

How Is Positive Parenting Defined and Measured? A Review of Literature

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ABSTRACT

More than 500 peer-reviewed studies that used the term “positive parenting” in the title or abstract, or both, were identified from a computer search. They were then coded to address three questions: (1) Were the three founders of the parenting approach referenced? (2) How was the term conceptually defined? and (3) How was the construct measured? Findings revealed that with only a few exceptions, the founders are not recognized or referenced in the academic parenting literature. Two-thirds of the studies did not offer a conceptual definition of the term, and measurement of the construct was inconsistent and frequently haphazard. Although positive parenting is a widely used term and has a strong theoretical basis, the empirical literature is not coherent in either its conceptualization or measurement of it.

Keywords: *Positive parenting, literature review, parent education*

The maltreatment of children is a widespread and serious public health concern. Over 500,000 U.S. children were deemed to be victims of maltreatment in 2022 alone (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). In addition to these cases, a vast number of children experience sub-optimal parenting that also places them at risk for long-term poor developmental outcomes. For example, corporal punishment is a commonly used disciplinary strategy in the United States (Straus, 2010; Zero to Three & Bezos Family Foundation, 2016). A large corpus of research has established that despite its popularity, corporal punishment is ineffective at correcting child misbehavior, can cause physical injury, and can precipitate children’s mental health and behavioral problems (Gershoff, 2010, 2013; Sege, 2018). Likewise, psychologically maltreating behaviors are harmful for children (e.g., Abajobir et al., 2017; Brassard, 2019; Norman et al., 2012; Spinazzola et al., 2014), even when parents engage in it at low levels (Yeung et al., 2023). Both corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment have been identified as an adverse childhood experience (Afifi et al., 2017; Felitti et al., 1998) and yet behaviors such as yelling, shaming, ignoring, and threatening to abandon a child as well as spanking continue to be frequently used parenting practices (Cuartas et al., 2019; Finkelhor et al., 2014).

Given the profound impact of problematic parenting on children’s development, helping parents replace harmful practices, including corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment, with more effective strategies remains a critically important policy and programmatic goal for both the scientific and practice communities. Although several clearinghouses have identified evidence-based parenting programs (e.g., The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare), not all parents are aware of, have access to, or want to participate in a group parenting program (e.g., Rostad et al., 2018). Parents as well as the human service professionals who work with families need to have access to a directory of resources (including manualized programs, but also websites and books) that they can utilize and refer parents to in order to help parents better support and promote the health and well-being of their children.

The current review was undertaken as a first step in the creation of such a resource directory, with a particular focus on resources identified as embodying the childrearing philosophy known

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as positive parenting, in light of its promise as a scientifically-based and widely popular parenting approach. For example, a Google search using the term *positive parenting* produces over a billion hits. An Amazon book search produced over 20,000 responses and a search on YouTube resulted in thousands of videos, many of which have garnered tens of thousands of views. It is clear that there is something compelling about the concept of positive parenting, a childrearing approach that was first popularized in the United States by parenting expert Jane Nelsen in her seminal book *Positive Discipline*, published in 1981. Nelsen herself credits the source of the philosophy to Rudolf Dreikurs (1964) and his mentor, Alfred Adler (1957; 1963).

The term positive parenting also frequently appears in the academic literature. However, to date little is known about how parenting researchers define and measure it. This lack of information was the impetus for the current effort, which emerged from discussions at the National Initiative to End Corporal Punishment (NIECP) and the Psychological Maltreatment Alliance (PMA), and among professionals in child welfare and maltreatment, about which parenting resources should be recommended to parents and professionals as an alternative to corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment. There was consensus among the professionals that, as a first step, a better understanding was needed about how positive parenting is conceptualized and measured in the scientific literature.

The study was designed to address the following three specific questions: (1) Do scientists who study parenting credit and reference Adler, Dreikurs, and Nelsen as the founders of the childrearing approach? (2) How is positive parenting conceptually defined? and (3) How is positive parenting measured?

Method

The authors conducted two PsychInfo searches for the years from 1986 to 2023. Each search resulted in a pool of possible articles, some of which were eliminated. The remaining articles comprised the

sample for the study. For both searches the inclusion criteria were as follows: papers (1) written in the English language; (2) published in a peer-reviewed journal; and (3) containing the term *positive parenting* in the title (first search) or in the abstract (second search). Each search ruled out papers based on the following exclusion criteria: (1) It was not empirical (i.e., theoretical papers, policy papers, clinical descriptions, program descriptions, case studies, literature reviews, scoping reviews, feasibility studies, or meta analyses); (2) positive parenting was not included as a variable; and (3) the study sample did not consist of children with developmental disabilities or autism. The first search resulted in 164 articles, 24 of which were excluded, resulting in 140. The second search began with over 2,000 studies; the first 600 articles of which were examined to determine if they met the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Two hundred and twenty-three papers were eliminated based on the exclusion criteria, resulting in 377. The final sample comprised 140 from the first search and 377 from the second, 517 in all. These papers were all written in the English language with the term positive parenting in the title and/or abstract, and the construct of positive parenting was a variable that was measured in the study.

