



Positive Discipline for Children with Special Needs: Raising and Teaching All Children to Become Resilient, Responsible, and Respectful

By Jane Nelsen, Steven Foster, Arlene Raphael

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A Positive Approach To Helping Children With Special Needs Realize Their Potential

Every child deserves to lead a happy and fulfilling life. For parents and teachers of children with special needs, helping their child to not only negotiate daily challenges, but to live fulfilling, meaningful lives, can be the most difficult challenge they will face.

Over the years, millions of parents and teachers have come to trust Jane Nelsen's classic Positive Discipline series for its consistent, commonsense approach to childrearing. Now, the bestselling series addresses the specific challenges that parents and teachers of children with special needs face, and offers them straightforward advice for supporting them in positive ways. In these pages are practical solutions to challenges such as:

Learning to look beyond diagnostic labels ● Believing in each child's potential regardless of his/her stage of development ● Helping children integrate socially and interact with their peers ● Coping with the frustration that inevitably occurs when a child is being difficult ● Strengthening a child's sense of belonging and significance ● And Many More!

Use this book to answer such questions as:

- How do you accommodate a disability, while still teaching a child to try their best?
- How do you help a child cope with anger they may have trouble expressing, especially when that anger may on some level be justified?
- How do you teach a child who may struggle with seemingly straight forward

tasks to contribute to the world around them in a way that will be meaningful to them?

“If you are raising or teaching a child with special needs, this book is a must-read. As the mother of a child with autism, my hopes and dreams for my son were no different than those of other parents. I wanted a parenting approach that helped my child grow up to be self confident, happy, and prepared for success in relationships, work, and life. I also needed practical, effective methods for addressing the significant, challenging behaviors I faced on a daily basis. Finally, in this amazing book, I found both....**Thank you, thank you, thank you to the authors of this groundbreaking book.**” - Rachel Fink Parks, MS, PCC

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Dr. Jane Nelsen is a California licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and author or co-author of 18 books, including *Positive Discipline*, *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*, *Serenity, When Your Dog is Like Family*, and 12 other books in the *Positive Discipline Series*. She earned her Ed.D. from the University of San Francisco, but her formal training has been secondary to her hands-on training as the mother of seven and grandmother of 20. She now shares this wealth of knowledge and experience as a popular keynote speaker and workshop leader throughout the world.

Steven Foster is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who has been working with children and families in the Portland area for over thirty years. During that time he has worked in, directed and designed a number of treatment programs, always using a relationship-based approach, for young children and families struggling with emotional, social and behavioral challenges. For the last sixteen years he has worked as an Early Childhood Specialist at the Clackamas Education Service District outside of Portland. There he has helped to create the array of services provided to children ages birth to five, and their families. A Positive Discipline parent educator since 2001, Steven is also a Certified Positive Discipline Trainer, training others to teach parenting classes. He is also a sought-after speaker on working with children and families with mental health concerns.

Arlene Raphael, M.S. Special Education, is a Certified Positive Discipline Trainer. For over 35 years, Arlene has provided services to children on the autism spectrum and to children with other significant special needs. This has included teaching students in classroom and clinic settings, training their instructors in public and private school settings, and educating their families through parent education classes and family consultations. She has designed and taught Positive Discipline courses for parents and teachers of children with special needs, including children on the autism spectrum. Arlene serves as an adjunct instructor in Special Education at Portland State University where she supervises student teachers and assists with the development of course curricula for teacher candidates who serve students with significant disabilities.

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Chapter 1

“But My Child is Different!”

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, in Vienna, there was a psychiatrist, Alfred Adler, who was a contemporary, and for a short time, a colleague of Sigmund Freud. In groundbreaking work, Adler broke away from Freud and developed the theories of human development that were later significantly enhanced by Rudolf Dreikurs. Positive Discipline is based on the theories and methods of Adler and Dreikurs.

