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Positive Discipline

by Lisa Kelly

All parents and caregivers want to help children learn how to behave so that they can lead full, successful lives—lives in which they act with confidence, continually learn and grow, have healthy relationships, and become good citizens who contribute to the community. At the same time we want to steer children away from negative behaviors that will not serve them well in the future. We do not want our children to lie, steal, or cheat. So how do we teach children positive behaviors and eliminate negative ones? Traditionally, rewards and punishments have been used to accomplish these goals, but many researchers (most notably Aflie Kohn, author of Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason) now argue that such reinforcement, whether positive or negative, is not the most effective method.

Marilyn Watson (2003) wrote about "developmental discipline," which she defines as creating an atmosphere of caring and respect for children, so that they learn positive behavior and how to stop mistaken behavior in non-punitive ways. She rejects methods that use bribes (also often euphemistically called "positive reinforcement" or "praise") or threats (euphemistically known as "consequences") to coerce children. Instead, she urges us to work to "unconditionally accept and value children while we work to control their unacceptable behavior" (Watson, 2003, p. 4). This framework, called responsive and positive caregiving, is extremely important because it exemplifies prosocial behavior, which is defined as caring about the welfare and rights of others, feeling concern and empathy for them, and acting in ways that benefit others. This alternative approach to discipline encourages children to follow their naturally empathetic dispositions, promoting altruism and reciprocity.
Most of us were raised with consequences and rewards—making it almost impossible for us to envision child-rearing without them. So what does "positive discipline" look like? To examine this question, let's consider a situation that occurred while I was teaching in a preschool for children ages three to five.

At the end of the morning circle the head teacher calls the children's names to dismiss them to their assigned work areas. "Lou" stands up without being dismissed to play with a train on top of a nearby shelf. Throughout circle, I found myself continuously reminding Lou to stop playing with the toys near him in order to minimize his distraction of the rest of the group.

As Lou stands up, I reach up and place my hand on his arm to remind him to sit back down. "Lou," I begin to say. Before I can finish my sentence, Lou whirls around and whips me across the face with his fabric circle, then sits across from me and snarls. "I don't like you," he says to me. "Are you okay?" the littler girl sitting next to me asks, eyes wide. "I'm a little upset, but I'll be okay," I tell her.

I do not interact further with Lou.

After Lou hit me, I felt angry and shocked. I could not have said anything to Lou calmly in that moment—I felt like hitting him back or yelling at him. My colleagues helped me realize that I made a good decision to not discuss the incident at that point in time. But in the long run, , this was not an effective strategy for dealing with Lou's antisocial behavior.

In my shock and anger, I forgot that all behaviors children exhibit are an attempt to fulfill a need, and that my job is to try to determine what is motivating a child's mistaken behavior. As the head teacher reminded me, I have to keep in mind that four-year-olds are just beginning to learn how to coexist socially in our society. I have to remember that no child is evil, but rather is struggling to figure out how to express or manage their own anger and displeasure. As Griffin (1994) states, "children of three and four are full of strong feelings" (p. 58). Children of three and four feel stress as they try to gain some control over their lives and find their place in the world. Griffin reminds caregivers that "a sensitive kind of awareness is necessary for a teacher [parent] to meet each child where he or she is…while maintaining her faith that the child will surely grow and continue to learn" (p. 53). To love and nurture children we need to believe that every child will, and is willing to, learn to control their impulses if we accept their feelings. If we find a child's capabilities, we can use that as the groundwork for teaching them prosocial behavior.

Positive discipline entails maintaining faith in the child, remembering their developmental capabilities, accepting their feelings and separating our own feelings and experience from

theirs and their learning opportunities. Wittmer and Honig (1994) support the idea that firm and consistent boundaries and accepting of children's feelings discourage antisocial behaviors:

"When teachers[parents] use positive discipline techniques-such as reasoning…and empathetic listening – and authoritative strategies – loving, positive commitment to the child plus firm, clear rules and explanations – children are more likely to behave prosocially."

Griffin (1994) supports the idea of adults separating personal feelings in order to focus on and accept the child's feelings, writing that caregivers must always promote "a consistent acceptance of a child's feelings, even though she is not able to permit some of his actions; to this end she works to resolve any negative feelings she may have toward him and tries to be always ready to listen to him" (p. 52). My feelings toward Lou in the example I described above were clearly negative, and reexamining this case allows me to resolve them so that next time, I am ready to accept Lou's anger and try to understand his motivation, all while setting firm limits.

How do we separate our feelings from the situation to implement positive discipline? Dinwiddie (1994) suggests that we must control our own reactions in order to accept children's feelings, pointing out that conflict can often lead to anger which, in the worst-case scenario, leads to violence. Instead of moving to violence, I stopped my reaction and did not act at all, giving the implicit message that Lou's behavior was acceptable. Dinwiddie suggests that conflict can lead to feelings of frustration that can lead to innovative solutions and problem-solving. To achieve the necessary mindset for this second, more productive path, Dinwiddie outlines certain attitudes a caregiver should have. These attitudes include knowing that conflicts are acceptable and frequent, and remaining nonjudgmental and objective. These attitudes permit us to problem-solve to assist aggressive children in discovering acceptable means to meet their needs.

To implement positive discipline, I need to separate my negative feelings from the situation and be ready to listen. If I could re-do the situation with Lou, I would first take a deep breath and remember that Lou is hitting me because of internal factors, stress or desires. This would help me accept the feelings of the aggressive child so that I could gently and firmly state that hitting teachers and friends is never okay. I could separate Lou from the circle and let him know that it is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hit. I could suggest alternative outlets to release aggression such as clenching fists and breathing deeply.

Sometimes contradicting our comfortable assumptions about parenting and care-giving, positive discipline can be a difficult concept to understand and to implement. But I believe it is worth the effort because it offers children inspiration and guidance toward becoming caring, considerate, and empathetic adults. Above all, the most important thing we can do for children is to provide them with unconditional love and acceptance. This does not mean accepting all of their behaviors, but rather accepting their feelings and motivations, and helping them find appropriate ways to express their intentions. If we can do that, no small task, we will have provided our children with the best possible foundation for positive social behavior and a happy and productive life.

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