

# Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

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## **THE POWER OF POSITIVITY – Part 1**

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*People do better when they feel better, not when they feel worse.*

Positivity is a more constructive teacher than negativity. Positive messages elevate, encourage, and foster growth.

## **ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE**

When thoughts are guided to focus on the positive and constructive, then the self is nourished and enriched. Self-worth is intangible, and much of its cause, as well as its effect, is a matter of choosing thoughts that expand and strengthen the human psyche—rather than constrict or weaken it. A monkey is smart enough to eat only the nourishing banana and throw away the bitter peel. Yet, humans often “chew on the peel” of criticism, ridicule, embarrassment, failure, or other negatives. *It is important that teachers and parents help young people learn to throw away the peel by teaching them to focus on the positive.*

One salesgirl in a candy store always had customers lined up waiting while other salesgirls stood around. The owner of the store noted her popularity and asked for her secret. “It’s easy,” she said. “The other girls scoop up more than a pound of candy and then start subtracting some. I always scoop up less than a pound and then add to it.” People are like magnets. They are drawn to the positive and are repelled by the negative. This is an important principle to understand when working with others. People who are effective in influencing other people phrase their communications in positive terms.

## **CONSEQUENCES VS. CONTINGENCIES**

Consequences are associated with everything we do and can be positive or negative. An imposed consequence, however, only works when a person finds value in the relationship or when the person sees value in what he is being asked to do. Otherwise, an imposed consequence is perceived in negative terms.

When a consequence is imposed, it is often associated with a threat. Such is the case when a the adult says, “If you continue to do that, here is what will happen to you.” Telling a youngster, “You chose to do that and must now realize the consequence” is a pseudo choice and plays a mindgame. It causes the young person to feel as if he punished himself. “If your work is not finished, you’re not going” is also perceived in a negative sense. In this case, the adult also has added to his own workload because now the *adult* has the task of checking on the condition that has been established, namely, to check when the work is finished before giving permission. This approach transfers the responsibility away from the young person—where it belongs—to the adult.

In contrast to imposed and reactive consequences, proactive contingencies rely on internal motivation and are perceived in a positive way. “You can *do that as soon as you do this.*” “*If/then*” and “*as soon as*” assist in sending both a positive message and placing the responsibility on the young person—where it belongs. Notice these in the following examples: “*If your work is finished, then you can go to one of the activity centers.*” “*Sure, you can go as soon as your work is finished.*”

Although the result of a contingency is the same as that of a consequence, the *message and emotional effect are markably different.* As already mentioned, when using a consequence the responsibility for checking is placed on the enforcer—the *adult*. When using a contingency, the responsibility is on the *youngster*. In addition, whereas a consequence implies a lack of trust, a contingency conveys a message of confidence and trust. The crucial difference can be best understood in personal terms. Which would you prefer to hear your supervisor say to you: “If you leave and are not back on time, we will have a real problem,” or “Sure, you can leave as long as long as you are back in time”?

An example of the difference between a consequence and a contingency was illustrated on a television sitcom featuring Bill Cosby playing the role of Dr. Cliff Huxtable. He was sitting at the dinner table with Rudy, his youngest daughter. The father would not let the daughter leave the table until she had eaten all of her dinner. Rudy refused to finish her dinner. The father gave her a choice of finishing her dinner and leaving the table or remaining at the dinner table until she did finish. Still, she refused to eat, whereupon the father went on and on about this other 5-year-old who would not finish her dinner, and all her friends went to middle school, graduated from high school, and went to college, but the young girl remained at her dinner table. Rudy, apparently, was not impressed; she still would not finish her meal.

Denise, Rudy’s older sister, came into the house, and Rudy could hear Denise and her friends move the living room couch, roll up the carpet, start to play music, and begin to dance. Just then, Denise came into the kitchen, and Rudy asked her older sister, “Can I dance with you and your friends?” Denise said, “Sure, as soon as you finish your dinner.” Dr. Cliff Huxtable, the father, gave his daughter what amounted to a consequence: finish your dinner, or stay at the table. Denise, on the other hand, offered a contingency—whereupon Rudy ate her three Brussels sprouts, placed the plate in the sink, and went out to dance. Too often, we say to young people, “Eat your Brussels sprouts or else,” and we don’t understand why they are not motivated.

## **WHEN CONSEQUENCES ARE NECESSARY**

My experiences with discipline as an elementary school principal, middle school assistant principal, high school assistant principal, and high school principal have all had a common thread: Young people need structure; they want to know where they stand. Consequences provide that security. Ironically, knowing the consequences beforehand provides many young people an invitation for mischief.

Some students will push as far as they can, in part, because they already know the amount of risk involved. Having knowledge ahead of time as to what will happen gives them security and reduces their risk. For example, the youngster is referred to the office for misconduct. The administrator inquires as to the cause of the referral. The student pleads ignorance. He is told to stand against the wall for five minutes until he remembers. The student will stand against the wall for five minutes. The same scenario is repeated, except this time the administrator tells the student to stand until he remembers. The student inquires, “How long do I have to stand here?” The administrator responds, “I don’t know.” The youngster inquires again, “How long do I have to remain here?” The administrator says, “I don’t know; I guess until you remember.” The student will remember in fewer than five minutes because of the uncertainty of how long he will need to keep standing. The same principle is at work in the high school where the student is stopped in the hallway after the bell has

rung. The administrator queries the student who replies, "This is only my second tardy. I have one more to go before I get detention."

Announcing consequences ahead of time is counterproductive when dealing with young people. Uncertainty is much more effective. Knowing the consequence focuses on the consequence. It is better to have students focus and think about what is appropriate.

If a consequence is deemed necessary, rather than *impose* it, a more effective approach is to *elicit* the consequence from the young person. For example, whenever I was absent from my class, my substitute folder contained a form which requested the substitute to leave the names of those students who acted inappropriately. Upon my return, I would speak to those students who had not been good hosts to the visitor in our classroom. The students understood that their behaviors were unacceptable, and I inquired of them what should be done. Having dealt with so many behavior problems at all grade levels, in urban as well as suburban schools, I learned that in the majority of cases the student chose something more effective for changing his or her behavior than I would have imposed. If what the student chose was not acceptable to me, the student would be given other opportunities until we could both agree on the consequence that would help the student to become more responsible.

Here is another example of how *eliciting a consequence*—rather than *imposing one*—was used. The school year was almost over, and a student had done something that could not be overlooked. The eighth-grade party, the big event of the year, was fast approaching. The student understood that what he had done could not be ignored. The question was put to him, "What shall we do?" He said, "I guess I shouldn't go to the eighth grade party." I responded that I could live with that decision. By my eliciting the consequence, ownership and responsibility remained with the student. The teacher was not the villain, and the student was not the victim.

To be effective for long-lasting results, the person must feel ownership. Lack of ownership is a prime reason why student discipline contracts don't work. A contract agreed to under duress has little ownership for a young signer.

**(Concluded next month)**

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