Data Extraction Methods

Each study was read by the first author and, for a reliability check, 7% of the studies were also read by the second author to extract data on the following 13 variables:

1. From what country was the sample drawn? (open-ended)
2. Was there a conceptual definition provided of the term positive parenting in the introduction to the paper (the portion of the paper prior to the methods section)? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
3. If yes, what was the conceptual definition? (open-ended)
4. Was the positive parenting variable the independent variable, dependent variable, or both? (1 = IV, 2 = DV, 3 = Both)

5. Was the term positive parenting operationalized as participation in a specific parenting program? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
6. If so, what was the name of the parenting program? (open-ended)
7. Was positive parenting operationalized through observations? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
8. Was positive parenting operationalized through questionnaires/surveys? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
9. Was positive parenting operationalized through interviews? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
10. Was positive parenting operationalized through parent data? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
11. Was positive parenting operationalized through child data? (0 = No, 1 = Yes)
12. What was the name of the positive parenting measure? (open-ended)
13. Which, if any, of the three founders of the positive parenting childrearing approach were cited in the paper: Alfred Adler, Rudolf Dreikurs, and Jane Nelsen? (open-ended)

Inter-rater reliability was determined using five articles prior to beginning the coding, which resulted in 95% agreement. Thirty-five additional articles were subsequently double-coded, resulting in 93.9% agreement. All disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus.

The 517 articles in the study sample were published between 1986 and 2023. Roughly half were written by researchers in the United States studying U.S. families, while the remaining half were written by researchers from over 20 countries studying samples of families from around the world.

Results

What Percentage of Studies Reference the Founders

Only six of the studies (1.2%) recognized any of the three founders of the childrearing approach of positive parenting.

How Is Positive Parenting Conceptually Defined

Two thirds of the studies ($n = 347$, 67.1%) did not provide a conceptual definition of positive parenting. In most of these studies, the term positive parenting was used in a general way with the word *positive* functioning as a synonym for good (e.g., Dvorsky et al., 2021; Feinberg et al., 2021; Ziegler et al., 2020). In other studies, the word *positive* appears in the name of the program such as Triple P Positive Parenting Program (e.g., Bor et al., 2002; Clarke et al., 2013 Ozyurt et al., 2019), Video-Feedback Intervention for Positive Parenting (e.g., Hodes et al., 2017; Mendelsohn et al., 2018), or Rational Positive Parenting Program (David, 2014; David et al., 2014) but a definition of the concept did not appear in the introductions.

The remaining 170 studies (32.9%) did provide a conceptual definition of positive parenting. From these definitions, a list was created of the parenting behaviors specified, such as providing affection, being encouraging, monitoring, and supporting children. Two authors (AB and GH) sorted these 39 behaviors into the following seven categories with 95% agreement:

1. warmth and positive regard (e.g., affection, sensitivity, nurturance, acceptance)
2. investment of time and attention/engagement (e.g., paying attention, monitoring)
3. discipline (setting limits, consequences)
4. reliability (e.g., consistency)
5. specific parenting behaviors (e.g., eating meals together, listening)
6. teaching and education (e.g., reading together, providing a safe learning environment)
7. miscellaneous

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These seven categories were derived solely from the list of 39 parenting behaviors and were not based on any *a priori* notion of what positive parenting should be. Each study was then coded to determine which of the seven categories was represented in that study's conceptual definition of the construct. These data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency Distribution of the Categories of Parenting Behaviors Included in Conceptual Definitions Provided (n=170)

Category of Parenting	N	%
Warmth/Positive Regard	146	85.9
Involvement/Engagement	87	51.2
Discipline	30	17.6
Reliable and Consistent Interactions	10	05.9
Specific Behaviors	11	06.5
Teaching and Education	09	05.3
Miscellaneous	28	16.5

As can be seen, most researchers defined *positive parenting* as a form of parental warmth/positive regard. About half of the studies used definitions that included parental involvement and engagement in the child's life. Fewer than 20% included parenting behaviors related to the other five categories.

One third of the 170 study definitions included parenting behaviors from only one of the seven categories and two thirds included parenting behaviors from more than one category. About 40% of the studies included behaviors from two categories; about 17% included behaviors from three categories, and only a handful of studies included behaviors from more than three categories. The average number of categories included in these studies was 1.9 ($SD = .83$).

