

## Discipline in the Classroom

NOTE: Refer to your church's policy on discipline in the classroom. Whatever it says there, is what you need to do. If you have questions about what you can and cannot do in class, as far as correcting children or encouraging good behavior, you should ask your immediate Supervisor.

In general any discipline (or correction) that you do in class has to be appropriate and it has to make sense to the kids, or else they will consider you unfair, and then you've lost them. For example: It's not fair to punish the whole class just because one child is misbehaving. Say that a 12 year old is misbehaving during a game or activity. Ask that child to sit out for the rest of that game or activity. The child can try again later.

You really do have to be able to teach in your classroom. But, sometimes the behavior of a single child can become so disruptive that you can't have class at all. (*Been there, done that.*)

My number one rule is: **Don't get mad, get help!**

**Add more adults to your classroom.** If certain children are repeatedly disruptive, add adults assigned specifically to them. More serious problems may require more serious interventions.

Remember that the time you have in Sunday School (usually less than 1 hour a week) may limit your ability to significantly impact the behavior of any child.

### Being Pro-Active (Preventing Bad Behavior... as best you can!)

It's important to be energetic and excited about your classes and what you are teaching. This helps get students interested and involved. Interested and involved students are MUCH LESS likely to create discipline problems, than if they are bored and disinterested.

You may have to try a few new things. Be innovative about your teaching. If something isn't working in class, you can even try to change something on the spot. Some ideas include:

- Moving around in the classroom
- Starting a new activity or game
- Involving students in telling (or acting out) the story
  - Drag some "volunteers" up from the group to help you
- Asking a few silly questions and awarding thousands of "points" to the "team" that gets them right.
- Cut your losses and move on to the next thing you had planned

Remember that children have limited attention spans. Limit the time spent on any one activity.

## Replacing Fear with Trust

Sometimes students do not want to participate in class because they are afraid: Afraid of looking bad in front of their friends; or of being ridiculed; or of being picked on by others. Sometimes they are even afraid of being picked on by the teacher! (*We can't have that!*)

Fear can keep students from sharing their ideas in class, or even from asking questions. Fear can make it almost impossible for students to learn, or to do much of anything else, in class. Since they are too afraid to share and to learn, these students often get bored and are indifferent in class. This can lead to poor classroom behavior, including things like: repeatedly changing the subject, trying to take over the conversations, ignoring what is going on in class, being disrespectful, causing problems with other students, and generally disrupting the class.

You don't want any of this. And it can happen, believe it or not, whether you are working with children, teens, or even... wait for it... adults! (*That's right... I've seen it happen.*)

To deal with this problem, it is necessary to start by discussing it and getting it out in the open. Talk about how in class you must be able to trust each other or nothing good will come of it. Say that you are going to trust the students and that you want them to trust you (and each other.)

Explain that you will try to be worthy of their trust. You will not tease them or laugh at them if they don't understand something. You also do not want anyone in class to pick on others if they don't know an answer, or if they have a question. If it seems like this might still be a problem, explain that NO ONE wants to be laughed at, when they ask a question or don't know an answer. (Remember the Golden Rule: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*)

In addition, it is important that if someone shares a confidence in the class (or in a small group) the confidence generally should not be repeated outside of class.

Students, especially children, want to be worthy of the trust and respect that you offer them. (It is an important thing to them.) Explain that, if they do something to lose your trust, things will be different after that. Trust, when lost, takes a long time to regain. However, students should be allowed a chance to earn your trust again. Explain that if they do something to break your trust, your relationship will still be ok, but it will not be as good as it could have been, if it hadn't been broken in the first place

Our classrooms should be nice, safe places. Make every effort to encourage trust and respect in your classroom. Do not allow bad behavior, but address it as you go, encouraging people to return to the subject at hand, to listen to others as they speak, and not to mock or tease others.

