

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

## DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Historical Materials from University of  
Nebraska-Lincoln Extension

Extension

---

1993

### G93-1190 Positive Approach to Discipline

Patricia E. Steffens

*University of Nebraska - Lincoln*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist>



Part of the [Agriculture Commons](#), and the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

---

Steffens, Patricia E., "G93-1190 Positive Approach to Discipline" (1993). *Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension*. 564.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/extensionhist/564>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Extension at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Historical Materials from University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.



## Positive Approach to Discipline

**Discipline is not the same as punishment. Discipline is not what you do to the child, but what you do with and for the child.**

---

*Pat Steffens, Extension Family Life Specialist*

---

- [Positive Discipline](#)
- [Table of Negatives and Positives](#)
- [Typical Discipline Problems and Possibilities](#)
- [Preventing Discipline Problems](#)
- [Teaching by Example is Powerful. \(Adults as Role Models\)](#)
- [References](#)

There is no magic formula that will answer all disciplinary questions. Nor is there one perfect way to discipline. No method is going to work with every child or in every situation. What we can do is to commit ourselves to a positive approach in our discipline...one that includes respect, clearly defined expectations, setting limits, and using reasonable consequences.

A positive approach to discipline helps adults and children work together rather than against each other. It preserves a child's dignity and self-esteem while encouraging cooperative, positive, and loving relationships. Learning to use positive discipline is based upon mutual respect and cooperation, which can have a powerful affect on helping a child develop confidence and a strong self image.

The purpose of positive discipline is to teach in such a way that children can develop their inner guidance system so they can function responsibly by themselves. Because adults won't always be around to tell children what to do, we must instill inner discipline and help children develop the ability to think, judge, and make decisions on their own. Youth need to learn self-discipline with little issues so they have the experience and confidence to deal with larger issues later on. This process takes time, but the end product is worth the investment!

In its original form, *discipline* meant teaching or learning -- not "to punish." The root word of discipline is disciple, a person who leads others in the way they should go. To discipline is to lead or guide behavior.

The short term goal of discipline is to guide behavior on a daily basis and to protect children from hurting themselves and others. The long term goal is to help children become self-disciplined and

responsible for their own behavior. They need to be able to rely on themselves.

Motivating a child to cooperate is the key to effective discipline. When our relationship with a child is a series of power struggles, the adult is bound to lose. We want children to have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. To accomplish this goal, we don't have to humiliate or harm a child's self-esteem or body. We can guide children with love and firmness toward the goal of self-discipline and stable self-esteem. Here are a few positive discipline strategies to try:

- **Use the power of the positive.** Positive statements tell a child what to do rather than what not to do, and they promote a more positive environment for learning and nurturing self-esteem. Given half a chance, children want to please us. By using encouragement as an incentive for behaving appropriately, we can build a child's positive self-image and sense of individuality because we are placing the power in their hands.
- **Hold a positive expectation.** Children are very sensitive to our attitudes about them. If you perceive a child as responsible and cooperative, you unconsciously give them more opportunities to demonstrate their competence and develop a sense of responsibility. The more trust and confidence you place in a child, the more the child learns that they are worthy of trust, and, in turn, the more trustworthy they become.
- **Give directions in a positive way.** "Keep the sand in the sandbox" tells what to do with the sand. "Watch what you do with the sand" is not enough information for a child. A child can follow your directions and still dump sand on the grass or sidewalk, which probably isn't what you had in mind.
- **Avoid saying "No" or "Don't". A good rule of thumb is to save "no" for important situations so the child takes "no" seriously. Here are some ways to avoid saying "don't":**

**Negative**

Don't spill...

Don't yell....

Don't talk with you mouth full...

Don't run over the flowers...

Don't throw the ball in the house...

**Positive**

Pour carefully.

Use your quiet voice inside.

Chew and swallow -- then talk.

Ride on the sidewalk.

Throw the ball in the backyard.  
(or) Roll the ball on the floor.

- **Say "Yes" whenever possible.** Sometimes, children want something they cannot have at the moment. Instead of saying, "No, you may not have a cookie," try, "Yes, you may have a cookie right after lunch." Then the child knows the wish is acceptable, but that the timing is wrong.
- **Acknowledge positive behavior.** Perhaps the most significant element of a positive approach to guiding behavior is acknowledging behaviors we want to be repeated. Most children spend great stretches of time behaving well. This deserves recognition. Positive recognition shows a child they can get the attention they need without misbehaving.

