



Positive Discipline as a Transformative Approach to Strengthening Students' Worship Practices

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Abstract

The formation of worship practices in Islamic boarding schools cannot be reduced to rule enforcement or ritual scheduling, because students' engagement in worship grows through relationships, emotional experiences, and the meaning they construct in daily life. This study argues that positive discipline becomes transformative only when it is lived as a humane, relational, and spiritually grounded practice within the pesantren environment. Through a phenomenological exploration of teachers, caregivers, and students at Madinatul Ulum Pamenang, the research reveals that the shift from punitive control to a compassionate and dialogic approach fundamentally reshapes how students understand and perform worship. Rather than compelling compliance, teachers cultivate commitment by modeling sincerity, guiding students through reflective conversations, and creating rhythms of life where worship becomes integrated into personal identity. Students internalize worship not because they fear reprimand but because they witness authentic devotion, receive empathetic support, and participate in structured routines that gradually evolve into personal habits. The findings show that positive discipline functions less as a technique and more as a moral culture that nurtures students' responsibility, emotional maturity, and spiritual awareness. In this environment, worship becomes an expression of inner readiness instead of external obligation. This study demonstrates that when discipline is reframed as a relational and meaning-oriented process, pesantren life provides fertile ground for cultivating enduring spiritual practices that students sustain even beyond institutional supervision.

Introduction

The idea that education must shape the inner life of learners rather than merely regulate their outer behavior has long been emphasized in classical and modern educational thought. Positive discipline emerges as one of the most influential contemporary approaches that aligns with this vision because it encourages students to develop self-regulation, emotional maturity, and intrinsic responsibility instead of reacting through fear or external pressure. In learning environments, this approach is not limited to behavioral correction. It cultivates reflective awareness, strengthens interpersonal bonds, and promotes respectful communication that supports long-term character development, as suggested by Agustiningrum, Ni'maturrohmah, and Ferayanti (2023) and reinforced in Rogers's humanistic learning principles which stress trust, empathy, and holistic growth (Rogers, 1983). Within Islamic educational traditions, this aligns with Ki Hajar Dewantara's emphasis on guidance rather than coercion, a philosophy revived across Indonesian schooling reforms (Yulianto, 2024; Utami & Nursikin, 2024; Nayla et al., 2024).

Studies on positive discipline consistently show its potential for transforming school culture. Classroom-based agreements help students regulate themselves voluntarily rather than through fear of punishment, as demonstrated by Utari (2023) and Yuniar et al. (2024). When students understand rules as personal commitments rather than imposed demands, they tend to internalize expectations more deeply and remind peers to maintain shared norms. Research in various educational levels shows similar patterns, where positive discipline fosters emotional safety, strengthens teacher-student trust, and enhances self-driven responsibility (Asbari et al., 2024; Ardiantoro et al., 2024; Rahayuningsih et al., 2024). School leaders also play a crucial role in shaping these environments, as positive leadership styles significantly influence the sustainability of discipline practices (Amri et al., 2024). These findings suggest that positive discipline is most effective when it becomes a relational ethos rather than merely a behavioral program.

Despite the growing body of research, the application of positive discipline to religious formation, particularly within pesantren, remains understudied. Pesantren function not only as educational institutions but also as religious communities where worship practices constitute the core of student life. Worship cannot be reduced to technical obedience because it embodies spiritual awareness, emotional presence, and moral intention. Classical Islamic thought, particularly in al-Ghazali's writings, insists that devotion arises from the heart and cannot be nurtured through force (Al-Ghazali, 1991; Jalaldeen & Al-Hidabi, 2025). Contemporary Islamic educational scholarship similarly argues that religious formation should rest upon persuasion, habituation, and moral exemplification rather than authoritarian instruction (Firmansyah, 2019; Frimayanti, 2017; Purnamasari, 2017; Ridwanuloh & Wulandari, 2022). These perspectives indicate that positive discipline aligns strongly with Islamic traditions that foreground compassion, wisdom, and exemplary conduct as the foundations of spiritual growth.

Yet many pesantren continue to rely on punitive or highly rigid models of discipline. While such systems can produce outward compliance, they often fall short of cultivating sustained worship practices or fostering genuine spiritual motivation. Studies on religious education practices reveal that authoritarian approaches may create formality without depth and obedience without understanding (Mukni'ah, 2019; Sugiarti et al., 2021; Weigle & Brandt, 2022; Munawwarah, 2025). These findings underline a persistent gap between traditional disciplinary patterns and the relational, compassionate ethos recommended by both modern psychological theories and classical Islamic educational philosophy. When students obey only in the presence of authority figures, worship becomes externally driven and fails to develop into an internalized commitment.

The Madinatul Ulum Pamenang Islamic Boarding School illustrates this tension clearly. Historically, the pesantren employed a traditional, punitive style of discipline that relied on reprimands and strict correction, producing students who complied only when monitored. The rituals of prayer often became mechanical, and students displayed minimal engagement when caregivers were absent. The institution eventually recognized the limitations of this approach and introduced a structured transition toward positive discipline, supported by training programs, musyrif certification, and workshops on child-friendly caregiving. This shift reflects broader movements in Indonesian Islamic education that seek to harmonize religious formation with humane, psychologically grounded disciplinary practices, as suggested by Saputra (2023), Solichah & Abidin (2023), and Renaldi & Wiza (2022).

Studies on adolescent character formation reinforce the importance of modeling and relational warmth in shaping long-term behavior. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights that

learning emerges through guided participation in meaningful activities (Vygotsky, 1978), while Bandura's work demonstrates that imitation of respected figures forms the backbone of behavioral internalization (Bandura, 1977). Research within Islamic educational settings also shows that spiritual modeling, consistent teacher presence, and emotionally supportive guidance significantly influence students' moral and religious development (Harmi, 2022; Sutarto & Sari, 2020). These theoretical and empirical insights suggest that worship habits become stable not through commands but through lived examples embedded in daily routines.

