

The positive use of language to nurture positive behaviour

Over the past 12 months **Lauren Colvin** has been implementing and evaluating the 'Positive Discipline' approach towards nurturing positive behaviour within her classroom. Here she explores the positive and negative affects the language we use, along with the delivery and feelings behind it, has on children.

At the core of the 'Positive Discipline' approach is the message of caring based on kindness and firmness, dignity and mutual respect. The feeling behind what we say has a big impact on the way we deliver it and in turn the way in which it will be received and responded to by the recipient. Reminding yourself that you are dealing with children will help you to reassess the way you may be dealing with issues. Ask yourself if you are using a kind and respectful tone of voice. When the language we use is respectful and the tone of voice is kind, then we are more likely to win the child's co-operation. On the other hand if the language is humiliating and disrespectful then we elude our chances

consequence as long as the language used remains respectful. It would not be respectful to say, "You should be more careful, I won't let you pour the water again." A more respectful comment would be, "Whoops, what do you need to do now?" It is amazing how often a child knows what a logical solution would be and how willing they are to do it. "Where did we ever get the crazy idea that to make people do better, we first have to make them feel worse? People do better when they feel better."² If the child doesn't know what to do, it is probably because they have never been shown before, therefore making your expectation or request unreasonable. This is therefore a good opportunity to take time in these cases for training, so that going



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of achieving this goal. Instead we trigger defence mechanisms and are likely to be met with rebellion from the child. A simple question such as, "What did you learn from this?" can be delivered in a blame or shame manner or with empathy and interest. The first of which invites distance and hostility whereas the second approach helps to create an atmosphere of closeness and trust. It makes sense to assume that it is much more difficult to have a positive influence on the child when creating hostility as opposed to closeness. "Children are human beings by whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of their future."¹

Adding humiliation breaches the basic concept of mutual respect. It also turns what could be a kind and logical consequence into what seems like a punishment. An accident such as spilling water can be easily resolved by the child simply cleaning up the spillage. This remains a logical and fair

forward the child knows what to do during similar events. Mistakes are great opportunities for learning and not something to be ashamed of. Instead of jumping in and criticising a child for a mistake, discuss with the child in an encouraging way what could be done in the future to prevent such mistakes occurring again. Allow the child time to reflect and come up with suggestions. Handling things in this way demonstrates how mistakes are wonderful opportunities to learn. Notice how asking rather than telling the child is much more engaging. Asking, 'what', 'why' and 'how' questions to children as much as possible, instead of telling them the answers to situations they are more than likely capable of solving themselves is much more effective.

If you are constantly finding the solution to the problem for a child, then instead of 'rescuing' them you are robbing them of a valuable opportunity to explore problem solving techniques

themselves. "We are looking for solutions – not blame."³

I had a wonderful experience recently with a boy from my class. He was working alongside another child with the threading beads activity. The beads were stored in a small lightweight plastic container, which repeatedly tipped over whenever the two children reached in to take beads out. They were both becoming more and more frustrated with one another and came to tell me about the problem. I asked the boys if they had any ideas to stop this from happening again.

One of the boys instantly replied, "I know what we need to do. We need to put the beads in this other tray because it won't tip over when we get the beads out." The child had made a suggestion that had not crossed my mind. He had noticed that the small tray that the threading material was stored on would be a much better container to store the beads in whilst working with the activity. This was a great idea as the

tray was flatter and wider and therefore easier for the children to both select beads at the same time. Plus it was made of clay and therefore heavier and much less likely to fall over as the plastic one had done so previously. This is a prime example of how children, when given the chance, are great problem solvers, better than adults in most cases. If the child feels safe and comfortable in their environment and unafraid of the possibility of making a mistake, they will explore and experiment within their environment with confidence.

A great way to explore problem-solving techniques with children is to have brainstorming sessions. In my class we have regular class meetings, during which the children and I brainstorm ideas to try and find solutions to problems together. A nice way to start a class meeting is to exchange compliments. This can be a difficult concept for young children to understand, but with practise children will grasp the meaning and soon be able to give and receive compliments with ease. This is a valuable skill for children to learn.

Children regularly talk about others to tell on them for something they feel they have done wrong. Exploring compliments invites them to use positive language to describe others and acknowledge good things about those around them. Starting a meeting in this way creates a positive and happy mood, which makes people feel more willing to discuss and compromise over issues.

Encouragement is the foundation for all concepts behind the 'Positive Discipline' approach. It involves not just words, but our attitude towards and treatment of children also. Encouragement involves appreciating that each child is unique and celebrating that without having unrealistic expectations. It means to have faith in children's capabilities; to care for each child by taking the time to respond carefully and respectfully towards their behaviour. People sometimes get confused with the difference between praise and

encouragement; it is important to note the difference between the two as they offer conflicting long term effects. Praise keeps your child dependent on the authority figure for approval to feel good about him/herself. It can often be a disguise for expressing our personal values and opinions. Encouragement allows your child to focus on how he/she feels from the inside out. For example, "It looks like you enjoyed drawing that picture," rather than "You're a good boy" gives the child

responsibility for his/her happiness rather than looking for someone or something to bring him/her happiness. Encouragement focuses on the hard work and effort involved in the

children who need the most encouragement and therefore we must work hard to help them to feel supported and to boost their self-esteem.

Being more sensitive and aware of the language I use within my classroom has definitely had a positive impact. Our ultimate goal as teachers and parents is to work alongside children to help them achieve their full potential. Helping children to accomplish academic success is the main focus within many classrooms. We must not forget however the importance of supporting children towards developing self-esteem and belief in their own abilities, along with awareness and consideration for those around them. Our social skills and the way we feel about ourselves form the backbone of personal and professional success. They help us to navigate everyday interactions such as

exchanging greetings, holding conversations, starting and maintaining friendships and other relationships, asking for help and giving instructions. Happiness is the key to success, which is defined by our relationships and the perception we have of ourselves. It is evident how language is a huge contributor towards achieving this objective. Every day I can see small changes in my children, through their growing confidence in their abilities, taking responsibility for their choices and actions, freely giving compliments, assessing alternate approaches to day-to-day life and offering more socially acceptable behaviour. I look forward to continuing to put this methodology into practice and helping to support and nurture the uniqueness and great potential within each child.

References

- 1 Montessori, Maria. *Learning Together*. London: Montessori St Nicholas Charity, 2012, p.97
- 2 Nelson, Jane. *Positive Discipline*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2006, p.14
- 3 Nelson, Jane. *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*. New York: The Three Rivers Press, 2000, p.149

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From the top: Chopping, playing in the garden, sweeping and peeling an orange



process. For example "I can tell you're working hard on reading because you finished a longer book," as oppose to "What a smart child you are".

Through encouragement we are teaching children to look inside themselves for their motivation, for the answers to their questions, and for knowing their purpose and direction. Encouragement helps children to realize that it is their challenge to do

things to make themselves happy. It is easy to praise and reward children who are behaving well and doing well in tasks. However it is much more difficult to praise more challenging children who are misbehaving and have negative outlooks. These are the