

# Positive Practice

## Skill building for appropriate behaviors

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**The rationale:** Positive practice is designed to help the child learn new skills. The more a child does a certain behavior, the more likely that behavior is to happen just by habit.

Many times, children are punished for doing the inappropriate behavior. But punishment doesn't teach the child how to do the right behavior, it just tells the child that he/she did the wrong behavior and then the child is left to figure out what he/she should have done.

Additionally, for children who are impulsive and do not think before acting, punishment is largely ineffective in the long run because punishment only works if the child remembers before doing the behavior, "Hey! The last time I did this behavior I got punished and I don't like getting punished, therefore, I won't behave that way now" and then thinks of an alternative way to behave. Impulsive children are at a severe disadvantage when it comes to thinking things through ahead of time in the heat of an emotional situation—in fact, that is the problem! So punishment doesn't usually help solve that problem (although this is not to say that punishment should not be used; it just doesn't help the child pick the right behavior). Also, impulsive children are at a disadvantage for coming up with alternative ways of behaving, especially if they have not behaved appropriately very often.

Positive practice helps by doing two things. First, it is mildly punishing because the child must repetitively perform some behavior; repetition itself is mildly punishing, especially for children with attention deficits and/or impulsivity. Second, and most importantly, it teaches a new skill through having the child actually perform the skill. Just telling a child what the correct response was (i.e., lecturing them) often does not result in a change in their behavior, much in the same way that lecturing me about how to golf like a pro will not create in me professional-quality golf skills. However, if a child actually acts out the correct behavior repeatedly, a habit is strengthened because the more times a behavior is done, the more likely it is to slip out without thinking, much in the same way that having me *practice* golf skills will move me closer to quality golf performance much more effectively than just telling me what to do if I never actually do it.

If the only behavior a child ever shows is an inappropriate behavior, the only habit getting stronger is the bad habit and that is exactly what we don't want. With Positive Practice, a positive behavior is done more times than the negative behavior which means that the positive habit will be strengthened (over time; it takes time to overcome a habit) more than the negative habit.

Be aware that Positive Practice takes time on your part because you will need to role play all the parts of the original situation that were not the child's part. However, in the end, Positive Practice tends to take you much less time because you end up having to correct behaviors less often, you do not have to spend time dealing with the difficulties involved in lengthy and repeated groundings, etc. The time invested now will result in a great return on your

investment—you will end up with much more time later, and a much better feeling as your child's behavior improves.

You may choose to use Positive Practice in many different ways. Here are some ideas:

1. Give the child the choice to either accept a punishment (e.g., grounding from media for a day) or to do the Positive Practice. Most kids will choose the Positive Practice and that is great because what we really want is not for them to be miserable (which they will be when they are grounded; and frequently we are miserable when the child is grounded too, so it punishes us as much or more than the child!), but we want them to behave appropriately. So, Positive Practice increases the chances that the child will behave appropriately.
2. For particularly severe behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, etc.), it can be useful to combine punishment with Positive Practice. For example, the child has the choice to either accept a punishment (e.g., 1 week of grounding from media) or to do Positive Practice with a reduced punishment (e.g., does Positive Practice and then is grounded from media for only 3 days instead of 7 days).
3. For children who tend to refuse to do Positive Practice or whom you anticipate will refuse to do it, you can weight the options—but be sure you are OK with whatever option they choose. For example, for a non-serious (i.e., not physically aggressive) but still inappropriate behavior (e.g., rudeness, noncompliance, defiance, tantrums, etc.), make the punishment high enough that the Positive Practice looks like a really good option (e.g., grounded for 1 week, or, do Positive Practice).
4. Another option instead of offering choices is that the punishment is in place until the child does the Positive Practice. For example, the child is grounded from media (TV, video games, CD, radio, etc.) until the child does the Positive Practice.

## The Positive Practice Steps:

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1. **Connect with child's emotions.** Do not argue about the accuracy of their perceptions; say things like, "If that's what you thought was going on, I can definitely see why you were angry", or, "Wow. I can see things felt really unfair to you.", or, "Yeah, I can understand that you felt really frustrated.", or, "Yeah, I can understand that you felt anxious when you realized you might get into trouble."
2. **Think of behaviors that the child could do that would make things go better next time.** Give the child the first chance to come up with ideas, but, it's OK for you to give the child specific things to do if the child has a hard time thinking of appropriate things to do on their own. The important thing in this step is for them to have several ideas about what they could do to make things go better.
3. **Role play 5-7 times the appropriate ways while praising the positive behaviors.** For younger children or children with attention deficits, 3 times may be all they can do. For older children and repeat offenses, more repetitions are appropriate. Be sure to praise the child for how well they do the appropriate behavior during the role play. In the role plays, be sure that you initially role play a positive outcome for the appropriate behavior. As you proceed closer to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> role play, you may choose to make the outcome more difficult to achieve to help expand and strengthen the child's skills. Remember,

however, that during Positive Practice, you want the child's appropriate behaviors to bring the child success. Success is a great motivator.

If during the Positive Practice the child demonstrates an inappropriate way of solving the problem, re-start the number of practices owed. So, if a child is to do 5 practices and on the 4<sup>th</sup> practice he/she acts out an inappropriate behavior, the child must start over and will owe 5 more practices. You may decide to wait and do the practices later and the child will remain grounded until he/she can complete the Practice appropriately. Remember, the last thing we want is for the child to practice doing inappropriate behaviors.

The parent's job is to take on all roles necessary to allow the child to act out his/her appropriate behaviors. This may require the parent to act as the child's brother/sister, friend, etc. Children who were victim's should not be required to participate in the Positive Practice. That is, if Billy hits Sally, the parent would take on the role of Sally during the Positive Practice; Sally should not be punished by having to do the Practice if she did not do anything wrong. Even if she did do something wrong, it is best to do the Practice separately for each child to prevent further escalation between the children and additional acting out toward each other.

If children strongly resist doing Positive Practice, it can often be because they are truly not sure how to do the appropriate behavior even if they can say the words. In these cases, it may be helpful for the parent to reverse roles with the child initially. That is, the parent can act out a demonstration of one of the appropriate behaviors and then ask the child to do the same thing the parent just modeled.