



***Being Right or Builing Relationships?  
– Positive Discipline in the School Classroom  
Racja czy relacja?  
– pozytywna dyscyplina w klasie szkolnej***

**ABSTRACT**


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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The goal is to point out the importance of establishing relationships between teachers and students in view of selected research, to outline the tenets of J. Nelsen's Positive Discipline and to signal the ways of establishing relationships in the school classroom according to this method.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The main problem was formulated as follows: What is the importance of building relationships between students and teachers, and what are the possibilities of applying Positive Discipline in the school classroom? The research is based on the analytical-synthetic method, which was used to analyze the literature on psychology and pedagogy.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The article refers to research conducted in Poland and other countries that shows the importance of relationships in the educational process, and also indicates the theoretical premises of Positive Discipline as an educational method. I also discuss the implications of this method for school practice.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Research done in many countries shows that good relationships at school translate into educational success for students. Children and adolescents are more willing to learn when they have a sense of belonging and importance, and when they feel that the teacher likes them. Therefore, Positive Discipline, which is based on the premise that teachers should develop children's social competencies in addition to their academic knowledge and skills is worth implementing in schools to build a good atmosphere between students and teachers.

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**CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS:** Positive discipline is a method that is worth implementing in educational institutions when working with students of all ages. Recognizing the importance of interpersonal relations in the educational process, we should organize the space at school in such a way that it becomes a place where everyone satisfies the need for belonging and meaning, and where everyone has the right to make mistakes. It is also worth conducting empirical research to diagnose relationship-building in schools.

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→ **KEYWORDS:** **STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP, POSITIVE DISCIPLINE, SCHOOL, EDUCATION, EDUCATION PROCESS**

## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem naukowym jest wskazanie na znaczenie nawiązywania relacji między nauczycielami a uczniami w świetle wybranych badań naukowych, przedstawienie założeń pozytywnej dyscypliny J. Nelsen oraz zasygnalizowanie na podstawie tej metody sposobów nawiązywania relacji w klasie szkolnej.

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**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Problem główny został sformułowany następująco: Jakie jest znaczenie budowania relacji między uczniami a nauczycielami oraz jakie są możliwości zastosowania pozytywnej dyscypliny w klasie szkolnej? W badaniach zastosowano metodę analityczno-syntetyczną, która posłużyła do analizy literatury przedmiotu z zakresu psychologii i pedagogiki.

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**PROCES WYWODU:** W artykule odwołano się do wyników przeprowadzonych w Polsce i innych krajach badań ukazujących znaczenie relacji w procesie kształcenia, a także wskazano założenia teoretyczne pozytywnej dyscypliny jako metody wychowawczej. Wskazano także implikacje dla praktyki szkolnej z wykorzystaniem wspomnianej metody.

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**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Wyniki badań przeprowadzonych w wielu krajach ukazują, że dobre relacje panujące w szkole przekładają się na sukcesy edukacyjne uczniów. Dzieci i młodzież chętniej uczą się, gdy mają poczucie przynależności i znaczenia, a także gdy czują, że nauczyciel ich lubi. W związku z tym pozytywna dyscyplina – opierająca się na założeniu, że oprócz wiedzy i umiejętności akademickich należy rozwijać kompetencje społeczne – jest metodą, którą warto wdrażać w szkołach i wykorzystywać jej narzędzia w celu budowania dobrego klimatu między uczniami i nauczycielami.

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**WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE:** Pozytywna dyscyplina to metoda, którą warto wdrażać w placówkach oświatowych w pracy z uczniami w każdym wieku. Uznając wagę relacji interpersonalnych w procesie kształcenia, należy tak organizować przestrzeń w szkole, by była miejscem, gdzie każdy zaspokaja potrzebę przynależności i znaczenia, a także w której ma prawo popełniać błędy. Warto również przeprowadzić badania empiryczne w celu zdiagnozowania stanu budowania relacji w szkołach.

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→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**      **RELACJA UCZEŃ–NAUCZYCIEL, POZYTYWNA  
DYSCYPLINA, SZKOŁA, EDUKACJA, PROCES  
KSZTAŁCENIA**

## Introduction

Recently, when students began to return to school after a long period of isolation caused by the pandemic, there has been a lot of talk about the need to build relationships at school, and to replace classes that test knowledge with integrative classes that develop social skills. Some schools have pledged to abandon tests by the end of the school year. One may ask the question: why would they? After all, school is there to teach and test

knowledge. The outcome of the educational process is supposed to be an educated, creative person. But is this really the point of education? Is this the only point?

D. Goleman (1997) has showed that high intelligence and very good academic performance are not a guarantee of later success: whether private or professional. He writes that

[...] theoretical intelligence, manifested as excellent grades in school, hardly prepares one to fend off adversity or to take advantage of the opportunities that the vicissitudes of fate bring. And yet, even though a high IQ guarantees neither prosperity, prestige, nor happiness in life, our schools and our culture focus on academic ability, while ignoring emotional intelligence, a set of traits [...] that also has great bearing on our individual destinies (Goleman, 1997, p. 36).

