Learning Positive Guidance

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Learning and Teaching Positive Guidance Skills:

Lessons From Early Childhood Practicum Students

Positive guidance is becoming an increasingly familiar term in the field of early childhood education. Positive guidance techniques, rather than punitive discipline techniques, are considered by many experts to be the most appropriate way to respond to children’s behavior (Flicker & Hoffman, 2002; Gartrell, 2002). Although they agree that positive guidance is best for children, experts sometimes have different views on which techniques are encompassed by the term positive guidance (Gartrell, 1997). Parents, educators, and pre-service teachers, may also be confused. Despite this lack of clarity, little attention in the literature has been given to understanding the differing definitions of positive guidance. One purpose of this study is to examine early childhood practicum students’ definitions of positive guidance both before and after a semester long undergraduate class and lab placement focused on acquiring and implementing positive guidance skills. In addition, because there is a lack of empirical research on the topic of positive guidance skill development, this study examines early childhood practicum students’ experiences in learning and using these skills, as well as the aspects of class (eg. lectures, lab experience, etc.) that contributed most significantly to effective learning. Lastly, this study focuses on understanding how students’ positive guidance skills progress, and what they perceive to be the easiest and most difficult techniques to develop.

What is Positive Guidance?

Positive guidance involves a process through which adults use strategies including reasoning, choice giving, problem-solving, negotiation, conflict resolution, and redirection when approaching children’s behaviors (Gartrell, 2004; Porter, 2003).
From a positive guidance perspective, conflict amongst children is valued as a learning opportunity for negotiation and conflict resolution, rather than a situation that requires punishment (Russell, 2004). The long-term goals of positive guidance are that children will internalize right from wrong, develop social competence and peer relationships skills, and learn to self-regulate, while enhancing self esteem (Gartrell, 1997). Positive guidance focuses on helping children learn from their mistakes, rather than punishing children for making mistakes. Children are empowered by learning to solve their own problems through the use of guidance techniques.

Before reacting to children’s behaviors, it is important for adults to understand typical development of children at different ages, and to consider the many reasons why children may act out (Miller, 2004). Adults can do this by carefully observing each individual child and forming close relationships with them (Flicker & Hoffman, 2004). Children are not always “behaving badly” or “being naughty” to make adults mad or because they are spoiled or inherently mean. Rather, a whole host of factors could contribute to particular behaviors. Emotional factors (boredom, anxiety, low self-esteem, fears, overstimulation), family factors (sibling rivalry, divorce, domestic violence, abuse), classroom factors (overcrowding, too much clutter, excessive noise), physical factors (hunger, fatigue, illness), learning difficulties (speech and language, ADD/ADHD), and environmental factors (poor housing, poverty, community violence), can all contribute to children’s behavioral issues (Flicker & Hoffman, 2004). It is important for adults to consider all of these potential contributing factors when deciding which guidance strategies will be most effective for individual children. Positive guidance is not a “one size fits all” approach. It instead calls for an individualized response to each child and involves the development of close and trusting relationships with children. Gartrell (1995) recommends that instead of
viewing children as “misbehaving”, which implies a wilful wrongdoing, early childhood professionals view children as engaging in “mistaken behaviour”, which implies that children make mistakes as they learn complex life skills.

One method for guiding children’s behavior involves telling children what they are expected to do rather than telling them what they should not do. This should be done when possible by using positive statements, rather than “No”, “Don’t”, and “Stop”. Being constantly told “No” can quickly make a child feel like he or she can never do anything right and may cause a child to be afraid to try new things or to make a mistake. On the other hand, positive phrasing, such as saying “Please put the napkin in the trash can” as opposed to “Don’t throw your napkin on the floor,” conveys to children what the desired behavior is, but does not make them feel self-conscious or bad about themselves. Children do not always understand the desired behaviors. Children who are repeatedly told to stop their behavior have difficulty learning how to improve their behavior in the future (Greenberg, 1988). Positive statements make it clear to children what they can do and let them know in the future how they should behave.

Positive statements should be as clear as possible, avoiding any vague terms which children may not always understand. For example, if two children are arguing over a toy, saying, “Stop fighting and be nice to each other,” is not likely to provide the children much support in resolving the conflict. Children may interpret “be nice” differently from adults and may not know how to stop fighting. Instead, a specific positive statement could be used, such as, “It looks like you both want the toy. I saw that Kim had it first. Jack, if you want the toy, ask ‘Can I have a turn.’” The adult can also model problem solving and conflict negotiation by suggesting words that the
children could use to communicate with one another. This approach teaches children skills they will need in the case of future conflict.

Gartrell (1997) outlines six key guidance practices. First, it is essential for teachers to understand that children’s social skills take time to develop, and that in the learning process, children will make mistakes along the way. Secondly, teachers should reduce the need for mistaken behavior by adjusting the environment to better match children’s needs. Developing a positive relationship with each individual child is important. Additionally, teachers should practice intervention strategies that are solution oriented, such as conflict management. Building partnerships with parents is also critical in order to learn as much as possible about individual children. Finally, teachers should use teamwork when working with other adults in order to best meet children’s needs (Gartrell, 1997).