When we spend our time focusing on the negative, the child may feel "what's the use, they never notice anything I do right." If you find yourself spending too much time focusing on what a child is doing wrong, start shifting your attention to notice what they are doing right and comment on it. Whenever possible, ignore misbehavior; but give attention to behavior you desire. This may

require more patience some days!

If we focus our time, attention, and energy on the positive, negative behavior will soon decrease and the positive will increase. By noticing children doing things right, we bring out the good that is already there. It is encouraging to you and the child when you focus on what is working.

Whenever children do something special for themselves or others, acknowledge that behavior and tell them you appreciate it. (This activity is good for adults who seldom comment on good behavior.) A child tends to repeat a behavior that has been noticed, and it's more fun to repeat behavior that others like rather than do what adults complain about.

- **Make punishment positive!** Although children often believe it is their behavior that got them into trouble, it is really the *choice* they made that created the problem. We need to keep in mind that the real objective of discipline is to help the child make better *choices*. The kind of "punishment" that works best--in the long term--is the kind of discipline that teaches the skill and the importance of making good choices.

Discipline is not the same as punishment. Discipline is not what you do to the child, but what you do with and for the child. Punishment in a positive sense goes back to the fact that, regardless of what we do, some of our discipline techniques are not going to be successful, or indeed the child may still misbehave or behave in a manner in which we need to correct that behavior rather than to guide it.

For our purposes then, positive punishment means to *correct* behavior that you do not want repeated or that you see as inappropriate for the situation. Helping children correct behavior is taking the time to give feedback about the choices they made and discussing why their choices are important so they can make a wiser choice next time.

- **Use reasonable consequences.** Consequences can occur naturally, or they can be structured. An example of a structured consequence is denying television until the toys are put away. An example of a natural consequence is, instead of nagging a child to finish lunch, remove the uneaten food and don't allow more until afternoon snack time. The natural result of not finishing lunch is hunger pains an hour later. The child's own inner discomfort is much more effective than your nagging the child to finish lunch. Remember that consequences should be directly related to the misbehavior.
- **Use "time out".** Another possible structured consequence for misbehavior is a "time out". This allows a child to rest or be separated from others when they fight, squabble, hit, or keep irritating one another. A typical "time out" for a child is to sit on a chair for a specified length of time or to be put in/sent to a room for a specified period. A rule of thumb is one minute of "time out" for each year of age. When disciplining a child in this way, tell them to go to the place you have chosen. Then set a timer for the specified time. If he or she leaves the chair before the timer rings, reset the timer and tell them to stay in the chair until the timer rings. Repeat the process until they sit in the chair for the specified time.

"Time out" from the group may also be spent with a caring adult who is able to help the child understand his or her feelings and those of others involved. This use of "time out" enables healing to take place and becomes a very positive strategy.

- **Offer encouragement in the form of descriptive praise.** Be specific in your encouragement --

describe in concrete terms what you see and how you feel. Rather than "You're doing a good job." tell the child, "I like the way you put away the toys by yourself this morning." The child's conclusion: "I'm responsible and can take care of my things." When giving encouragement, focus on the deed, not the doer. Avoid statements like "You're an angel." or "You're terrific!" that set unrealistic standards for a child to live up to. Effective praise should be a way of celebrating rather than evaluating a child.

## Typical Discipline Problems and Possibilities

Parents may have trouble dealing with certain behaviors a child exhibits. A parent's response should be appropriate for the situation and for the age of the child. A few such discipline problems and some possible solutions follow:

- **Yelling or screaming.** "I want to hear what you're saying. When you speak too loudly I can't listen because it hurts my ears. Whisper now to help my ears feel better." Or, "Loud voices are for outdoors, soft ones for indoors." Or "You seem to be angry/upset. I can listen better when you speak more softly."
- **Speaking when an adult is speaking.** "It is your turn to listen now, and my turn to speak. Then we'll trade. I'm glad you have something to tell me." Remember to follow through and ask the child what they wanted to say.
- **Cleaning up.** "I'll help you put the toys/books/tools/clothes away. It's a big job, but it can be fun when people work together. It gives us time to talk to each other."
- **Name calling.** "She likes to be called by her right name, which is \_\_\_\_\_."
- **Abuse of books/toys/clothes.** "There's a special way to turn pages so they won't tear (...hang up clothes so they will look nice the next time you want to wear them)." Demonstrate taking hold of the corner and then turning the page. "If you feel like tearing something, here are some magazines that you may tear. Everyone has finished reading them."
- **Disruptive behavior.** There may be situations when time away from the group is desirable for a child. Going on an errand with an adult provides distance, physical activity, time for conversation, and an opportunity to unwind. "Time out", as discussed earlier, is a possible solution.

## Preventing Discipline Problems

What else can parents do to ensure that reasonable efforts are being made to prevent discipline problems?

1. Accept each child as a worthwhile and important person and understand that children's behavior is a reflection of their life experiences to date.
2. Anticipate behaviors and intervene before disruptive behavior occurs.
3. Provide materials, activities, and opportunities that reflect a wide range of interests and abilities.
4. Alternate livelier and quieter activities.
5. Maintain an orderly flow through routines so children are neither hurried nor required to spend much time waiting.
6. Plan activities appropriate for the developmental stages of children. Children need challenges, but not serious frustrations. (Clewett, 1988)

## **Teaching by Example is Powerful! (Adults as Role Models)**

Children do not automatically know what constitutes appropriate behavior, but, they are natural imitators. Frequently, they model themselves after important adults in their life and learn to think and behave as the adult thinks and behaves. Likes and dislikes, interests, manners, and morals are learned mainly through imitation. If we want children to respect the rights and feelings of others, we can begin by respecting the rights and feelings of children. Sometimes we communicate double messages to them. For example, the adult who spansks a child as punishment for hitting another child is actually imitating the behavior for which the child is being punished. The child may be confused by the double message received: "I'm not supposed to hit, but it is okay for an adult to hit me."

You are an extremely important role model in children's lives. Children will notice how you approach stressful situations, resolve conflicts, solve problems, and conduct yourself, in general, around other children and adults.

Adults need to recognize that the easiest way to reinforce positive discipline is to serve as a role model of appropriate behavior. In managing conflicts, you can either blow up, shout, get wild-eyed and red-faced, or conduct yourself in a manner that models the way you want children to act when they are faced with a conflict.

Conversely, if you notice and appreciate something a child has done, you can either say nothing to the child, announce that the child has finally done something right, or thank the child for the kindness. You appreciate it if someone acknowledges what you have done well and right. By expressing sincere appreciation for something a child has done, a parent models an appropriate behavior. Consistent, positive role modeling can result in children responding to you and others in similar ways.

As adults, we must model the behavior we want to see in children. What we do often speaks much louder than what we say. When we lead, guide, and help children improve their choices, we are literally guiding them along paths that will give them the best chance for growth, happiness, and success. Used in the right way, this approach can help us form many of the first positive paths that children will follow. Deciding to use a positive approach to guiding young children can create a bond--and an understanding--that can last throughout a child's entire life!

When the going gets tough, keep in mind that discipline - in combination with understanding - is one of the most precious and lasting gifts you can give a child. As a child grows, they will gain the skills necessary to discipline themselves. And that, after all, is the whole idea behind this positive approach!

### **References**

- Clewett, A. S. "Guidance and Discipline: Teaching Young Children Appropriate Behavior." *Young Children*, May 1988, pp. 26-35.
- Dreikurs, R. and L. Grey. *A New Approach to Discipline: Logical Consequences*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1968.
- Glenn, H. S. and J. Nelsen. *Raising Self-Reliant Children In a Self-Indulgent World*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing & Communications, 1989.
- Nelsen, J. *Positive Discipline*. New York: Ballentine Books, 1987.
- Wyckoff, J. and B. C. Unell. *Discipline Without Shouting or Spanking*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

---

***File G1190 under FAMILY LIFE***

***H-1, Parenting***

*Paper version issued November 1993; 3,500 printed.*

*Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Elbert C. Dickey, Director of Cooperative Extension, University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources.*

*University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension educational programs abide with the non-discrimination policies of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the United States Department of Agriculture.*