The present study argues that positive discipline provides a culturally and pedagogically appropriate framework for strengthening worship practices in pesantren because it integrates modeling, dialogue, habituation, reflective guidance, and emotional support into a coherent moral culture. While previous studies have focused primarily on academic behavior, classroom engagement, or general character formation, the exploration of worship formation through positive discipline remains limited. Examining the lived experience of educators and students in this context is therefore crucial for understanding how worship can evolve from externally imposed routines into internalized, meaningful spiritual practice. By investigating how positive discipline reshapes interactions, daily rhythms, and emotional environments within the pesantren, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how spiritual responsibility and personal sincerity in worship can be cultivated in a non-coercive yet structured manner.

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach that allowed the researcher to understand the experiences, meanings, and daily realities of how positive discipline is implemented in shaping students' worship discipline at the Madinatul Ulum Pamenang Islamic Boarding School. The choice of phenomenology was grounded in the need to explore discipline not as a mechanical procedure but as a lived experience that unfolds in everyday interactions between teachers, caregivers, and students. Because the research focused on the inner processes, emotional responses, and reflective interpretations associated with religious discipline, the phenomenological strategy provided the depth necessary to capture nuance and contextual complexity. Through this approach the researcher sought to reveal how discipline becomes internalized and how students gradually shift from external obedience to intrinsic motivation.

The study was carried out in the authentic environment of the pesantren, which represents a rich social and spiritual ecosystem where discipline, worship routines, and interpersonal relationships are deeply interwoven. Participants were selected purposively, as only those who actively participated in the formation of worship discipline could provide insight into the implementation model. Musyrif and musyrifah offered perspectives from their roles as daily supervisors and mentors, teachers contributed their educational viewpoints and spiritual guidance experiences, boarding school leaders provided institutional understanding, and students conveyed their personal interpretations of discipline as they experienced it. This purposeful selection ensured that the data reflected a range of experiences across multiple layers of pesantren life.

Data were collected through a combination of in-depth interviews, naturalistic observations, and documentation review. Interviews were conducted in a conversational yet structured manner, allowing participants to articulate their perceptions freely while still guiding the discussion toward themes relevant to the phenomenon under study. Through these dialogues participants narrated how they understood discipline, how they practiced it, how they communicated it to students, and how they perceived students' responses. The interviews were conducted in relaxed settings that fostered openness, ensuring that participants could reflect

deeply on their experiences. Observation functioned as an essential complement because the practice of discipline often reveals itself more honestly through behavior and routine than through verbal explanation. The researcher observed worship activities, morning and evening routines, mentoring processes, peer interactions, and the general emotional tone of disciplinary supervision. These observations made it possible to witness how modeling, habituation, dialogue, and supervision unfolded naturally in the rhythm of pesantren life. Documentation, including worship schedules, attendance records, institutional guidelines, and training materials for musyrif, provided contextual grounding and supported triangulation by offering evidence of the structural framework supporting discipline formation.

Data analysis followed an iterative, interpretive process that involved organizing and reviewing the material repeatedly until clear thematic patterns emerged. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were examined to identify recurring meanings related to the central phenomenon. As the analysis progressed, the researcher compared individual accounts with observed behavior and contextual documents to ensure consistency and depth. The analytic work involved condensing large amounts of information into meaningful categories, interpreting the significance of these categories, and finally building a coherent narrative that captured how positive discipline manifests in the pesantren environment. The process was dynamic and reflexive, which allowed the researcher to move back and forth between interpretation and raw data. This constant engagement with the material ensured that the findings reflected the lived realities of the participants rather than preconceived expectations.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were integrated naturally throughout the research process. Credibility was strengthened by the use of multiple data sources, prolonged engagement in the field, and repeated clarification of meaning with participants. The blending of interview accounts, observed behaviors, and formal documents allowed the researcher to develop interpretations that aligned closely with the actual experiences of the community. Dependability was ensured through a systematic documentation process in which all decisions, procedures, and changes were recorded. The analytic procedures were reviewed with academic supervisors, which helped maintain consistency and methodological coherence. Confirmability was addressed through careful reflexivity. The researcher continually examined personal assumptions and emotions to prevent them from shaping the interpretation. Field notes, analytic memos, and direct quotations from participants were used to allow the data itself to guide the conclusions. Transferability was supported by rich descriptions of the setting, participant roles, worship routines, and the interpersonal climate within the pesantren. These detailed portrayals provide sufficient contextual information for readers to determine whether similar approaches may be applicable in other Islamic boarding schools or educational settings.

All participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research, and participation was entirely voluntary. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing identities and securing all data responsibly. The researcher treated participants with respect and sensitivity, recognizing that the discussion of worship and discipline can be personally meaningful and emotionally delicate.

Results and Discussion

Spiritual Modeling as the Central Driver of Worship Discipline Formation

The interviews show clearly that the most fundamental element shaping students' worship discipline is the daily example set by teachers, caregivers and senior students. The development of discipline does not begin with rules or schedules. It begins with what students witness. They

do not learn worship through verbal instruction alone but through consistent exposure to adults who perform worship sincerely, punctually and with emotional presence. The environment operates like a living demonstration. Students internalize worship behaviour because they observe it being practiced with commitment and calmness by people they respect. The informants describe that students copy what they see, and that modeling is not superficial imitation but an influential source of motivation, meaning and behavioural consistency.

