

POSITIVITY PYRAMID

PRINCIPLES FOR
FLOURISHING FAMILIES



Positivity Pyramid



PRINCIPLES THAT WILL BRING YOU A LOT OF STINKIN' HAPPINESS AND JOY

I hope this handout will give you some new insights about how and where to prioritize your time and efforts in building a flourishing family. It is scientifically sound and there are some key principles that, when applied, will bring lots of stinkin' happiness and joy.

I think it's important to start by sharing both my views and some research that backs it all up. Family life certainly brings me the greatest joys and the biggest frustrations. We all want to be good parents and partners in our relationships. We want to be close to our children, and we want them to develop into good people.

We have mental pictures of loving, peaceful, happy families with visions of mealtimes, vacations, and family pictures where all goes well and all are smiling at the same time.

But let's be honest—milk spills, kids refuse to try food, children get sick on vacation, and I have yet to hear about a family picture where there isn't a child throwing a fit and has teary eyes!

And we parents get tired, distracted, frustrated, and overwhelmed. Life burdens us.

A brilliant child psychologist and author (Haim Ginott) of one of my favorite parenting books (*Between Parent and Child*, it's a classic!) put it this way:

"No parent wakes up in the morning planning to make a child's life miserable. No mother or father says, 'Today I'll yell, nag, and humiliate my child whenever possible.' On the contrary, in the morning many parents resolve, 'This is going to be a peaceful day. No yelling, no arguing, and no fighting.' Yet, in spite of good intentions, the unwanted war breaks out again. Once again we find ourselves saying things we do not mean, in a tone we do not like."

Okay, let's be honest, who can relate? Yep, all of us, that's who.

You can see below that the top of the pyramid is correction. There are all kinds of methods and books on correcting and disciplining children. This area is all about what to do when things go wrong. Countless books have made this their central theme – and why not? Millions of parents long to know what to do when things go wrong.

Trust me, I get it. I've been there with our four kiddos (who are now teenagers). While correction is an important piece of parenting, too many of us invest boatloads of time and energy here. As we'll soon see, correction is at the top for a reason, and the effectiveness of our correction, whatever type we use, will depend on everything else going on in the underlying layers of the pyramid.

Research has shown that parents' attempts to correct and control children can usually be divided into three categories. I won't get to academic and nerdy on you, but these are worth a quick review so stick with me!



CORRECTION

CONTROL BY POWER

The first is power assertion or coercion. We can use force—including spanking, threats, rewards, and punishment—to control children. This technique gets compliance as long as we have more power than our children and are present to flex that power. But this technique doesn't teach children an inner set of values such as moral internalization or conscience.

As you might expect, consistently using power and control, more often than not, results in unwanted outcomes. Children of parents who regularly use power assertion are more likely to be either passive or rebellious. Neither of those outcomes is wanted, right?

We don't want children who surrender their agency to powerful others and we don't want kiddos who foolishly fight against authority. Yet those are the likely outcomes of using power to control children. When we live by the sword, we die by the sword. No more swords!

One very popular form of coercion involves shaming and scolding children. Some parents may even slip into this without realizing it or believe that scolding and shaming are effective ways of helping children understand when their behavior is obnoxious or irresponsible. Heck, I'm guilty!

Sometimes we may lose our temper and dive into scolding when we're feeling frustrated (again, I've been there!). Or we may think of this as the quickest way of letting our children know they are out-of-line. But let's consider scolding from our children's shoes.

Scolding and punishment often frighten the bajeebies out of children. Their natural tendency when scared is to cling to their mother [or father], but she [or he] is the one doing the scolding, and in doing so she is pushing the child away from her.

This causes additional anxiety, and the child is frustrated—unable to act on his or her natural impulses of wanting comfort from a parent. The people who are supposed to shield the child from anxiety and comfort the child are instead the source of an anxiety from which the child can find no shelter. Research actually shows that when this cycle is repeated, it can damage the child's fundamental trust—and that ain't good!

