Many ways to manage the behavior and actions of young adults and children have been concocted over the years, falling anywhere on the spectrum from the more old-fashioned corporal punishment of yesteryear to a more recent development, positive reinforcement. The range of these different styles is broad; not everyone subscribes to the full positive reinforcement idea. While that idea has become very popular in schools and homes throughout the United States, it has yet to fully cross the borders into many other countries and areas. However, many schools and families in the U.S. still utilize hitting or spanking in a home or school setting. While many states have outlawed these practices, there are still many states where corporal punishment has yet to be explicitly outlawed, and therefore may still be practiced.

The practice of positive reinforcement has been documented in many articles, one of which was published in the Early Childhood Education Journal, “From Positive Reinforcement to Positive Behaviors: An Everyday Guide for the Practitioner”. This article explains how positive reinforcement can cause children to repeat their negative and undesired behaviors as infrequently as possible. Ellen Sigler, author of this piece, is careful to articulate the difference between praise and positive reinforcement, one which she is clearly defines as making a huge difference in the actions that the child will do in the future.

It is essential…to differentiate between ‘praise’ and ‘positive reinforcement’. In the most classic definition, positive reinforcement is a method of identifying to children which behaviors are appropriate and which behaviors are not. More specifically, the use of positive reinforcement is the act of identifying and reinforcing a behavior (Sigler 249).
Sigler makes it clear that, though she believes in the power of positive reinforcement, there is a
definitive and harsh difference between that as empty praise, and that a child of almost any age
will be able to tell the difference between the two. She insists that educators differentiate
between the two when working with children of any age, and saying that the failure to do so will
result in extremely limited effectiveness of any kind of positive reinforcement. For instance, if a
child has been struggling with the act of tying their shoes, it is not positive reinforcement to tell
them that they are doing well, when they can obviously see that this is not the truth. Instead, she
details, positive reinforcement should be enacted only as often as real praise is warranted.
However, she makes sure to stipulate that she is not encouraging stinginess on the part of the
educator, but offering lavish praise only when it has been earned. This way, the educator will
avoid the “dilution effect”, a phrase referring to the power of positive reinforcement being
diminished over time as the child is praised for actions that have not earned praise.

Ryan Del Guercio, author of “Back to the Basics of Classroom Management”, has taken a
slightly different approach in the matter of positive reinforcement’s place in the classroom. He
argues that control, not praise is the best way to form the behaviors of young children. By this
method, he says it is of crucial importance to establish a firm sense of control over the children
when you first start working with them, and control to establish that control as time goes on, as
the upkeep of that control is essential to the obedience you require from your class or group of
children. “Classroom management is an ongoing process; it can be difficult to sustain because it
requires attention to detail on a daily basis. Just because students abide by rules in the fall
doesn’t mean they won’t test the boundaries later in the year” (Del Guercio 40). He disagrees
with Ms. Sigler in that he does not advocate for praise whenever it has been earned, but only on
rare occasions, or to make an example of a well behaved student to the class. This is not meant to
impact the particular child’s behavior down the road, but merely to affect the actions of the rest of the group being taught in the here and now. The focus of Mr. Del Guercio’s argument is not one of generous praise, but instead a set of rules which will have been established on day one and, if they are not followed to the letter, children are punished when any slight infraction occurs. He does not, however, stray completely from the idea of positive reinforcement as an effective tool for behavior management in children. Instead, he advocates heavily for a system in which every action, both negative and positive, has a well-publicized and immediately acted upon reaction. For instance, if a child is ever informed that you are planning to call or email his parents or the principal, that absolutely must be done. Without doing so, Mr. Del Guercio insists you ensure rapid loss of any respect the students had for you in the first place.

The claim that every action you take concerning a student, whether that action is disciplinary or praise related, as Mr. Del Guercio does, is a claim that Mr. Joel Sherill refutes in his article “When Reprimand Consistency May and May Not Matter”. Throughout Mr. Del Guercio’s article, he restates over and over that you must be almost militaristic in your ability to enact consistency in every aspect of your disciplinary policy, or not discipline will ever have any effect at all, far less stop the undesired behavior all together. Mr. Sherill, however, has found information to the contrary of this idea and presents it in his article, published in Behavior Modification. He holds that this is especially true in cases when there are many variables at play which the disciplinarian is not directly in control of, as this removes their ability to make the encounter an overwhelmingly positive or negative one for the child in question. “Consequences for the misbehavior, for example, peer attention, that are not under the control of the parent or teacher may influence the consistency of that behavior” (Sherill 228). For example, a child might
be teased by his peers after being praised by a teacher for completing a praise worthy task, making that experience a negative one for him, no matter the consistency of the praise.

Coming from a slightly different direction on the subject is Scott Larson, author of “Strength-Based Discipline that Taps into the Resilience of Youth”, published in Reclaiming Children and Youth during 2010. He says that though praise and positivity have their place, they are not the most effective way to manage the acting out of youth. His approach is slightly more radical, saying that the most effective way to stop negative behavior in youth, especially teens, is to throw the responsibility for that action right back on to the child themselves. This is done by communicating the assumption that they are a great kid, and that you don’t understand how they could have gotten themselves into that situation. Instead of blame and the immediate negative action we were recommended in “Back to the Basics of Classroom Management”, he instead encourages us to show the children that they should not be engaging in this behavior, that they are responsible for their own actions and the subsequent reactions from the wronged party, not from the instructor, a relative middle-man in the scheme of acting out. Mr. Larson details the following in his article. “Even when discussing problems, adults have opportunities to validate the positive qualities of young persons. Instead of asking a blaming question ‘Why did you do something like that?’, one can ask ‘How did a great kid like you get into that kind of trouble?’ This conveys that the youth is more than his or her behavior” (Larson 23). In this way, Mr. Larson assures us that the behavioral control will eventually come from within the child, and they will no longer need to be policed in terms of disciplinary action.

On the other side of the spectrum of behavior control I mentioned above is corporal punishment. This is not something that is popular anymore in the United States, but it certainly was for quite some time. Now, that kind of action by a educator or any adult will land them in
trouble with the law, but this kind of behavior control continues as a method in many parts of the world. In “Why Are Kenyan Teachers Still Using Corporal Punishment Eight Years After a Ban on Corporal Punishment?”, Maureen Mwaru discusses how pervasive this disciplinary action has held strong in Kenya, even after the law in the country banned such acts from being legal. She interviewed many Kenyan teachers, after which she came to the conclusion that teachers in this area seem to believe the law is not best for the children. “This study has shown that, although the Kenyan Government has introduced laws to protect children, teachers will readily break them if they believe that it is for the children’s good” (Mwaru 248). This belief differs greatly from those held by the authors of the rest of the articles I have reviewed, and additionally seems to be held by almost none of the educational and academic community. Despite this, these teachers do not seem to be showing signs of stopping their use of corporal punishment as a punitive measure, and additionally believe that these actions are for the best interest of the children with whom they interact.

Obviously, the range of ideas on the best way to enforce desired behavior in children is extremely wide, and still includes the option of corporal punishment, though that particular choice is not one often seen in the United States. Many different views on the strictness, amount of praise, and amount of control are present throughout the academic community’s discussion on the topic of producing desired behavior in children and young adults.
Works Cited