Adler believed that the primary motivation for all human beings is to belong and feel significant, and that psychologically healthy people seek belonging and significance in socially useful ways. By “socially useful” we mean two things. First, that a person’s attempts to connect and be important invite a positive response from those around her. Second, we allude to a concept coined by Adler, which he called “Gemeinschaftsgefühl,” sometimes translated as “social interest.” Adler believed that mental health can be measured by the degree of an individual’s positive contribution in his or her community. Thus, a primary

purpose of *behavior* is to act on that motivation to achieve a sense of belonging and significance. Sometimes children (and adults) make “mistakes” about how to find belonging and significance and “misbehave.” All of us are constantly making decisions in our daily lives related to how we will achieve this sense of belonging. This process began the day we were born (and some believe in utero). These decisions play out in the context of the communities we find ourselves in from birth on: families, preschools, childcare, classrooms, peer groups, work groups and larger communities. It is crucial to understand that children with special needs are likely to make different decisions about how to find belonging and significance. If they are pampered (a huge temptation for many parents of children with special needs), they may decide that they feel loved when others give them “special service” and may decide to use their “special needs” to gain a sense of belonging and significance. Thus parents miss opportunities to help their children make decisions that lead them to feel capable. Another possibility is for children with special needs to be neglected, which could cause them to make other less than productive decisions about how to achieve belonging and significance. Dreikurs noted that children can easily go about meeting their need to belong in misguided ways, referring to these ways as “mistaken goals of behavior” (which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 2). He pointed out that children are excellent perceivers and noticers; if you doubt this, take a walk around the block with a toddler and notice how long it takes as your toddler finds everything endlessly fascinating. However, children are notoriously poor interpreters of what they see. As they interact with the people in their world children make decisions based on their understanding of these events. These decisions, often based on misinterpretations, lead them to pursue belonging and significance in ways that befuddle and sometimes enrage the adults who love them.

Three year old Courtney has Down Syndrome. She is playing with her mother when the phone rings. Her mother gets up to answer the phone and, as she is speaking, Courtney hurls herself at her mother's knees and cries piteously. The mother shushes Courtney, which is briefly successful, but a few moments later finds her knees under assault once again. This is a scene that has played out numerous times and the mother is exasperated yet again. But she gets off the phone quickly and picks Courtney up and resumes their play, a little resentfully.

What could possibly be going on for Courtney? She has been playing with her mother who leaves the game when the phone rings. Courtney notices this, of course, but has learned to misinterpret it. She believes that the phone is more important to her mother than she is. Why else would she leave? Of course this is not true. However, “truth” does not matter here. If Courtney believes that it's true she might develop a mistaken belief about what she must do to feel a sense of belonging with her mother. (There is more on mistaken beliefs in Chapter 2.) She might believe that she must be the center of her mother's attention in order to feel connected and important. And her mother might feel as though she is neglecting Courtney any time she diverts her attention.

This scene can, and frequently does, play out in many homes, regardless of special needs status. This is an important point because when Adler and Dreikurs suggested that all human beings are driven to belong and seek significance in socially useful ways, they did not mean *except for children with autism or cerebral palsy or Down Syndrome or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or developmental delays or any of the myriad conditions that we consider "special needs."* All children are apt to misinterpret their experiences and pursue mistaken goals. However, Adler understood that children's tendencies to make decisions based on their misinterpretation are exacerbated when one or more of the following is true:

- 1) They are pampered.
- 2) They are neglected.
- 3) They are handicapped. (Adler used this word before it became politically unacceptable.)

Children with special needs may be pampered. When pampering them, parents often underestimate their children's capabilities and use their condition as a justification for low expectations. These children are usually clever enough to use their parents “sympathy” to manipulate for more special service.

Other children with special needs may be neglected because their parents are so discouraged that they give

up and neglect their children emotionally if not physically. These children do not receive the guidance they need to learn to find belonging and significance in socially useful ways.

Innocent Behaviors

As we shall see in later chapters, children with special needs can demonstrate behavior which is not socially directed but, instead, is “innocent,” i.e. related to their special condition. For example, a child with Tourette Syndrome is more than likely not misbehaving when he makes unusual noises. This is usually an “innocent behavior” resulting from his condition.

How we respond to this behavior can determine whether or not it becomes mistaken goal behavior. Their “special need” does not make *all* of their behavior “innocent.” As we will also see in later chapters, children with special needs do indeed pursue mistaken goals as well. Differentiating between the two kinds of behaviors (innocent and mistaken goal) presents unique challenges to both parents and teachers. It is our intent to present Positive Discipline concepts and tools that will be useful to both.