The caregivers repeatedly emphasize that students are highly sensitive to what their teachers do. They watch and then follow. This is illustrated when the caregiver explains that,

“Students have very strong powers of observation and imitation... they see how the ustaz or instructor performs worship”

This quote shows that worship learning begins as an observational process. Students are not persuaded by rules but by a visible pattern of behaviour enacted in front of them. When students see teachers pray with calmness, arrive early for congregational prayer or recite the Qur'an consistently, they adopt these actions because they occur in a relational context where adults serve as behavioural and moral reference points. The caregiver continues by elaborating how powerful this modeling is. He says that students

“It is easier to follow if they see directly how the ustaz and administrators carry out worship with enthusiasm and sincerity.”

This reinforces the idea that the teacher's presence during rituals is not optional but central to the formation of worship discipline.

One of the most detailed explanations appears when the caregiver describes the visual scenes students encounter every morning. He states that when students observe teachers,

“Waking up before dawn, taking ablutions calmly, and walking to the mosque with a face full of devotion, even without being asked, the students will feel compelled to do the same thing.”

This quotation captures the mechanism of influence. The image of a teacher quietly preparing for prayer creates a motivational pull. Students do not experience worship as a forced routine because they see the sincerity of those who model it. The caregiver portrays a progression from observation to internal desire. This shows that worship discipline is not imposed from above but produced through a shared environment of devotion.

The interviews also show that worship discipline is tied closely to how teachers frame the meaning of discipline itself. One informant explains that they

“always trying to instill in the students that discipline is part of the responsibility as a servant of God”

When teachers explain that discipline is a responsibility before God, students see the alignment between what teachers do and what teachers say. The model and the message reinforce each other. The teacher's own behaviour becomes the interpretive lens for students to understand why discipline matters. This alignment enhances credibility. If teachers only instruct but do not model, students would likely disengage or view discipline as a formal requirement rather than a spiritual commitment.

Another caregiver confirms the significance of modeling by linking it with the students' readiness to follow religious schedules. He notes that

“It will be easier for students to follow the prayer schedule if they see that their teacher is also present at the mosque before the call to prayer, participates in the tadarus, and is active in religious activities.”

This statement shows that modeling functions as a prerequisite for discipline. Discipline becomes believable and attainable because it has been demonstrated concretely. Students are not following an abstract rule. They are following a living example that shows the rule embodied in practice.

Modeling is not limited to worship performance. It extends into the emotional tone teachers display. When teachers show calmness, sincerity and warmth, students mirror these qualities in their worship participation. One informant emphasizes that teachers always try to connect with students spiritually. He explains that they continuously remind students that worship is not merely obligation but “*form of devotion*” and that every action, from cleanliness to punctuality, is part of worship when internalized correctly. This affects students because the teachers themselves demonstrate this integrated view of worship in their daily conduct.

The interviews also show that modeling spreads horizontally among students. Teachers intentionally empower certain disciplined students to guide and remind their peers. This peer modeling reinforces what teachers demonstrate. As one teacher says,

“their friends who are used to being a positive influence”

Students become models for each other. When students see fellow students taking responsibility, coming early to the mosque or reminding others gently, discipline becomes a shared norm rather than a top-down instruction.

Modeling also influences how deeply students internalize the meaning of worship. Students shift from compliance to inner motivation because they see genuine examples of worship driven by longing and devotion. One of the clearest statements describing this transformation is when the informant says that students eventually,

“waking up early not because they were woken up, but because they miss the morning prayer in congregation” and that they are punctual “not because they are afraid of being reprimanded, but because they value time as a trust”

This indicates that modeling helps shift discipline from an externally enforced duty into a voluntary, emotionally grounded habit. Students begin to embody the attitude they observe. Work on discipline becomes work on meaning.

In addition, the interviews provide evidence that modeling produces long-term stability. When teachers demonstrate consistent behaviour, students continue performing acts of worship even outside direct supervision. One teacher notes that after a period of modeling and internalization, many students maintain their routines because worship “*has become a habit and personal need*” rather than a requirement tied to monitoring

This shows that modeling contributes to sustainable discipline because it shapes inner orientation rather than mere outward conformity.

There is also a critical dimension revealed in the interviews. Modeling is effective only when it is consistent and sincere. Students can identify performative behaviour and will not respond deeply to it. What the interviews suggest is that the influence of modeling comes from the emotional authenticity of teachers. Modeling loses its strength when teachers are absent from rituals or when their behaviour contradicts their instructions. Conversely, when teachers demonstrate routines patiently and repeatedly, students interpret this consistency as evidence

of commitment. This strengthens trust. Once trust is established, the teacher's presence itself becomes motivational. Another critical insight is that modeling does not operate in isolation. It interacts with explanations, reminders, discussions and emotional support. The quotes show that students interpret worship behaviour more deeply when teachers provide spiritual meaning alongside the example. For instance, the teachers often integrate reminders about the value of worship and its connection to inner peace. These explanations help students understand why the behaviour modeled is worth imitating and why it matters for their identity.

The Shift from Punitive Control to Positive Discipline as a Transformational Turning Point

The interviews reveal a significant transformation in how discipline is understood and practiced in the pesantren. For many years, discipline relied heavily on strict instruction, fear of sanctions and external pressure. Students often complied because they did not want to be reprimanded. However, during the past two to three years, the institution has undertaken a deliberate shift toward a positive discipline approach. This shift is not a superficial change in techniques but reflects a deep reorientation in the values guiding how students are shaped. The new approach emphasizes persuasion, understanding, emotional guidance and the gradual cultivation of internal motivation. The interviews demonstrate that this change has had a powerful effect on students' worship behaviour. It has altered the emotional climate of discipline from fear to trust and has transformed worship from a forced task into a personally meaningful practice.

