



*Save the Children has been promoting the elimination of all violence against children in Southeast Asia and the Pacific since 2003. We work with governments and local partners to raise awareness of children's rights to protection against violence. This includes providing practical guidance to parents and caregivers on how to raise children without violence.*

*This new publication Positive Discipline: What it is and how to do it authored by Joan Durrant, a child-clinical psychologist and an Associate Professor of Family Social Sciences of the University of Manitoba (Canada), provides concrete answers to parents who want to raise their children without corporal punishment, in a positive climate.*

# INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR: **JOAN E. DURRANT, PH. D.**

**Q:** What was your inspiration for writing this manual?

**Joan E. Durrant:** Increasingly, parents are being advised to use positive discipline. But parents often ask, "What is positive discipline and how to do it?" People working for Save the Children and the Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children suggested we should compile a guide explaining to parents and professionals the principles of positive discipline.

**Q:** What exactly is positive discipline?

**Joan E. Durrant:** The word "discipline" has often been associated with "punishment". So the idea of "positive discipline" might seem odd to some. But the word "discipline" actually means "teaching". Teaching is based on setting goals for learning, planning an effective approach, and finding solutions that work. Positive discipline is an approach to teaching that helps children succeed, gives them information, and supports their growth.

The major characteristics of positive discipline are that it:

- is non-violent and respectful of the child as a learner,
- is about finding long-term solutions that develop children's own self-discipline,
- involves clear communication of parents' expectations, rules and limits,
- builds a mutually respectful relationship between parent and child,
- teaches children life-long skills,
- increases children's competence and confidence to handle challenging situations,
- teaches courtesy, non-violence, empathy, self-respect, human rights and respect for others.

The four principles of positive discipline are: 1) identifying your long-term parenting goals; 2) providing warmth (love, security) and structure (information, expectations, guidelines); 3) understanding how children think and feel; and 4) problem solving.

**Q:** There are many parenting guides to choose from, what makes this one different from the others?

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**Joan E. Durrant:** Simplicity. All of the research findings on positive discipline are boiled down to four basic principles that parents can use to guide their interactions with their children.

Another unique aspect of this guide is the opportunity it provides for practice. It can be very difficult to think rationally in situations of parent-child conflict. It takes effort and practice to shift from impulsive punitive responses to thought-out constructive responses in such situations. This guide gives parents practice in thinking through their responses so that they are better prepared when difficult situations arise.

A third unique feature of this manual is that it interweaves findings of academic research with children's rights principles. It will help readers understand the links among child development, effective parenting, and children's rights.

**Q:** The manual strongly discourages parents from using corporal punishment. Why is this important?

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**Joan E. Durrant:** Corporal punishment has been repeatedly shown to interfere with parents' long-term goals for their children. Most parents want their children to grow into non-violent problem-solvers who have good relationships with their families and high self-esteem and who are happy people. Corporal punishment interferes with development in all of these areas. It predicts higher levels of aggression in children, poorer parent-child relationships, and poorer child mental health. It serves no useful purpose in teaching children what we want them to learn.

**Q:** This manual begins with an introduction on children's rights. What are the links between children's rights and positive discipline?

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**Joan E. Durrant:** Children's rights are based on knowledge of what children need to develop to their full potential. The necessities of life for a child include not only food, water and shelter, but also emotional security and physical safety. Children need positive relationships with, and strong attachments to, their caregivers.

*“Parents everywhere have long-term goals for their children. Children everywhere thrive on warmth and respect. Parent-child conflict can be resolved everywhere through mutual understanding, a change of view and problem-solving.”*

Almost all countries of the world have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention sets out the fundamental rights of children based on their developmental needs. Three of these rights have particular relevance to discipline. First, children have the right to freedom from all forms of violence. This means that we need to learn ways of responding to parent-child conflict without hitting. Second, children have the right to be treated with respect for their dignity. This means that we need to learn ways of teaching children without humiliating them with put-downs, name-calling, or threats. Third, children have the right to express themselves. This means that we need to learn not only how to talk to children, but also how to listen and understand how they think and feel.

**Q:** As a parent, can you share with us some real life situations when you used positive discipline at home?

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**Joan E. Durrant:** Once, my 3-year-old son dropped his father's toothbrush into the toilet. I considered my options. I could spank him to teach him not to do that again, scold him, or take something away from him to punish him. But I realized that these responses wouldn't teach him anything about why he shouldn't drop toothbrushes in the toilet. I also realized that, at 3 years of age, he didn't understand anything about germs, money, or plumbing. He didn't do this because he wanted to damage the toothbrush or the toilet. He didn't know that it was any different from dropping a toothbrush into the sink.