*What is Punishment or Traditional Discipline?*

Punishment involves the short-term goal of immediately stopping inappropriate behavior. This is often accomplished though shaming or physical means, without a focus on how the child should behave in the future. These types of punitive techniques have been found to have long term negative outcomes for children (Gershoff, 2002).

For the last two decades, child development experts have warned that punishment is harmful to children, and have advocated for more child-oriented discipline, such as reasoning, discussion, and limit setting (Flicker & Hoffman, 2002). Traditional discipline often focuses on implementing some type of punishment or consequence for “inappropriate” behavior, regardless of the reasons why the behavior occurred. Traditional techniques may include time out, standing in the corner, or the
use of a “naughty chair”, a technique popularized by a reality television program on
the ABC network, “Supernanny”.

The problem with these types of strategies is that they are often used in exactly
the same way with all children and for a plethora of behaviors. This strategy of
universal punishment does not consider children’s individual needs or situations.
These punishment strategies also fail to teach children skills that they will need in the
future to cope with problem situations, to deal with their strong emotions, to
communicate their needs, and to interact with others in an appropriate way. In fact,
the purpose of punishment is to stop the child from repeating “inappropriate”
behavior, regardless of why it occurred, by exerting control and power over the child.
Thus, the child becomes concerned with avoiding getting caught and punished,
instead of truly internalizing why he or she should not engage in particular behaviors.
Punishment also carries the danger of creating a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, whereby
children internalize the negative labels given to them, and come to view themselves in
a negative way, and, thus, act accordingly (Gartrell, 1995).

Common Misconceptions about Positive Guidance

You should let children do whatever they want.

There is not always a consistent understanding amongst early childhood
professionals and parents as to the meaning of positive guidance. Sometimes, this
term is misinterpreted to mean that limits should not be enforced and that the child
should make all the choices, resulting in extreme leniency when dealing with
children’s behavior issues (Ehrensaft, 1997). This type of permissiveness can be
detrimental to children in that they do not learn boundaries and consequences for their
behavior (Flicker & Hoffman, 2002). Numerous studies have found permissive
parenting to be linked with negative child outcomes (Lee, Vandell, & Posner, 1998;
Mauro & Harris, 2000; Morrongiello, Corbett, Lasenby, Johnston, & McCourt, 2006). Positive guidance does not entail letting children “do whatever they want”, but instead involves setting boundaries and limits in a fair way, based on developmentally appropriate expectations and individual needs.

*Time-out is a form of positive guidance.*

It is likely that time-out was originally used in classrooms as a positive alternative to public scolding and corporal punishment (Gartrell, 2001). This technique of placing children away from the rest of the group for a period of time after an “inappropriate behavior” is still used in many early childhood classrooms today. However, this technique is not reflective of a positive guidance approach. Marion (1999) suggests that time-out is “punishment by loss”, where the adult deprives the child of being part of the group. This type of punishment does not teach children how to correct their behavior in the future.

Schreiber (1999) offers several reasons why time-out is inappropriate, referring specifically to toddlers. Time-out does not allow children to develop internal control over their own behaviour, it does not meet the individual needs of each child, diminishes children’s self-worth and self-confidence, it leaves children confused about the relation of their actions to the consequences, and time-out does not allow for opportunities to learn lessons in social relations. Time-out is also socially isolating and publicly humiliating for children. It appears time-out is a punishment, rather than a guidance technique, yet, it is commonly used in homes and classrooms today.

*I tried reasoning with the child, but it didn’t work.*

Often, adults who are new to the positive guidance approach, are skeptical of its effectiveness. This kind of skepticism sometimes stems from the fact that positive
guidance is not a “quick fix” approach like spanking, time-outs, and similar punishments. Many times, adults new to this approach give up after the first few attempts at using the techniques because they do not see immediate changes in behavior. The appeal of punishment is that typically, adults can see immediate cessation of inappropriate behavior. It is possible that positive guidance can be viewed ineffectively if immediate compliance is not obtained. However, guidance takes a great deal of observation, assessment, reflection, and trial and error. Positive guidance is a process rather than an immediate solution.

The development of close adult-child relationships is essential in effective positive guidance (Gartrell, 2003). Close relationships take time and effort to develop as they require getting to know each child as well as learning about each child’s family and cultural practices (Gallagher & Mayer, 2006). The development of relationships and the teaching of complex social and conflict negotiation skills does not take place overnight. Sometimes adults are not aware that there exists a wide range of positive guidance techniques to choose from. Guidance is a process that is individualized and embedded in close relationships, rather than an act that takes place in isolation (Gartrell, 2004).