The golden mean, as suggested by N. Boszczyk (2020), is to develop three qualities: knowledge, skills and attitudes; in other words, competencies. In order for this process to be effective, one should take care of good relationships at school, as this is largely what motivates people to act. J. Bauer explains that isolation and social exclusion lead to deactivation of the reward area of the brain. To keep this area stimulated, we must provide the student with acceptance and recognition, which are the basis for generating intrinsic motivation (Bauer, 2015).

Researchers have found that students with a stronger sense of belonging to their school, group and teacher are more motivated to attend school and succeed in it (Osterman, 2000). Unfortunately, as the report of the study *Atmosphere at School and Its Importance for Student Performance* indicates, Poland ranks last among the OECD countries surveyed when it comes to teacher-student relations (Przewłocka, 2015). The same study reveals that some students in Poland do not feel a sense of belonging at school. According to the findings, 76% of Polish 15-year-olds feel that they are part of the school, but in most OECD countries this value exceeded 80%. Consequently, Poland was ranked 31st out of 34 (Przewłocka, 2015). This is disturbing data. Therefore, this article seeks to highlight the importance of maintaining, developing, and improving relationships and ensuring that students feel a sense of belonging and importance in their school, all in the spirit of Positive Discipline, a method that was created by J. Nelsen, based on the work of A. Adler and R. Dreikurs.

## 1. The importance of relationships in education

In our discussion of relationships, it is worth asking ourselves the title question of the article, which is more important: being right or building relationships? Which do I – as a teacher – care about more? Do I want to be right more than anything, or do I want to let students learn to solve problems, pursue knowledge and find out, in an atmosphere of respect and safety, that indeed the teacher was right. Or was he or she not after all?

Research by C. Murray and K. Malmgren (2005) shows that the relationship between teachers and students is closely related to how children function in school. J. Hattie (2015) points out that students who like their teacher and feel that he or she likes them acquire knowledge faster and more effectively. In turn, E. Babad (1993), E.A. Davis (2006), H.A. Davis (2003, 2006) and B. Hamre and R. Pianta (2005) make the interesting claim that a friendly, sincerely interested teacher who is responsive to the student's needs is much more effective in the educational process than the very methods he uses. D. Sterna (2016) adds that without a relationship it is difficult to give feedback, which is based on communication, and pointing out the student's strengths and weaknesses. In a space where they feel safer, children can make mistakes and learn from them.

If we feel very uncomfortable, even demotivated as adults, when someone at work holds resentment towards us, assumes in advance that we are reluctant to perform our duties, and questions our competence, what does a student feel in such a situation? Especially that school is the place where he or she spends some of the longest time during the week? Students also want to be needed, noticed, understood, and liked. N. Boszczyk points out that

[...] good relations are the basis for every group that is connected with education: for the students, who are happy to go to school thanks to positive relations, for the parents, who feel that they are noticed and listened to, for the teachers, who can successfully work together and support each other thanks to good relations, for the principal, who finds it easier to manage a happy team of employees, and for other school employees, who also influence the atmosphere at the school (Boszczyk, 2020, pp. 31-32).

W. Welskop (2013) notes that good student-teacher relationships support students in developing social competences and building a cohesive identity. These relationships are especially important for students who are in a disadvantaged emotional, socio-economic or educational situation. It is often the school that can support such children, and equip them with social and life competencies. One method that can help us achieve these goals is Positive Discipline, which will be discussed below.

## 2. Positive discipline as an educational method

Positive discipline has its roots in the 1970s; it originated in the United States and is based on the teachings of A. Adler and R. Dreikurs (Nelsen, 2015). They believed that one of the basic human needs is the need for belonging and meaning. They also argued that parents and teachers should treat children with respect, but also without leniency (Sankowska, n.d.). J. Nelsen, a certified family therapist, contributed to developing the method and naming it (Nelsen, 2015). Although the name itself may have some negative connotations, it derives from the Latin *disciplina* or "learning" (Okoń, 2001). This means that children are in the phase of learning, i.e. assimilating the rules accepted by

all, and this process should take place in an atmosphere of respect for oneself, others and the requirements of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Positive discipline includes five basic criteria:

- firmness and politeness; in other words, respect for the child, ourselves and the situation we are in.
- the need for belonging and meaning: it is this need, according to Positive Discipline, that guides the child's behavior. If it is not satisfied, the child seeks it by following the wrong strategies, such as attention, power, revenge or lack of self-confidence.
- long-term effectiveness: Positive discipline starts from the idea that we should be able to see the goal of parenting, to ask ourselves the questions: what kind of person do we want to raise? What should he or she be like in 20 or 30 years? How can I help him or her now to become that way? Just because we don't see results at the moment doesn't mean that our actions don't have an effect. In order for us to shape a good, happy person with self-confidence, Positive Discipline advocates giving up rewards and punishments, and instead proposes focusing on natural and ultimately logical consequences.
- shaping life and social competencies: Positive discipline focuses on developing in the child the competencies he or she needs to function properly in society, including respect for self and others, problem-solving skills; the ability to recognize one's own emotions and show them appropriately.
- the idea that children are capable: this means supporting children in discovering their potential, abilities and encouraging them to use them properly (Positive Discipline, n.d.).