One of the unintended effects of scolding and other forms of punishment and coercion is that children feel lost. In a confusing and hostile world, they have no advocate or friend. It's no wonder that coercion has negative outcomes when used as a control technique.

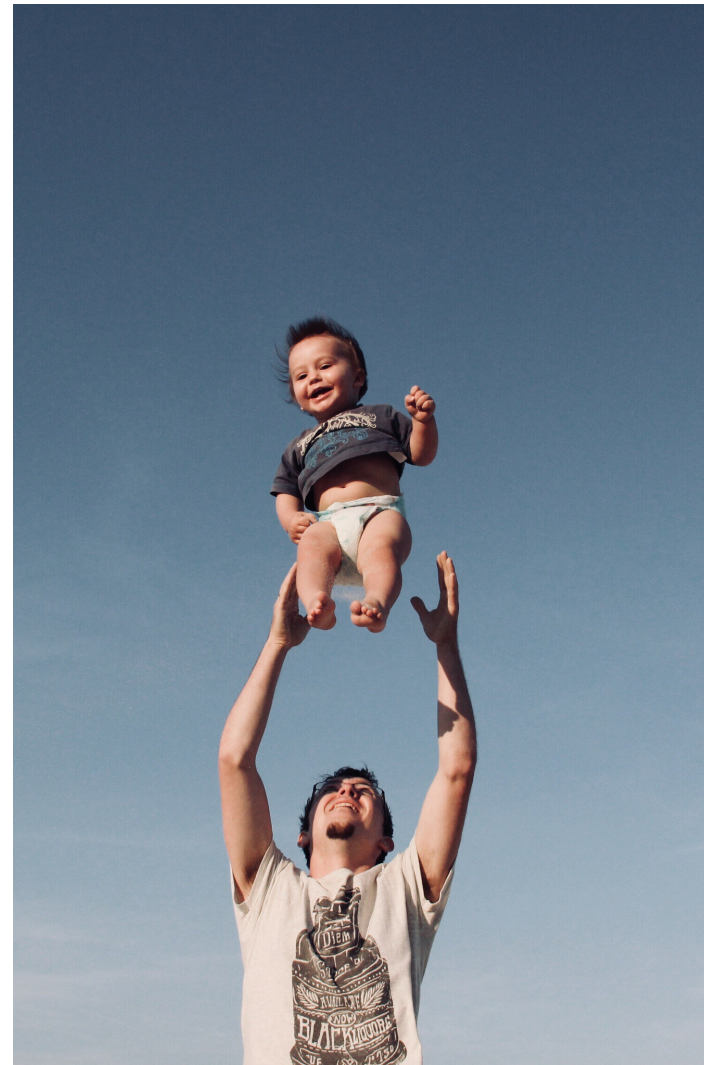


CONTROL BY LOVE WITHDRAWAL

The second kind of control technique is called love withdrawal. And it's exactly what it sounds like—it involves any action by parents where the message is that the parent won't stay in a relationship with children who act in certain ways. Heaping guilt on children can be of form of love withdrawal.

Yep, even timeouts can feel like love withdrawal if they communicate to children that their parents don't want anything to do with them based on their behavior. Adults sometimes do this to each other in marriage. It's called the cold shoulder or silent treatment—and it's not fun or helpful!

Research shows that love withdrawal is not consistently constructive or destructive. It can cause children to feel guilty and insecure. Only sometimes do kiddos comply and it does not encourage moral development. Perhaps worst of all, love withdrawal is really about emotional manipulation; it doesn't teach children better ways to make decisions. There is a better way.



CONTROL BY INDUCTION

The third kind of control that is far more effective at helping children learn to make better choices and decisions. Scholars sometimes call it induction, which is a quirky academic word that basically refers to actions by parents that attempt to influence and persuade children to do what is right. It involves helping children understand the effect of their behavior on others and themselves. It provides explanations and reasons.