The caregivers explain that this change did not happen suddenly but emerged through training, reflection and recognition that old punitive methods no longer resonated with contemporary students. One of the clearest statements describing this turning point appears when the caregiver states that the application of positive discipline "*has been started for the last two to three years*" and that previously, even though there were elements of motivation and persuasion, they were "*not yet structured in a comprehensive coaching system*". This quote reveals a collective institutional realization. The staff recognized that traditional discipline, although familiar, was insufficient for forming stable worship discipline. By shifting to a more humane and educational approach, teachers began to understand discipline as a relational and developmental process.

The interviews consistently show that before the shift took place, the older methods produced compliance but not conviction. A teacher recalls that "*Discipline in worship used to be quite low*" because many students "*carrying out worship with a sense of compulsion*" under the older style of directives and reprimands. Students delayed prayers and approached rituals passively. Their behaviour was shaped by fear of being recorded or scolded. These descriptions illustrate that coercive discipline created behavioural changes only on the surface. Students complied externally but did not internalize the meaning of worship. This insight becomes important because it demonstrates why the shift toward positive discipline became necessary. Punitive systems had reached a limit in producing authentic transformation.

The new approach to discipline emphasizes understanding, emotional support and dialogue. Teachers explain that when a student is late or inconsistent, the first step is not confrontation. Instead, they begin by listening. One teacher explains that "*We don't just scold them... we sit down with them, talk to them in a nice way.*" and that they often discover that rule-breaking results from "*not familiar*" or personal challenges rather than intentional disobedience. This quote illustrates how positive discipline reframes misbehaviour not as defiance but as a developmental issue. The teacher's choice to listen rather than punish allows students to feel understood, which reshapes their emotional relationship with worship. Students are guided by empathy rather than pressure.

This shift also reshapes how teachers interpret their role. Discipline is no longer seen as enforcement but as accompaniment. Another teacher describes this by saying that their aim is to help students learn responsibility “*not because they are afraid of punishment, but because they are aware that discipline is important*”.

This statement shows a profound conceptual shift. The goal is no longer behavioural control but internal awareness. Teachers therefore become facilitators who guide students to make sense of worship and its value. The emphasis is on enabling students to understand why worship matters rather than inducing compliance.

Positive discipline also redefines how teachers correct students. Caregivers repeatedly emphasize that reprimands must be delivered “*with empathy*” and never through fear-inducing methods. The caregiver explains that if a student is late to prayer, the approach is not to scold but to “*invite them to dialogue so they understand the reasons and promise to improve*”. This quote shows that discipline becomes a teaching moment. Instead of reinforcing hierarchy, the teacher partners with the student in reflection. This increases ownership. Students see correction as support rather than surveillance.

The interviews show that this softer approach does not make discipline weaker but more effective. Teachers observe that after the shift, many students changed their behaviour voluntarily. One teacher describes a student who used to be frequently reprimanded but eventually transformed into a student who “*remind his friends*” and who wakes others up when the call to prayer is heard. This example demonstrates that when students feel guided rather than controlled, they can move beyond self-improvement and begin supporting the spiritual growth of others. This kind of peer-led behaviour seldom emerges in punitive environments because those environments cultivate fear rather than initiative.

Another key insight is that positive discipline gradually changes the atmosphere of worship. Teachers repeatedly describe an observable difference. They explain that now students come to the mosque “*without being asked*” and sometimes sit in the front rows “*before the call to prayer*” because they want to be there, not because they are being monitored. These observations show that positive discipline produces behavioural transformation with depth. Fear-based discipline can achieve punctuality, but it cannot generate eagerness. The new approach cultivates emotional readiness, which is essential for sustained worship commitment.

One of the most powerful reflections appears when a caregiver explains that through positive discipline students learn to experience ibadah not as an external burden but as an inner need. This transition is expressed in the observation that “*Over time, worship becomes a necessity, not a burden.*” and that many students maintain routines even “*after being unsupervised*” because the values have already taken root internally. The essence of this quote is that positive discipline enables worship discipline to continue independent of external control. The internalization of value becomes stronger than the requirement to follow rules.

The interviews also show that this shift required extensive teacher development. Caregivers state that they underwent training on persuasive approaches and understanding student characters. They explain that “*we participated in the student-friendly musyrif training*” which taught them how to guide students through positive interaction and effective communication. This indicates that positive discipline is not intuitive. It is a professional skill that must be learned. Teachers needed support to reorient their mindset away from punishment and toward emotional guidance. This also shows that successful positive discipline depends not only on rules but on the competency of educators.

Structured Habituation Supported by Humanizing Supervision

The interviews show that worship discipline at the pesantren does not emerge spontaneously. It is cultivated through a system of structured habituation that shapes daily life from the moment students wake up until they sleep. This structured environment is not rigid for the sake of control. Instead, it creates predictability, rhythm and continuity so that worship becomes a natural pattern of life rather than an isolated religious duty. The system is strengthened by supervision that avoids intimidation and instead prioritizes compassion, warmth and personal guidance. Together, these two elements provide both the structure and emotional safety that allow students to practice worship consistently and eventually internalize it as a personal habit.

The informants describe in detail how worship routines are intentionally embedded throughout the day. They explain that the pesantren has a comprehensive worship schedule, including qiyamullail, Subuh congregation, morning dhikr, tadarus, Dhuha prayer, afternoon worship and evening religious activities. One teacher explains that the worship schedule “*arranged in detail and aligned with teaching and learning activities*” and that all activities “*monitored by each dormitory supervisor and daily musyrif*”. This quote captures the intentionality of the system. Worship is not added onto daily life. It forms the core structure around which academic and social activities are arranged. This predictable repetition helps students develop habits without relying on moment-to-moment motivation.

