Positive Psychology and School Discipline: Positive Is Not Simply the Opposite of Punitive

**By George Bear**

Historically, most educators have recognized two primary aims of school discipline: (a) managing student behavior, relying primarily on the use of teacher-centered techniques for preventing and correcting misbehavior and (b) developing self-discipline, combining teacher-centered techniques with more student-centered techniques that focus on inculcating students with social, emotional, moral, and behavioral competencies needed to manage their own behavior (Bear, 2005). Research in the areas of both parenting and classroom management coalesce in showing that both aims are equally important. Nevertheless, in both the past and the present, it is not uncommon to find approaches and models of school discipline in which only one aim receives much attention. More often than not, it is the aim of managing or controlling student behavior, using punitive or “positive” techniques.

When first introduced in the 1970s, and largely in reaction to increased disorder and violence in the schools, Assertive Discipline advised teachers to be “prepared to back up her words with actions” (Canter & Canter, 1976, p. 30) and to let “the child know that she means what she says and says what she means” (p. 9). As is true with many codes of conduct used today and especially found in the pervasive zero tolerance approach to school discipline, the techniques of choice in Assertive Discipline were primarily punitive. These included writing names on the board, calling home to report misbehavior, and removing students from the classroom or school. Although teachers were encouraged to use techniques of positive reinforcement (e.g., “Marbles in a Jar”), those techniques received much less attention. Since its first edition, Assertive Discipline has been revised three times (Canter & Canter, 1992, 2001, 2009), offering a more “positive” model of classroom management and school discipline in which techniques of positive reinforcement are preferred over the use of punishment. This is reflected in the authors changing the subtitle of Assertive Discipline from “A Take Charge Approach for Today’s Teacher” in 1976 to “Positive Behavior Management for Today’s Classroom” in editions since then.

Calling one’s approach to classroom management and school discipline “positive” is now quite fashionable. In addition to the popularity of positive assertive discipline, we have positive discipline (Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000), used widely by parents and teachers alike, and school-wide positive behavioral supports (SWPBS; Sugai & Horner, 2009), adopted nationwide by approximately 10,000 schools. Unfortunately, in each of these models and approaches, it is unclear what “positive” means, other than the greater use of positive reinforcement than punishment (especially suspension and expulsion). That is, positive is simply presented as the opposite of something “negative” or
undesirable. Similar to the use of the terms freedom (e.g., Operation Freedom in Iraq), patriotism (the Patriot Act), and security (Homeland Security), the use of the term “positive” in approaches to school discipline has led many to accept those approaches with little scrutiny—“if it’s positive, it must be good” (and especially if endorsed by the government, as is the case with the Department of Education’s support of SWPBS).

To be sure, in most cases of changing student behavior, the use of positive reinforcement should be preferred over the use of punishment. However, it is well recognized that both techniques can be used to achieve the same ends, and those ends might be either good or bad (Landrum & Kauffman, 2006). Unfortunately, too often, whether it’s with the use of punishment or positive reinforcement, the primary aim of school discipline is one and the same: student compliance to rules and adult authority. This is most evident in programs that rely upon office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) and suspensions as the primary, if not exclusive, measured outcome of a program’s effectiveness. “Improvement” is shown via indicators of increased compliance (i.e., fewer ODRs and suspensions), irrespective of any improvement in how students think, feel, or act in a prosocial or self-disciplined manner or in Research-Based Practice improvements in school climate. When improvements in school climate are shown, they are typically reported by teachers and staff who implemented the program. Student perceptions of school climate are rarely reported, especially perceptions that should matter the most, such as perceptions of student relations, teacher-student relations, fairness of rules, and liking of school.

Thus, “positive improvement” is often claimed when students simply learn to avoid punishment, and perhaps to earn tangible rewards, and teachers report that the school climate is better (i.e., students are more compliant and school is viewed as safer). Too often, improvement is the result of teaching students to assume a self-centered, hedonistic perspective—the very perspective that characterizes those with the most frequent and serious behavior problems, including bullies and juvenile delinquents (Gina, 2006; Manning & Bear, 2002; Stams, et al., 2006). The school might also “improve” by not changing student behavior at all, including compliance, but simply by changing its policies and practices of referring students to the office and suspending them. The latter is exactly what we are now hearing is happening in Delaware schools in response to the recent publicity that Delaware has among the highest suspension rates in the nation. This is not to say that many students, especially those in preschool and elementary school, and those at any age who lack self-discipline, should not be directly taught the importance of compliance and to learn that good behavior is often rewarded and bad behavior punished (if you get caught). It does mean, however, that the primary aim of school discipline should not be compliance; it should be developing self-discipline. It also means that the techniques for achieving this aim should not be the same in preschool as in high school (e.g., tokens for good behavior, and removal from the classroom). In
practice, developing self-discipline is the primary aim of most character education (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2006) and social and emotional learning (SEL; Zins & Elias, 2006) programs. This aim also is consistent with positive psychology (Petersen & Seligman, 2004; Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology provides educators with guidance as to what it means for a program to be “positive” (other than simply being less punitive or negative). From the framework of positive psychology, a “positive” approach to school discipline has the following features (Bear, 2009).

