

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



**SESSION 16**

Discipline and Classroom Management

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# Discipline and Classroom Management

## SESSION OVERVIEW

### Student Expectations

### Defining and Exercising Discipline

### Establishing an Environment for Success

### Application

### Exam

### Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand some reasons children misbehave.
- suggest interventions for particular misbehaviors.
- identify some strategies for developing an environment that promotes self-discipline.

## INTRODUCTION

Classroom discipline remains one of the most difficult problems for many children's leaders and volunteers. Often, disciplinary problems begin in the local classroom or immediate ministry setting. Sometimes, these problems extend throughout a program. Children's leaders need to understand the motivation behind misbehaving children as well as find strategies to manage classes so that other children can still benefit from the ministry, including those who misbehave. This lesson explores the reasons for poor behavior, interventions, and creating an environment that promotes self-discipline in children.

## STUDENT EXPECTATIONS



### NOTES

Throughout this course, we have been encouraged to have a planned approach to children's ministry. Our vision statement provides a rationale for our ministry; we have set goals for programs, events, and developed a strategic plan. We have worked to develop leaders, engage students, and assess curriculum. Yet, for all of our efforts, children who enter our ministry may not share our vision statement, goals, and strategy. Why do children misbehave? Often poor behavior is anchored in both needs and issues children face as well as the personalities of many children in communicating what they desire.

#### *Why Children Misbehave*

To begin, many children misbehave primarily because they are searching for their place. All children want to belong. Limits help children to know where they stand. Consider trying to climb up or down stairs in a strange place with the lights off. We know a stairway exists but we don't know how high the steps are or how far they are apart. What is that like? How do we approach that situation? We test the limits. We kick a foot out and make tentative movements. It is a very uncomfortable feeling. If we try to take a step that isn't there or miss a step, it can be very painful. We have nothing by which to judge our limits.

Children sometimes misbehave as they search for a place within their peer group. They do (or don't do) something in order to be accepted as part of the group or to stand out from the group. Children often misbehave if there is not a climate of cooperation within the group or if they don't feel part of the group.

Children also misbehave due to chaotic boundaries. Sometimes, there is a problem with the classroom structure. Sometimes, there is a problem at home. Boundaries for social behavior may not have been taught by parents, or the consequences for negative behavior are inconsistent. Sometimes, the consequences for negative behavior are better for a child than no parental attention at all. Kids who feel that way may misbehave indiscriminately.

Children often misbehave out of boredom. Kids who do not engage in the environment around them—the activities we have planned—make their own entertainment. Usually, this starts out subtly, but it can become a full-fledged revolt if the children are good leaders. Behavioral issues may result from a mismatch of "pace." Activities may be too fast for some children to be able to respond to what teachers are saying or asking them to do. When we move along too quickly and don't check for understanding, children soon become discouraged and stop trying. Or, the pace might be too slow for them (similar to boredom).

 **NOTES**

Children also misbehave due to environmental factors. Some children are easily influenced by factors, such as room arrangement. For example, if the furniture is arranged in such a way that there is a lot of open space, this invites running. Similarly, if the temperature is not optimal, children may be wiggly or lethargic. Usually, environmentally-stimulated misbehavior is physical misbehavior (but not all physical misbehavior is environmentally stimulated).

It is interesting to note that young children process verbs faster than they process other parts of speech. So when we say, "Don't run," what they hear first is the action word, RUN. It takes them longer to cue into the word, "don't." As a result, they may DO the word before they finish thinking about your directions. Also, giving more than one direction at a time may cause some children to have processing problems. When you give a series of instructions, use your fingers to list the order (along with order words, such as first, second, then, last) or give visual cues, such as pictures or a list for older children. Don't assume that a child who doesn't follow directions doesn't WANT to do the task.

Some children feel a need for control. Some children (not many) take delight in exploring the emotional reactions they can engender. They want to control the emotions of a group. They may enjoy shocking you or a peer, making a person angry, upset, or something else. This is the class clown profile. This behavior is usually connected with one or more of the other reasons for misbehavior, such as boredom or chaotic boundaries.

Children may misbehave because they are feeling disrespected. Children very often respond in kind. When children feel they are not taken seriously, not treated their age, not treated fairly, or ignored, they may respond with negative behavior. This disrespect may be real or perceived and may come from teachers or peers. The usual response is often to be disrespectful to everyone in their way.

Physical issues can result in behavioral problems. A child who is hungry cannot focus, becomes grouchy, and struggles with judgment. If children do not identify their condition as hunger, they are pressed to act competitively as though they are food-seeking. Overtired children begin to over-secrete adrenaline, the fight or flight hormone, and their behavior becomes aggression or withdrawal (tears and other emotional cries for help). Children who are over-stimulated by too much activity may have a hard time "coming down" or making the transition to the demands of a different kind of behavior. These situations are not excuses for misbehavior, but they are physical conditions that cause a child to struggle with an activity you are prescribing.

 **NOTES**

There are physical disabilities, diagnosed or undiagnosed, that interfere with a child's ability to act (or not act) with intent. Children who suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome, ADHD, or other physical conditions need understanding along with disciplinary consequences. Children who appear not to be listening may not be hearing. When problems are consistent, don't presume the problems are attitude problems. Look for actual reasons a child may be non-compliant.

Children misbehave as a response to inappropriate expectations. Young children lack the ability to understand the full consequences of their behavior. It is not naughty to pour glue all over the paper. It is a problem caused by lack of experience with the amount of pressure required to get the appropriate amount of glue in the right place (or perhaps a fascination with the process of gluing!). Children may know there is a rule about running down the hallway, but they lack understanding of why that rule matters—give them some examples. Obedience accompanied by understanding wins over blind obedience every time.

