

Positive Guidance: Making A Place for Everyone

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Introduction:

A Note to Supervisors, Mentors and Managers

A generation ago, the overwhelming majority of young children spent their early years at home, developing a relationship with one or two primary caregivers, squabbling with a sibling or two, playing with a cousin or neighborhood friend now and then, and idling away their time in unstructured, unhurried daydreams while their bodies and minds went through the natural and inevitable changes that would culminate in what today we would call school readiness.

Now this same group of children, instead, spends a great deal of their waking hours in institutional care where daydreaming has been replaced by an astounding array of “activities and materials,” where the demand for social interaction has increased exponentially, and where every waking (and sleeping minute, for that matter) has become structured and scheduled. What is astonishing about this unprecedented social experiment is that so many children thrive in this environment.

Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone addresses the needs of those children who don't. How do we support and guide children who are not yet ready for the group experience - who can't share, or follow directions, or take turns, or wait, or “use words” or participate in groups - children who hit and defy and resist and otherwise implode emotionally when confronted with the overwhelming social experience that we call Head Start?

Intentionally nonacademic in style, yet thoroughly grounded in research, **Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone** is designed to meet the needs of direct service practitioners (and parents) who deal with the day to day challenge of guiding children's behavior. Thorny issues often sidestepped in behavior management literature are addressed realistically and honestly. Specifically, these include:

Positive Guidance vs. Punishment and Reward

Teachers are trained and behavior management policies are written as if positive guidance was a universally accepted norm. Many teachers, though, have been educated in schools and raised in homes in which punishment and reward were the unquestioned tools of discipline. Teachers who have internalized this approach may have a great deal of trouble buying into a system that promotes child choice. Rather than insist that teachers use positive guidance because it is right, or best, or even mandated by Performance Standards, **Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone** encourages teachers and parents alike to consider the pros and cons and unintentional consequences of each approach. Like the children they guide, teachers are not told to do anything - they are encouraged to make a better choice.

Blaming Parents

Working with children who display challenging behaviors can be extremely frustrating. The temptation to blame the home environment and thereby shift responsibility for dealing with troubling behaviors can sometimes be very strong. **Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone** asks teachers to consider the implications of statements such as, “If the parents would follow through

with what we do in Head Start we wouldn't have this problem." Or, "No wonder he acts this way, with his parents getting a divorce and all." Are these statements and others like them actually true? Are they at all helpful in developing strategies for supporting children? How does it affect the parent-staff relationship when staff identify the home as the source of their stress and frustration?

Values and Beliefs

Managers, supervisors, content specialists, and Directors often respond to the observed needs of staff who struggle with positive guidance by providing additional training. And more training. And more training. When staff fail to respond to training, frustration and futile attempts at coercion often follow.

The missing piece may very well be the disconnect between the values, goals, paradigms and beliefs implicit in the training and those actually held by the teacher. A person, for example, who thinks of a teacher as someone who stands in front of a group and *teaches* may not respond easily to training that suggests she spend her time playing on the floor. A person who strongly believes that children need to be *obedient* will struggle with strategies that involve child choice. A person who values *fairness* may not see the value in strategies that require a great deal of individualization.

Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone does not suggest to staff that their values and beliefs may be wrong or inappropriate. It merely asks teachers to be more self aware of what it is they believe and hold dear. It assists staff in identifying personal belief systems that may contradict the institutional beliefs of Head Starts and best practice. It encourages staff to consider the benefit to children of incorporating elements of positive guidance into their own approach even when it is not easy, natural, or comfortable.

Race and Culture

Multi-culturalism, celebrating diversity - these are pillars of the Head Start approach to working with children and families. Curricula and teaching materials abound. Yet beyond activities and materials, how do issues of race and culture affect interactions between children and teachers? How do they influence the manner in which positive guidance is (or is not implemented) in classrooms?

These are difficult and sometimes painful questions that nevertheless need to be addressed, not because teachers are consciously biased, but because interactions between the dominant white culture and non dominant cultures often have unintended and unacknowledged negative consequences for children who belong to non-dominant cultures. **Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone** obviously does not have all the answers to these issues, but it does provide an opportunity for teachers to examine their own ideas and practices and to become more aware of how the unexamined behavior of well intentioned people can adversely affect children of color.

Positive Guidance: Making a Place for Everyone is written informally and conversationally. It is grounded in real life experiences with real life children and is replete with stories and examples that almost every teacher and parent will recognize. For staff who have been trained and trained and trained but who have trouble connecting training to practice, who have listened to experts who don't listen to them, and who want help but can't seem to find it, this book will be a refreshing and practical resource.