The caregivers also emphasize that scheduled worship is not restricted to normal weekdays. They describe that the routine “*not only valid on weekdays, but also on weekends and holidays*” so that worship becomes “*lifestyle, not incidental activities*”. This consistency is crucial. Habits require recurrence without interruption. Weekend breaks or relaxed supervision would weaken the rhythm. Instead, the pesantren maintains a continuous flow so that students never experience worship as an occasional requirement but as the natural cycle of the day.

However, structured routines alone cannot create meaningful discipline. This is why the pesantren combines structure with humanizing supervision. The interviews show repeatedly that supervision is carried out carefully so that it does not create fear or anxiety. One of the caregivers explains that they are “*be very careful so that supervision does not make students feel stressed or overly supervised*” and that supervision must always be “*in a humanistic and communicative manner*”. This quote illustrates a pedagogical philosophy: supervision should guide, not intimidate. When students feel safe rather than judged, they are more willing to follow routines wholeheartedly.

The interviews describe how this humanizing supervision looks in practice. Teachers do not shout wake-up orders. They wake students “*gently, then invite with light advice before praying*” and speak with them personally when motivation decreases. This method positions teachers not as enforcers but as companions. Students interpret these actions as care rather than authority. The emotional experience of being guided kindly allows worship routines to be associated with positive feelings, which strengthens habit formation. Fear-based systems may enforce short-term obedience, but they undermine internal motivation. The caregivers’ approach prevents this outcome.

The positive nature of supervision is also reflected in how teachers respond to latecomers or those who struggle. The caregivers explain that if students break routines, they are approached privately and calmly. They say they avoid direct reprimands and instead ask about root causes and guide students to reflect. They describe that,

“If we find minor violations, we don't immediately issue sanctions or harsh warnings. Instead, we approach them privately in a relaxed and warm atmosphere.”

This creates learning moments rather than disciplinary consequences. Through personal conversation, students are not only corrected but supported emotionally. This reduces resistance and increases willingness to return to the routine.

Structured habituation is strengthened further by peer involvement. The system purposely turns senior or highly disciplined students into role models and monitors who help their peers maintain consistency. One informant explains that the pesantren “*give trust to several students to become monitors or reminders for their friends*” and that these students are taught to remind others “*in a polite manner*” so that they do not replicate harsh methods but reinforce positive discipline values. This peer-based support spreads the culture of discipline horizontally, allowing routines to be strengthened at the student-to-student level outside teacher supervision.

The interviews also reveal that the structured system is paired with consistent motivational guidance. Teachers regularly explain the importance of worship so that students understand the purpose behind the routines. One informant explains that students are always reminded that worship routines are not technical requirements but “*a form of closeness to God*”. With this added meaning, structured routines acquire emotional and spiritual significance. This helps discipline move beyond enforced repetition and become internalized commitment.

The outcomes described by the teachers show the effectiveness of combining structure with humanizing supervision. One teacher notes that previously, students often delayed worship or lacked enthusiasm. But after the structured system and positive guidance were implemented, “*students are now more aware and enthusiastic*” and often arrive “*without being asked, even before the call to prayer*”. These behavioural shifts show that structured routines do not produce mechanical compliance. Instead, they create predictability in behaviour while positive supervision cultivates genuine desire to participate.

Another teacher observes that consistency eventually leads to stability in worship practice. Over time, students keep the routine even when no one is watching. This is described when the teacher explains that worship becomes “*personal habits and needs*” because the values have taken root through daily repetition combined with supportive mentoring. This demonstrates the core function of structured habituation. It provides the behavioural foundation upon which inner meaning and long-term discipline can grow. Structured routines can fail if supervision is harsh. Students may follow schedules externally but resist internally if they feel controlled. The shift to a humanizing approach prevents this resistance. It transforms routines into a shared practice between teachers and students rather than a system imposed upon them. This partnership allows routines to shape identity instead of merely regulating behaviour.

Dialogic, Empathic Interaction as the Core Mechanism That Shapes Students’ Inner Readiness for Discipline

The interviews show that the formation of worship discipline at the pesantren is deeply influenced by the quality of communication between teachers and students. Beyond routines and schedules, the most transformative moments occur in the emotional and dialogic exchanges where teachers listen, guide and respond to students with empathy. This theme highlights how discipline becomes effective not through authority but through relationships. When students feel heard, understood and respected, they become more willing to take responsibility for their worship behaviour. The caregivers describe an environment where communication is gentle, personal and reflective. These conversations are crucial because they help students connect discipline with meaning and help them feel safe enough to internalize what is being taught.

Throughout the interviews, teachers repeatedly emphasize that discipline does not begin with rules but with understanding the student’s internal state. They describe how students who

struggle with worship routines are not confronted but approached with sincere curiosity. One teacher explains this clearly:

"We don't just scold them... we sit down with them, talk to them in a friendly manner, and get to the root of the problem."

This quote illustrates the core of the dialogic approach. Teachers seek to uncover reasons behind behaviour rather than assuming rebellion. They view mistakes as opportunities for conversation rather than punishment. This fosters emotional safety, which is essential for students to accept correction willingly.

Another strong statement reinforcing this philosophy comes from the staff member who explains that they always try to "*approach them personally in a relaxed and warm atmosphere*" whenever irregularities are found, and that guidance is given in a way that helps students feel "*supported and given the opportunity to improve oneself without fear*". The description of the tone of interaction shows that teachers treat disciplinary issues with relational sensitivity rather than institutional strictness. Students are allowed to explain themselves. They are treated with dignity. The teacher's warm presence creates an emotional buffer that transforms correction into encouragement.

