Module 5. Setting boundaries and promoting positive discipline at home

Objectives:

● Teach parents the importance of setting clear and consistent boundaries to promote respectful behaviour at home and prevent bullying.

● Help parents understand the difference between discipline and punishment and how positive discipline techniques can foster better behaviour in children.

● Provide parents with practical tools for reinforcing positive behaviour through reward systems, positive reinforcement, and natural consequences.

● Encourage parents to establish a family culture based on mutual respect.

Summary of content:

● Defining boundaries at home and their importance for child development and bullying prevention.

● Positive discipline versus punishment: Clarify the difference between discipline (guiding behaviour) and punishment (inflicting suffering for wrongdoing).

● Introduce positive discipline techniques.

● Highlight the importance of being consistent with rules and consequences to foster a sense of security and predictability.

Lesson 1. Healthy boundaries and bullying prevention

Boundaries are the limits and guidelines that family members set to create a safe, respectful and supportive environment. The main role of the boundaries is to clarify personal responsibilities at home, to indicate the acceptable behaviours and expectations and to help members of the family understand their roles, and their needs.

Research indicates that some parenting styles have the power to influence children's development. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Chu & Chen (2024) evaluated the associations between four parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and uninvolved—and bullying perpetration and victimization. The study found that certain parenting styles are linked to higher risks of children engaging in or falling victim to bullying behaviors.

- Authoritative parenting: Characterized by high responsiveness and high demandingness, authoritative parenting was associated with the lowest levels of bullying involvement. Children raised with this style exhibited better emotional regulation and social competence, reducing the likelihood of participating in or becoming targets of bullying.

- Authoritarian parenting: Defined by low responsiveness and high demandingness, authoritarian parenting was linked to higher instances of bullying perpetration. The strict and less supportive nature of this style may impede children's development of empathy and social skills, potentially leading to aggressive behaviors.
- Permissive parenting: With high responsiveness but low demandingness, permissive parenting showed a positive correlation with both bullying perpetration and victimization. The lack of clear boundaries and discipline might result in children struggling with self-control and social boundaries.
- Uninvolved parenting: Characterized by low responsiveness and low demandingness, uninvolved parenting was associated with the highest risk of children becoming victims of bullying. The absence of parental support and guidance can leave children vulnerable to peer victimization.

In the following section we will provide practical examples of boundaries categorized by developmental domains of human needs:

When parents establish appropriate boundaries, children learn to recognize their own needs and respect others' limits, so they develop a clear sense of self. By understanding their rights and responsibilities, children gain self-respect and confidence, which are essential for standing up for themselves in social situations, including when facing bullying.
Examples:

● Teach children to knock before entering a room and expect the same in return for their space.

● Encourage children to express their feelings openly, but also teach them to recognize and respect others' emotions.

● Allow children to spend some time alone in their room or doing an activity they enjoy, with a reminder that everyone in the family also has their own alone time.

Emotional regulation - when boundaries are clear, children feel safer and more secure, which fosters emotional regulation. Emotional safety at home allows children to process their emotions in a stable environment, helping them manage stress or frustration effectively, therefore they can handle conflict assertively and calmly, reducing the likelihood of being bullied or bullying others.
Examples:

● Create a "calm-down" space at home where children can go when they feel overwhelmed or upset

● Teach the children to express their emotions openly and respectfully, such as using "I feel" statements rather than yelling or blaming others.

● Establish clear consequences for aggressive actions (e.g., hitting, throwing things) and instead encourage alternative ways of expressing anger, such as talking it out or doing a physical activity.

● Encourage children to try out calming strategies like deep breathing, counting to ten, or squeezing a stress ball when they're upset, and make these techniques part of their daily routines.

Social skills and respect for others - healthy boundaries teach respect for personal space, privacy, and others' feelings.

Examples:

● Teach the child to respect their and others personal preferences in terms of personal space, they can ask someone if it's okay to hang out together or if they need space.

● Normalise that it's useful to use words to say how they feel, instead of hitting or yelling.

● When someone else is talking, teach the child to listen and wait they turn to speak, it's a form of respect

● Normalize that it's ok to apologize when you hurt someone, that shows you respect their feelings.

Assertiveness and self-advocacy- When boundaries are consistently respected and reinforced at home, children learn to communicate their needs clearly and assertively without aggression. This assertiveness can be a protective factor against bullying.

- Help the children to express their needs clearly and ask politely for what they need (attention, affection, money etc.).

● Teach the children to ask for help when they feel overwhelmed or helpless.

● Teach the children to set boundaries when something makes them uncomfortable, let they know that can say things like "I don't like this, I want you to stop".