The Lens

Positive Discipline is certainly not a cure for any of the conditions mentioned above.. However, since belonging and significance are so vital to a happy and fulfilling life, we must find ways to help *all* children achieve these. Parents of young children with special needs struggle with a host of extra tasks that must be juggled constantly. These tasks include all of those that any parent faces: getting kids up and out the door in the morning, getting them to sleep, dressing, eating nourishing foods, potty learning (a much nicer way to think of potty “training”), finding childcare, etc. They must add to these tasks the often complicated overlay of whatever their child’s condition is. In addition, they often must get to doctor or clinic appointments and special education meetings while trying to figure out how they are going to ask for yet more time off from work or make it to their other child’s soccer game.

In parenting classes for parents of children with special needs, we work hard to present Positive Discipline not as a cure but as a *lens* for parents to view their children (and themselves) differently. It can be said that these parents have two perspectives to overcome. The first is the traditional child-rearing perspective that suggests that when children misbehave they must either be punished in such a way that they will learn not to repeat the misbehavior or they must be rewarded when they are “good” to ensure that this good behavior will continue. The second is perhaps the tougher to overcome. It suggests that because their children have disabilities of some sort they do not have the same needs as other children. In the first class we hand out three-dimensional glasses to the parents as an experiential way to emphasize looking at their children’s behaviors and their own responses to this behavior differently.

Let us state it clearly: Children with special needs of any sort still have the same need to belong and feel significant in ways that invite positive responses from those around them. What is different is how we as parents and teachers must adapt our interactions with them to take their special needs into account without allowing these needs to block our vision of the children underneath.

Education

The parents of children with special needs have always known that their kids deserved the same love and attention as other children. They also have always known that their children deserved to be educated to the best of their abilities. As a society we have not always treated the education of children with special needs with the urgency it deserves.

In 1975, the United States Congress passed a landmark piece of legislation called the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142. Over the years the act has been amended and updated and is now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In essence the law of the land

began to catch up with what parents had always known. Our children, *all our children*, must have their education taken seriously. The law guarantees that all children with special needs have the right to a “free and appropriate public education.” It also guarantees that parents of children with special needs have the right to be involved in their children’s education and to both advocate for them and be heard.

According to a Department of Education website, in 1970 only one in five children with disabilities was being educated. Several states actually had laws *excluding* children with special needs from attending *public* schools. Many children were institutionalized and their education neglected. While those of us who work in special education are well aware of the bureaucracy and sometimes overwhelming documentation requirements, it is a fact that after parents of special needs children convinced Congress to enact the law, IDEA has been instrumental in changing how our society as a whole views these children.

Teachers in both special education and regular education are confronted with meeting the educational needs of children whose special needs represent a wide spectrum of conditions. Some of these children are in special education full time, some in regular education full time, many in some blend of the two. Something they all have in common is that when their behavior is not “socially useful,” it interferes with their ability to glean as much from their academic experiences as they might otherwise. It is no exaggeration to say that teachers of children with special needs can feel very challenged by these behaviors.

Four year old Kaleb attends preschool at a local Head Start program. He has been found to have developmental delays by the local Early Childhood Special Education agency. Though obviously very bright, Kaleb struggles with the simplest expectations of a preschool classroom. He refuses to come to circle time, instead darting under the art easel. When encouraged to come out and find a seat with the group, he screams, “No!” and tells the teacher he wants to go outside immediately. When he is reassured that the group will go outside but that circle time will happen before that, he jumps up, runs to the center of the classroom, crosses his arms dramatically and screams, “Fine!” He remains away from the circle.

Schools of education across the country are addressing behavior challenges like these in their curricula for aspiring teachers. There are several different approaches offered. What they all have in common is that they view behaviors such as Kaleb’s as obstacles that must be overcome in order for children to gain increased access to all of the positive educational experiences their schools provide. (We will return to Kaleb at the end of this chapter.) To understand behavior in the context of the classroom, many programs teach Functional Behavioral Analysis, a tool that uses meticulous observation to determine what it might be that children like Kaleb are either getting from their behavior or what they might be seeking to avoid by employing it. In addition, many behavioral approaches now taught in graduate schools of education, to their credit, are beginning to recognize the power of the relationship between teachers and students to help students develop the skills to manage their own behavior. And finally, well researched systems such as Positive Behavior Supports have discovered that any system must be taught at least school-wide (and preferably school district-wide) and on a number of different levels, ranging from a general curriculum for most students to more specialized interventions for children whose behaviors present more significant challenges.

