

# What is Positive Discipline?

[www.posdis.org](http://www.posdis.org)



"We have received amazing comments from the teachers who have been to the Positive Discipline seminar. It has been credited with essentially eliminating the 'Principal Referrals' and allowing the teachers to handle some of the large class sizes we have this year because the kids do their own problem solving."

Big Springs, Elementary School  
Garland, TX

Where did we ever get the crazy idea that in order to make children do better, first we have to make them feel worse? Children do better when they feel better."

Jane Nelsen

"I believe we have a different environment in our school when it comes to our interaction with each other. There are problems, (Christmas is coming you know) but the percentage of negative interaction is going down. I am not dealing with conflicts in the office in the same quantity."

School principal - after 3 months of Positive Discipline in the Classroom in her school

*Positive Discipline* is a program designed to teach young people to become responsible, respectful and resourceful members of their communities. Based on the best selling Positive Discipline books by Dr. Jane Nelsen, Lynn Lott, Cheryl Erwin, Kate Ortolano, Mary Hughes, Mike Brock, Lisa Larson and others, it teaches important social and life skills in a manner that is deeply respectful and encouraging for both children and adults (including parents, teachers, childcare providers, youth workers, and others).

Recent research tells us that children are "hardwired" from birth to connect with others, and that children who feel a sense of connection to their community, family, and school are less likely to misbehave. To be successful, contributing members of their community, children must learn necessary social and life skills. Positive Discipline is based on the understanding that discipline must be taught and that discipline teaches.

Jane Nelsen gives the following criteria for "effective discipline that teaches":

## FOUR CRITERIA FOR EFFECTIVE DISCIPLINE

### Effective discipline...

1. **Helps children feel a sense of connection.** (Belonging and significance)
2. **Is mutually respectful and encouraging.** (Kind and firm at the same time.)
3. **Is effective long - term.** (Considers what the child is thinking, feeling, learning, and deciding about himself and his world – and what to do in the future to survive or to thrive.)
4. **Teaches important social and life skills .** (Respect, concern for others, problem solving, and cooperation as well as the skills to contribute to the home, school or larger community.)

The Positive Discipline Parenting and Classroom Management models are aimed at developing mutually respectful relationships. Positive Discipline teaches adults to employ kindness and firmness at the same time, and is neither punitive nor permissive. The tools and concepts of Positive Discipline include:

- **Mutual respect.** Adults model firmness by respecting themselves and the needs of the situation, and kindness by respecting the needs of the child.
- **Identifying the belief behind the behavior.** Effective discipline recognizes the reasons kids do what they do and works to change those beliefs, rather than merely attempting to change behavior.
- **Effective communication and problem solving skills.**
- **Discipline that teaches** (and is neither permissive nor punitive).
- **Focusing on solutions instead of punishment.**
- **Encouragement (instead of praise).** Encouragement notices effort and improvement, not just success, and builds long-term self-esteem and empowerment..

“Parents and teachers can no longer function as bosses, but they must acquire the skill of being democratic leaders.”

Rudolf Dreikurs in [Social Equality the Challenge of Today](#)

“Democracy in the classroom is not just a frill or an isolated social studies unit, but an educational necessity.”

Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels and Arthur Hyde in [Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.](#) 1998

“My children are becoming more aware of their capabilities and my confidence in them.”

R. Swetz, parent

“I have not seen a child yet that hasn't improved because of Positive Discipline”

Margaret Wilson, 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

“The best motivation for doing a job well is the satisfaction of doing it.”

Rudolf Dreikurs in [Social Equality the Challenge of Today](#)

Unique characteristics of the Positive Discipline Model also include:

- **Teaching adults and students through experiential activities.** Creating opportunity to practice new skills and to have fun learning by doing.
- **Classroom discipline programs and parent education programs that are consistent.** Parents, teachers, and childcare providers can work together to provide a secure, consistent environment for children.
- **Inexpensive training and ongoing support** so members of communities can teach each other Positive Discipline skills..
- **Certified trainers across the country who can work with schools and communities.**

## A HISTORY OF POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

The Positive Discipline Parenting and Classroom Management Model is based on the work of Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Adler first introduced the idea of parenting education to United States audiences in the 1920s. He advocated treating children respectfully, but also argued that spoiling and pampering children was not encouraging to them and resulted in social and behavioral problems. The classroom techniques, which were initially introduced in Vienna in the early 1920s, were brought to the United States by Dr. Dreikurs in the late 1930s. Dreikurs and Adler refer to the kind and firm approach to teaching and parenting as “democratic.”

In the 1980's, Lynn Lott and Jane Nelsen attended a workshop facilitated by John Taylor.<sup>2</sup> Lynn began training interns to teach experientially and wrote (with the help of her interns) the first Teaching Parenting Manual. Jane was the director of Project ACCEPT (Adlerian Counseling Concepts for Encouraging Parents and Teachers), a federally funded project that had received exemplary status while in its developmental phase. Jane wrote and self-published *Positive Discipline* in 1981. It was published by Ballantine in 1987. In 1988, Jane and Lynn decided to collaborate on the book which is now titled, *Positive Discipline for Teenagers*, and began to teach parenting and classroom management skills experientially. Lynn and Jane also wrote *Positive Discipline in the Classroom* and developed a manual filled with experiential activities for teachers and their students.

In the years since, Positive Discipline series has grown to include titles that address different age groups, family settings, and special situations. Positive Discipline is taught to schools, parents, and parent educators by trained Certified Positive Discipline Associates. Community members, parents, and teachers are encouraged to become trained facilitators and to share the concepts of Positive Discipline with their own groups.