Reflection exercise

Which of the strategies described above you already use in the interaction with your children? Write a list of the strategies that you don't use, but you would like to start implementing in the way you relate to your children.

Lesson 2. Discipline versus punishment. Are they the same?

Discipline and punishment are two different approaches to encouraging children to embrace a structured and socially adaptive behaviour. Discipline comes from the Latin verb "*disciplinare*", meaning to teach. Much like a teacher, parents guide their children's behaviour towards a multitude of constructive goals which eventually lead to children adopting a well-adjusted and socially adequate conduct. Another aim of this process is to help the child develop self-control and self-discipline.

Discipline is often confused with punishment, when punishment is just one of many approaches to discipline. Spencer (2013) defines punishment as "*a penalty imposed on an*

offender for a fault, offense, or violation". It means inflicting suffering or responding in a punitive way for wrongdoing and poor behaviour. Punishment can take various form, for example that of a parent who scolds a child for talking back, taking away screen time or access to video games when a child doesn't follow household rules.

Punishment is neither the most effective, nor the most rewarding approach to discipline. **Positive parenting,** on the other hand, has been shown to be beneficial for both children's and parents' wellbeing.

The benefits of positive discipline

Children do not come into this world preprogramed to act the right way in a society that is so complex to navigate even for adults. They need gentle guidance in distinguishing right from wrong, how to interact with others and how to behave to get what they want (Spencer, 2013).

Jane Nelsen (2018), a pioneer in the development of positive discipline, promotes a style of parenting which:
1.   Is kind, firm, and encouraging
2.   Fosters a sense of connectedness, belonging, and significance (contribution)
3.   Is oriented towards long term effectiveness
4.   Is dedicated to building social and life skills such as care for others' wellbeing, problem-solving, accountability, contribution, and cooperation
5.   Highlights how resourceful children are and how to use these resources constructively.

Recent research showed that, by focusing on internal motivations rather than external rewards or punishments, positive discipline encourages teenagers to take responsibility for their actions. This approach helps adolescents develop a sense of autonomy and accountability, leading to better decision-making skills. Research suggests that intrinsic motivation is more effective for long-term behavior change, as it fosters independence and self-esteem (Backman et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025). Along the same line, implementing positive discipline techniques has been associated with a decrease in problematic behaviors among teenagers. By addressing the underlying needs and emotions driving misbehavior, parents can guide adolescents toward more appropriate actions. A systematic overview of evidence on non-violent discipline options found that these approaches are effective in reducing aggression and conduct problems in children and adolescents (Backman et al., 2024). The benefits of positive discipline extend into adulthood. Adolescents raised with this approach are more likely to exhibit higher self-esteem, better social skills, and lower rates of mental health issues.

The costs of a punitive approach to discipline
The punitive approach to misbehaviour relies heavily on control, imposing rules, threats, punishment to persuade children to conform. The children might pick up as an underlying message the idea that the parents do not trust them to do things well enough their

own way, and at their own pace. The children might feel pressured to do things as their parents want and when they want it. In some situations, punishment can produce obedience and temporary compliance. Other times, this pressure might foster anger and lead to power struggles, pushing children in the opposite direction, towards rebellious, uncooperative, risky and sometimes even aggressive behaviours (Nelsen, 2018).

Above all, verbal and physical punishment communicate that it is ok to behave aggressively towards someone in a weaker position. The parent who uses this approach might unwittingly encourage and model an aggressive and bully-like behaviour in children, who might then act it out in other contexts and in relationship with their peers. This approach can also normalize the experience of being a victim of aggressive and bullying behaviour, which will make it more likely for the children to accept a similar treatment from their peers (Nelsen, 2018).

Punishment is also problematic because it desensitizes children to aggression and punitive behaviours and does not help them empathize with the feelings and needs behind any misbehaviour. This reduces the likelihood of them reacting prosocially when witnessing bullying situations or of defending themselves when they are victims of bullying or aggression.

Lesson 3. How to introduce positive discipline

Positive discipline is an approach based on psychological principles that emphasize teaching, guidance and mutual respect, rather than punishment. Therefore, a parenting approach based on positive discipline should focus on teaching and guiding the children to develop self-discipline, responsibility and respect.

Positive discipline is based on concepts from developmental psychology, including:
- **Behavioural reinforcement** (Skinner, 1953): Positive reinforcement strengthens desirable behaviours.
- **Natural consequences** (Montessori, 1949): Children learn best through real-life outcomes of their actions.
- **Respectful communication** (Rogers, 1961): Empathy and respect nurture self-esteem and cooperation in children.

Research suggests that these techniques promote emotional regulation, responsibility, and better parent-child relationships (Baumrind, 1991).