*You should reward children for good behavior.*

Often, people mistakenly believe that positive guidance involves giving children praise, such as “good girl”, or “that painting looks beautiful”, or tangible rewards, such as sticker charts to promote “good” behavior. However, a positive guidance framework does not advocate the use of such techniques, which are based on the ideas of behaviorism, specifically positive reinforcement (Porter, 2003). Thus, if children are consistently rewarded for a preferred behavior, such as cleaning up their toys, they will be more likely to clean up their toys in the future. While it may appear
on the surface that external or tangible rewards can be positive for children, they can actually inhibit positive outcomes.

Kohn (1999) emphasizes the problems that can occur with external reward systems. When rewards are used to mold children’s behavior, only temporary obedience is obtained. The more adults rely on rewards to motivate children, the more children lose interest in what adults want them to do (Kohn, 1999). Children soon become interested only in the reward. Also, the more praise children get, the more reliant they become on adult approval, thus, inhibiting development of internal motivation. Children essentially become dependent on adults to tell them if what they have done is worthy or not (Gordon, 2003; Wolfgang, 2004). A common phrase used by parents and teachers is “good job”, intended to be positive and supportive of children’s accomplishments. However, this phrase may prohibit children from learning self-motivation and making their own decisions and judgements (Wolfgang, 2004).

Instead of praise and rewards, positive guidance focuses on the use of encouragement as a way to instil internal, rather than external, motivation (Albert, 1996; Dreikers, 1964). Effective teachers should strive to convey a sense that each child is always worthwhile and accepted, and this is accomplished through using encouragement (Dreikers, 1964). While praise stresses the teacher being satisfied with the child’s achievement of product, encouragement helps children to judge their own actions and the process and effort they go through, rather than the end product (Wolfgang, 2004). For example, instead of saying to a child, “Good job sharing your toy with Susie,” an encouraging statement is phrased, “You shared your toy with Susie. That made her happy.”

Teacher Training in Positive Guidance
Considering the many misconceptions there are about positive guidance, it is essential that teacher training and child development programs help adults to develop the skills they will need to implement positive guidance with children in classroom settings. Numerous books and guides have been written and are used to teach pre-service teachers classroom management skills (Arthur, Gordon, & Butterfield, 2003; Gordon, 2003; Smith, 2004). While many teacher training programs focus on the development of positive communication and close, respectful relationships between children and adults, they do not always focus specifically on the positive guidance techniques advocated by Gartrell (2003). Although studies have examined teacher training in general (McMullen, 1997), empirical literature examining how adults learn and develop positive guidance skills is lacking. Understanding these processes is critical for creating effective positive guidance training programs.

The aim of the present study is to examine this issue in detail. Specifically, we investigate undergraduate university early childhood practicum students’ definitions and misconceptions about positive guidance before participation in a class aimed at learning and implementing positive guidance skills. We also examine how positive guidance skills develop, including what students consider to be the most difficult and the least difficult skills to master, and what the greatest challenges were. We also investigate students’ attitudes about positive guidance pre and post-class, how these attitudes change or do not change, and what aspects of the learning process contribute to more favorable attitudes. Additionally, we look at various factors that could relate to the development of guidance skills, such as previous child care experience, age of the student, and attitude about positive guidance. Finally, students’ levels of confidence in their ability to implement positive guidance and aspects of positive guidance that students do not agree with are examined.
Method

Participants

Participants were university students in their junior or senior years in a Human Development and Family Sciences undergraduate program at a university in the southern region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in an undergraduate class focused on learning “positive guidance” interaction skills and classroom management with young children. Approval was gained from the University ethics committee and students from two semesters were asked for their consent to participate in the study. The overall consent rate was 86.4%. Data from the two cohorts were combined and the total number of participants was 63; 60 participants were female and three were male.

Participants ranged in age from 19-25, with a mean of 21.2 (SD=1.27). The ethnic background of the participants included Turkish (1.6%, n=1), African American (7.9%, n=5), Hispanic (25.4%, n=16), Asian (6.3%, n=4), Indian (1.6%, n=1), and Caucasian (55.6%, n=35). The educational background of participants’ mothers was: 4.8% did not complete high school, 22.22% completed high school, 23.8% completed some college, 28.6% completed college, 17.5% obtained a Master’s Degree, and 3.2% obtained a Ph.D. The educational background of participants’ fathers was: 4.8% did not complete high school, 15.9% completed high school, 19% completed some college, 31.7% completed college, 27% obtained a Master’s Degree, 1.6% obtained a Ph.D. Most of the participants had previous experience working with children (96.8%, n=61), and 27% (n=17) had professional child care experience.

Procedure

Participants were enrolled in an undergraduate class on positive guidance for one semester, which lasts 3.5 months. Participants attended a lecture component for
two hours per week in which content was addressed, in addition to a four hour per week practical placement in a University Lab School where they were able to practice the positive guidance techniques learned about in lecture. During lectures, participants were presented with a range of topics related to positive guidance including general child development, positive guidance techniques (e.g. conflict negotiation, redirection, positive language), cultural issues, gender issues, effects of corporal punishment, and child aggression. In addition to lecture topics, participants engaged in a variety of practical activities as well as small and large group discussions on the topics. At the beginning of the semester students filled out a “Pre-Class Guidance Survey” and during the last class they filled out a “Post-Class Guidance Survey” to assess their ideas about positive guidance.

