

# author

## Lo que aprendí mientras te portabas mal

Positive discipline is a way of seeing and understanding life



**Margarita de las Nieves Acosta** is a mother, a teacher, has a degree in pedagogy and psycho-pedagogy, a master's degree in Special Education and Prevention and Psychological Intervention in Behavioural Problems at School, a trainer in Positive Discipline, a university specialist in Mindfulness and training in story therapy and author of the socio-emotional programme "[Siempre Atentos](#)". We are particularly interested in her latest publication: "Lo que aprendí mientras te portabas mal" -What I Learned While You Misbehaved-: the book aims to offer an inclusive educational response to build a protected environment in schools and classrooms for learning.



## INTERVIEW WITH MARGARITA DE LAS NIEVES ACOSTA

by Jordi Viladrosa i Clua

**W**hat led you to research how to provide more opportunities for students with behavioural problems?

I have always been attracted to behavioural problems. First, I was difficult teenager who made it difficult for my teachers. Secondly, I have lived with children in juvenile centres who had behavioural problems. Third, we have had children in foster care with very little self-control over themselves and their emotions in my family. And, fourthly, because I have had the good fortune to work in schools with behavioural problems children: I have been able to learn a lot from them, thanks to observation, seeing how they behave, do and their needs. And they have allowed me to learn from them about myself, about what I can do to make them work better, to make us all work better.

**What is positive discipline, and how can it support the attention of all learners in the classroom?**

Positive discipline is a philosophy, a grounded method. It is also a way of seeing and understanding life. It is based on simple things that sometimes we forget. It is based on mutual respect from adult to child and child to adult. Sometimes we adults are the ones who maintain some lack of respect.

Positive discipline is very effective because it is a long-term investment. Educators, parents, and teachers should understand that it's not a short-term investment despite educating the child in the present. Our vision is to train and educate an adult who, when he is 30 years old, is autonomous, flexible and can relate to

himself and the world healthily.

Positive discipline is based on assertive communication, clearly establishing rules and limits, respectfully and firmly and kindly. Thanks to it, I understood what a behavioural problem hides, what that child, and all adults, are looking for. Ultimately, we all look for a sense of belonging to a group - to our reference group-, seek a sense of importance within that group, and pursue feeling useful: granting with, or by doing something a positive influence on others, since if one doesn't find it positively, he looks for it negatively.

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Positive discipline is a challenge, but it is also a reality. People think about where we feel comfortable, how we behave, where we collaborate, in which environments we are recognised. The same thing happens to children, as early as infancy, even in infancy.

**In your book "[Lo que aprendí cuando te portabas mal](#)", you argue that the school should become a safe space for learning where each child can feel unique. How do we achieve this goal when we have some adolescent and disruptive students in the classroom simultaneously?**

Having unique students is the basis of education because all people are different. Sometimes, we strive to give a uniform lesson when people are

not; when we do this, we leave many children out of the system because what we offer them sometimes does not make sense. It requires an effort and a change of outlook.

The most important thing is to know the pupils because we often forget that each one of them is a different person. If we really knew them, if we stopped to think a bit, we would see it much more clearly: "now I am with Manuel, and at the same time I am talking to Carmen; Manuel is not the same as Carmen, I can't give him the same thing".

Nowadays, it is a little more complicated because it requires effort. We live in a society where effort is not well regarded; it requires effort on the teacher and the pupil's part. Perhaps some time ago, there were fewer prejudices, or we showed ourselves a little more as we were. Still, now, children have a kind of armour due to different circumstances.

We also have to educate children to try to know themselves and make themselves known. Some children do it naturally, and others don't, and we adults have to be the ones to teach them and guide them along the way.

