

# Conditioning Apps in the Classroom



Connor Schiefer logs a point for good conduct with the ClassDojo app at Hunter Elementary School in

HUNTER, N.Y. — For better or for worse, the third graders in Greg Fletcher’s class at Hunter Elementary School always know where they stand.

One morning in mid-October, Mr. Fletcher walked to the front of the classroom where an interactive white board displayed ClassDojo, a behavior-tracking app that lets teachers award points or subtract them based on a student’s conduct. On the board was a virtual classroom showing each student’s name, a cartoon avatar and the student’s scores so far that week.

“I’m going to have to take a point for no math homework,” Mr. Fletcher said to a blond boy in a striped shirt and then clicked on the boy’s avatar, a googly-eyed green monster, and subtracted a point.

The program emitted a disappointed pong sound, audible to the whole class — and sent a notice to the child’s parents if they had signed up for an account on the service.

ClassDojo is used by at least one teacher in roughly one out of three schools in the United States, according to its developer. The app is among the innovations to emerge from the [estimated \\$7.9 billion](#) education software market aimed at students from prekindergarten through high school. Although there are similar behavior-tracking programs, they are not as popular as ClassDojo.

Many teachers say the app helps them automate the task of recording classroom conduct, as well as allowing them to communicate directly with parents.

But some parents, teachers and privacy law scholars say ClassDojo, along with other unproven technologies that record sensitive information about students, is being adopted without sufficiently considering the ramifications for data privacy and fairness, like where and how the data might eventually be used.

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Mr. Chaudhary (the founder of ClassDojo) said ClassDojo gave students feedback as a way of encouraging them to develop skills like leadership and teamwork. Some special-education teachers also use the program to set individualized goals with students and their parents.

“Kids are being judged at school every day,” Mr. Chaudhary said. “They are just being judged on a narrow set of things. If we can broaden that set, it’s a good thing.”

But critics say that the kind of classroom discipline that Class Dojo promotes is not made effective by packaging it in an app that awards virtual badges for obedience.

“This is just a flashy digital update of programs that have long been used to treat children like pets, bribing or threatening them into compliance,” said Alfie Kohn, the author of “The Myth of the Spoiled Child” and other books on learning and child-rearing.

Teachers who use ClassDojo can choose which behaviors to reward or discourage. Kelly Connolly-Hickey, an English teacher at West Babylon Senior High School in West Babylon, N.Y., rewards students who “brought in supplies” or “brightened someone’s day” while docking points for cellphone use.

“Knowing that they are being graded on how they behave and participate every day makes it easier for them to stay on task,” Ms. Connolly-Hickey said of her students.

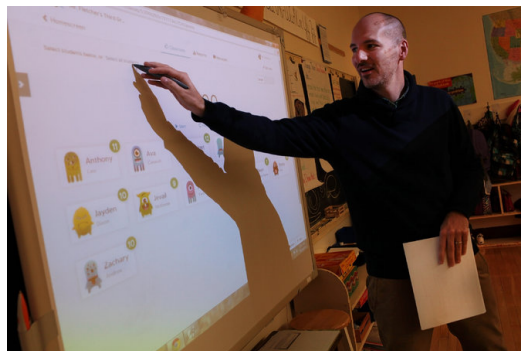
She added that she had not read ClassDojo’s policies on handling student data, but that she had shown the principal of her school how she used the app.

“I’m one of those people who, when the terms of service are 18 pages, I just click agree,” she said.

Teachers can decide whether to display students’ points or to use the system in private mode. Mr. Fletcher, the third-grade teacher, said he used ClassDojo publicly in an effort to be transparent. He deliberately awards many more points for good behavior than subtracts them for being off-task.

Last month, after a well-mannered class discussion about the motivations of characters in a picture book, Mr. Fletcher invited each student to the white board to award him- or herself a point for teamwork. With each point, the app emitted a contented ping.

“I don’t ever award the kids points or take away points without them knowing,” he said. “What I am trying to do is put the ownership back on the kid.”



Mr. Fletcher said that in using ClassDojo he awards many more points for good behavior than he subtracts for being off-task.

Melinda McCool, the school’s principal, said she felt Mr. Fletcher used the app judiciously, and had asked him to show other teachers how he used it.

But at least one school is concerned that the app could make a student feel publicly shamed.

“I have told all my staff, ‘You cannot display this data publicly,’ “ said Matt Renwick, the principal of Howe Elementary School in Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.

His school also requires teachers to obtain permission from a child’s parent before they start using any app that transfers the student’s data to a company.

Parents are also [divided over ClassDojo](#).

Some like being able to use the app to follow their child’s progress and receive reports from teachers.

“It’s a great way to get the prognosis on your child,” said Gabrielle Canezin, whose daughter is in Mr. Fletcher’s class.

But Tony Porterfield, a software engineer in Los Altos, Calif., asked a teacher to remove his son’s information from ClassDojo. He said he was concerned that it might later be analyzed and used in unforeseen ways.

“It creates a label for a child,” he said. “It’s a little early to be doing that to my 6-year-old.”