For the practical component of this class, students were placed in one of the nine classrooms at a University Lab School, including four toddler classes, two three-year-old classes, two four-year-old classes, and one five-year-old class. Students registered for each placement based on their schedule availability. Students were under the supervision of an experienced Master Teacher who modelled positive guidance strategies, gave daily feedback, and completed a mid-semester and end-of-semester evaluation (Professional Skills Inventory) on the students’ developing skills. Each of the six Master Teachers supervised between one and three students in their classrooms per day, four days per week. Students completed self evaluations (Professional Skills Inventory) on how they believed their positive guidance skills were developing both mid-semester and end-of semester. Students also completed a mid-semester “goals sheet” at the mid-point of their lab placement and end-of semester “status of goals sheet” after lab placements ended.

Measures
Pre-class guidance survey.

This measure consisted of 11 questions assessing participants’ background (eg. age, previous experience with children, educational levels of mother and father, ethnicity, cultural and religious background of their family of origin), and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. It also contained open-ended questions related to participants’ perspectives on their families’ views, such as, “Describe how your culture or your family of origin views guidance or discipline for young children; for example, what type of discipline or guidance was used with you?”, and “In what ways do you agree or disagree with your cultural or family of origin’s views on guidance or discipline?” Finally, participants were asked “Before taking this course, what did the term “positive guidance” mean to you?”, “Where had you heard the term positive guidance before?”, and “On a scale of 1 to 10, how favorable is your attitude about the approach of positive guidance?”. Not all questions were analysed for this particular paper. The impact of culture and previous discipline experiences were addressed in another paper (McFarland, Allen, Saunders, 2007).

Post-class guidance survey.

This measure, which was administered after completing the class, took approximately 20 minutes to complete and was comprised of 10 questions addressing participants’ views on positive guidance, as well as their cultural views on the topic. Questions asked in this measure included, “After taking this class, did your attitude about positive guidance/discipline change and if so, how,” “Has your view on your family’s cultural beliefs about guidance or discipline changed and if so, how,” and, “If your attitude about positive guidance changed, what aspects of the class or lab experience contributed to the change?” Other questions included “Are there any aspects of positive guidance that you do not agree with,” “After taking this course,
what does the term ‘positive guidance’ mean to you,” “What guidance techniques did you feel were the easiest to master,” “What guidance techniques did you feel were the most difficult to master?”, “On a scale of 1-10, how confident do you feel about your ability to use positive guidance techniques with children in future settings?”, “How favorable do you feel about the approach of positive guidance after taking this course?”, and “How helpful were the self-reflection and self-evaluation assignments in helping you recognize your strengths and weaknesses?”. As with the pre-class survey, questions about cultural experiences were analysed in a previous paper (McFarland et al., 2007).

Accuracy of positive guidance definition.

For the questions “Before taking this course, what did the term “positive guidance” mean to you”, and, “After taking this course, what does the term ‘positive guidance’ mean to you,” participants’ responses were coded for their degree of accuracy of defining positive guidance. The definition of positive guidance used for comparison came from Gartrell (1997). A subheading of Gartrell’s article is “Guidance defined”, whereby the authors of this study compiled a definition based on Gartrell’s description. The definition used is as follows:

... guidance involves developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive education to reduce the occurrence of classroom problems.” “Guidance teaches children the life skills they need as citizens of democracy (Wittmer & Honig, 1994): respecting others and one’s self, working together in groups, solving problems using words, expressing strong emotions in acceptable ways, making decisions ethically and intelligently.” “The interventions teachers make to address mistaken behaviours are firm but friendly, instructive and solution oriented but not punitive. The teacher helps children learn from their mistakes rather than punishing them for the mistakes they make; empowers children to solve problems rather than punishing them for problems they cannot solve; helps children accept consequences but leaves self-esteem intact. Guidance teaching is character education in its truest, least political sense-guiding children to develop the empathy, self esteem, and self-control needed for autonomy, Piaget’s term for the capacity to make intelligent, ethical decisions (Kamii, 1984, p. 34-35)
Participants’ definitions of positive guidance were coded into three categories: *accurate, somewhat inaccurate, inaccurate/do not know what it means*. Definitions did not have to match exactly the definition by Gartrell (1997), rather, this definition served as a guide for assessing accuracy. Accuracy was coded by the first two authors, who both have extensive training in positive guidance. The first author has taught undergraduate classes on positive guidance for four years, given staff and director trainings on the topic in the community, given parent workshops, and supervised guidance students in the classroom. She was also a lead teacher in a university lab school for seven years. The second author has served as a teaching assistant for undergraduate classes on positive guidance for three years, acted as an expert guidance teacher in a positive guidance classroom for toddlers, given parent workshops, and supervised guidance students in the classroom as well. Participant names were removed from all data and replaced with participant numbers. The first author coded the accuracy of all students’ definitions of positive guidance both before and after the course; the second author coded one-third of the cases. Cohen’s kappa for the inter-rater reliability of coding students’ definitions of positive guidance before the course is 1.0; Cohen’s kappa for the reliability of coding students’ definitions of positive guidance after the course is .91.