Parenting and Teaching With a Long Term View

With this kind of preparation available to aspiring teachers, it is reasonable to wonder what Positive Discipline has to offer that is different and better. To begin to answer this, let us perform an exercise together. Think of your child with special needs, your own child if you are a parent or a student you know if you are a teacher. Make a list of the behaviors that you find the most challenging. If you are like the parents and teachers in our workshops, the list will look something like this:

- Ø Screaming
- Ø Hitting

- Ø Tantrumming
- Ø Whining
- Ø Demanding
- Ø Odd fixations
- Ø Disrupting the class
- Ø Running away
- Ø Hiding
- Ø Refusal

For many groups, the list could go on and on. Now, indulge us for another moment. After you read this paragraph, put the book down and close your eyes. Imagine that you are sitting comfortably in your living room or classroom and thirty years have gone by. You hear a knock at the door. The door opens and in walks the child you had in mind when we made the list of challenging behaviors. This child is now grown up, somewhere between thirty and thirty-eight years old. What would you like to be true about this adult in your living room or classroom?

Again, if your answers are like those of groups in our workshops, the list will include things like:

- Ø Confident
- Ø Educated
- Ø Compassionate
- Ø Sense of Humor
- Ø Working
- Ø Honest
- Ø Respectful
- Ø Independent
- Ø Healthy
- Ø Good parent
- Ø Likeable
- Ø Kind

(One of our favorite responses was from a dad who, when asked what he wanted to be true about his son thirty years later, replied, “Just visiting.” What a wonderful way to describe independence!)

In adopting a Positive Discipline approach, we are taking a long term view. We are concerned with the kinds of men, women, parents and citizens our children will be. The behavioral approaches advocated in many parenting classes and taught in most schools of education will, in fact, work. *Yes, you read that correctly!* Punishments and rewards work. Systems built on stickers for good behavior and the loss of privileges for bad behavior all are effective in the short term. Positive Discipline, an authoritative approach built on the foundations of mutual respect, kindness and firmness at the same time, an emphasis on problem-solving and teaching valuable social and life skills may not provide quick results, especially if you are using a very different style now. However, it will lead to children developing the character traits and skills necessary for the second list you made above. Positive Discipline is supported by recent public health research that has demonstrated that an authoritative approach to discipline leads children to develop greater responsibility over their lives and increased academic success[i]. It is also supported by brain research in the past two decades that affirms the importance of emotional connection between children and adults (parents *and* teachers) in optimal brain development.

Back in Kaleb’s classroom, his teacher, using a technique from Positive Discipline, first asked herself how

she was feeling about Kaleb's behavior, knowing that this was the clue to help her understand the belief behind it and, therefore, some possible solutions. She realized that she was annoyed that the behavior kept repeating and worried that Kaleb wasn't benefiting from the fun that the rest of the class was having at circle time. This let her know that Kaleb was pursuing the mistaken goal of "undue attention." (You will learn how to determine the mistaken goal in the next chapter.) Armed with this knowledge she made a plan.

Before the next circle time she showed Kaleb a "first/then" sheet. On this sheet were two pictures: under "first" there was a picture of children at circle time; under "then" was a picture of children playing outside. She also told him that she was really looking forward to playing hide and seek with him outside. At circle time, Kaleb was still antsy. The teacher could see him glance down repeatedly at the "first/then" sheet, but he stayed in the circle until it was time to go outside. The hide and seek game afterwards was great fun!

It can be very encouraging to think of a behavior challenge as an opportunity to teach social and life skills that help your child grow into a capable, happy, contributing adult. Keep the end results in mind, while enjoying your child now.

[i] Jody McVittie and Al M. Best, *The impact of Adlerian-based parenting classes on self-reported parental behavior*, The Journal of Individual Psychology, 65, 264-285, Fall, 2009.

Users Review

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Nancy Sanchez:

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