**What principles of positive discipline have a neuroscientific basis and how can they be applied in an ordinary school classroom?**

Knowing how the brain works is essential for all teachers and educators. José María Toro says it is tough to design a glove without

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## The best tool of all in education is ourselves, the teachers

seeing a hand before. We often try to teach without knowing how the brain works. Learning that there are critical periods for specific learning processes, such as speech, is relevant because it emphasises the best moment and time to carry out this learning. Knowing the best time to teach a child to read helps or allows us to choose when the brain is ready for it. Suppose we insist on teaching reading too early. In that case, we may be generating learning difficulties that, in the end, are not learning problems but teaching difficulties.

Positive discipline makes great emphasis on brain development in order to offer an answer to children with behavioural problems by learning the educational applications of the so-called “triune brain”: the classification proposed by Paul McLean in the 1960s tells us that the brain evolves and that everyone has an instinctive part of the brain, another is rational and the third is emotional. Knowing the development process and whether a child acts from the instinct or emotional part allows us to work with them differently. That is to say: it will enable us to know what we can ask for, depending on the child's age and level of development.

### How do you teach maturely different pupils at the same time?

With children who have difficulties, especially those with a visible and tangible disability, we all empathise with them and look for strategies and tools to make their lives easier. On the other hand, children difficulties who misbehave lie in their executive functions; they do not have that capacity for inhibition. It is not because they don't want to; their impulsive behaviour is because they cannot or are not yet ready to have

the reflective thinking they need. For example, the limitation that blind children have is that they cannot see. No teacher would ever say, “look here, look”, and it would never occur to us to get angry. Still, on the contrary, we empathise, look for Braille, and look for tools so that they can access the curriculum. When faced with a difficulty, we have to change how we look at it and give the necessary support.

### What knowledge do we have about how positive discipline is applied in classrooms?

Positive discipline says such basic things that when I train teachers, I tell them, “let's stop and spend some time thinking”.

One of these tips is to connect with students; to get their attention, we have to be aware of that because if we don't, we raise our voices. We have to know simple things like that to talk to someone and to feel listened to, and you have to look them in the eye; it's something so fundamental that sometimes we forget.

One of the tools of positive discipline is to take care of yourself as a teacher. If you are not well, you cannot give the best of yourself, which is what children need and deserve. The best tool of all in education is ourselves, the teachers. But the most critical barrier is also each of us because it is a personal challenge. Positive discipline does not need complicated tools or any specific material. But each teacher has to ensure that their students learn to self-regulate to listen; it must be done from what each of us knows, from what we are. We educate with what we think, what we say, what we do, and what we feel. We can transmit what will remain in the end and what will make them the adult we are educating them to be.

### What should this training consist of to apply positive discipline to be effective and sustainable?

Training must be experiential because the first change we have to make is towards ourselves. For that, it has to be completely practical and applicable. In other words, when we have the possibility of experiencing and empathising with a student, if we can see what they are feeling, we can really change.

I have experience conducting open training through the CEP (Teachers' Centres) with teachers from different schools who have similar concerns and in the schools themselves. When a whole teaching staff manages to change their outlook and tune in to inclusion, that is when the magic happens. There is also the possibility of doing this online training through Antonio Márquez's “Aula Desigual” platform. Still, the answer to behavioural problems is not in books nor courses, but in every teacher becoming aware of looking at this pupil as someone who needs to feel important and valuable in the classroom. And when you do that, you give them security, and from that security comes change.

The answer to behavioural problems is who needs to feel important.

### I understand that you are offering the “Positive Discipline Plan” for dealing with behavioural problems course; what are their contents?

The contents are an open offer for each teacher to decide what they need. For example, let's ask ourselves how we can make that student pay attention or how often we tell children to be quiet in a day. We should also ask ourselves how many times we teach them to silence as such. In this sense, one of the tools proposed in the course is “teaching what

## The answer to behavioural problems is to make the pupil feel important







you are demanding". We demand or ask children for respect and companionship and share a space, but we have to teach it and dedicate that time and space to it.

We need to know how the brain works, part of the course content, and see a pupil's mistakes as a real learning opportunity. It allows giving some strategies. An example: when a toddler starts to walk and falls, parents or adults pick him up with affection, we don't shout, "You fell again!" Similarly, when a child assaults another child, what we do say is, "You hit again! Instead, we should see it as an opportunity to teach them to relate differently, which is learned in the classroom. However, we must dedicate the right time and space to it.

