

Positive Discipline in Child Care

Discipline is one of the most important tools child care providers use to help children grow. Yet, the word discipline is often misunderstood and is commonly associated with punishment or control. In reality, discipline is not simply about punishing children; it's about teaching and guiding them. It helps children learn how to make thoughtful choices and understand the difference between what is acceptable and what is not. Every child, regardless of age or temperament, can benefit from consistent, supportive guidance to develop the skills and understanding they need to thrive.

Still, discipline is one of the most common and persistent challenges in child care settings. Like families, child care providers work with children who have different personalities, needs, and home experiences. Each child is unique, and what works for one may not work for another. Providers often deal with a wide range of behaviors, developmental needs, and family expectations – and it can be hard to know how to respond without effective strategies.

This article talks about how *positive discipline* can help child care providers meet these challenges while fostering children's development in a thoughtful, respectful, and effective way.

What is positive discipline?

Many experts support the idea of positive discipline. While they may explain it in slightly different ways, they all agree that it's about understanding how children grow or develop and giving them the information they need so they can behave appropriately in different situations. Instead of simply relying on punishment or rewards, positive discipline focuses on building a good relationship with children and helping them learn *not only what not to do, but what they can and should do*.

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Some key elements of positive discipline include **being both kind and firm** (Durrant, 2016), such as gently holding a child's hand to stop them from throwing sand while calmly saying, "Sand stays in the sandbox so it doesn't hurt our friends."

Positive discipline also means **setting clear and respectful limits, listening to children's feelings**, and **guiding them to make better choices** (Erwin & Frey, 2023; (Spartaro & Bloch, 2018). For example, if a child grabs a toy from others, instead of simply scolding or taking the toy away, you might say, "I know you really want that toy, but grabbing it from a friend is not the way to do it. Let's ask for a turn or find something else to play with while we wait." This approach acknowledges or validates the child's feelings by letting them know that it's okay to feel frustrated; it shows you understand why they acted the way they did. At the same time, it helps them learn a more respectful and appropriate way to express those feelings. When children feel that adults try to understand them, they are more likely to respond positively to guidance and learn from the situation.

Positive discipline also includes **sharing decision-making and problem-solving with children** when it makes sense (Durrant, 2016). Some rules, like safety rules, are non-negotiable. But in other situations, children can help set rules and expectations. For example, you might ask, "How many children should play in the block area at once?" or "Before saying no to a new food, how many bites should we try?" This helps children feel involved and understand why rules are important. When children help create the rules, they are more likely to follow and remember them without constantly needing reminders.

That said, know that young children are still developing a lot of skills they would need in life. As such, it's also important to remember that children benefit from knowing what is expected of them. Don't assume they already know what to do, even if they've been in the same situation before. A gentle reminder of the day's expectations can go a long way in helping children know how to act or behave.

Benefits for children

Research indicates that children benefit from positive discipline in many ways (Erwin & Frey, 2023; Ferguson & Gfroerer, 2023; Carroll, 2022). For example, children who experience positive discipline feel a deep sense of connection with their caregiver (Carroll, 2022; Ferguson & Gfroerer, 2023). Below are some more benefits for children:

- Improves self-regulation (Ferguson & Gfroerer, 2023), or the ability to manage one's feelings and actions
- Teaches effective and respectful communication skills (Ferguson & Gfroerer, 2023).
- Improves problem-solving skills (Ferguson & Gfroerer, 2023).
- Improves school performance (Erwin & Frey, 2023).
- Decreases externalizing hyperactive behavior (Erwin & Frey, 2023), such as aggression towards others and lack of self-control.
- Lowers risk for risky behaviors later in life, such as smoking, use of marijuana, use of alcohol, being violent or early onset of sexual activity (Aquilino, 2001; Baumrind, 1991; Jackson et al., 1998; Simons, Morton et al., 2001)

Benefits for childcare providers

Engaging in positive discipline techniques is not only beneficial for children; it can also be helpful for adults. For example, research found that adults who use positive discipline tend to experience lower stress (Carroll, 2022). Adults who use positive discipline strategies are also better prepared to handle challenging behaviors in the classroom (Hemmeter et al., 2012). Children are also less likely to resist transitions when positive discipline is used, which helps the day go more smoothly for everyone.

Below are some strategies and scripts that you can use in your early childhood program to help you implement positive discipline.

- **Set clear expectations.** Use simple rules and explain them positively.
e.g., "Walk inside" instead of "Don't run."
- **Redirect behavior.** Offer a better choice instead of simply saying "no."
e.g., "Let's bang on the drum instead of the wall."
- **Show them appreciation and encouragement.** Thank the child for showing efforts to do well and help others.
e.g., "Thank you for helping Maya clean up the mess; you are such a good friend."

- **Validate feelings while guiding behavior.**

Acknowledge the child's emotions and offer appropriate alternatives:

e.g., "I know you're upset because the block tower fell. It's okay to feel upset. How about we take a deep breath and try again?"

- **Offer gentle reminders.** Don't assume children remember every rule. A quick prompt can be helpful.

e.g., "Remember, we use our indoor voice when we're inside the room."

Conclusion

Implementing positive discipline is not about being permissive or losing control. Instead, it's about guiding children with kindness and clear, appropriate expectations, helping them develop the skills they need to act more independently later on. By moving away from punishment and toward calm and respectful teaching moments, early childhood professionals can create supportive environments where every child feels safe, valued, and ready to learn. And when you practice positive discipline, you're not just helping the children; you're also making your own work easier and more rewarding by building trust, reducing conflicts, and fostering a more peaceful and happier space.

References

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