Positive reinforcement

Rewards increase the likelihood of repeating a behaviour (Skinner, 1953). Positive reinforcement works because it associates a specific behaviour with a positive outcome, creating a motivation for the individual to repeat the action in the future.

How to apply:
- Recognize and praise specific positive behaviours. For instance, instead of a generic "Good job," say, "Thank you for sharing your day with me; that was very kind."
- Use age-appropriate rewards, such as extra smartphone time for teens, and toys for smaller children.

- Focus on intrinsic motivation by explaining why the behaviour is appreciated: "Helping with chores makes our home a happier place for everyone."

Natural consequences
Experiencing the natural outcomes of choices helps children learn accountability (Montessori, 1949). Children develop a deeper understanding of cause and effect when they experience the direct results of their actions. This method helps in fostering independence and responsibility through real-world experiences.

How to apply:
- Allow safe natural consequences to unfold. For example, if a child doesn't do his homework, they will experience a drop in the grade (avoid intervening in teachers' ways of applying consequences).
- Avoid rescuing the child (e.g., talking to the teacher to give him extra days to do it, to forgive him) unless harm is imminent.

Logical consequences
Clear, related consequences foster learning and fairness (Dreikurs & Grey, 1964). This approach emphasizes that logical consequences are most effective when they are directly related to the misbehaviour and are administered in a respectful, non-punitive way. This method encourages children to understand the relationship between their actions and the outcomes, promoting responsibility and fairness.

How to apply:
- Link consequences directly to the behaviour. For example, if a child refuses to take his clothes from the floor and put them in the proper basket, they won't be washed and the child won't be able to use them.
- Always explain the reasoning behind the consequence calmly to ensure understanding: "We put dirty clothes in the basket, so we can wash them. It's each member's responsibility to do this. They are your clothes, so you are responsible to put them in the basket".
- Be consistent, to establish predictability and trust.

Family code of conduct
Clear expectations reduce ambiguity and promote cooperation (Baumrind, 1991). Diana Baumrind's research on parenting styles highlights the importance of setting clear, consistent expectations.

How to apply:
- Collaborate with your children to create a set of family rules and values, such as honesty, kindness, and responsibility.
- Write these down and display them in a communal area to serve as a visual reminder.
- Regularly review and update the code together, to reflect the family's evolving needs.

Example of a family code of conduct:

Core values

1. **Honesty** – We tell the truth and take responsibility for our actions.
2. **Kindness** – We treat each other with respect, empathy, and care.
3. **Responsibility** – We take care of our tasks, belongings, and commitments.
4. **Teamwork** – We work together to help and support one another.
5. **Fairness** – We share, take turns, and consider the needs of others.

Family rules

1. Communication

- **Listen actively** when someone is speaking without interrupting.
- Speak respectfully, avoiding yelling, name-calling, or hurtful words.
- Share your feelings openly and honestly, but calmly.

2. Respect for each other

- Knock on closed doors before entering.
- Ask for permission before using something that belongs to someone else.

3. Chores and responsibilities

- **Teen (16 years old):**
    - Take out the trash twice a week.
    - Help with grocery shopping on weekends.
    - Complete homework and let parents know if extra help is needed.
- **Sibling (8 years old):**
    - Put toys away after playing.
    - Help set the table for meals.
    - Feed the family pet every evening.
- **Parents:**
    - Divide household tasks equally and provide support when children need help.
    - Be available to discuss challenges and offer guidance.

4. Technology and screen time

- Screen time is limited to:
    - 2 hours daily for entertainment for the teen.
    - 1 hour daily for the sibling (after homework or schoolwork is done).
- Phones and devices are put away during meals and family time.
- Social media accounts are monitored by parents to ensure safety (teen-specific).

6. Family time

- Have dinner together as a family at least four nights a week.
- Participate in a family activity every weekend (e.g., board games, movie night, or a hike).

- Celebrate achievements together, big or small.

7. Health and safety

- Keep common areas clean and organized.
- Wash hands before meals and after coming home.
- Let parents know your plans, including where you'll be, who you're with, and when you'll return.

8. Education

- Prioritize schoolwork and strive to do your best.
- Explore hobbies and interests that make you happy and curious.
- Read for at least 20 minutes every day (age-appropriate material for all family members).

Tips for a successful implementation:
1. **Start small:** Introduce one technique at a time and practice it consistently.
2. **Be patient:** Behavioural changes take time. Focus on progress rather than perfection.
3. **Stay positive:** Avoid harsh criticism; instead, guide behaviour with encouragement.
4. **Adapt to your child's age:** Tailor techniques to suit their developmental stage.
5. **Reflect together:** Discuss how the techniques are working during family meetings and adjust as needed.