*Professional skills inventory (PSI).*

This measure consists of 40 items related to professionalism and guidance skills including the categories and sub-categories of “Professionalism and relationship with adults” (appearance, participation in daily planning and evaluation, dependability, and cooperation with other adults), “Relationships with children” (positive communication and situation specific knowledge), and “Guidance practices” (avoiding problems, responding to problems, and promoting problem-solving
strategies). Each sub-category contains more specific items which were rated both mid- and end-of-semester by both the Master Teacher and the student. For example, some items related to avoiding problems included “presents choices or alternatives” and “communicated expectations clearly.” Some items related to positive communication included “uses positive body language” and “demonstrates positive verbal communication”. Each of the 40 items was rated on a 5-point scale; 5 = Strength/excellent skill usage, 4 = Good performance/good skill usage, 3 = Needs improvement/average skills usage, 2 = Minimal performance/less than average skill usage, and 1 = Failing performance/disinterest in skill usage. The total PSI score was obtained by totalling points from each item; the maximum score possible was 200 points.

*Mid-semester goals sheet.*

This survey contained three open-ended questions focused on self-assessing students’ strengths, weaknesses, and goals in learning and implementing guidance skills. Questions included “What are your strengths as far as guidance skills with the children?”, “What are some personal goals you have related to guidance skills, that you hope to accomplish by the end of your lab experience (what are some areas/skills you would like to see improvement)?”, and, “What steps will you take to accomplish these goals?” Students were instructed to take time to reflect on the questions carefully and to be as specific as possible. Otherwise, students were free to answer the questions any way they saw fit.

*Status of goals sheet.*

This questionnaire was aimed at allowing students to self-reflect and assess their progress at reaching their guidance goals. There were three open-ended questions including, “List your mid-semester goals and describe your progress in
reaching each goal” (e.g., Have you accomplished the goal or do you feel like you could use more work in that area?), “What were your greatest challenges in reaching your guidance goals?” and, “What area/skill do you feel like you learned the most or made the most improvement over the semester?” Students were asked to be specific and elaborate on their responses.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

When asked how favorable participants felt about the approach of positive guidance before the class, on a scale of 1-10, the mean rating was 8.6 (SD=1.16), with a range of 6-10. After class, participants indicated their favorability ratings with a mean of 9 (SD=.82), and a range of 7-10. Thus, students had quite favorable attitudes pre-class, with a slight increase post-class.

The mean score on the Master Teacher rated mid-semester professional skills inventory was 153.8 out of a possible 200 (SD=8.9), with a range of 135.5 to 177. The mean score on the end-of semester Master Teacher rated PSI was 187.6 (SD=9.2), with a range of 148.5 to 200. On average, students increased 33.6 points from mid- to end-of semester (SD=9.5), with a range of 7.5 to 58. It appears that in general, students’ guidance skills improved from pre- to post- class, with a wide range in the amount that individuals improved.

Participants indicated a relatively high level of confidence in their ability to implement positive guidance after the class. On a scale of 1-10, the average confidence rating was 8.2 (SD = .78), with a range of 6 to 10.

Accuracy of Positive Guidance Definitions

Prior to the class, 38.1% (n=24) of students either were unable to give any definition of positive guidance or had an inaccurate definition. Some examples of
inaccurate definitions include, “Giving someone advice that would be helpful for their future,” “A permissive form of discipline,” “I thought it was to be a lot more lenient with the children,” “To me it meant talking to children in a gentle way, like you always had to be happy,” and “Physically guiding children to do the right thing,” and “Both parental involvement”.

Forty six percent of participants (n=29) had a somewhat inaccurate definition. Some examples include “Giving someone positive alternatives,” modelling and rewarding good behaviour,” “Redirecting the child when the child has done something wrong or not in the best judgement,” “Reinforcing a child’s behaviour using positive words rather than negative ones,” “Helping children to make the right choices to be successful and happy,” “Guiding children in a positive manner in learning what is right and wrong,” and, “Using words instead of physical punishment.” These examples indicate that the student had some idea of what positive guidance entails, but the definition is too broad or incomplete.