Developing character strengths and virtues associated with self-discipline as its primary aim. Often used interchangeably with the terms autonomy, self-determination, responsibility, self-regulation, and self-control, self-discipline refers to students inhibiting inappropriate behavior and exhibiting prosocial behavior under their own volition, reflecting the internalization of values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes of their parents, teachers, peers, and others in society. Self-discipline is often seen in student compliance with rules and authority, but only when such compliance is committed (Kochanska, 2002) or willing compliance (Brophy, 1996), motivated by a sense of pride and autonomy. This is in contrast to situational (Kochanska, 2002) or grudging compliance (Brophy, 1996), motivated by the systematic use of external rewards and punishment to govern or control student behavior.

In positive psychology, the following character strengths and virtues, recognized as being central to mental health and emotional well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), are most directly related to committed or willing compliance, or to self-discipline: self-regulation, social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, authenticity (being genuine and speaking the truth), and kindness. Rather than specific behaviors that are the function of ever-changing external contingencies, these character strengths and virtues are viewed as global personality traits that generalize across situations, reflecting an integration of an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Emphasis on meeting three basic human needs: the need for competence, the need for belongingness, and the need for autonomy. In positive psychology, it is understood that unless the needs for competence, belongingness, and autonomy are met, an individual will not experience personal and social well-being, which includes self-determination and intrinsic motivation—key aspects of self-discipline. This is supported by a wealth of research linking those needs to various important personal and social outcomes (see Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006).

Emphasis on developing behaviors, thoughts, and emotions that reflect character strengths and virtues associated with self-discipline. From the perspective of positive psychology, it is not sufficient to teach students what to do and what not to do. They also need to learn how to decide between right
and wrong and why behaviors are right or wrong (other than reasons based on gaining rewards and avoiding punishment). With direct implications for developing self-discipline, a substantial body of research and theory shows that a variety of cognitive processes and emotional mechanisms mediate, support, enhance, or augment antisocial and prosocial behavior (see Bear, 2010).

**Greater emphasis on techniques for developing self-discipline and meeting the basic needs of children, and on preventing behavior problems, than on using techniques to correct misbehavior.** To obtain the above positive aims, school need to emphasize positive means. Punishment would still be used, where necessary and appropriate, but never as the primary means of gaining compliance. When used, it would always be in combination with positive techniques for developing, strengthening, or increasing desired thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and for preventing those that are not desired. Likewise, it should be used sparingly and wisely, while recognizing and responding to its many limitations. The intent of positive psychology is not to replace practices that are effective in addressing individual weaknesses (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). This would include the wise and strategic use of punishment, especially mild forms (e.g., proximity control, verbal reprimands, taking away privileges). Research has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of techniques of applied behavior analysis (Alberto & Troutman, 2006) and that sanctions and punishment are among the techniques used by the most effective classroom managers (in combination with other techniques; Brophy, 1996; Landrum & Kauffman, 2006). Those techniques also characterize the most effective schools (Arum, 2003; Gottfredson, 2001). Positive psychology makes it clear, however, that punishment does not develop positive character traits and positive emotions, and thus should be used sparingly.

As in the use of punishment, educators also should be aware of the limitations to the use of rewards and praise. They should use those techniques wisely and strategically, and especially in an informational rather than controlling manner, which is the least likely to harm intrinsic motivation (see Bear, 2010 for strategies on the strategic use of praise and rewards).

In sum, too often the “positive” in school discipline is left undefined, and evidence of a program’s effectiveness is limited to measures indicating greater student compliance (and perhaps safety). Irrespective of one’s theoretical perspective toward school discipline, to be viewed as positive, an approach or program should demonstrate that it leads to more meaningful outcomes than those obtained via increased external control using either punishment or external rewards—the same techniques found to be effective in juvenile correctional facilities where a “seek rewards, avoid punishment” orientation is prevalent among the residents. Positive psychology provides guidance as to what those outcomes should be. Consistent with positive psychology, it is suggested that the most positive and effective programs for school discipline
recognize the importance of the two traditional aims of school discipline: to manage and correct student behavior and to develop self-discipline. As such, positive outcomes are most likely to be achieved by combining techniques commonly found in character education, SEL, and SPBS programs, while doing so in a wise, strategic, and developmentally appropriate manner (Bear, 2010; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010).

References


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