

# Discipline

There is a security for students when rules are established. Be up-front with them about your expectations so they will know what they can and cannot do. Establish classroom rules and then stick with the rules.

Also, always be specific with kids when dealing with discipline issues. If a student has misbehaved, get on their level, eye-to-eye, and get the student to look you in the eyes. Explain what they did and why it was wrong. Tell them you love them and that you want them to be in your class, but to do that, they have to keep the rules. Also, it is always best to have conversations like this away from the eyes of their peers.

It is also very important to take care of discipline issues when they arise. Don't let a child get into a pattern of condoned or ignored misbehavior. If so, it will take longer to help them understand where the line is drawn for unacceptable behavior. Be clear and consistent from the beginning.

And never make empty "threats." Only say it if you mean it. In other words, if you say, "This is your last warning. If you do that again, I'm sending you to [the name of the person in charge]." The next time they do it again, without hesitation, you must be good to your word. If you are not, by your actions, you have already expressed to every child in the room that they can't depend on your words to tell them when you mean what you say and when you don't. Do you see how this greatly diminishes their personal security and obscures the lines of consistency? It also casts doubt on everything else that you say.

Being true to your word also means that you must never threaten something with which you aren't willing or don't have the authority to follow-through. For example, a sponsor at a camp should never say, "If you do that again, we're going to send you home," because as a sponsor you don't have the authority to say this. Only the children's minister or the person in charge should make this decision. Likewise, the person in charge of your program should be the only person to contact a child's parents in the event of a discipline situation. In part, this is a safeguard for the teachers, because they will never have to "take the heat" for correcting a child, but it also helps to keep the discipline fair and consistent for all. If ten different people are all disciplining to different degrees, it is impossible for two children not to do the same thing but to have different consequences.

Furthermore, as a teacher, you should never physically restrain or raise your voice to a child. If you feel you are coming to the "breaking point" and are red in the face and regretting volunteering or dreading coming to church because "that child" might be there, then you are not putting correct discipline procedures in place early enough. A child who is disruptive should get one warning and then be removed from the class to speak with the leader or children's minister.

And in the event of severe misbehavior (obscene gestures, cussing, the intentional harm of others, etc.), the child should be removed immediately without a warning. Removing a child from class does not mean that he can't return later, but that's a decision for your children's minister or program leader to make. *(NOTE: This process is based on the suggested discipline procedure below. For this reason, you should be familiar with your church's discipline policy and follow the guidelines that they have established.)*

If you have child that makes your heart sink because you know the day is going to be a struggle because he is there, then you need to do the exact opposite of what your natural tendency probably is. Look for him. Try to see him before he sees you. Then immediately greet him and give him a high five. Take a specific interest in him. Give him attention before you cries out for it. Also, look for a way to give him responsibility in your class, something that he can begin doing the moment he comes into class. Deepen your relationship with that child. Don't look at his misbehavior as a discipline" problem" but as an opportunity for you to specifically meet his emotional and spiritual needs. What an honor to impact just one life in this way! Imagine the difference it can make in a life when a child, who might not experience loving discipline or behavior guidelines at home, learns the life-lesson, as a child, that wrong actions carry consequences. Can you imagine how much hurt and pain he will avoid because he learned from you that love disciplines and that love is fair and consistent and also just—just like God.

Finally, if your church doesn't have set discipline guidelines, a sample pattern is below:

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## Sample Discipline Procedure

*Below is an example of an effective children's ministry discipline procedure for students who misbehave or who are continually disrupting.*

Step 1—The teacher talks one-on-one with the student who is creating disruptions. He is given one warning and told the next time he will be sent to the person in charge.

A sample conversation might go as follows: "Tom, do you know why I brought you out of class into the hallway? There's something we need to discuss. What you are doing in class is disrupting and it's not fair to the others that they can't learn or enjoy fun activities because you are misbehaving. Tom, I love you and I want you to be in class but we have rules and to be in our class you have to follow those rules. Do you understand? This is your warning. I am going to give you one more chance to obey, but next time you will be taken to [name of the person in charge]."

Step 2—If the child continues disrupting, he should be escorted to the person in charge. The teacher, apart from the hearing of the child, should tell the leader what has happened and what he or she has done. Then the person in charge should have a one-on-one talk with the child.

A sample conversation might go as follows: "Tom, I love you and I want you to be a part of the fun things happening here, but we have rules. You earn the right to be in class by following those rules. Your teacher has told me how you have been behaving, but I know how good you can be and I believe that you can do better than what you have shown your teachers today. So, I'm going to give you a choice: Either you can go back into class and do everything that your teachers ask you to do and obey the way I know you can, or you can sit here in this chair. You will not participate in any activities; you will not have snacks; you will do nothing but sit here until your parents arrive and then we will have a talk with them about what happened in class. So, what's your choice?" If they choose to go back to class, which 95% of kids do, tell them, "When we get to your class, I am going to tell your teachers that if you do anything wrong—anything at all that disrupts your class, that they are immediately to bring you back to me. If that happens, then you will stay here. You will not be allowed to go back into class for the rest of the day and we will discuss the matter with your parents when they come to pick you up."

Step 3—The child returns to class with the understanding that he will be brought back for the remainder of the time and you will discuss the situation with his parents if he does anything else that disrupts.

This pattern, if followed, is very effective, and if there are continual issues, it will give you, as the children's minister or program leader, the opportunity to work with the child one-on-one and with his parents concerning his behavior. However, the key here is that for this pattern to work, it must be followed. If your teachers don't follow-through by warning children correctly and sending them to you when they should, instead of making empty threats or even ignoring situations, or if there is inconsistency between teachers, it will greatly diminish your overall effectiveness not only to have a smooth-running program, but also to affect these children for life in knowing right and wrong.