The interviews also show that dialogic interaction changes the meaning of discipline for the students. The teachers do not merely tell students what went wrong. They help them understand why worship matters and how their behaviour connects to their identity. One teacher describes that during conversations, they emphasize that discipline is "*not just a technical matter*" but part of "*responsibility as a servant of God*" so that students "*interpreting discipline as a form of devotion*". Through such explanations, discipline is linked with personal purpose. Students see discipline not as a burden but as a path toward becoming sincere worshippers. This deepens their motivation because they understand the meaning behind the rules.

Another significant element reflected across the interviews is that conversations are handled in private, not in public. Teachers intentionally avoid embarrassing students. They avoid harsh tones. They avoid turning disciplinary moments into performances of authority. One informant notes that they talk to students "*in private, not in front of his friends*" because this method is more effective and helps students feel valued and respected. This practice shows that the pesantren sees dignity as integral to discipline. Public confrontation would create shame and resistance. Private dialogue creates space for honesty and transformation.

The interviews also highlight how dialogic interaction supports students who are struggling emotionally or personally. Teachers often discover that a lack of discipline is not caused by laziness but by difficulties adjusting, psychological factors or family situations. One teacher says that they regularly find that students break rules not out of intention but because they "*still adapting, not used to it, or sometimes there are psychological or family factors that influence it*". This insight is crucial because it redefines disciplinary problems as human experiences. When teachers understand the person behind the behaviour, their responses become more compassionate. This compassion strengthens students' trust in the institution.

Dialogic guidance is also used to gradually transform behaviour. Teachers describe how they help students adjust their schedules, develop better habits and recognize their own weaknesses. In one example, a teacher explains that when a student neglects tahajjud, they do not threaten him but instead ask about the difficulty and "*help organize his sleep schedule*" so the student can manage his energy better. This is an example of discipline functioning through problem-solving rather than punishment. The teacher helps the student access the conditions needed for

success. This collaborative approach reinforces to the student that discipline is achievable and that the teacher is invested in their development.

The caregivers also emphasize the long-term effects of empathetic interaction. They observe that once students experience discipline delivered through kindness and dialogue, they begin to take initiative. They start to reflect on their behaviour and correct themselves without being asked. They begin to advise their peers. A teacher mentions a student who “*used to be warned often*” but later became someone who reminds his friends and wakes them up for prayer. This example shows that dialogic guidance not only changes behaviour but also develops leadership and peer influence. Students who were once passive become active contributors to the worship environment.

In addition, teachers describe how spiritual dialogues are incorporated into daily activities beyond formal reprimands. They often use informal moments, such as mealtimes or physical activities, to integrate short reminders that support worship discipline. One teacher explains that they “*take advantage of informal moments to insert light advice*” since these contexts allow students to absorb guidance without feeling pressured. This steady, relational flow of conversation creates a supportive environment that continually shapes students’ attitudes and emotions toward worship.

The critical significance of dialogic interaction emerges especially in relation to students’ inner states. The interviews show that emotional readiness is as important as behavioural routine. Without empathy, routines become mechanical. Without dialogue, rules become empty. But when teachers consistently communicate warmth, meaning and understanding, students begin to adopt discipline from within themselves. They transform from reluctant followers to willing participants.

Positive Reinforcement, Continuous Evaluation, and Communal Support as the System that Sustains Worship Discipline

The interviews reveal that the sustainability of worship discipline in the pesantren is not achieved through modeling, structure or empathy alone. What gives discipline long-term stability is a comprehensive reinforcement system that includes regular evaluation, personal reflection, appreciation, peer support and structured mentoring. These mechanisms ensure that the discipline students develop does not fade with time, does not depend solely on teacher supervision and does not collapse when motivation fluctuates. Instead, discipline becomes anchored in reflection, meaning, accountability and communal encouragement. This theme shows how worship discipline matures from repeated action into a personally rooted commitment reinforced by an ecosystem of support.

The caregivers explain that the pesantren conducts systematic evaluations that involve teachers, musyrif and administrators. These evaluations track students’ worship consistency and identify areas needing support. One interview states clearly that “*Every month we hold a comprehensive evaluation... involving daily administrators, musyrifs, and caregivers*” not only to assess students but also “*improve the approach of the ustaz*”. This quotation shows that evaluation is not used as a punitive measure. It is a reflective tool for both students and staff. Teachers adjust their strategies, and students are guided toward progress. The evaluation process ensures that worship discipline is always monitored, refined and supported.

Weekly evaluations also play a central role. One teacher explains that “*We conduct weekly evaluations to see the development of students’ discipline.*” and then discuss the findings with musyrif to plan follow-up intervention. This consistent monitoring helps teachers identify early signs of decline in discipline, allowing them to intervene before problems deepen. Weekly

feedback also encourages students to remain mindful of their worship habits. Instead of relying on sudden reprimands, the pesantren uses structured reflection to help students understand where they stand and where they need to improve.

To strengthen internal awareness, the pesantren integrates personal reflection tools. Teachers encourage students to keep a daily worship journal and share reflections periodically. This is described when one teacher states that they ask students to “*keep a daily devotional journal and share their reflections periodically*” as part of strengthening consistency and consciousness. This practice requires students not only to perform worship but also to think about why they perform it and how consistently they do so. Reflection transforms routine into self-awareness. It helps students recognize personal patterns, motivations and weaknesses. Over time, it cultivates a sense of responsibility that does not depend on external pressure.

Positive reinforcement is another fundamental component of this theme. Appreciation is frequently used to encourage perseverance and improvement. The interviews mention that the pesantren intends to expand the appreciation system, not only for high-performing students but also for those who show gradual improvement. They explain that the program will,

“expanding the appreciation program, not only for the most diligent students, but also for those who show consistent improvement”

This approach ensures that discipline is not framed as a competition. Instead, it becomes a process where every student, regardless of starting point, has an opportunity to feel acknowledged and encouraged. Positive reinforcement nurtures motivation more effectively than punishment because it affirms effort and helps students associate discipline with emotional reward.