How Was Positive Parenting Measured

Positive parenting was assessed predominantly with questionnaires ($n = 333$, 64.4%). In one fourth of the studies, positive parenting was measured through observations, and in 1.9% of the studies, positive parenting was assessed with interviews with parents. In 69 (13.3%) of the studies, positive parenting was simply determined by parents' participation in a positive parenting program.

An astonishing variety of over 200 different questionnaires and observational measures were employed to operationalize positive parenting. The most commonly used measures were the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (Frick, 1979), used with either the total score or subset of scales in 92 studies; the Parenting Scale (Arnold et al., 1993) relied upon in 24 studies; the Dyadic Parent-Child Interaction Coding System (DPICS) (Eyberg, 2005) used in 17 studies; the HOME (Caldwell & Bradley, 1984) used in 12 studies; and the Parenting Style and Dimension Questionnaire (Robinson et al., 1995) completed by parents in 9 studies. Fifteen measures appeared in between four and eight studies: Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schaefer, 1965), Parenting Practices Scale (Strayhorn & Weidman, 1988), Parenting Young Children (McEachern et al., 2012), Egma Minnen av Bardndosna Uppforstran (childhood memories) (Perris et al., 1980), Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scale (Melby et al., 1993), NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD, 1999), Parent Child Interaction Rating System (Belsky et al., 1995), Parenting Practices Interview (Webster-Stratton, 2001), Child Rearing Practices Report (Block, 1981), Parent Child Interaction System (PARCHISY) (Deater-Decker et al., 1997), Parental Acceptance Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 2005), Child Report of Parent Behavior Inventory (Schludermann & Schludermann, 1988), Emotional Availability Scale (Biringen, 2008), Parent Interaction Inventory (Dumas et al., 2009), and the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978). An additional 183 measures appeared in fewer than four studies each.

The majority of studies ($n = 443$, 85.7%) used only one measure of positive parenting (including participation in the program); 44 studies (8.5%) included two measures; 24 (4.6%) used three measures; and six (1.2%)

used four or more measures. In 95 (18.4%) of the studies, researchers used an unnamed measure and failed to describe it.

To determine which of the seven previously identified categories of parenting behaviors were covered by the measures, the specific variables in the measures (questionnaires and observational coding systems) were examined. This was done because many of the measures—such as the Parent Behavior Checklist (Fox, 1994), the Child Parent Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992), or the Scale of Parenting Styles (Gafoor & Kurukkan, 2019)—had vague titles, and it was not clear what parenting behaviors were actually being measured. Moreover, even if better-known measures were used, such as the Alabama Parenting Questionnaire (Frick, 1979), some studies used all the subscales, while others used only a subset. It was thus necessary to examine the variables to determine what parenting behaviors were being assessed. We coded the variables into one of the seven parenting behavior categories: (1) warmth/positive regard; (2) involvement/engagement; (3) reliability; (4) discipline; (5) teaching skills; (6) specific behaviors; and (7) miscellaneous. These data are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Categories of Parenting Measured for Studies Using a Measure (not including participation in the program as a measure) (n=443)

Category of Parenting	N	%
Warmth/Positive Regard	401	90.5
Involvement/Engagement	287	64.8
Discipline	166	37.5
Reliable and Consistent Interactions	54	12.2
Specific Behaviors	25	05.6
Teaching and Education	33	07.4
Miscellaneous	125	28.2

Almost all ($n = 401$, 90.5%) of the studies that used either a questionnaire or an observational coding system included variables related to warmth/positive regard when assessing positive parenting. About two thirds ($n = 287$, 64.8%) had variables related to involvement/engagement, and one third ($n = 166$, 37.5%) had variables that related to parental

disciplinary behaviors. The remaining elements of parenting were measured much less often.

With respect to the number of categories of parenting behaviors measured, about one fifth of the studies ($n = 103$, 23.3%) included variables related to just one category; almost 30% ($n = 144$, 32.5%) had variables from two categories; about one fourth ($n = 107$, 24.2%) included variables from three categories; and only a handful of studies ($n = 71$, 16%) included variables from four or more categories. The average number of categories measured was 2.5 ($SD = 1.2$). A Pearson correlation was conducted between the number of categories included in the conceptual definition and the number of categories actually measured, which was found to be not statistically significant ($r = .14$, $p > .05$). Thus, there was no relationship between the number of categories included in the conceptualization of positive parenting and how many of these categories were actually measured in the study.



