

Lesson 6: Can Schools Condition Behavior?

Repeated messages about who is smart or capable can change how people act.

The Beginner's Investigation · Lesson 6 of 10

The Big Idea

School doesn't only teach information. Through repeated messages, rewards, and expectations, it can also shape behavior. That's called **conditioning**.

The Jane Elliott Exercise

Educator Jane Elliott became famous for a classroom exercise in which students were divided by eye color. One group was treated as superior for a day; the other was treated as inferior.

Students told they were superior behaved differently. Students told they were inferior behaved differently too. The lesson: **people respond to social expectations surprisingly quickly**.

Conditioning, Simply

Train a dog by rewarding a behavior again and again, and the dog repeats it. People are far more complex — but we also learn from rewards, punishments, approval, rejection, repetition, authority, social pressure, and expectations.

A Student Who Repeatedly Hears...	May Develop...
"You're smart."	Confidence
"People like you don't succeed in school."	A very different expectation

The words aren't magic. But repeated signals can shape what a person believes they're capable of.

Try It

Write down three messages you heard often growing up about who you are or what you're good at. Ask: *Did those messages shape what I tried — or didn't try?*

Don't take our word for it. Investigate.