



Practitioner Researcher

## **Theoretical foundations of positive child guidance**

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Positive child guidance describes the support provided in terms of social and emotional growth for the child (Gartrell & Gallo, 2015). It is a process of guiding children to develop healthy self-esteem, respect for themselves and others and skills to manage an array of potential stressors (Marion & Koralek, 2013). Miller (2004) suggests that positive child guidance should focus on the growth of naturally unfolding motivation for self-control and pro-social behaviours, which are necessary for effective living. Knowledge of positive guidance skills is very important for teachers, as early childhood programs provide a child opportunities to absorb democratic life skills, and to grow as adults who are self-directed, productive citizens capable of managing their behaviours (Miller, 2004). In this paper, the focus is on teachers' perceptions of positive child guidance and the theories that guide the values and beliefs of child guidance.

### ***Introduction***

Mcfarland, Saunders and Sydnye (2008) found in their study that, although early childhood teachers agree that positive child guidance is important for children, positive child guidance and the techniques that fall under this approach were not clearly understood. There are many misconceptions about positive child guidance that prevail in the early childhood education (ECE) teaching community, for the term is often understood as controlling annoying behaviours (Mcfarland, Saunders, & Sydnye, 2008), though behaviour management is only a part of child guidance. The ultimate objective is to develop self-confidence, inner responsibility, motivation and self-control in the child (Miller, 2004). Positive child guidance can be seen as a process of developing self-control in which adults use strategies such as logical reasoning, choice giving, problem solving, cooperation, conflict resolution and redirection (Mcfarland, Saunders, & Sydnye, 2008). Some other concepts that are considered under positive guidance are time-out to control inappropriate behaviour and reward giving for appropriate behaviour, however, these do not necessarily reflect positive guidance (Mcfarland, Saunders, & Sydnye, 2008). Sometimes, teachers are also doubtful about the effectiveness of positive child guidance, as it does not yield immediate results, and is more a process of observation, assessment and reflection (Mcfarland, Saunders, & Sydnye, 2008).

### ***Teachers' perceptions of positive child guidance***

A teacher's philosophy affects the way they view the child and the way in which the child learns the intentions and reasons behind their behaviour (Miller, 2004). Different teachers use different approaches towards child guidance and are guided by different theories or beliefs (Mcfarland, Saunders, & Sydnye, 2008). The behaviourist, constructivist and socio-constructivist approaches are reviewed here.

### ***Behaviourist approach***

The behaviourist approach views the child as tabula rasa or empty slate, as proposed by the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) (Miller, 2004). The learner is considered passive and the environment, or



nurture, is believed to be accountable for all the learning and behaviour (McMullen, 2010). The behaviourist approach sees child guidance as external, and an adult directed process where the adult or teacher is responsible for the development of appropriate behaviour (Miller, 2004). Behaviourism works on the stimulus-response approach and believes that external stimuli and reinforcement of responses determine whether the child learns a desired behaviour (McMullen, 2010). A behaviourist teacher focuses on observable behaviours and is responsible for identifying and selecting goals for a child (Miller, 2004). The reinforcement of appropriate or desired behaviour with rewards and punishment for inappropriate behaviour leads to operant learning of the desired behaviour, the central idea of the behaviourist approach (Miller, 2004).

Moberly, Waddle and Duff (2005) found in their study that stickers, stamps, pencils, prizes and candies are some commonly used reinforcers or rewards in ECE classrooms. Praise was also used as an external motivator that could be categorised as an intangible reward, while punishment in the form of time out or giving up privileges in ECE classrooms was seen as common practice (Moberly et al., 2005). Behaviourist strategies are a quick fix approach and yield results in a short time; however, behaviourism has been criticised for being dehumanising, as it promotes external control of human behaviour (Strain & McConnell, 2005).

Moberly et al. (2005) argue that teachers can manipulate the behaviour of children and exercise power with the help of rewards. Rewards are seductive and ego-centric and lead to competition instead of interest in a given task. This use of rewards also interferes with relationships a child may have with their peers and adults (Moberly et al., 2005). Rewards are extrinsic motivators that do not change a child's emotional or cognitive state underlying a behaviour, as a child will exhibit the desired behaviour only in the presence of reward. Moberly et al. (2005), in their study, found that intrinsic motivation and pro-social behaviour decrease with the use of such external motivators.

Behaviourist teachers use conventional praise to motivate children; however, Gartrell (2004) maintains that conventional praise is ineffective, as it has little meaning for the child and can lower a child's self-esteem. Frequent use of conventional praise makes the child dependent on adult approval, thus inhibiting the internal motivation. To be effective, praise has to be selective and specific, so that it provides meaningful feedback to the child and fosters healthy self-esteem (Gartrell, 2004). Time-out is a form of punishment for inappropriate behaviour used in ECE classrooms; however; it is an undesirable practice. As Gartrell (2004) says, time-out is external control forced on a child, which inhibits a child's ability to develop self-control. Sitting on a time-out chair makes the child feel rejected and a negative self-image is reinforced (Gartrell & Gallo, 2015). Moberly, Waddle and Duff (2005) have concluded in their study that any form of punishment can result in anger, rebelliousness and wanting revenge. These feelings are unfavourable in cultivating social competence in the child and also impede the child from learning to respond to their own needs and participation in social problem solving.