I am convinced that a class with a pupil with behavioural problems is a lucky one. When we have a child who is challenging us, it makes us look for our best response to give. We cannot see it as a burden; on the contrary, it is an opportunity to become better teachers.

**What suggestions do you have for teachers to get there before behavioural problems arise?**

The best and most effective method for dealing with behavioural problems

is prevention. Prevention from infancy, prevention every day, every week; because we teach respect, we don't have to ask for it. If children understand and experience respect as something positive, they will not see its scourge.

Prevention is acquired through training. That is why socio-emotional education programmes in the classroom work so well because they allow us to first get to know the students and then turn them into our allies to give the rest of their classmates a much better response than we can.

Sometimes there are explosive moments with children despite having the best social-emotional programs, the best tools or even by using very good inclusive practices, and the most appropriate response to it is a calm acceptance of the students for what they are but not for what we would like them to be, also by regulation (the adult's regulation- this is what achieves the child's regulation) and

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empathy, to put ourselves in the place of a person who is overwhelmed by their emotions at that moment.

**On your website "Siempre Atentos" you present a plan for an inclusive classroom to tackle behavioural problems through positive from the discipline's perspective. What does this plan contribute?**

First, they must want to because it means changing and training to unify criteria. At "Siempre atentos" we propose a general positive discipline plan. Still, each school, each institute has to develop its own. It is not a question of changing everything but changing what has not been working for years. The positive discipline plan is based on two pillars:

1. Making the classroom and the school a safe space.
2. Providing a respectful and effective response to serious behavioural crises.

A safe space is considered safe when the teacher applies strategies that work, some educational experiences: speaking calmly, taking care of oneself, connecting with pupils, maintaining clear, respectful and positive rules, also by organising space and the classroom itself, the structure and the provision of

## Children should understand and experience respect as something positive

materials needed by the children.

Creating a safe classroom is also achieved by a socio-emotional programme of weekly dedication, giving time for assemblies, time to talk, time to listen to each other, time to play, time to laugh, time to have stories read to them, time to have stories read to them. One hour a week, for example, implies neither effort nor real-time. In addition, each school must have a plan and a protocol for action in crises and self-regulation. If there is a child overwhelmed by his or her circumstances, he or she must have a physical space where he or she can return to calm. Suppose the school does not provide them with that security. In that case, they will look for it outside and then find security in the gangs of other much older children and where they can feel important doing things that are not healthy, neither for them nor for the rest of society. We must try to give them the acknowledgement they

deserve just as a blind child needs a Braille machine or a deaf child needs sign language, these children deserve calm, acceptance, regulation and empathy.

### **So who are the key players: tutors, teachers, counsellors, managers?**

Each and every one of us is a key element; even the classmates and the child himself are decisive within the school. We have to make the child aware of the difficulties they have so that they want to change and do things differently. If we don't give them the confidence that they can do things differently, that it is possible to change from within, they have to feel that they can do things better.

### **We are all the key players: teachers, classmates, family and the child himself**

That trust will also come from peers and family, especially with behavioural problems children. Sometimes the professional can do a lot for that family and for that child, which in the end is what we are interested in.

### **Finally, how can inclusive classrooms and positive discipline contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in the 2030 Agenda?**

I hope that there will be no need to talk about inclusion in a few years' time because it will be understood that we are all different and that we provide an education and curricular content accessible to all boys and girls to all our students.

Self-evaluation should be the starting point: firstly, of what each faculty member does and secondly as a faculty itself. Secondly, finding out what is well done and what should be better. There are tools: universal design for learning (UDL), story therapy, thinking about whether what is being done is useful, whether it is sustainable, whether we are teaching children to respect the environment, not to be consumerists, to respect others, to respect nature, etc.

In the end, little people doing little things is what can change the world, as Eduardo Galeano says.