

The Challenges of Positive Parenting

July 16, 2020

Having a good relationship with our children is important. Research on attachment, for example, shows that the way parents connect to their children has wide-ranging consequences for [their mental health](#), [self-control](#) and ability to [create meaningful relationships with others](#).

Today's parents are encouraged to build a good relationship with their children by using explanations and offering choices instead of shouting, shaming or leveraging rewards and punishments.

It's an approach known as positive parenting, a method praised for hitting the sweet spot between a strict upbringing and allowing children to do whatever they want. If a boy is hitting his sister, for example, the positive parenting approach would be to remove him from the situation, then take a moment to talk about what both children are feeling and look for solutions together.

Emily Edlynn, an Illinois-based psychologist who writes a blog called [The Art and Science of Mom](#), describes it as a “an empathy-based approach with firm compassion, focusing on responding to a child's emotions underlying challenging behaviours, within the framework of how our interactions now are part of forming a lifelong relationship with our child”.

Yet experts suggest positive parenting can take a toll on parents, while potentially shielding children from negative emotions they will need to understand in later life.

Praising the positive

The positive parenting framework has been around since the 1920s (then called ‘[positive discipline](#)’), brought to the US by Austrian psychiatrists Alfred Adler and Rudolph Dreikurs. But it really took off in the 1990s when influential American psychologist Martin Seligman made the [field of positive psychology](#) the focus of international interest.

Instead of analysing the things that made humans sick, positive psychology looked at what made us happy. “We were so focused on disease that we were not looking at the factors that contribute to flourishing and happiness,” says Karin Coifman, a psychologist at Kent State University who studies the importance of emotions, both negative and positive, for our mental health.

When applied to parenting, this philosophy encourages parents to “[catch their children being good](#)” and give more positive than negative feedback, instead of focusing on bad behaviour. It's seen as a happy medium between [authoritarian parenting](#), which can lead children to internalise problems and act out, and a [permissive parenting style](#) that can leave children without appropriate boundaries.

Today, books, blog posts and articles sing the praises of positive parenting. “Based on the number of headlines and articles that I see within the parenting niche, I think positive parenting is arguably the

most popular parenting philosophy of the moment,” says Edlynn.

Yet some argue that constant positivity – or failing to achieve it – can take a toll. American journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, in a book examining the phenomenon, called it an ideological force that “encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate”.

Coifman argues that all emotions serve important functions. “Positive emotions are essential for building connections, but negative emotions are helpful in planning and higher-order-thinking kind of processes, and they have been essential in human survival,” she says.

When people – including parents – feel they’re not allowed to share any negative emotions, that can be detrimental to their mental health. “We make mistakes. We get upset. Sometimes we take things out on people that we shouldn’t take things out on. And this is normal and human, and they are normal for parents too,” explains Coifman.

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