Parents who use induction are far more likely to have children who are socially competent, more independent, more able to control their impulses, and more responsible. Maybe most important of all, such children have better moral internalization; they do what is right because it is right. They do not require enforcers.

Whew! So this wasn't meant to be a guilt trip! All parents lose their cool and say and do things we later regret. Some of you may even strongly disagree with the research on the first two and say things like, "I was raised in a tough environment and I turned out just fine." And many children do. Resilience is awesome. But I strive to go with the third method (induction) as much as possible, when it comes to correction.



TEACHING



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The next level of the Positivity Pyramid is Teaching. As parents, we do a ton of teaching, both by our words and our actions. And yep, sometimes we have to teach something over and over and over (like putting your shoes away, turning off lights, loading your dishes...).

The better we teach, the less correction is needed

Teaching children is actually a life-long process. Don't worry, one day they will understand that they don't know everything and that you have lots of wisdom to share. Some day.

Ultimately, the better job we do at teaching, the less correction is needed. And when correction is needed, it should be a natural extension of our teaching. If we are not constantly teaching our children, they will learn things from other teachers, including the Internet and friends.

CORRECTION

TEACHING

POSITIVE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

POSITIVITY PYRAMID

I'll admit that it took me a long time as a Dad to understand that the effectiveness of my correction and teaching of my children depended a great deal on my relationship with them! In short, they are less likely to listen to me if they don't like me. It's true.

Mounds of research suggest there are two fundamental principles for positive parenting and building positive relationships. And when I say "fundamental," I mean these are the two big rocks of parenting. And the best parents are able to balance these fairly well (most of the time).

Ready for these? Drum roll...they are Nurture and Guidance and the foundation for both is Understanding and Compassion.

Let me explain. We know a good chunk of parenting is improving our understanding of children—everything from normal baby and child development to



understanding a child's unique temperament and circumstances. And this is massively popular, with more than 40,000 results on Amazon when I type in "parenting." We are all trying to understand our children and their world.

Even stronger than understanding is compassion. Compassion goes beyond understanding our child, because it's about "feeling" and our readiness to act in their best interest. When we see the world from our child's perspective, we are on the road to compassion. Parental compassion is the offering of our whole souls to experience the lives of our children.

We do better as parents when we strive to understand more about them and understand their worlds, hopes, and dreams (compassion – being touched by their struggles and striving to understand their perspective). I believe our development of compassion is absolutely foundational to good parenting. I'm going soapbox here...in the absence of compassion, we cannot be effective parents. **There, I said it.**

Back to nurture and guidance. A great friend and mentor, Wally Goddard (true family life scholar, educator, and legend, I recommend all of his books) once told me that the purpose of parenting is to help children get what they want (nurture), in ways that we (as parents) feel good about (guidance).

I like that. It rings true and makes sense to me. I want my children to live out their own dreams but in order to do that, they need a bunch of love as well as some direction and redirection along their life journey.

Nurture is any behavior the child experiences as warm, caring, and supportive. The key is how the child experiences the behavior. In other words, all the parental “I love you’s” in the world do not equate to nurture unless the child feels loved. If you are familiar with the book by Gary Chapman, “5 Love Languages,” this is what nurture is all about. Loving children in ways they prefer to feel loved.

Guidance is equally important to nurturing children. It’s not enough to feel love. Children also need to learn important life rules and principles and the natural consequences of disregarding them. They must learn to use their ability to choose responsibly. So guidance is about structure, discipline, supervision, and setting limits.

And yep, sometimes they won’t feel loved or loving when they are learning about consequences. Just like we don’t feel loved when a police officer writes us a ticket for disobeying a rule. We get frustrated and even angry. It’s part of accepting consequences for breaking rules. But when our own hearts are right, our children will know we truly love them and want what’s best for them. Consequences can be frustrating and painful.

So building a strong parent-child relationship takes time, patience, and a mountain of love. I encourage investing one-on-one time with each child, building the relationship and strengthening the connection.