The interviews reveal that peer influence is also intentionally woven into the reinforcement system. Students who have shown strong discipline are entrusted with supporting their peers. One teacher states that “*We gave trust to several students to become monitors or reminders for their friends.*” and that they are taught to remind gently and respectfully so the process becomes nurturing instead of punitive. This peer-based reinforcement has a powerful effect because adolescents tend to respond strongly to the influence of their classmates. When disciplined behaviour becomes a peer norm, students feel naturally encouraged to join, reducing resistance and increasing voluntary participation.

The interviews also highlight how peer support helps normalize discipline and create a communal identity centered on worship. A teacher describes how some students who previously struggled eventually become motivators for others. He recounts the case of a student who once required frequent reminders but later became someone who wakes others for prayer and reminds friends to prepare for worship. This transformation illustrates the deep impact of a communal support system. Students internalize discipline not only for themselves but also as a responsibility to their peers. When discipline becomes communal, it gains emotional weight and social meaning, making it more enduring.

Another insight from the interviews is that reinforcement is not only vertical (from teacher to student) but also horizontal (among students) and environmental (through routine and institutional culture). Teachers observe that students begin reminding each other naturally, not because they are assigned to but because discipline has become a relational expectation. The interviews show that the environment gradually shifts into a spiritually vibrant atmosphere where students feel comfortable encouraging one another. Over time, worship discipline becomes embedded in the social fabric of the pesantren, strengthening individual commitment through collective identity.

The teachers also emphasize that reinforcement is combined with meaningful explanations so that students understand why discipline matters. They integrate short spiritual teachings into daily activities so that worship is connected to value and purpose. One teacher explains that they often remind students that worship routines are “*not just a mandatory routine*” but moments that bring them closer to God, and that this explanation deepens commitment beyond external instruction. When reinforcement is connected to meaning, discipline becomes not only behaviourally consistent but spiritually grounded.

The interview data also show that reinforcement helps bridge the gap between early compliance and later internal motivation. As students develop habits, teachers observe that worship eventually becomes “*personal habits and needs*” rather than an obligation sustained by monitoring. This indicates the success of the reinforcement system. Students maintain worship because they want to, not because they are being evaluated. Positive reinforcement and reflection guide students toward autonomy, which is the final stage of discipline formation.

Integrative Reflections on the Transformative Role of Positive Discipline in Worship Formation

The findings of this study reveal that positive discipline becomes transformative within the pesantren precisely because it reshapes the relational, emotional, and spiritual fabric of daily life. When students encounter worship not as an obligation to be obeyed but as a meaningful practice cultivated through modeling, empathetic dialogue, and rhythmic habituation, their engagement shifts from external compliance toward internal ownership. This transformation aligns with the broader understanding in educational psychology that authentic behavior change stems from supportive relationships rather than coercive control. Rogers’ humanistic emphasis on empathy and emotional presence (1983), Vygotsky’s sociocultural notion of learning through guided participation (1978), and Bandura’s explanation of observational learning (1977) all converge to suggest that students internalize values when they see them authentically embodied in those they trust. Studies by Harmi (2022), Sutarto and Sari (2020), and Pratama et al. (n.d.) echo this pattern within Islamic educational contexts, showing that spiritual sincerity and teacher example exert a deeper moral influence than rules alone. Together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives illuminate why the positive discipline approach in the pesantren facilitated a more profound engagement with worship.

The central role of modeling in shaping students’ Islamic identity is further reinforced by research across diverse Islamic educational settings. Classical Islamic scholarship, particularly al-Ghazali (1991), emphasizes that the heart is shaped through seeing rather than merely hearing. Students imitate the tranquility, devotion, and consistency of their teachers, not because they are ordered to but because they witness the beauty of the practice. Contemporary studies reaffirm this principle. Frimayanti (2017), Purnamasari (2017), and Firmansyah (2019) argue that religious formation requires persuasive moral presence rather than authoritarian enforcement. This resonates powerfully with the experience of students at Madinatul Ulum Pamenang, who began to adopt worship behavior more consistently after experiencing role models who prayed with serenity, approached rituals with reverence, and encouraged reflection rather than reprimand. As Cendana & Suryana (2021) and Ridwanuloh & Wulandari (2022) observe, moral character becomes stable when it is demonstrated in emotionally meaningful contexts, especially in close-knit communities such as pesantren where students’ daily lives are inseparable from their teachers’ example. The present study reveals that modeling functions not merely as a visual guide but as a spiritual anchor that slowly nurtures students’ inner readiness for devotion.

The transition from punitive control to positive discipline within the pesantren mirrors shifts occurring throughout Indonesian educational environments. Institutions increasingly recognize the ethical and pedagogical limitations of authoritarian discipline, which may secure temporary compliance but cannot cultivate intrinsic motivation. Research by Agustiningrum et al. (2023), Asbari et al. (2024), Ardiantoro et al. (2024), and Rahayuningsih et al. (2024) shows that positive discipline builds trust, encourages student agency, and reduces resistance to behavioral expectations. These findings parallel the transformation observed at Madinatul Ulum Pamenang, where students became more responsive to worship guidance when teachers adopted a dialogic stance emphasizing compassion, reflection, and partnership. Studies focusing on leadership and organizational influence, including Amri et al. (2024), Solichah and Abidin (2023), and Putikadyanto et al. (2024), also highlight that institutional commitment to humane practices enhances teacher consistency and strengthens school culture. When school leaders model respect and emotional understanding, the ethos of the institution gradually shifts, enabling new forms of relational engagement between teachers and students. This broader shift underscores that positive discipline is not a superficial strategy but a new way of imagining authority in education.