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The final analysis examined the extent to which the studies demonstrated concordance between the conceptualization of positive parenting and how positive parenting was actually measured. These data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Consistency Between Conceptualization and Measurement

Category of Parenting	N	%
Warmth(n=146)	133	91.1
Involvement (n=87)	71	81.6
Discipline (n=30)	18	60.0
Reliability (n=10)	01	10.0
Teaching (n=9)	03	33.3
Miscellaneous (n=28)	12	42.9

Ninety-one percent of the studies that conceptualized positive parenting as involving warmth/positive regard actually did measure some aspect of warmth/positive regard. About eight in 10 of the studies that conceptualized positive parenting as involvement/engagement measured it that way. Fewer than two thirds of the studies conceptualizing positive parenting as discipline actually measured discipline. None of the other elements were measured with any degree of concordance.

Discussion

This study was conducted to determine how the term positive parenting is defined and operationalized in the academic literature. The goal of this effort was to take the first step in a multi-step project to create a resource directory of evidence-based parenting resources for parents and human service professionals who work with parents engaging in sub-optimal and problematic parenting and placing their children at risk of maltreatment. A number of important findings emerged from our review.

First, in 98% of the studies the founders of the childrearing approach were not recognized. In this sample of positive parenting papers, for one reason or another, almost all researchers failed to cite one or more of the three pioneers. It could be a lack of knowledge about the origins of the approach, a failure to give credit to the pioneers, or the researchers' belief that their approach did not have historical

origins. Regardless, we believe that this particular childrearing approach is distinctive and researchers should recognize the origins of the construct and the foundational roles played by Adler, Dreikurs, and Nelsen in its development.

A second finding was that while researchers used the term positive parenting in their titles or abstracts, two thirds of them did not provide a conceptual definition. This common omission indicates that the term is being used in a generic and vague way that is not helpful in identifying specific childrearing behaviors that form the ingredients of positive parenting.

Third, of the studies that did define the term, the two most commonly cited elements were warmth/positive regard for the child and parental involvement/engagement. Fewer than one in six studies mentioned the other categories of positive parenting, including the category of discipline. This is noteworthy because the initial conceptualization of positive parenting, called positive discipline by Nelsen (1981), focused extensively on the importance of parental responses to children's perceived or real misbehavior.

A fourth finding from this review is that there is no consensus regarding measurement of positive parenting. Almost 200 different instruments were used in addition to 95 unnamed measures. Moreover, 69 studies did not assess positive parenting at all but, instead, used participation in a parenting program as a stand-in. There is virtually no uniformity or consistency as to how to assess positive parenting.

Fifth, there was a lack of concordance between how a study conceptually defined positive parenting and how this concept was measured. For example, although 30 studies recognized that disciplinary approaches could be useful for distinguishing parents who use positive parenting from those who do not, only 18 of these studies actually measured any aspects of discipline.

Taken together, although positive parenting is a widely used term and has a strong theoretical base, the empirical literature is not coherent in either its conceptualization or its measurement of positive parenting. Neither the essential elements of positive parenting nor their effectiveness in helping parents improve their parenting has been identified.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on these findings, three suggestions are offered:

First, when the term positive parenting is used, it should be made clear whether the term is referencing a specific approach to parenting as initially outlined in Nelsen (1981) or if the term is being used in a generic sense to connote good parenting. Such a distinction will avoid the considerable confusion that currently exists with the terminology. One option would be to follow the lead of Holden and colleagues (2017) and refer to Nelsen's approach as the "strong form" of positive parenting, in contrast to the "lite" manifestation referring more generally to good childrearing practices that may not actually be consistent with the founder's approach.

Second, it behooves researchers who use the concept of positive parenting to define it and measure it with valid and reliable measurement instruments that are consistent with the conceptualization they utilize.

Our third suggestion is for the creation of a directory of positive parenting resources that are evidence-based and reflect the childrearing approach following the conceptualizations of Adler, Driekurs, and Nelsen. This directory would serve as a clearinghouse for books, websites, and parenting programs. The directory would explain the degree to which a resource adheres to the various components of the "strong form" (i.e., consistent with the founders' approach) of positive parenting. The directory would identify the essential components of positive parenting and which programs best embody those elements.



Practice Implications

Practitioners in dozens of different parenting books and some websites have described positive parenting approaches using many different names. Adjectives such as gentle, peaceful, cooperative parenting have been used to capture this approach. Some of these parenting books (e.g., Markham, 2012) are very much in line with the conceptualization of the pioneers. However, other books are not. An authoritative directory that provides a reference guide of evidence-based positive parenting resources would do much to promote the childrearing approach. This directory can be made widely available both for parents and for professionals working in prevention, intervention, and treatment programs. Such a resource will be invaluable for professionals in their efforts to steer parents toward the best evidence-based positive parenting practices so they can promote their children's healthy growth, thriving development, and emotional well-being.

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