Positive Discipline parent education classes are taught across the country, and Positive Discipline is successfully used as the classroom management model in private, religious, and public elementary schools. A demonstration school program is currently being developed.

<sup>1</sup>Alfred Adler (1870 - 1937) was a Viennese psychiatrist who immigrated to the United States. Though a contemporary of Freud, he promoted a substantially different view of human behavior. Adler believed that behavior is not driven by events in the past, but moves toward a goal of belonging and significance that is influenced by each individual's decisions about themselves, others, and the world. Rudolf Dreikurs (1897 - 1972), also a Viennese psychiatrist, was the director of one of the child guidance centers in Vienna that used Adler's methods with families and classrooms. He immigrated to the United States to avoid Nazi persecution in 1937, earlier in his career than Adler. Dreikurs was one of the first people to recognize the benefits of groups in therapy. He was a tireless advocate for relationships based on mutual respect, both at home and at school. His well known books include [Children the Challenge](#), [Maintaining Sanity in the Classroom](#), [The Psychology of the Classroom](#).

<sup>2</sup>John Taylor lives and works in Oregon. He is author of [Person to Person: Awareness Techniques for Counselors, Group Leaders, and Parent Educators](#). (1984) R & E Publishers, Saratoga, CA.

“The more we learn, the more enjoyment we get out of being parents. Thank you!”

Parent

I've taught school for 15 years. In the past the teacher was the judge, jury, and executioner. Now children solve their own problems so we have more time.

Mary DiNatale, 3rd grade teacher

“Positive Discipline is one of the few practical, effective classes I've taken since entering the teaching field. PD has opened so many options for dealing with student needs. I feel like I have more "real" tools to actually help kids be successful and help themselves.”

Teacher

“My oldest child is starting to volunteer her thoughts and opinions. We love the changes!”

Parent

## THE EVIDENCE FOR POSITIVE DISCIPLINE

Formal evaluation comparing Positive Discipline Schools with schools using other discipline programs is just beginning. However, studies of implementation of Positive Discipline techniques have shown that Positive Discipline tools do produce significant results. A study of 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 annually), vandalism decreased (from 24 episodes to 2) and teachers reported improvement in classroom atmosphere, behavior, attitudes and academic performance. (Platt, 1979) A study of parent and teacher education programs directed at parents and teachers of students with “maladaptive” behavior that implemented Positive Discipline tools showed a statistically significant improvement in the behavior of students in the program schools when compared to control schools. (Nelsen, 1979) Smaller studies examining the impacts of specific Positive Discipline tools have also shown positive results. (Browning, 2000; Potter, 1999; Esquivel) Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that a student’s perception of being part of the school community (being “connected” to school) decreases the incidence of socially risky behavior (such as emotional distress and suicidal thoughts / attempts, cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use; violent behavior) and increases academic performance. (Resnick et al, 1997; Battistich, 1999; Goodenow, 1993) There is also significant evidence that teaching younger students social skills has a protective effect that lasts into adolescence. Students that have been taught social skills are more likely to succeed in school and less likely to engage in problem behaviors. (Kellam et al, 1998; Battistich, 1999)

Although specific studies of the Positive Discipline parenting program are in the early stages, programs similar to Positive Discipline have been studied and shown to be effective in changing parent behavior. In a study of Adlerian parent education classes for parents of teens, Stanley (1978) found that parents did more problem solving with their teens and were less autocratic in decision making. Positive Discipline teaches parents the skills to be both kind and firm at the same time. Numerous studies show that teens who perceive their parents as both kind (responsive) and firm (demanding) are at lower risk for smoking, use of marijuana, use of alcohol, or being violent, and have a later onset of sexual activity. (Aquilino, 2001; Baumrind, 1991; Jackson et al, 1998; Simons, Morton et al, 2001) Other studies have correlated the teen’s perception of parenting style (kind and firm versus autocratic or permissive) with improved academic performance. (Cohen, 1997; Deslandes, 1997; Dornbusch et al, 1987; Lam, 1997).

---

## To learn more about Positive Discipline

- POSITIVE DISCIPLINE ASSOCIATES
- TRAINING WORKSHOPS
- ARTICLES
- NEWSLETTER
- RESEARCH

Visit us online at [www.posdis.org](http://www.posdis.org)

or call toll-free 1-866-POS-DISC (1-866-767-4372)

## What is The Positive Discipline Association and what does it offer?

### \* Mission

The Positive Discipline Association is dedicated to promoting and encouraging the ongoing development of social and life skills and respectful relationships in families, schools, businesses and community systems.

### \* Services

The Positive Discipline Association, exists to strengthen families, schools, and communities. It provides training for trainers who educate parents (including foster parents and house parents for residential settings), teachers, administrators and other helping professionals. It provides training materials and follow-up services. All the work is based upon Adlerian/Dreikursian principles for issues relating to parenting, guidance, discipline, relationships, communication skills, and team building. Specific target groups for workshops or trainings include, but are not limited to:

- Parents, grandparents, foster parents and other family caregivers
- Families
- Parent educators
- Teachers and school administrators for preschool through grade12
- Child-care providers
- Therapists, counselors, social workers
- Community organizations
- Communities of faith
- Corporate trainers

---

Literature review conducted by  
Jody McVittie, M.D.

For more extensive research  
visit online at:

<http://www.posdis.org/page7.html>