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Positive parenting: concept and applications
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Families in development:
Assessing progress, challenges and emerging issues
Focus on modalities for IYF+30 & parenting education

Positive parenting is a continual relationship that includes caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of a child consistently and unconditionally. Its approach also implies the attachment theory, the influence of child guidance; the use of principles of behaviorism; social learning and child development. There is plenty of research supporting the short-term and long-term effects of positive parenting on adaptive child outcomes, and various mechanisms through which positive parenting promotes a child's prosocial development and nurtures children's self-esteem; creativity; belief in the future; ability to get along with others; and sense of mastery over their environment.

Most men become parents at some point in their lives, but most of them will have to overcome different challenges raising their children across all developmental stages. The consequences of how they do it will affect the whole society. That is why it is so important to move from parental stress to family wellbeing.¹

Positive parenting exemplifies this approach by seeking to promote the parenting behaviors that are most essential for fostering positive youth development.²

Concept of positive parenting

Seay, Freysteinson and McFarlane reviewed 120 pertinent articles and came up with the following universal definition: "Positive parenting is the continual relationship of (a) parent(s) and (a) child (children) that includes caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of a child consistently and unconditionally."³

Combining this definition with the rest of the most common ones, we can list the following notes: positive parenting involves guiding, leading, teaching, caring, empowering, nurturing, and it is basically sensitive to the child's needs, consistent, non-violent, affective, emotionally secure and warm,

¹ UNICEF, 'Redesigning the workplace to be family-friendly: What governments and businesses can do' (2019).

² M. J. Rodrigo, A. Almeida, C. Spiel, and W. Koops, 'Evidence-based parent education programmes to promote positive parenting' (2012).

³ A. Seay, W. M. Freysteinson and J. McFarlane, 'Positive Parenting' (2014).

it provides unconditional love, it recognizes the positive, it respects the child's developmental stage, it rewards accomplishments, it sets boundaries, it shows empathy for the child's feelings and the child's best interests. To understand the benefits of it, positive discipline has to be considered first.⁴

Current research demonstrates that quality relationships with adults and peers make a tremendous difference for young people. A sense of connection or belonging is an important protective factor. Students who perceive a sense of connectedness or community at school and/or home are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, like smoking, using drugs or engaging in violence. They are also more likely to be successful academically. Young people who grow up in families that they perceive as both kind and firm are more likely to thrive. Positive Discipline teaches parents and teachers how to be kind and firm at the same time and how to invite a sense of connection from the youngsters they are involved with. The approach is neither permissive nor punitive. Positive Discipline is an effective way for parents, teachers and students to learn life skills and build a sense of community and connectedness based on mutually respectful relationships.⁵

The Positive Discipline model is based on the work of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs, who introduced the idea of parenting education to United States audiences in the 1920s.⁶ It implies mutually respectful relationships at home, at school and in the community and provides the skills necessary to create healthy interpersonal connections in an environment where each person's contribution has meaning, is valued, and expected.⁷

Some other concepts and realities have also to be considered: the influence of positive psychology, where it comes from the relation with the attachment theory, the influence of the theory of child guidance; the use of principles of behaviorism; and the principles of social learning and child development.

Positive Psychology is the study of how people flourish, based on the view that all individuals want to have lives that are meaningful and fulfilling by exploring, enhancing, and using our individual strengths and to be able to enjoy love, play, and work. Positive parenting draws this outlook from it, to focus on the understanding that children come into the world primed with the tools and capacities to follow a path of optimal growth and development.

The attachment theory was defined initially by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth⁸. It tries to establish a close parent-child relationship. The attachment can be secure when parents respond to the child's needs in a sensitive and loving way; it can be insecure, either because the child avoids the parent and showing he or she is in distress, also called avoidant attachment, or because the response the child gets is inconsistent or unpredictable, also called ambivalent or resistant attachment.

Child Guidance, as a method of treatment or study of children with emotional and behavioral problems, is based on Alfred Adler's Individual Psychology approach, as developed by Rudolf Dreikurs.⁹ His advice for parents is based in three points: parents should show encouragement for their child's efforts and should not set standards the child cannot reach; rather than rewards and punishment, parents should use natural consequences that stem from the child's actions; and children need to be taught important skills and habits, but this should be done when the child is calm and inside a familiar environment.