In conclusion, Positive Discipline focuses on recognizing the beliefs that guide the child. Any difficult behavior of the child is the result of him or her adopting the wrong strategy to satisfy the need for belonging and meaning. The method relies on mutual respect: respect for the child's needs, emotions, and also respect of the adult, of his or her boundaries. In this regard, it calls for giving up rewards and punishments. The cornerstone of the method is effective communication and problem-solving skills, focusing on finding a solution rather than punishing the guilty party. Instead of praise, it recommends using encouragement, which puts the main emphasis on the process, the effort put into action. It is not the successes and the final stage that is most important, but the path one has traveled.

### 3. Ways of building good relationships at school based on Positive Discipline

K. Baryś, a deputy director of one of the schools, said that "a student comes to school with two backpacks. One holds his books and notebooks, while the other holds their whole world: their loneliness, their parents' divorce, their dream of success in sport or their grandfather's illness. The teacher should always keep these two kinds of baggage

in mind” (Redakcja MamaDu, 2018). Many people think that school is about learning what the curriculum prescribes and that discipline programs should support success in this, but imagine a train that travels to its destination on one rail: that’s not feasible. The train needs two rails as do our schools. One rail is school subjects, and the other is social and emotional development. Therefore, we need to make sure that students have a chance to develop cognitively, intellectually, but also socially and emotionally. Thus, the first point from which to start building a good atmosphere and relationship in the classroom is to remember the two backpacks that students bring to our classroom every day and the rails on which the school train travels.

We should remember that a child’s difficult behavior is only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface, it hides unmet needs that are the cause of what we see. J. Nelsen reiterates that misbehaving children are discouraged children (Nelsen, 2015). A student behaves badly when he or she feels bad. In other words, when children lack a sense of belonging and meaning, they behave “badly:” they choose the wrong behavioral strategies for meeting this need. Positive Discipline mentions the following misguided strategies:

- attention – the belief that conditions a student’s behavior is that I only count when I’m noticed or given special treatment. If you take care of me, it means I am needed;
- power – the belief that I can achieve the need to belong and matter when I prove to others that they can’t force me to do anything, I am the one with the power;
- revenge – I feel hurt, so I will make others feel this way. I don’t feel like I belong, so I hurt others because I feel hurt myself;
- lack of faith – I’m not perfect, so I can’t belong, so I’ll convince others not to demand anything from me.

R. Dreikurs stressed the importance of encouragement. He said that without it, children – just like plants without water – will not survive (after: Nelsen 2015). With these strategies in mind, it is worth building relationships in the classroom by looking at the child like at an iceberg: not focusing on his or her behavior, but on what he or she is hiding inside. Each misguided strategy is a different form of message that we send to the student.

A safe classroom atmosphere is essential in building relationships. In such a space, a student can flourish, make mistakes, and take responsibility. When children feel safe, when they feel that they mean something in the classroom, that they are a part of it, they become brave people, who are capable and willing to express their opinions, with the confidence that the teacher will not judge them. Positive Discipline postulates several techniques that help in effective communication, and in creating a safe space for children. The first of these is “Establish a relationship before you fix the situation.” Where there is a relationship, it is easier to deal with problems. Until I am able to look at the other person with respect, I should not fix the situation. Building a relationship is the foundation for building a positive atmosphere in the classroom. Convincing students that teachers genuinely care about them is fundamental to their sense of connection, belonging and meaning.

Be firm and kind at the same time – this is another principle of Positive Discipline. J. Nelsen points out that being firm is a sign of respect for yourself and for the demands of the situation, while politeness is respect for yourself and for the child (Nelsen, 2015). What does being both firm and polite mean in practice? For example, it means wording messages properly. Imagine a student who constantly interrupts a lesson: when the teacher is explaining a difficult task, he or she is constantly talking. According to Positive Discipline, this is a misguided attention strategy, and an appropriately worded message will be “I can hear you and will only be able to respond to you during the break.” There is an element of politeness (“I hear you, I notice you”) and firmness (“I will only be able to respond during the break.”) Being firm and polite at the same time involves setting your boundaries while respecting the child’s boundaries.