I thought about the situation from his point of view and considered what he needed to know in order not to do it again. I didn't scold him or hit him because I wanted him to listen to me and learn. I calmly explained that the toilet is not the place for things we put into our mouths and why. I explained that his father wouldn't be able to use that toothbrush again, and this would mean that his father would have to go out and buy a new one. I told him

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that I understood that he had not intended to damage his Dad's toothbrush. I also explained that when we damage other people's belongings, even by mistake, we need to take responsibility and fix the situation. I asked him how he could fix this mistake. He suggested that he could buy his Dad a new toothbrush.

He got some of his own money and we went to the store. He picked out a toothbrush that he thought his Dad would like. When we went home, he went to his father and explained what had happened. He apologized and gave his Dad the new toothbrush. His Dad expressed his respect for how he had handled the situation, as well as appreciation for his honesty and for taking responsibility.

My son has never dropped anything else into the toilet or damaged anything, for that matter. From that experience, he obtained information that he used in other situations. He also saw himself as honest and capable of repairing his mistakes, which he continues to do. He felt respected by his father and respects him, in turn. He felt understood and supported by me, so he is not afraid to tell me when he has made a mistake. He trusts his parents to provide the structure that he needs, but in an atmosphere of warmth, rather than fear. This is the foundation of positive discipline.

**Q:** The example you give works within Canada's culture. Will this method work in Southeast Asia and the Pacific and other parts of the world?

**Joan E. Durrant:** The manual was piloted in Asia, with a group of professionals who work with parents. What we found was that the fundamental principles applied across all of those countries, but some of the specific examples of parent-child conflict were more relevant to some countries than to others.

The principles of positive discipline are universal. Parents everywhere have long-term goals for their children. Children everywhere thrive on warmth and structure. And parent-child conflict can be resolved everywhere through considering each other's points of view and problem solving. So the fundamental principles can be applied all over the world.

Where there can be differences is in the situations that lead to conflict. For example, in North America it is common for parents and children to sleep in separate rooms. This situation often results in conflict because children are afraid to be alone in the dark. In other cultures, it is common for parents and children to sleep together. This situation reduces conflict about going to bed. So, in North America, parents could use the positive discipline approach to resolve bedtime problems. In other cultures it might not be necessary to use positive discipline at bedtime, but it would be useful in other situations.

The positive discipline approach is based on principles that can be applied in all cultures across a wide range of situations. We have aimed to make the examples in the manual as universal as possible, but we have also provided space for parents to think about their own unique situations and work through the problem solving process for those specific areas of conflict.

**Q:** Your book mentions the importance of knowing how children think and feel, as well as providing children with warmth and structure...Why is that important?

**Joan E. Durrant:** In resolving any problem or conflict, it helps tremendously to see the situation from the other person's point of view. This is particularly true in the case of parents and children. We are often mistaken about children's motivations. When we think that they are intentionally defying us or trying to make us angry, we are likely to respond with anger and punishment. But, in most cases, children are not trying to make us angry or "defy" us. They are simply trying to learn. They don't have all of the knowledge that we have, as adults, so they make mistakes. They need to feel safe when they make mistakes. They need to be able to trust us to respond in a respectful way that teaches them what we really want them to learn.



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**Q:** How in your opinion will this manual help parents, guardians, or future parents?

**Joan E. Durrant:** It will give parents, guardians and other caregivers a few simple principles to follow when they are feeling frustrated. Because it is difficult to think about principles in a moment of frustration, they will have opportunities to practice and prepare for situations that they find particularly challenging. If they follow the principles, they will feel less anger toward their children, they will build their relationships with their children, and they will help their children become respectful, confident and competent people.

Future parents can use the manual to learn about child development so that they are better prepared for typical parenting challenges. They also can learn the principles ahead of time and work through the exercises. This should help them to think more clearly when they are in actual situations of conflict with their children. Preparing for difficult situations can make a very big difference to our ability to manage them well.

**Q:** Who else could benefit from using this manual?

**Joan E. Durrant:** This manual could be very useful to professionals who work with parents. It can be used with individual parents or with groups. It could also be useful to people working in advocacy organizations who don't necessarily work directly with parents, but who would like to have a better understanding of what positive discipline is.

## About the Author



Joan E. Durrant, Ph.D. is a Child-Clinical Psychologist and an Associate Professor of Family Social Sciences at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. She conducts research on the factors that lead parents to strike their children, as well as on the impact of laws that prohibit physical punishment. She was the principal researcher and co-author of the Canadian Joint Statement on Physical Punishment of Children and Youth; a member of the Research Advisory Committee of the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children; and a co-editor of *Eliminating Corporal Punishment: The Way Forward to Constructive Discipline* (UNESCO). She has written parenting materials for the Canadian government, and has given speeches and workshops in many countries on the topics of physical punishment and positive parenting.

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