Eventually the students themselves will get the idea and encourage their peers to go along with the plan of replacing fear with trust. Your room will become a virtual oasis, where students feel safe. *Recommended Resource: "Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire," © Rafe Esquith, 2007.*

## Dealing with (very) Poorly Disciplined Students

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- First of All... Remember... They aren't your kids!
  - Which means that you can't necessarily discipline them the way you would, if they *were* your kids ☺
- Next... Talk with your supervisors
  - Send this up the line... Don't even think about trying to handle this problem alone
- If YOU are the supervisor
  - Pray
  - Talk with staff / pastor as necessary (again you may want to send this up the line)
  - Finally... talk with parents
- Options with Parents:
  - Unfortunately, poorly behaved kids often have challenging or difficult parents.
  - The families are often dysfunctional (They do not function or "work" well.)
  - Often it is a good idea just to invite a parent to attend class with their child
    - However, sometimes this can cause even more problems!
- Other Options:
  - Alternatively, consider removing the child from class for a certain period of time (a week or two, minimum – depending on the behavior that has occurred)
  - After the time period is ended, allow the child back in class ONLY with a parent (or another supervising adult) present, for a set period of weeks or months
    - Try to pair the child with a positive adult role model
  - Make every effort to help the child improve his/her behavior in a positive way
    - Verbally recognize efforts at appropriate behavior
    - Encourage participation in activities that the child finds interesting
    - Help provide peer mentoring, if possible
  - When the child is more familiar and comfortable with his/her surroundings AND behavior has improved, try having the child in class without the supervising adult
  - REPEAT this process as necessary
  - If the child stops coming to class, every effort should be made to continue to reach out to the child and the family; often by staff or other church leaders

***Again, these are just suggestions. Please follow the Official Policy and Procedures of your church.***

## An EXTRA SPECIAL NOTE from Sharon:

Sometimes the problem in the classroom isn't the kids... Sometimes the problem is YOU! ☺

Don't feel bad. It can happen to any of us. Sometimes you're working with the wrong age group. Sometimes you don't have enough help in class. Sometimes you've just been at it for too long. Whatever the problem, it's important to figure it out, and to know when to make a change.

Take me, for instance: I now know that I prefer working with younger children. I am IN AWE of teachers, who work well with children 12-18. (I admire their patience, their energy, and their light-hearted attitudes.) But, over time, I have come to realize that I cannot do what they do.

My answer to this... I only work in classrooms with younger children. I do other things to help out with older groups, but I don't volunteer to help with classes or activities, or go on any field trips or outings with them. And now, because of that, things go along very nicely.

It's important to know when things aren't working out for you. Some signs of distress are:

- Lots of behavioral problems in class
- You find yourself "yelling" or "losing your cool" in class
- Kids don't seem to be having fun in class
- Kids stop coming to class or won't bring their friends
- Complaints from kids (and/or their parents)
- Complaints, or concerns, voiced by other teachers or staff
- Disciplinary action taken by supervisors or staff members

Recognize these warning signs. Don't let things get worse. Don't let bad things happen.

- Make some changes! Try one or more of the following:
  - Talk to someone you trust about the problems (pastor/ staff/ another teacher)
  - Get some extra help in your classroom
  - Let someone else teach a while, and you help them
  - Take a break for a while (vacation, sabbatical, or just a few weeks away)
  - Switch classrooms, or work with a different age group altogether
  - If you are having personal problems, get help (seek counseling)
  - Consider serving in another area at church, instead of teaching, for a while
  - Resign or Retire. *(All journeys end! Thank God for the opportunity to serve!)*

I am sure that none of this applies to you. You are probably the best teacher ever. However, anyone (*no matter how wonderful a teacher they are*) can have problems. And whatever those problems are, they deserve appropriate attention! If you notice these signs of distress, either in yourself or in someone else around you, TALK to someone. *God bless you. And thank you for your faithful service to God and to His Kingdom!*

- Sharon