CORRECTION

TEACHING

POSITIVE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

And while it’s never too late to build that relationship, it sure is easier to start when they are young. For example, with three teenage daughters, I know if I want them to be open to my teaching and correction, I better have invested time and effort into building a strong relationship with them when they were young—and I did!

POSITIVE MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP

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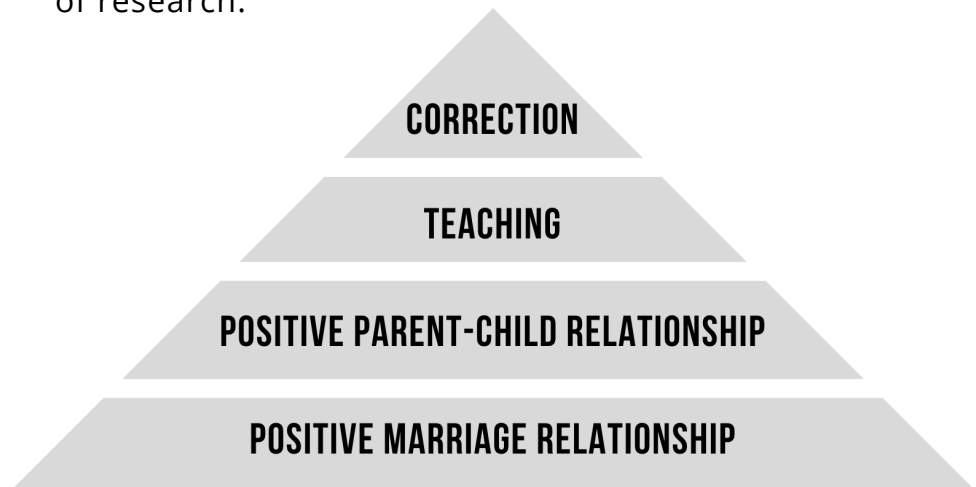
I realize that not all of you reading this will be married. Some will be divorced or have other circumstances when the child's other parent is not living with you. Being a single parent is downright difficult. I know several who are doing an amazing job. In some situations, the quality of the co-parenting relationship with the child's other parent (if living) could be inserted in that space instead.

If you are in this situation, you surely know by now that the quality of the co-parenting relationship spills over into the parent-child relationships. Children know when things are rocky and the icy silence and awkwardness around parents is unmistakable. Although I'm not divorced, I taught more than 3,000 divorcing parents over 9 years so I understand some of what parents experience here. It's not easy.



For parents who are married, the same spill-over principle holds true as it does for divorced/co-parents. I'll have much more to share in other ways about building a positive marriage relationship. Investing

in this relationship is likely the most important investment in your life. For now, here are some key principles to keep in mind that come right from a large body of research:



- **Be a Positive Flourishing Person:** When you feel good, you bring more good to your marriage (see the next level underneath marriage in the pyramid).
- **Show Your Commitment:** Love is more than a feeling; it is a commitment.
- **Nurture Your Marriage:** Marriage requires heaps of kindness, care, and gratitude.
- **Understand Your Spouse's World:** Get beyond your guesses and assumptions to know your spouse's world.
- **Deal with the Challenges in Healthy Ways:** We can make creative or destructive use of our differences—and we all have them.



Of course there's tons more I could share about building positive marriages—and I will eventually. For now, it's important to be reminded that if things are not going as well as they could between you and your children, you may need to invest more time in your marriage (not always, but children's choices and differences in parenting styles can sure put a cramp in your marriage).