An accurate definition was expressed by 14.3% (n=9) of students. These definitions indicated that the student had a good understanding coming in to the class of what positive guidance entailed. Some examples of more accurate definitions included “Guiding children in a positive direction, using support, reinforcement, and love, without using yelling, criticising, demanding, and negative interactions,” “Giving good advice to someone so they make the right decision for themselves. Guide someone to make the appropriate choice,” “Focus on the positive and not the negative. To not concentrate on what children do wrong and always correct them, but to encourage them and focus on what they do that helps them develop,” and “Helping children solve their own problems and correcting misbehaviors in a positive way.”
After taking the class, 27% (n=17) of participants expressed an inaccurate definition of positive guidance, 52.4% (n=33) had a somewhat inaccurate definition, and 17.5% (n=11) had a close or accurate definition. Students who began the course with too broad of a definition or a small misconception in their definition were more likely to have an inaccurate definition or keep their misconception at the end of the course than to define positive guidance accurately ($\chi^2 (1, N = 60) = 9.78, p = .044$).

**Origins of Participant Definitions of Positive Guidance**

In response to the question “Where have you heard the term positive guidance before?” 17.5% (n=11) responded that they had never heard in before. The greatest percentage of students, 56.6% (n=35), responded that they had heard in other undergraduate classes. Other sources of information included “friend” (1.6%. n=1), “parent” (4.8%, n=3), “church” (7.9%, n=5), “environment working with children” (9.5%, n=6), and “magazine article/reading” (1.6%, n=1). Data was missing for one participant.

**Did participants’ degree of accuracy in their pre-class definition of positive guidance vary according to where they had heard the term before?**

Chi-square was used to compare students who had heard the term positive guidance in another undergraduate class to those who had heard it in less formal settings, to determine if there were differences in accuracy of definition. No significant differences were found. Thus, students who had heard the term positive guidance in another undergraduate class were not more accurate in their definition compared to students who had heard it in less formal settings.

**Is accuracy of definition of positive guidance, both pre and post class, related to Professional Skills Inventory score?**
ANOVA’s did not reveal any statistical differences comparing students who had inaccurate positive guidance definitions, somewhat inaccurate definitions, and accurate definitions on their PSI scores. Thus, students who initially held more accurate definitions of positive guidance did not score higher on guidance skills post-class, indicating that those who were familiar with positive guidance initially did were not advantaged by this familiarity.

Did the PSI scores differ comparing participants whose definitions did not become more accurate or became less accurate post-class?

One-way ANOVA comparing students whose positive guidance definition either remained inaccurate or became less accurate post-class with other students on post-class PSI scores did not reveal any statistical differences. Thus, guidance skills as assessed by the PSI were unrelated to whether or not students’ definition of positive guidance was inaccurate.

What aspects of class contribute to more favourable attitudes about positive guidance?

Students were asked which aspect of class contributed most to them developing a more favorable attitude about positive guidance. Several students (6.9%, n=4) indicated that their attitude about positive guidance did not change because it was already very positive before the class began. Data from five participants was missing for this question. Of the remaining participants, a variety of factors contributed to more favorable attitudes, including using the techniques in lab (27.6%, n=16), seeing the guidance techniques actually work with children (27.6%, n=16), assigned class readings (10.3%, n=6), lecture on the effects of spanking (10.3%, n=6), class discussions of implementing the techniques (3.4%, n=2), lectures in general (5.2%, n=3), and critiquing episodes of “Supernanny” (5.2%, n=3). Collapsing the
categories, 55.2% of participants indicated “hands-on” aspects of the class (using the techniques and seeing them work) contributed most to favorable attitudes.

*Do prior experience with children and age of participant relate to mid- and end-of-semester PSI score, amount of improvement in PSI scores, confidence in guidance skills or favourability toward guidance?*

Table 1 summarizes the correlations between age of participant, mid and end evaluations, confidence in guidance skills, and favorability towards guidance. Students who were older received higher scores from their Master Teachers on their end of the semester evaluations. ANOVAs revealed that there were no relationships between prior experience with children and the same variables.

*Most and Least Difficult Positive Guidance Skills*

Table 2 summarises participants’ descriptions of the most difficult positive guidance techniques. Data was missing for three participants. Students reported having most difficulty mastering the skill of conflict resolution, followed by positive language. Table 3 summarizes participant reports of the least difficult positive guidance skills to master. Data for three participants were missing. Redirection and positive reinforcement/encouragement were reported by students as the easiest skills to master.

*Greatest Challenges in Developing Guidance Skills*

Participants were asked to name their greatest challenge in reaching their guidance goals. Table 4 summarizes the results. The top two challenges described were “lack of confidence” and “being overwhelmed with not knowing how to respond”.

*Greatest Skill Improvement*
Participants were asked which guidance skill they felt they had most improved on. Results are summarized in Table 5. The top two skills for which students felt they made the most progress were “positive language” and “addressing children’s individual needs”.

**Student Disagreement with Components of Positive Guidance**

Participants were asked post-class if there were any aspects of positive guidance they did not agree with, and if so, to explain. Data were not available for two participants. The majority of participants stated that they agree with positive guidance and that there were not any aspects with which they disagreed (66.7%, n=40). Participants cited several aspects of positive guidance they did not agree with including “avoiding negative language like, ‘no’, and ‘don’t’” (16.7%, n=10), “it is not possible to use guidance in every situation” (5%, n=3), “ignoring particular behavior” (5%, n=3), “spanking may be necessary sometimes” (1.7%, n=1), “avoiding praise” (1.7%, n=1), “not getting involved in children’s play” (1.7%, n=1), and “not stern or firm enough” (1.7%, n=1).

