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## Church School Behavior

Whether you call it Sunday school or Christian formation or education hour, if you have a group of children, you will have classroom management issues. Don't set yourself up for failure, or benevolent dictatorship! Start the year with the right attitude and set your class up to work collectively towards Jesus' mandate to love our neighbors as ourselves.

## Set Expectations

Work with your group to craft a list of expectations in advance or as part of the first class gathering. Like most people, kids are more likely to follow what they know and what they had a voice in creating. For younger children, or when time is short, you might simply go over a pre-made list together. Keep it to a few broad concepts that are *always stated positively rather than negatively*. i.e. “Treat others with kindness and respect” rather than “Don't interrupt when someone else is talking.”

Create a poster together of the expectations and have everyone sign it. Refer to it during class time. Kids tend to be better at self-regulating (and redirecting each other) if they know what is expected. By establishing group expectations, you remove one source of power play between teacher and child. Point to your poster and say, “What you are doing doesn't following our classroom rules. We all need you to follow the rules we agreed on.” The message here is that it is *their* behavior that is causing the negative outcome, not your whim as a capricious teacher.

## Create Structure

Establish a schedule and some form of structure for your class. As a liturgical church at worship, we know that we will follow a certain set of movements, we will be expected to listen, respond, kneel, and stand, and we will know when they happen. Not only do people behave better when they know what to expect, we model good worship practices when we set a basic outline of how our time will be spent together. If you are using a purchased curriculum, you will already be doing some sort of basic liturgical schedule. Make it fit your

time allotment, but try not to deviate from it too much.

Beginnings and endings are particularly important. Take a moment to center everyone's attention (which can be hard with latecomers trickling in). In our class, we light candles - which can be a prayerful experience and it's also a tactile experience, which is important for kids.

During any self-directed activity, allow for the fact that children work at different paces. Have something else on hand for those who are finished, so that they don't distract those who are still working.

Allow for time at the end for something fun they anticipate, "Let's focus on our discussion so that we have time to draw on the chalkboard at the end of class."

Always, always close with prayer! This is how we leave worship, this is how we should leave classroom time, too. Many curricula include closing prayers, or you or your students can choose an appropriate one from the Book of Common Prayer.

## Use Humor

Find joy in responding to intentional provocation in unexpected and humorous ways. If you absolutely can't ignore, here are some suggestions:

- For the kid who gives a ridiculous answer on purpose, *find a way to make that answer valid*. "Who is your hero?" "My dog." "Wow - that's great! Dogs can be heroes, like search & rescue dogs. What a great example!" And then move on to someone else. Don't allow the provoker to hijack the whole class.
- For the eye-rolling middle schooler, *imitation is better than aggravation*. "OOOH! That's was an EXCELLENT eye-roll. Let's all roll our eyes at each other!" It looks really dumb when everybody does it.
- For the did-not-did-so arguers. Have them hold hands and sing their grievances to one another. Opera style. "You kept sitting in my seaaaaaat....." Feel free to provide a chorus.

## Addressing Misbehavior

When deflection using distraction and/or humor and referring to group norms is not enough, you will need to have a one-on-one conversation and ask, "What are we going to do about

this?" It's important that it's not you as the adult saying "I am punishing you" but rather saying to the child, "You are breaking our classroom contract. How are you going to change your behavior? What can I do to help you? What are the consequences going to be?" Lay out a timeline for the behavior to change. If they trip up, remind them of your conversation: "Remember, we agreed that if you talked while someone else was talking, that you would have to choose another seat. So please go and find another seat now."

During your conversation, work to find a way to correct the behavior but make clear that if they continue to break the class contract, their parents will be included in the discussion. Usually that is enough, but you should be prepared to talk with the parents.

When you do talk with parents, ask the child to begin by saying "Can you please tell your parents what has been going on in our classroom and why I asked them to join us in this conversation?" Kids usually know exactly what they've been doing and tend to be pretty honest about it. By having the child explain their transgression, it reduces the likelihood that the parents will accuse you of maligning their child. Paraphrase what the child has said, and detail how you have worked to correct the situation. Then ask for the parents' suggestions.

Always state the expectation as a *when not an if*. "WHEN Joe uses kind words, then he can participate in classroom discussions" not "IF Joe uses kind words..." It's less confrontational and less of an ultimatum.

## Keep a Healthy Perspective

It may be a classroom, but it's not school. Remember that Christians are not to "conform to this world" (Romans 12:2). Our learning environments should be different than Monday through Friday. Recall that "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6). As leaders and teachers we should be making every attempt to be faithful to being made in God's image.

Finally, remember that sometimes the best learning occurs when things go utterly off-script. Stay open. Consider that sometimes it might not be a lack of classroom management, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

*Lisa Brown recently accepted a position as the Director of Digital Ministry with [Membership Vision](#). Building on her work in Children's Ministry and Communications at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Pittsburgh, PA, she helps churches connect to people and to God in the digital space. An active member of Forma and Girl Scout leader, Lisa is passionate about enriching the spiritual lives of people. Her book "The Best Do-It-Yourself VBS Workbook Ever" was published in 2017.*