⁴ T. A. Kyriazos and A. Stalikas, 'Positive Parenting or Positive Psychology Parenting? Towards a Conceptual Framework of Positive Psychology Parenting' (2018).

⁵ J. Nelsen, 'Positive Discipline' (2006).

⁶ R. Dreikurs and V. Soltz, 'Children: The Challenge' (1964).

⁷ Positive discipline is in contrast to negative discipline. Negative discipline may involve angry, destructive, or violent responses to inappropriate behavior.

⁸ J. Bowlby, 'Attachment and loss' (1969); M. D. Ainsworth and S. M. Bell, 'Attachment, exploration, and separation: illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation' (1970).

⁹ R. Dreikurs, 'Fundamentals of Adlerian psychology' (1950).

Burrhus Frederic Skinner developed the behavioral theory of operant conditioning, based on the idea that to understand behavior, one must look at both what happened before and the consequences following the behavior.¹⁰ In parenting, Glenn Latham, for instance, wrote extensively about positive parenting and using positive reinforcement.¹¹ It means that parents should find as many opportunities as possible each day to compliment their children for making good choices or engaging in behaviors that are pleasing to the parent.

The basic idea behind the power of modeling comes mainly from Albert Bandura's social learning theory.¹² In positive parenting, it consists of the examples being set by parents or caregivers and use the power of modeling to teach children those behaviors and emotions, which will support the most optimal outcomes. According to this theory, children's reproduction of a behavior or emotional response learnt will depend on whether it was positively rewarded when the child observed it.

Child development refers to the sequence of physical, language, thought and emotional changes that occur in a child from birth to the beginning of adulthood. When parents have adequate child development knowledge, particularly when they are better aware of developmental milestones, and understand children mature out of certain behaviors, they parent more effectively. Such parents are more accurate in determining their child's abilities, and are more tolerant of and supportive of their children's blossoming skills. All of this results in children having better cognitive outcomes, such as better grades in school, higher self-esteem, superior functioning socially, and fewer behavior problems, as these children have better emotional and behavior self-control.¹³

Review of the literature

Getting into more detail, the research clearly shows that young people do better when they perceive both firmness and kindness from their parents. Children who rate their parents as authoritative — both responsive and demanding— engage significantly less in socially risky behaviors.¹⁴ Other studies have correlated the teen's perception of parenting that is both kind and firm with improved academic performance.¹⁵

As mentioned before, a young person's sense of community, connection or "belongingness" at home and at school also increases academic success and decreases socially risky behavior. Interventions at school and at home can decrease the "socially risky" behaviors and increase a young person's likelihood of succeeding at school and in their social environment. Interventions that teach skills for social belonging in elementary school have lasting positive effects.¹⁶

The techniques used in Positive Discipline have been shown to have a relevant impact on schools.¹⁷ A study of a school-wide implementation of classroom meetings in a lower income Sacramento elementary school over a four-year period showed that suspensions decreased from 64 annually to 4

¹⁰ B. F. Skinner 'Are theories of learning necessary?' (1950).

¹¹ G. I. Latham, 'The Power of Positive Parenting: A Wonderful Way to Raise Children' (1994).

¹² A. Bandura, 'Social learning theory' (1977).

¹³ M. H. Bornstein and C. S. Tamis-Lemonda, 'Maternal responsiveness and cognitive development in children' (1989).

¹⁴ W. Aquilino and A. Supple, 'Long-term effects of parenting practices during adolescence on well-being: Outcomes in young adulthood' (2001).

¹⁵ D. Cohen and J. Rice, 'Parenting styles, adolescent substance use, and academic achievement (1997); Rollande Deslandes, Egide Royer, Daniel Turcotte and Richard Bertrand, 'School achievement at the secondary level: influence of parenting style and parent involvement in schooling' (1997); Sanford M. Dornbusch, Philip L. Ritter, P. Herbert Leiderman and Donald F. Roberts, 'The Relation of Parenting Style to Adolescent School Performance' (1987).

¹⁶ M. D. Resnick, P. S. Bearman, R. Blum and K. E. Bauman, 'Protecting Adolescents From Harm Findings From the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health' (1997).