The findings also show that empathetic communication constitutes a central mechanism through which positive discipline becomes internalized by students. Rather than interpreting lateness, inattentiveness, or inconsistency as defiance, teachers sought to understand students' emotional and developmental struggles (Shala, 2021; Bowler, 2022; Koh, 2025). This approach resonates with theories of intrinsic motivation articulated by Deci and Ryan (1985), which explain that autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster deep engagement in meaningful practices. When educators listen rather than reprimand, students perceive discipline not as surveillance but as guidance. Research by Nurzakiah et al. (2024), Saputra (2023), and Renaldi and Wiza (2022) supports this finding, showing that students respond positively when teachers adopt restorative, relational forms of correction. Within Islamic educational settings, such empathetic interaction aligns with prophetic models of nurturing character gently, a point emphasized by Purnamasari (2017), Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1991), and Islamic counseling scholars like Elawati et al. (2023). The experiences of the students in this study reflect these theoretical insights, as they reported a greater willingness to engage with worship after encountering teachers who acknowledged their struggles and supported them without judgment.

Another significant finding concerns the role of structured habituation in strengthening worship practices. The integration of prayer routines, Qur'anic recitation, and spiritual mentoring into daily rhythms reflects the developmental principle that habits emerge through consistent practice, as noted by Hurlock (1990; 1991). The pesantren's consistent structure created predictable patterns that helped students transition from extrinsic reminders to intrinsic motivation. Studies by Mukni'ah (2019), Sugiarti et al. (2021) confirm that structured environments facilitate the internalization of moral behavior when paired with supportive guidance. Research within Islamic schooling contexts, such as Hana et al. (2024) and Nurzakiah et al. (2024), similarly notes that scheduled religious activities cultivate perseverance and spiritual discipline when accompanied by relational encouragement. The findings of this study extend this literature by showing that structured routines alone are insufficient. They become transformative only when joined with the warmth, presence, and sincerity of mentors who embody the worship practices they teach.

The importance of peer influence also emerged strongly in this study, complementing existing research on communal learning in Islamic educational settings. Students who had previously struggled with worship routines began to motivate others after experiencing positive guidance

themselves. This recursive pattern echoes Bandura's (1977) recognition that peers serve as powerful models once behaviors become internalized. Research by Yuniar et al. (2024) and Arumda et al. (2024) shows that class-based agreements and peer reminders reinforce discipline more effectively when trust and mutual respect are present. Similar findings in studies by Renaldi & Wiza (2022) and Sugiarti et al. (2021) highlight how communal cultures shape moral behavior through shared expectations and interpersonal accountability. In the pesantren studied, peer support became a spontaneous expression of emerging spiritual maturity rather than a formal program, indicating that positive discipline can create fertile conditions for the organic development of student leadership.

These findings and the broader literature suggest that positive discipline operates most effectively when it becomes the moral and relational atmosphere of the educational environment rather than a behavioral management technique. The experience at Madinatul Ulum Pamenang shows that when discipline is reframed as a form of caring engagement, students gradually move from performing worship as a task toward embracing it as part of their identity. Worship becomes an expression of personal meaning shaped by the harmony of modeling, structure, empathy, and shared spiritual purpose. Studies across Islamic education, general pedagogy, developmental psychology, and character education all point toward the same conclusion: genuine transformation occurs when students are supported in becoming responsible moral actors rather than controlled into behaving correctly. The findings therefore demonstrate that positive discipline offers a powerful framework for cultivating enduring worship practices, grounding students not only in religious obedience but in spiritual consciousness, relational trust, and personal devotion.

Conclusion

Positive discipline at the Madinatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School is implemented through seven main approaches exemplary behavior, positive habits, positive reinforcement, responsibility, persuasive dialogue, spiritual guidance, and educational supervision. This holistic approach fosters awareness, responsibility, and discipline within students without pressure or punishment. As a result, students are not only consistent in their worship but also develop into individuals with good morals, independence, emotional maturity, and spiritual strength.

The positive discipline model at the Madinatul Ulum Islamic Boarding School is implemented systematically and continuously, emphasizing character development, spiritual awareness, and humanitarian values. This development is carried out through socialization, instructor training, habituation of worship, role modeling, emotional engagement, and spiritual reflection. Worship activities such as congregational prayer, Dhuha prayer, tadarus (recitation of the Koran), voluntary fasting, religious sermons, and spiritual mentoring are conducted using a persuasive and educational approach. The primary strategy is to foster students' internal motivation, supported by various methods such as reflective dialogue, reward systems, halaqah (religious discussion), and self-reflection (muhasabah). This process is reinforced by evaluation and deliberation, so that students develop into individuals who are conscious, independent, responsible, and disciplined in their worship, driven by inner motivation. Thus, positive discipline serves as a strategic foundation for comprehensive and sustainable Islamic character education.

The implementation of positive discipline in Islamic boarding schools has a significant impact on the gradual and sustainable development of students' religious discipline. Students no longer worship out of mere obligation, but rather out of spiritual awareness. Through role models, persuasive dialogue, positive reinforcement, the assignment of responsibilities, and

spiritual guidance, students experience a transformation from simply obeying rules to becoming independent, religious, and responsible individuals. Structured worship schedules, halaqah (Islamic group gatherings), and mentoring strengthen emotional and spiritual engagement, so that worship becomes part of the students' character. While individual outcomes vary, there is a general increase in discipline, devotion, and independence. Thus, positive discipline has proven effective in fostering a holistic Islamic character, encompassing responsibility, caring, empathy, and deep spiritual awareness.

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