gained in Gordon's T.E.T. workshops around the country. The workshops have yielded superb transcripts of teacher-student conversations about Gordon's methods, but they also seem to get in the way of other things Gordon might well have said to teachers.

The "active listening" method employed by the second teacher in the example above grows out of one of Gordon's central insights: when students have problems that keep them from learning, our conventional responses—preaching, scolding, lecturing, advising, warning, ordering,

criticizing, diagnosing, probing, humoring—are almost guaranteed to fail. Such responses convey non-acceptance to kids when they most need acceptance and good listening to come to grips with their problems.

"Active listening" is, of course, more than a set of ploys that can be learned by reading a manual or attending a course. For most teachers, it means overcoming three major stumbling blocks: investing time, putting aside defensiveness created by Eddie's put-down of our lovely classroom, and being willing to get into mild counseling instead of teaching only subject matter. Gordon has thought through and effectively rebuts each of these objections. His conviction is that we will actually wind up saving teaching time if we talk to kids; that we should realize that it is the *kid's* problem, not the teacher's; and that counseling is a proper activity for anyone who learns "how to talk to people in a constructive way."

Gordon also has sound advice for teachers when *they* have problems. He urges us to avoid placing blame and using power ("You're always leaving this place like a barnyard. Now pick it up this instant!") and rely instead on an honest "I-statement" ("When you leave the room in a mess, I get shouted at by the custodian and have to clean it up alone"). Gordon contends that statements like this stand a much better chance of tapping reservoirs of thoughtfulness in kids ("Gee, we didn't know") and get better results than the negative, deprecatory messages we usually send when we're angry.

Gordon writes intelligently, often passionately, about conflict and how to avoid or at least minimize it—by changing the classroom environment, by changing ourselves, by use of arbitration. He warns that there can be problems with both authoritarian and permissive solutions to conflict, recommends classroom rule-setting meetings and spells out workable ways to deal with value conflicts, principals, parents and powerlessness. In my own case, his suggestions and wisdom gave me a handle on changing aspects of my teaching that have long troubled me.

Gordon contends that we use ineffective methods (the preaching, the scolding) not because we really believe in them but because we picked them up from our own teachers and parents. We develop Jeckyll and Hyde personalities—one for teaching, the other for control—and play out the same pointless confrontations we had with our elders with the same dismal results: defiance, withdrawal,

resentment, guilt and loss of communication. Gordon has created a system to avoid these traps, and from it has drawn important, specific and helpful suggestions for teachers.

Which is not to say that the book is well written or well organized or engagingly personal or humble or even a good example of teaching. It is none of these, and it may turn a lot of teachers off. The book is written in the royal "we" (in deference to all the T.E.T. instructors who contributed suggestions and dialogue), and nowhere in its pages do we meet Tom Gordon, human being, former teacher of children and maker of mistakes. Gordon's style constantly shifts between jargon-filled passages explaining T.E.T. and impassioned statements on power, kids, democracy and fairness. It's an oil-and-vinegar mix that doesn't quite emulsify, nor does it display any particular warmth or love for teachers. A more subjective and personal explanation of how the T.E.T. method developed could have reached more teachers, many of whom are understandably defensive about their methods and wary of pat solutions from "experts."

A more inductive approach would also have made the book a better learning experience. I wish Gordon had cited cases and challenged us to think about them, compare our ideas to his and then look at other cases and practice what we learned. Instead, Gordon titillates us with a mere handful of analytical cases, and leads us by the nose rather than letting us discover and learn on our own. Gordon seems to wish he had us in one of his T.E.T. sessions, and in fact broadly hints we should join the first one available. Should we? Perhaps, for they sound good, although a little "methody" and formalized. As for myself, I'd rather heed another of Gordon's suggestions: get together a group of colleagues who have read the book and use it as the basis for exchanging ideas about what we're doing wrong and he's doing right.

Kim Marshall is a teacher and author of Law and Order in Grade 6-E (Little, Brown).

Learning, May 1975