¹⁷ E. Tartari, 'The impact of positive discipline in the learning process' (2018).

annually, vandalism decreased from 24 episodes to 2, and the teachers reported great improvement in classroom atmosphere, behavior, attitudes and academic performance.¹⁸

Parenting styles were first established by Diana Baumrind more than half a century ago.¹⁹ They are made up of parents' attitudes about childrearing and parenting and represent how parents interact with their children. These attitudes take into account the dimension of parental responsiveness – the way to pay attention to a child and how he is acknowledged as unique – and parental demandingness – tied to how parents supervise and discipline. No doubt the style positive parenting is most aligned with is the authoritative and less similar to the authoritarian, the permissive, or the uninvolved.

Parenting style as it is perceived by the young people in the family is clearly associated with their academic success and with their chance of engaging in socially “risky” behaviors. There is overwhelming evidence that young people who see their parents as both kind –supportive/responsive– and firm –demanding– have more success socially and academically. Different studies have examined the association between parenting “style” and behavior from different perspectives.

The general conclusion is that when young people perceive that their parents are warm and responsive –kindness– and have high expectations –demandingness/firmness–, they are at significantly lower risk for drug and alcohol use, less likely to smoke and less violent.²⁰ They are also more likely to succeed academically.²¹ Studies also show that parenting styles that are authoritarian/ directive –high on demandingness, generally in an intrusive way and low on responsiveness–, permissive –high on warmth but little or no directiveness– and/or unengaged/inconsistent are clearly associated with worse outcomes.²² In a study over time, it has been found that “the benefits of authoritative parenting are largely in the maintenance of previous levels of high adjustment, the deleterious consequences of neglectful parenting continue to accumulate.”²³

There is much more research supporting the short-term and long-term effects of positive parenting on adaptive child outcomes. The following are some significant examples.

The Positive Parenting Research Team from the University of Southern Mississippi, directed by Bonnie Nicholson,²⁴ is involved in various studies aimed at examining the impact of positive parenting and it seeks to promote positive parenting behaviors within families. The main topics are the relationships between positive parenting and academic success; positive parenting as a predictor of protective behavioral strategies; parenting style and emotional health; maternal hardiness, coping and social support in parents of chronically ill children, etc.

¹⁸ J. M. Platt, ‘Life in the family zoo’ (1989).

¹⁹ D. Baumrind, ‘Child care practices anteceding three patterns of preschool behavior’ (1967).

²⁰ D. Baumrind, ‘The Influence of Parenting Style on Adolescent Competence and Substance Use’ (1991); J. S. Jackson, D. R. Williams and E. S. Gombert, ‘Aging and alcohol use and abuse among African Americans: A life course perspective (1998); B. Radziszewska, J. L. Richardson, C. W. Dent and B. R. Flay, ‘Parenting style and adolescent depressive symptoms, smoking and academic achievement: ethnic, gender and SES differences’ (1996); B. Simons-Morton, D. L. Haynie, A. D. Crump, S. P. Eitel and K. E. Saylor, ‘Peer and parent influences on smoking and drinking among early adolescents’ (2001).

²¹ D. A. Cohen, ‘Parenting Styles, Adolescent Substance Use, and Academic Achievement’ (1997); R. Deslandes, E. Royer, D. Turcotte and R. Bertrand, ‘School achievement at the secondary level: Influence of parenting style and parent involvement in schooling’ (1997); S. L. Lam, ‘How the family influences children’s academic achievement (1997).

²² W. S. Aquilino, A. J. Supple, ‘Long-Term Effects of Parenting Practices During Adolescence on Well-Being Outcomes in Young Adulthood’ (2001); G. S. Ginsburg and P. Bronstein, ‘Family factors related to children’s intrinsic/extrinsic motivational orientation and academic performance’ (1997).

²³ L. Steinberg, D. Lamborn, N. Darling and N. S. Mounts, ‘Over-time changes in adjustment and competence among adolescents from authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent, and neglectful families’ (1994).

²⁴ Cf. <https://bonnienicholson.weebly.com/>.

Pettit, Bates and Dodge examined the influence of supportive parenting among parents of pre-kindergartners.²⁵ Supportive parenting was defined as involving mother-to-child warmth, proactive teaching, inductive discipline, and positive involvement. Researchers contrasted this parenting approach with a less supportive, more harsh parenting style.