Focusing on solutions means that pointing the blame, and making the student feel worse will not improve his or her behavior, nor will it solve the problem. J. Nelsen asks: Do we have to feel worse to start doing something better? Is this logical? Where did this crazy idea even come from, that in order for people to start acting better, we first have to make them feel worse? She suggests that people perform better when they feel better (Nelsen, 2015). Similar conclusions can be drawn from research by K. Ostrowska and J. Surzykiewicz on aggression in children and adolescents. The analysis revealed that how students perceive the school, and how they feel in it, has an impact on their level of displaying aggressive behavior. According to the study, important predictors include the student’s well-being at school, atmosphere of the classroom (how much conflict there is), as well as student-teacher relations (see Ostrowska & Surzykiewicz, 2005). Therefore, instead of punishing students and expecting them to improve, it is better to teach them to look for a solution that will help them choose a better strategy next time. It is also better to make the classroom atmosphere conducive to well-being and to admitting mistakes. Positive discipline uses several techniques in teaching solution-seeking:

- the wheel of choice – each part of the wheel is a way of solving a problem that the child can use when needed. There are ideas from students on how problems can be handled, such as count to 10 to cool down, ask for help, ignore it, say what you need. The wheel of choice can be used in many different ways: each student can have his or her own copy on the desk, or you can place a large copy on the wall in the classroom;
- the peace table – this is a place in the room where students who are in conflict can sit down and calmly, respectfully come to a solution to the problem;
- class meeting agenda – a class meeting is a gathering of students once a week or more often depending on the needs and arrangements, where students have a chance to appreciate everyone, solve problems together, and plan activities for the next week, etc.

Another suggestion that helps build relationships in the classroom is a place for relaxation and the positive break technique. Everyone has moments when they don’t feel their best and need time alone. The same is true for young people: when a student feels down, behaves badly, but needs help to calm difficult emotions, learn to control them and find strategies to solve problems. The positive break is different from punitive isolation.

Punitive isolation is what we deal with when a child is sent to a time-out chair and is usually instructed to “think about their behavior.” Isolating a child from the group comes with a sense of blame, shame and punishment. This is absent in positive break time, when teachers engage students in creating a space that allows them to calm down and feel better, while also teaching them to self-regulate. Students have a say in what the space looks like: there can be pillows, headphones with music, coloring books, plasticine, squishies, etc. Children are not sent there as punishment, but are instead encouraged to use this space if they feel it will help them calm down and feel more comfortable. One rule for a positive break could be to let the student go to the place of relaxation whenever they feel the need. Another option is to offer choices: “What would be helpful for you right now: adding this to the agenda for a class meeting, or going to the place of relaxation?”. Creating, naming and deciding when to use it puts control of the entire process in the hands of students.

Students often want to be in charge of things, to make their own decisions. This is not always in line with the needs and capabilities of schools. This is where the limited choice technique comes in handy. Thanks to it, the student has a sense of agency, a sense that his or her opinion counts, while, on the other hand, the choice remains within the boundaries set by the teacher. The possibility of choice should focus on the fact that whichever path is chosen, it is accepted by the teacher. When part of the responsibility for the educational process is transferred to the student, he or she has a sense of empowerment and importance.

These techniques and principles of building relationships in the classroom are not the only ones. Positive discipline offers a number of specific ways to work with students, which are worth tapping into.

## Conclusion

Building close relationships in the classroom is a process that requires a lot of time. The effects may not be visible immediately, but it is worth keeping in mind the image of the person we want to see in the future and doing everything we can to equip him or her with both life and social competencies. As demonstrated in this article, a positive relationship between the teacher and the student is a prerequisite for an effective educational process, for stimulating the motivation to learn, and the desire to come to school. Relationships create a good school atmosphere, in which students are not afraid to make mistakes or be evaluated. A. Cichocki notes that “a friendly atmosphere has a profound impact on students’ motivation and attitudes in the learning process. The more the teacher’s strategy is oriented towards the student and his/her development, the more the atmosphere in the classroom is conducive to learning” (Cichocki, 2009, p. 366). Positive discipline is a method of education that offers practical guidance on how to build such an atmosphere, and how to nurture relationships. It is therefore worth exploring to discover that relationships are more important than being right.



Let's conclude this discussion with the words of W.J. Crocker, which are meant to inspire the reader to reflect on these issues. They point out the importance of the school in the process of forming the competencies of students, and in building the beliefs of children and young people about themselves:

If this is not a place where tears are understood,  
Where do I go to cry?  
If this is not a place where my spirits can take wing,  
Where do I go to fly?  
If this is not a place where my questions can be asked,  
Where do I go to seek?  
If this is not a place where my feelings can be heard,  
Where do I go to speak?  
If this is not a place where you'll accept me as I am,  
Where can I go to be?  
If this is not a place where I can try to learn and grow,  
Where can I be just me?

(Crocker, n.d.)

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