### ***Cognitive constructivist approach***

In contrast to the behaviourist approach, cognitive constructivism focuses on mental processes, rather than the observable behaviour. Constructivism views the child as an active constructor of their own knowledge, rather than a passive absorber of knowledge (Gordon & Williams, 2015). Constructivists believe that learning and behaviour comes from within the child and is relative to a stage of cognitive development. Wen (2007) acknowledges that, according to Piaget, development of an individual (nature) is supreme over learning (nurture) and learning follows after development. An individual constructs knowledge through assimilation and accommodation. Knowledge and behaviour is assimilated through experiences and then refined through testing in social situations. Thus, a child is responsible for their own decision to behave properly, whereas adults are only role models and guides (Wen, 2007).



While behaviourism works on external motivation, constructivism believes that intrinsic motivation is crucial for development of behaviour (Gordon & Williams, 2015). Guidance from a constructivist perspective is thus seen as a child-directed process where the role of the teacher is to foster autonomy by facilitating a positive learning environment, assisting the child to solve their problems (Gordon & Williams, 2015). A constructivist teacher addresses 'misbehaviour' as mistaken behaviour, as it reminds the teacher that the child is in a state of development and is at the beginning of learning complex social skills (Gartrell, 2004).

A cognitive constructivist teacher uses developmentally appropriate practices (DOP) to reduce mistaken behaviour (Gartrell, 2004). As Marion and Koralek (2013) observe, a well-constructed physical environment and a supportive interpersonal environment in ECE classrooms is reflective of DOP, which decreases the chances of conflict and helps the child to learn from their mistakes (Marion & Koralek, 2013). Caudle, Fouts, Wallace and Jung (2014) have found in their study that well organised indoor spaces and well planned transition times help to reduce disruptive behaviour, as waiting for a long time and long group times can be very stressful for young children. Cognitive constructivism views the teacher's role as creating a stimulating environment, rich in interesting and engaging experiences to support calm and creative behaviour (Rosenow, 2015).

Thus, for cognitive constructivists, development of appropriate behaviour is a natural process that requires internal motivation and minimum intervention from the teacher (Miller, 2004). Cognitive constructivists believe that a teacher's role is that of a facilitator and, given that a child's basic needs are met, the child will, without human intervention, develop the aptitude, social skills and bodily control necessary to behave properly (Miller, 2004). Although cognitive constructivism and DOP have a positive impact in ECE classrooms, Mayer (2004) adds that, where cognitive constructivism believes in discovery learning, children are expected to solve their own problems with little or no guidance; however, in terms of behaviour, a child can derive vague or untrue conclusions from a situation if a teacher is not available to provide direction. Cognitive constructivism also does not take into account family factors and learning difficulties that can contribute to behavioural issues (Mayer, 2004).

### ***Socio-constructivist approach***

Socio-constructivism is based on a compassionate and social justice perspective that views the child as a fully communicative human being with agency, who participates fully in the experiences of their life and seeks to build relationships (McMullen, 2010). The socio-constructivist approach believes that learning and development are collaborative, as compared to the constructivist approach, where development is dominant (Wen, 2007). The child constructs their learning while interacting repeatedly with their social and cultural environment and then internalises it (Wen, 2007).

In this approach, child guidance is neither adult-directed nor child-directed; it is, rather, interaction between the adult and the child in which either can lead or follow (Miller, 2004). Thus, reciprocal relationships and collaborative learning are important for teachers using the socio-constructivist approach towards guidance (Ozer, 2004).

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding, private speech and self-regulation are used by socio-constructivist teachers to provide positive guidance to children (Gordan Biddle, Garcia-Nevarez, Roundtree Henderson, & Valero-kerrick, 2013). Adults and peers play an important role in the child's acquisition of mental tools and self-regulation skills as they create a zone of proximal development (Miller, 2004). A child develops appropriate behaviour by exposure to words, concepts, skills and responsibilities beyond their ability but within a 'zone' of possible achievement (Wen, 2007).



A socio-constructivist teacher helps the child to monitor their own behaviour through scaffolding the behaviour in their ZPD (Gordan Biddle, Garcia-Nevarez, Roundtree Henderson, & Valero-kerrick, 2013). At first, the teacher helps the child to understand what behaviour is appropriate and the reasons behind it. The child internalises the behaviour and the associated reasons and guides their own behaviour in the future through private speech (Gordan Biddle, Garcia-Nevarez, Roundtree Henderson, & Valero-kerrick, 2013). A socio-constructivist teacher views the child as an extension of a family with a particular lifestyle, socio-economic status, home language, ethnic and cultural background (Gartrell, 2012). Teachers thus believe in partnership with families to enable the full effectiveness of a positive guidance approach. Gartrell and Gallo (2015) agree that children who exhibit disruptive behaviour frequently are actually reacting to unmanageable stress in their lives.

Although it is important for socio-constructivist teachers to recognise teachable moments in order to create ZPD, Haugen (2015) argues that moments of conflict are biochemically unteachable moments. She explains that, when a behaviour outburst occurs due to fear, anger or other strong emotions, the brain is flooded with cortisol (stress hormone) and the child is neuro-chemically blocked for applying reason to the situation and remains in a highly reactive impulsive state until the trigger is removed and cortisol production ceases. Thus, teachers should recognize the unteachable moments and should approach the child later, when the brain is in a calm state, to help the child to recognise the consequences of their behaviour and alternative solutions (Haugen, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that ECE teachers use different approaches towards positive child guidance. Teachers' own belief systems are a causative factor in the choices they make in interacting with children. While there are some misconceptions about positive child guidance in the teaching community, positive child guidance is not a 'one size fits all' approach and calls for an individualised response to each child. A whole multitude of factors contribute to a particular behaviour. Before reacting to a child's behaviour, it is important for teachers to understand typical development of children at different ages and to consider the many factors responsible for that child's mistaken behaviour.

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