

Classroom Management 101



Why are rules important?

After being a Sunday School teacher for a while, I finally realized something very important: children in Sunday School need guidelines and rules to follow, just as they do at home and school. Even though I knew how important boundaries were for my students during the week, I neglected to give my Sunday School class this same kind of structure. But kids need structure... and so do adults! Everyone likes to know what to expect – and just like a parent who doesn't set firm, consistent rules and can become overwhelmed, so can a Sunday School teacher. If you ever doubt this, just check out the chaos in some classrooms by mid-November! ☺

Setting appropriate boundaries doesn't make us unreasonable "ogres"... we are simply being the adults who have a responsibility to make Sunday School the best experience it can be for everyone. You have an equal responsibility for every child in your class. You are there to teach and you can't spend all your time and energy dealing only with problems that may arise. If we set clear rules at the beginning of the year, stay consistent with reinforcement, and keep children busy with fun learning activities, things should run pretty smoothly. The most important thing to remember is that we are the adults, so it's our responsibility to provide the framework where some incredibly important things can happen.

Children have an innate ability to be in relationship with God, but our role is to help create safe, holy space where children can nurture this special relationship and learn more about God and God's people. It is important to maintain classrooms where there is at least a little space for quiet... for the Holy Spirit to move... for magical, wonderful things to happen – even amidst the chaos of laughter and glitter and glue. If your classroom is a place where the adults are frazzled or frustrated and rambunctious children are seemingly in charge, it may be difficult to recognize and experience the wonder of authentic spiritual formation.

Setting Guidelines and Rules

The best time to set guidelines is at the very beginning of the year. (However, if you realize mid-year that things aren't working, you can always implement new rules at anytime by discussing them with your class.) It is important to go over these rules for several weeks in a row. I also suggest making copies of the rules to send home to parents and making a poster for your room that you can easily refer to if someone forgets a rule.

As much as possible, the rules should be worded in a positive way, such as "We listen when others are talking" instead of "Don't talk when others are talking." Here are some examples for younger and older classes:

For Younger Students (K-3)

We love to be in God's house, so...

- We listen while others are talking.
- We follow directions given by adults.
- We keep our hands and feet to ourselves.
- We keep our classroom neat and clean.

For Older Students (4th Grade and above)

We Respect...

- God – We worship seriously and we are careful with God's words
- Classmates – We are kind and we accept others' ideas
- Teachers – We listen quietly and follow directions
- Environment – We take care of our classroom and our church
- Ourselves – We remember we are special and one of a kind

When presenting guidelines to the class, be sure to discuss each rule with the group. Let the children explain what they think each rule means and let them come up with examples of following and not following the rules. With older classes, you might even let them help come up with the list of rules, so they feel some shared responsibility to help the group abide by the covenant they have made together.

Quiet Signal

Children have a tendency to get loud when they are enjoying themselves. You can often control some of this by the way you use your voice. Adopt a lower, quieter tone to reduce some of the chaos but it is often a good idea for each class to have a “quiet signal” decided at the beginning of the year. When you give the signal, the class knows to freeze and listen, which alleviates you having to shout “BE QUIET!” Practice the signal when you go over the rules, allowing them the fun of getting noisy, but ask them to watch carefully and get quiet at the signal.

Here are some examples – you can judge which is appropriate for the age you teach.

- Turn the classroom lights off. A reduction in light often can have a calming effect on children. (Note: Many educators now caution against the older practice of flipping lights on and off several times since this can further agitate some students and there is even a slight chance of triggering epileptic seizures.)
- Say, “One, two, three... Look at me” and put your finger over your lips.
- Silently put one finger over your lips and the other hand in the air. As each child sees you do this, they do it too... until the whole class is silent.
- Clap a rhythm with an answering rhythm back by the class. (This doesn’t work as well with very noisy situations.)

Positive Reinforcement

Children respond amazingly well to simple verbal praise. Often the rest of the class will scramble to attention when the teacher says, “I like the way John is standing straight and tall in line.” Then start naming others who are following directions, “Sue is doing a great job, so is Paul... and Ann and Rob...” Children love to hear their names said aloud. The children who weren’t doing as they were told will feel the social pressure and will be more likely to straighten up, so you won’t have to point out misbehavior.



Some teachers give prizes for good behavior. If you do this, keep it simple and small. A sticker or ink stamp on the hand should be special enough. They should be behaving because it is the right thing to do, not just to get a prize. If you are trying to improve behavior and the simple things aren’t working well enough, you may want to try a point system. Good behavior earns points and at the end of the designated time period, they can choose a prize out of a treasure box filled with small trinkets like pencils, erasers, stickers, small party favor games, etc. However, I wouldn’t start off the year with this technique because it can get complicated to keep up with. Also, children who are not able to come every week may be penalized because they don’t have enough points.

When All Else Fails

By using a consistent set of rules, a quiet signal, and positive verbal praise, you can usually establish a well-run classroom. However, there are some children who may present special challenges.

Remember that often the child who misbehaves the most is the same one who most needs a welcoming Christian community to accept them and lovingly enforce appropriate boundaries, so they can learn to be a more productive member of a group. Do your best to deal with these children quietly and calmly. Take them aside or speak softly into their ear so that their misbehavior does not become the class focus and therefore give them more attention. Consistently tell them they are loved and that you believe in them and you know they can make better choices.

If a student continues to misbehave, sometimes a designated Quiet Area is a good option, but be very careful that it is not created as a punitive “time out” area. Create a soft, cozy place called the “Thinking Spot” or some such name where children can go to calm themselves down and regroup before rejoining the class activity. At the beginning of the year, explain the spot to the entire class and tell them if they are having a particularly difficult time, they are always welcome to visit the Thinking Spot.

If you have a child who is consistently distracting, quietly and gently invite them to take a few moments in the thinking spot to regroup. If you have more than one adult in the classroom, ask that adult to check in with the student after a few minutes, listen to what the child is upset about and then get him or her re-engaged in the class activity.

If disruptive behavior continues, make it clear that you will talk to their parents when they come to pick the child up. Take notes if you need to, but explain the behavior to the parent in a clear, calm way: *“John had a hard time today. He could not keep his hands to himself and had to sit out from our activities for a while.”* Make sure that you always end on a positive note, such as *“I know he’ll do a better job next week and we can’t wait to have him back.”*

Finally, remember you are not alone. Talk with other teachers or your Christian Education staff person (DRE) or clergy person. Establish a clear universal method for dealing with behavior problems so that everyone knows the progression. For example,

- 1st time – invite child to spend a few minutes in the Thinking Spot
- 2nd time – talk to child about their behavior after class, not in front of their peers
- 3rd time – talk to parents about possible solutions; get DRE or other staff involved
- 4th time – DRE talks to parents to decide on further action – maybe parent attends class with child for a short period of time; clergy are contacted if necessary

Have a Great Year!



It is easy to feel intimidated by a noisy group of children and we sometimes worry about seeming mean or “un-cool”. Remember that the most important thing we can do as teachers is to create an accepting, loving environment for children to come to on Sunday mornings so that they can learn more about God and foster their relationship with God. Allowing a few children to monopolize the classroom could mean that some quieter, shyer children feel unsettled or even unsafe. Remember that our responsibility is to ALL our students, not just the ones who need the most attention.

Children need Christian community, but they also need boundaries and adults who can act like adults. Once you bond with your group and let them know how much you care about them, you’ll be amazed at how wonderfully they can respond. They will love you and you’ll be so glad you decided to embark on this wonderful adventure as a Sunday School teacher! Enjoy your year!

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