**Discussion**

Most participants were in their junior or senior year of university and came into the course having heard the term “positive guidance” in other undergraduate classes. Despite this fact, students’ definitions of the term were mostly inaccurate both before and after learning about positive guidance. The difficulty in defining positive guidance may be a result of multiple factors. Punishment is concrete and spanking or giving a time out are often used to resolve children’s behavioral concerns regardless of situational context. Positive guidance describes a child centered, non-punitive, approach to helping children learn to be socially competent rather than
reducing or extinguishing inappropriate behaviors immediately. The situational nature of positive guidance may make it more difficult to define than discipline. Learning to implement positive guidance techniques with children requires that adults work with children over time to teach them what is expected and how to accomplish goals effectively. Further, most participants in this sample came from backgrounds in which some form of traditional disciple was used (McFarland, Allen, & Saunders, 2007). It may be difficult, even over the period of one’s college years, to assimilate new information and reframe one’s thinking about discipline and guidance. It is likely to be difficult to define practices that do not fit into one’s current ideology about raising children.

In teaching new information to students which may be radically different from their current ideas and practices, educators need to be very clear about what positive guidance entails. Participants may not apply the same meaning to the term as those who are already familiar with the verbiage. Rather, participants may take time to assimilate strategies that are novel. In addition, students may have heard the term “positive guidance” before through multiple mediums such as school or the media. Sometimes positive guidance is misconstrued by the media as being permissive. It may be difficult for participants to be discerning consumers when they are receiving conflicting messages or inaccurate information about positive guidance.

In defining positive guidance, most participants did not explain why it is important or what the goals are of positive guidance. It is possible that asking for a definition only may have been too broad a question. Perhaps their perceived lack of accuracy could be helped by asking students to address specific components of the definition of positive guidance. Specifically, understanding the goals and why
positive guidance is important is crucial to accurately defining and understanding the concept.

After taking the positive guidance course, many participants still held an inaccurate definition. Again this may be because positive guidance is a difficult concept to define, or it may be that students learned how to implement positive guidance but they did not learn how to define it. It is important for educators to instil in students the ability to define what a concept means. As future early childhood educators, students must be able to use positive guidance techniques and express what positive guidance means to others who may be unknowledgeable. Thus, they must be able to clarify and define it for themselves. Early childhood professionals must be able to clearly express what positive guidance is, why they use it, what the benefits are for children, and what the techniques are so that parents understand the guidance practices being used with their children.

Results from this study also illustrate what positive guidance skills practicum students found most difficult (conflict resolution and positive language) and easiest to master (redirection and positive reinforcement/encouragement). These results have implications for education programs in positive guidance in highlighting what skills may need to be explained and practiced in more depth. Conflict resolution is a higher order skill that requires the adult to work through issues with young children and model appropriate negotiation techniques. This is one technique that students may need more feedback on from supervisors and more time to develop. Also, it is likely that students had difficulty using positive language because many adults have a habit of speaking to children using traditional negative terms (eg. “no”, “don’t”). This style of speaking to children may have been such an ingrained habit that students found it challenging to rephrase their statements positively. This is another skill that may need
further attention in developing in early childhood education and teacher training programs. Students also indicated that their greatest challenges in developing their positive guidance skills included a lack of confidence and being overwhelmed with not knowing how to respond to children. Implications for this finding include providing students with ample time to ease into their practicum and build responsibility in the classroom gradually. Perhaps a period of only observations would help students familiarize themselves with the guidance techniques and build their confidence. This finding also underscores the importance of providing students with positive, constructive feedback with a focus on their strengths and steps they can take to reach their goals.

When asked what aspects of the class and practicum contributed most to favorable attitudes about positive guidance, the majority of students stated that the “hands-on” aspects (eg. Using the techniques and seeing them work in a classroom) were most important. Clearly, students benefit from being able to practice and perfect the guidance skills they learn about in lecture and read about. This finding also suggests that students benefit from observing other skilled professionals (i.e., Master Teachers) model the techniques and observing how the children respond. It is important for training programs in positive guidance and classroom management to have a strong practical component.

Most students indicated that their attitudes toward positive guidance were favorable and their confidence in implementing these techniques was quite high. Also, end-of-semester PSI scores indicated that most students achieved a high level of skill development. These findings suggest that most students, after taking such a course and being able to practice the skills with children, see the value and effectiveness of
positive guidance and feel good about their ability to implement the strategies in other situations.

Although most students agreed with positive guidance techniques, some students indicated aspects of the techniques that they did not agree with. The most commonly cited technique that students disagreed with was using positive language in every situation. Some students thought it was impossible to avoid negative language with children in all situations. This finding could either indicate a misunderstanding about what positive guidance entails or a miscommunication about this aspect. Throughout the semester, students were told by the lecturer that it would not always be possible to use positive phrasing, but that children would benefit if positive language was used when possible. Students need clarification on how often and in what circumstances it is possible to use positive phrasing when interacting with children.