In our times, supportive parenting has been associated with more positive school adjustment and fewer behavior problems when the children were in sixth grade. Moreover, supportive parenting actually mitigated the negative impact of familial risk factors —i.e., socioeconomic disadvantage, family stress, and single parenthood— on children’s subsequent behavioral problems.²⁶

John and Julie Gottman have investigated the impact of positive parenting by developing a five-step ‘emotion coaching’ program designed to build children’s confidence and to promote healthy intellectual and psychosocial growth.²⁷ Gottman’s five steps for parents include: awareness of emotions; connecting with your child; listening to your child; naming emotions; and finding solutions. They have reported that children of “emotional coaches” benefit from a more positive developmental trajectory relative to kids without emotional coaches.

Moreover, an evaluation of emotional coaching by Bath Spa University found several positive outcomes for families trained in emotional coaching, such as parental reports of a 79% improvement in children’s positive behaviors and well-being.²⁸

Another way of thinking about the role of positive parenting is in terms of resilience. When children—including those who begin life with significant disadvantages— experience positive and supportive parenting, they are far more likely to thrive. It is in this way that positive parenting minimizes health and opportunity disparities by armoring children with large stores of emotional resilience.²⁹

Finally, there are many published studies on parenting education, most involving small numbers of families. The studies support the Positive Discipline model of teaching groups of parents experientially, with role plays and games. Teaching parents in groups has been shown to be more effective than individualized instruction. There is more change in parenting behavior and the positive impacts last longer.³⁰ Opportunities to practice what they are learning through role plays and other experiential activities is also cited by researchers as one of the tools that makes parenting class more effective in changing behavior.³¹

In a small but very interesting study, Stanley³² showed that when parents and teens are taught Adlerian parenting skills together, the teens continued to advance in their moral development for the year after the class.

Generally speaking, there are many aspects of positive parenting that nurture children’s self-esteem;

²⁵ G. S. Pettit, J. E. Bates, K. A. Dodge ‘Supportive Parenting’ (1997).

²⁶ G. S. Pettit, J. E. Bates, K. A. Dodge, ‘Supportive parenting, Ecological Context, and Children’s Adjustment: A seven-Year Longitudinal Study’ (2006).

²⁷ J. Gottman and J. Julie Schwartz Gottman, ‘The Science of Couples and Family Therapy: Behind the Scenes at the “Love Lab”’ (2018).

²⁸ Cf. <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/schools/education/research/emotion-coaching/>.

²⁹ R. Brooks and S. Goldstein, ‘Raising resilient children: Fostering strength, hope, and optimism in your child’ (2001).

³⁰ C. E. Cunningham, R. Bremner and M. Boyle, ‘Large group community-based parenting programmes for families at risk for disruptive behaviour disorders: Utilization, cost effectiveness, and outcome’ (1995); I. Goodson, ‘Social histories of educational change’ (2001).

³¹ D. Daro and K. McCurdy, ‘Preventing child abuse and neglect: Programmatic interventions’ (1994); K. Stone, ‘Child Welfare’ (1994).

³² S. F. Stanley, ‘Family education to enhance the moral atmosphere of the family and the moral development of adolescents’ (1978).

creativity; belief in the future; ability to get along with others; and sense of mastery over their environment.³³ The United States Center for Disease Control and Prevention also points to the opportunities that positive parenting offers to teach children self-reliance and decision-making skills and to develop self-esteem.³⁴

Some additional benefits of positive parenting include stronger parent-child relationships – it increases trust between children and parents because of the positive interactions that it promotes; result of positive parenting; more effective communication, as communication is an essential part of positive parenting, more in the sense of being able to listen to children and even encouraging them to talk about their feelings; self-esteem and happiness, as the focus on positive action, trust, and communication will lead to a greater level of happiness and help your children develop a sense of self-esteem – it can even bring happiness and reduce stress in parents.³⁵

Practical applications

There are various mechanisms through which positive parenting promotes a child's prosocial development. Eisenberg et al. suggest that positive parenting impacts children's temperament by enhancing emotion regulation —e.g., “effortful control” enabling children to focus attention in a way that promotes emotion modulation and expression. This ability to use effortful control was found to predict reduced externalizing problems years later when children were adolescents.³⁶