An important aspect of successfully implementing positive discipline is mutual respect. There are four actions that are essential in facilitating a mutually rewarding and respectful relationship (Schamuhn & Johnson, 2024):

1.   Reflect: When you notice that your child is misbehaving, stop and reflect for a moment what might be the root cause or the need the child is trying to pursue through that behaviour? Be curious and ask questions about what is truly going on inside your child's mind and heart when he is exhibiting a problematic attitude (Schamuhn & Johnson, 2024).

2.   Show empathy: Empathy means being able to step into your children's shoes and to see the world through their eyes. It is often about listening, truly listening to what your child is experiencing. Empathy does not mean feeling pity for the child, overidentifying with your child's experience, assuming what they are feeling, becoming overwhelmed yourself or trying to fix his/her problems (Schamuhn & Johnson, 2024).

3.   Limit-setting: Make sure that you articulate what you expect from your child in a simple and consistent manner. Use specific and clear statements, with as few words as possible. State clearly what behaviours are not acceptable, making sure that you validate the feelings and needs behind them and that you offer some desirable alternative actions your child might take (Schamuhn & Johnson, 2024). Here are two examples:

"You feel upset that your screen time has expired. You know the rule: you can only use the smartphone for 2 hours a day to play stuff. You can do something else with your sister now."

"You are so frustrated that you need to stop playing and start preparing for bed. You know the rule, you need to be in bed by 10:30 pm."

4.   Connect: After a limit was set, children often try to negotiate. When the parent maintains the limit firmly, children sometimes become upset. Children need time and need to be taught how to self-regulate, by firstly experiencing co-regulation in relationship with their parents (Schamuhn & Johnson, 2024).

Activity:
        Identify one action that you can implement right away in the relationship with your children. Start small, with the action that comes more naturally to you. Start implementing it and observe how your children react to it. Can you notice something different in their behaviour? Also notice how you feel when you implement this new action.

Lesson 4. The importance of consistent rules and consequences

        Setting boundaries is important and maintaining them is often the hardest, but the very necessary part. Enforcing the limits requires being firm and consistent, which can be very difficult when parents are tired or have a lot on their plate. However, rules are effective only when applied consistently. Consequences of stepping over boundaries are equally important. They need to be fair, to be clearly stated, should fit the deed and to be applied as soon as the problematic behaviour occurs and in a consistent manner (Spencer, 2001).
        Rules and consequences, when consistent and adjusted to the behaviour, offer structure and security to children. Children need time and consistency to internalize the rules and expectations the adults have in relation to them. They are sometimes likely to test these rules because they need to know the extent of the limits and they learn best from direct, hands-on experiences. Parents' empathic, but firm response to these attempts is necessary for the reaffirmation of the rules and for offering the much-needed predictability and security.
        Furthermore, appropriate consequences help children understand the effect their behaviour can have on their environment. The direct experience of reasonable consequences guide children in understanding the risks of not following the rules, as well as the benefits of adopting them. In time, this process allows children to make sense of and adapt to their environment gradually.
        Inconsistent discipline, on the other hand, characterize the situations in which rules, expectations and consequences for misbehaviour are not applied predictably and reliably. This means that children are sometimes scolded for misbehaviour, other times the same behaviour is ignored or responded to differently. For example, a child is confronted for not doing his homework one day, while the next day the child faces no consequence for the same behaviour. Inconsistent boundaries have been linked with a greater likelihood for the child to behave aggressively or rebelliously (Grant, et al., 2005; Stormshak et al., 2000).

How to stay consistent?

- Ensure rules are clear and unambiguous to avoid misunderstandings. Instead of "Do your chores," specify, "Wash the dishes by 7 PM every evening."
- Frame expectations positively to encourage cooperation: "I expect you to come home on time because I want to make sure you're safe."
- Teens may need reminders, so consistently reiterate rules and expectations. Before a party, say, "Remember, your curfew tonight is 10 PM."
- Apply agreed-upon consequences consistently, even if it feels inconvenient. If the rule is no phone use during dinner, confiscate the phone temporarily if the rule is broken, even if you're tired.
- Follow the same rules you expect your teen to follow. f the rule is no phones at the dinner table, ensure you also put your phone away.
- Implement daily or weekly routines to reduce decision fatigue and reinforce consistency. "Every Sunday evening, we'll check in about your plans and homework for the week."
- Ensure all caregivers enforce the same rules and consequences. Agree on rules for screen time or curfews and discuss how you'll handle disagreements privately, not in front of the teen. Avoid undermining each other's decisions - If one parent sets a consequence, the other should support it.

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