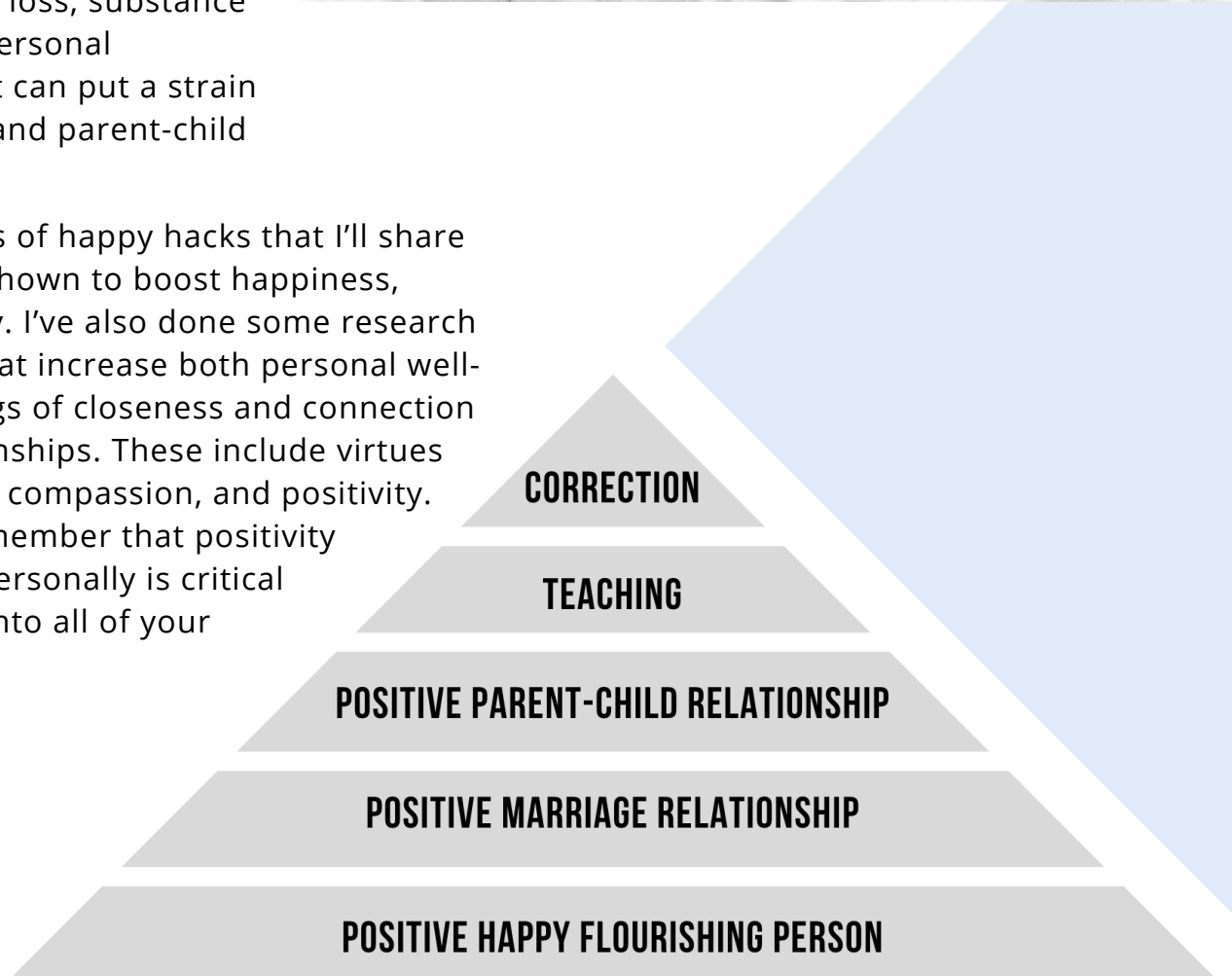
The principle is this: positive parent-child relationships are much easier to develop when parents have worked to build a strong positive marriage.

POSITIVE HAPPY FLOURISHING PERSON

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I'm convinced (and research confirms) that positive marriages consist of positive, happy, flourishing individuals. When there are personal struggles such as mental health challenges, addictions, dealing with grief and/or loss, substance abuse, or poor personal health/choices, it can put a strain on both marital and parent-child relationships.

There are dozens of happy hacks that I'll share that have been shown to boost happiness, meaning, and joy. I've also done some research on key virtues that increase both personal well-being and feelings of closeness and connection in couple relationships. These include virtues such as humility, compassion, and positivity. For now, just remember that positivity and doing well personally is critical and spills over into all of your relationships.



POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD/HIGHER POWER

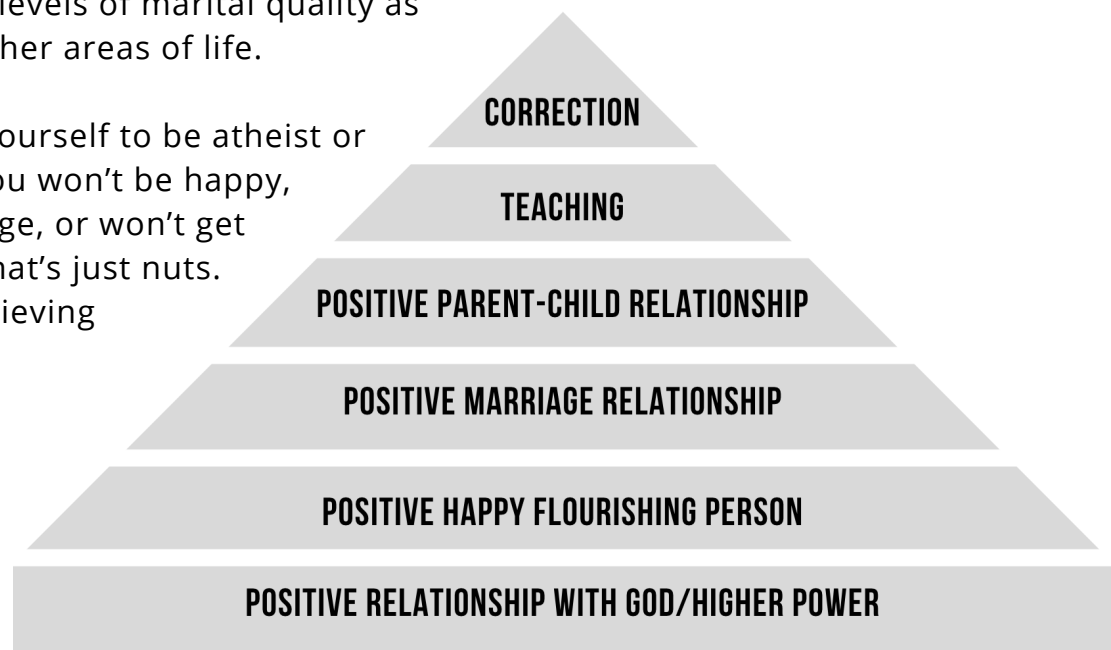


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The research on topics such as spirituality, prayer, and forgiveness has exploded in the past 20 years. Before the year 2000, these topics were often considered to be taboo, and some believed they had no place in science. Yet, hundreds of studies have been done and the results reveal some surprising benefits.

Regardless of your specific faith, research consistently shows that people who have a solid foundation of faith and belief in a God or Higher Power are happier, on average, and report higher levels of marital quality as well as positives in many other areas of life.