Those studies and many others have proven the benefits of positive parenting. A research project published in the *Journal of Clinical Adolescent Psychology* showed that positive parenting led to much lower instances of childhood depression compared to harsher styles of discipline. The study also showed that parents who experienced harsh discipline as children had higher instances of mental health issues in adulthood. They were more likely to pass these problems on to their children. This study shows that positive parenting can affect multiple generations.³⁷

The study on ‘Parent Personality and Positive Parenting as Predictors of Positive Adolescent Personality Development Over Time’ found evidence for an indirect link between parent personality and later adolescent personality through positive parenting. The results suggest that parents may play a significant role in the development of adolescent personality traits that promote competence and personal well-being across the life course.³⁸

In Hong-Kong, the results of a government student indicated that a positive parenting programme was effective in decreasing child behaviour problems, dysfunctional discipline styles, and improving parenting sense of competence, as well as marital relationship. The overall findings strongly confirm its efficacy in reducing conduct problems in children and in promoting more harmonious family relationships.³⁹

³³ Cf., for example, P. K. Coleman, K. H. Karraker, ‘Self-Efficacy and Parenting Quality: Findings and Future Applications’ (1998).

³⁴ Center for Disease Control and Prevention, ‘Essentials for Childhood – Creating Safe, Stable, Nurturing Relationships and Environments for All Children’ (Reprinted 2019).

³⁵ F. Juffer, M. J. Bakermans-Kranenburg and M. H. Van IJzendoorn, ‘Monographs in parenting series. Promoting positive parenting: An attachment-based intervention’ (2008); S. H. Landry, K. E. Smith KE, P. R. Swank and C. L. Miller-Loncar, ‘Early maternal and child influences on children's later independent cognitive and social functioning’ (2000);

³⁶ N. Eisenberg, Q. Zhou, T. L. Spinrad, C. Valiente, R. A. Fabes and J. Liew, ‘Relations among positive parenting, children's effortful control, and externalizing problems: A three-wave longitudinal study’ (2005).

³⁷ D. H. Dallaire, A. Q. Pineda, D. A. Cole, J. A. Ciesla, F. Jacquez, B. LaGrange, and A. E. Bruce, ‘Relation of Positive and Negative Parenting to Children's Depressive Symptoms’ (2006).

³⁸ T. J. Schofield, R. D. Conger, M. B. Donnellan, R. Jochem, K. F. Widaman, K. J. Conger, ‘Parent Personality and Positive Parenting as Predictors of Positive Adolescent Personality Development Over Time’ (2012).

³⁹ Cf. https://www.fhs.gov.hk/english/main_ser/child_health/14725.html.

Finally, parenting can become a kind of power struggle with kids trying to get away with bad behavior while avoiding punishment. The positive behaviors and desired actions leave less room for negative behavior.⁴⁰

Conclusions and recommendations

Positive parenting is backed by empirical evidence supporting its many benefits. It is therefore understandable why the UN General Assembly has repeatedly encouraged “to invest in parenting education as a tool to enhance children’s well-being and prevent all forms of violence against children, including through promoting non-violent forms of discipline.”⁴¹

Positive parenting begins early, even from the moment a person realizes he or she is going to become a parent as preparing for a child’s arrival will have an impact. But positive parenting does really apply to all developmental periods.

Positive parents raise their children in a way that empowers them to reach their full potential with an effective, joyful attitude. It is an effective, evidence-based approach that is neither punitive nor permissive. It involves clear rules, expectations, and consequences for behavior; and consistent follow-through.

Parenting education can be critical to support parents because of the impact of parent-child interactions on developmental outcomes; and the opportunity that parenting education provides for optimizing what parents do with their children.

Therefore, we suggest the following recommendations:

1. Ensure the adequate investment in the design and execution of parenting education programmes “as a tool to enhance children’s well-being and prevent all forms of violence against children, including through promoting non-violent forms of discipline.”
2. Focus those programmes on all developmental periods, starting by early childhood development.
3. Prevent punitive or permissive behavior through the Positive Discipline model through strengthening parent knowledge about how their actions affect child development.
4. Give parents skills to help their child’s healthy development and school readiness.

⁴⁰ Cf. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK402020/>.

⁴¹ United Nations General Assembly, Resolution on ‘Follow-up to the twentieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family and beyond’ - A/C.3/74/L.13/Rev.1 (2019).