There were some unexpected findings related to PSI score. Participant age, but not previous child care experience, was related to PSI scores at the end of the semester. Thus, older students had higher scores on guidance skills. One explanation for this is that perhaps development of these skills takes a certain amount of maturity to reflect on and understand why the positive guidance is important for children. Another explanation is that years of child care experience was not measured, only whether or not students had experience at all. It is possible that years of experience related with student age, which could explain the relationship between age and skill development.

Another unexpected finding was that higher PSI scores were related to more favorable attitudes about positive guidance post class. One possible explanation for this finding is that students who had more favorable attitudes were more open to
acquiring the skills. Another possible explanation is that the more prepared students were to acquire positive guidance skills, the more successful they were in implementing the techniques, and thus, attitude became more favorable.

This study has several limitations. One potential limitation is that the sample consisted of mostly females. Although the few males in the study indicated favorable attitudes about positive guidance, it is possible that with a larger sample, inclusive of more male participants, the findings would be more representative of female and male experiences with implementation of positive guidance. It is also possible that differences between female and male positive guidance implementation experiences would emerge.

Another limitation is that all of the students’ practicum experiences took place in a nationally accredited preschool of the highest quality and were supervised by highly trained early childhood educators. It is possible that student attitudes and acquisition of skills could vary depending on the quality (i.e., Ratios, level of teacher training, etc.) of the training environment and the population served. For example, it may be that students who are placed in settings with lower staff-child ratios or with supervisors who are not well-trained could have more negative attitudes about positive guidance if they are unable to get appropriate feedback or are unable to see the techniques used effectively. Future studies should compare the experiences of practicum students placed in a variety of settings. One final limitation in this study is that it was culturally homogenous in terms of the population served, most of the children with whom the students interacted were from an upper-middle class European background. Culturally diverse learning environments are increasing in early childhood education. It is important for future research to be inclusive of cultural factors of professionals, students, and children and families served by the
program. Another paper using this data set found that cultural differences may impact early childhood educators’ beliefs about positive guidance (McFarland, et al, 2007).

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the literature on positive guidance and has implications for effective early childhood educator training. In order to understand what positive guidance means and how positive guidance techniques work, teachers in training need adequate opportunities to guide children’s behavior. It is important to understand that educators of young children use their prior knowledge and previous experiences with child rearing as starting blocks when learning about positive guidance. Thus, educators learning to implement positive guidance with young children often begin at different places based on their individual experiences. Differences may dissipate, but often some differences remain even after taking a course on guiding young children’s behavior and implementing positive guidance techniques in a classroom environment. Extending learning opportunities for educators of young children over longer periods of time (e.g, two full semesters rather than one semester) may be one way to give educators more time to understand positive guidance and integrate positive guidance techniques into their existing child guidance knowledge bases.
References


Table 1
Correlations Between Age and Evaluation Scores, Confidence, and Favorability Towards Guidance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Correlated with Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Correlation (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mid PSI MT</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-.18 (.892)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid PSI Self</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>.191 (.137)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End PSI MT</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>.255* (.048)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End PSI Self</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>.045 (.727)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Improvement</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>.217 (.093)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Improvement</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>-.174 (.177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in skills</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>.166 (.201)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorability towards guidance before the course</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>.116 (.367)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorability towards guidance after the course</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>.251 (.051)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Most Difficult Positive Guidance Skills to Master

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidance Skill</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Language</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating Limits and Following Through</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering Choices</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement/Encouragement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redirection</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Reflective Listening</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentle Physical Intervention</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Statements</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging Empathy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of Problems</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logical Consequences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
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### Table 3
Descriptive statistics of the Least Difficult Positive Guidance Skills to Master

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guidance Skill</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redirection</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement/encouragement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating Limits and Following Through</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering Choices</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Language</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active and Reflective Listening</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making eye contact/Getting at Eye Level</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Consequences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Body Language</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
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### Table 4
Descriptive statistics of the Greatest Challenge in Meeting Guidance Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biggest Challenge</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Confidence</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Overwhelmed with not Knowing how to Respond</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Positive Language</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited time to Practice/lack of Experience</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing Individual Needs of all Children</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Firm</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Clear, Direct Statements</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting and Following</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through on Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stepping back and Observing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging Peer Interaction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using Encouragement Instead of Praise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxing and Enjoying the</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance Skill</td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Language</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing Children’s Individual Needs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Resolution/Problem Solving</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraging Empathy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacting Quickly to Problems</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering Choices</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting Limits and Following Through</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encouraging Children to use Words</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintaining a Global View of Classroom</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Stepping Back to Observe</td>
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<td>Generally Learning the Techniques</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding Reasons Behind Children’s Behavior</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being More Professional With Children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
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</table>