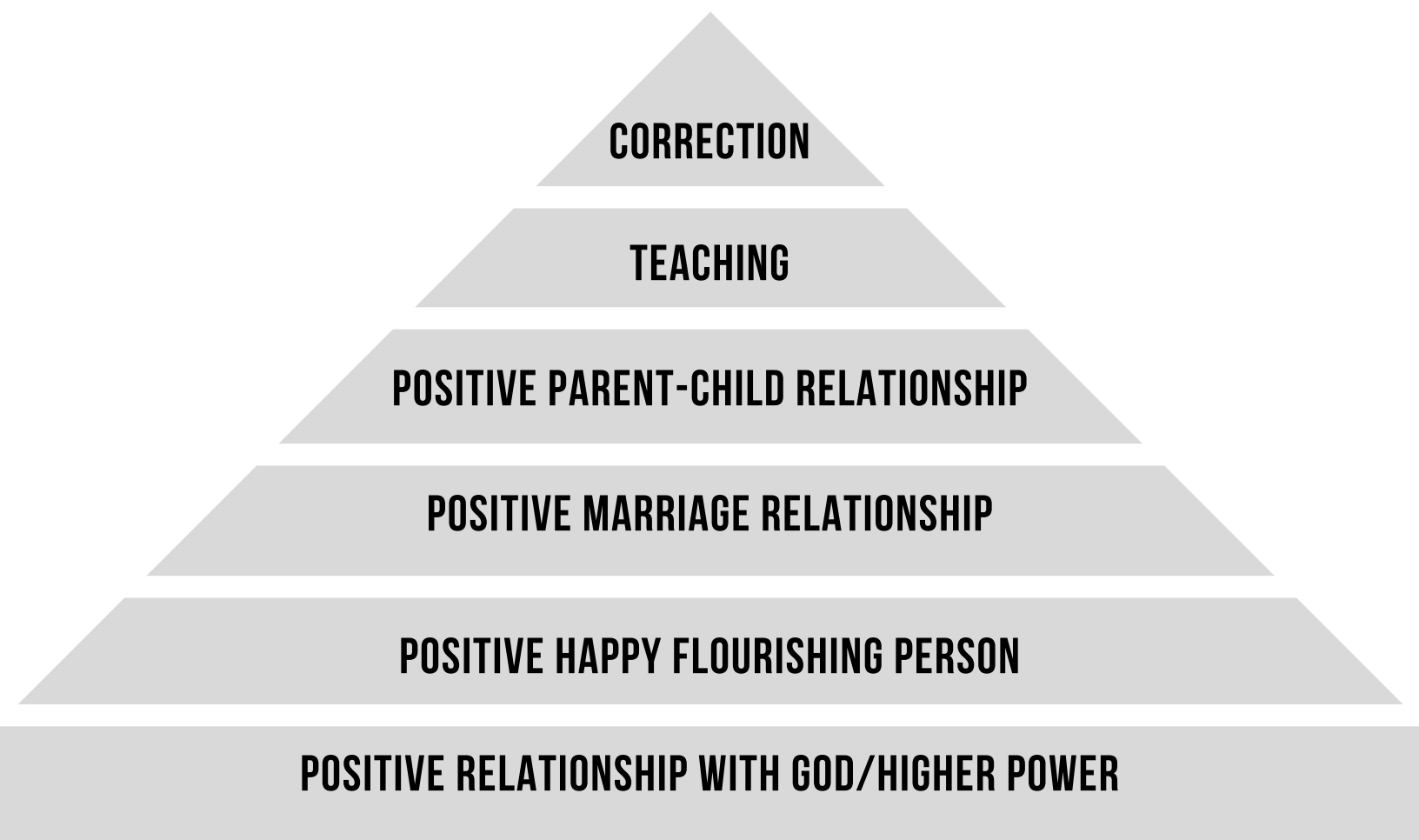
Of course, if you consider yourself to be atheist or agnostic, it doesn't mean you won't be happy, or have a wonderful marriage, or won't get along with your children. That's just nuts. What I am saying is that believing has benefits.



I hope you have found this Positivity Pyramid helpful as a framework and model. It's not rocket science and it's not perfect, but I will refer back to it frequently in other posts so it's nice to have it to refer back to.

Before I wrap up, let's revisit correction up there at the top. Some parents get frazzled easily, and with good reason, parenting is tough! But take a look at this pyramid and you may find it useful to imagine (or even draw) your own pyramid and then think about where you spend the bulk of your time and energy. You could even assign a rough percentage of time you spend on the first four levels of the pyramid.

With all the time, energy, and frustration we often give to correction, some parents feel like correction is near the bottom of the pyramid instead of the top. You may decide to make some changes as a result of assessing where you spend the bulk of your time and energy. That could be good! Ask yourself where you should invest more time and effort. The answers will come. Strive to act on it and when your priorities and pyramid levels are in order, you'll experience more joy!



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