Behavioral issues may emerge due to stress or trauma. Constant stress interferes with natural development. As you deal with children whose families are troubled, remember that traumatized or constantly-stressed children will lag behind developmentally. Physically, a child may be nine, but he or she may have the self-management skills of a seven-year-old. Emotionally, children may appear to be mature because of the situations they have dealt with. However, these children may be socially immature, physically unable to accomplish small motor tasks, mentally unable to read at grade level. In severe cases, the architecture of the brain is actually changed so that reasoning ability is affected. These children need special tools to manage their behavior and a great deal of understanding and love as they learn.

## DEFINING AND EXERCISING DISCIPLINE



### NOTES

#### *Defining Discipline*

As you read the following passages of Scripture, what is the theme of these verses? What words are repeated? In your mind, what is the difference between discipline and punishment?

- Psalm 94:12
- Proverbs 1:1-7
- Proverbs 12:1
- Proverbs 15:5, 32

These passages help us understand the meaning of the root word of discipline or disciple. The root word from the Latin means “to learn.” If learning is going to happen, it will happen because children are able to apply discipline to their lives and use personal self-control. In other words, children must value discipline as a tool for learning.

#### *Exercising Discipline: Profiles in Behavior*

Children often respond in classrooms through their personalities and their needs. While not always appropriate, many times children come to our ministries with different personal experiences that result in various behaviors. Each of the following descriptions may occur as a result of either general dispositions (begun at birth) or personal child-rearing, neither of which is the child's fault. Still, we must know how to recognize inappropriate behaviors and their motivations and use strategies that redirect that behavior into more constructive outlets. We need to understand the underlying need so we can fashion responses that help the child grow in social awareness and appropriate lifestyle.

*Desiring Attention Children:* Some children enter a classroom in deep need of attention. The motivation behind this need may be lack of attention or undue attention at home. Some children require attention merely due to an extroverted nature. It's not WHAT these children have to say that is so important. They want to GET the attention they need. These children will do all kinds of things to disturb, stir up, and challenge the flow. Their behaviors include yelling out inappropriate answers and exhibiting radically perfectionist tendencies in making crafts. Most of this misbehavior, however, will be verbal, and demands the class be diverted from the purpose of the lesson.


**NOTES**

Teachers find this behavior irritating. Yet, this kind of misbehavior shows that the children really want to be connected to you and the rest of the class. Teachers sometimes think they can follow the maxim, “Just ignore it (the behavior), and it will stop.” However, these children will always find someone to give them attention—enough to keep them convinced their strategy works. As noted, this kind of misbehavior emerges in children who have not learned to ask for attention in appropriate ways. Maybe they get too little attention at home, and they don’t develop self-confidence. Maybe they get so much attention at home they have become self-centered. Perhaps adults in their lives pay more attention to bad behavior than good behavior.

Teachers can help these children to begin to identify when the need for attention arises, so the need can be met appropriately. For example, a teacher might say, “I notice you try to make everyone laugh whenever you don’t want to do an activity. Instead of speaking out, could you wink at me? As soon as I finish giving instructions, you and I can talk alone for a minute about how to do the activity.” This allows a teacher to meet this child’s need for attention and special instruction. Other strategies include the following:

- Stand near the child, putting a hand gently on his or her shoulder or arm.
- Develop a signal that lets the child know you see him or her and are acknowledging the child. Signals that will not disrupt teaching are a finger to the lips, a point, or a tug on your ear.
- Actively involve the child by asking him or her for a favor, or asking a specific question directed just to him or her.
- If all else fails, good naturedly remind the child that if he or she needs attention, we can spend time together after class. Then follow up and direct full attention at that time.

*Dominants or Overly-Aggressive Children:* These children may or may not actually feel powerful, but they are determined to make each situation a war of momentous proportions. An introverted but dominating child may seem to pleasantly insist on doing his or her own activity, whatever else is happening. An extroverted over-achieving child may throw aggressive temper tantrums. Children may use physical misbehavior: kicking, pushing, or insisting on being the only child sitting when the rest of the class is standing up or vice versa. These children can make a teacher feel angry, frustrated, or drawn into a struggle for authority. The wonderful thing about this child is his or her independent thinking skills and the ability to stand firm. Some of this behavior seems to be inborn (strong-minded). Other factors may contribute to this pattern of behavior, such as witnessing lots of aggressive behavior or violence in life or through the media.




**NOTES**

Whenever possible, teachers should give the child choices, including the choice to opt out. Refusing to play power games provides one way to “win” with an over-aggressive child. Appreciate his or her strength when it is used appropriately, such as making a decision and sticking to it, or persevering when something gets tough. Other strategies include the following:

- Make a date to discuss the issue later when there is no audience, or discuss it with the parents.
- Set consequences for inappropriate behavior and stick to it.
- Distract from the issue with humor. (Try to break the impasse, but do not joke about or excuse the misbehavior.)
- Accept the opt-out option. “I see you have decided not to make a gift for your mom.”
- Give limited latitude, such as saying, “You have until 10:30 to change your mind.”

*Melancholy or Passive-Aggressive Children:* The melancholy child, like King Saul in Scripture, appears to want to make everyone else miserable. Also like King Saul, this child’s behavior may range from actively seeking revenge, to a pouting refusal to participate, to overt criticism (proclaiming “This is dumb!” during an activity). Since attack is part of the picture, either overtly or in a more passive-aggressive manner, this child causes a teacher to feel defensive, hurt, or angry.

Children’s leaders can challenge this child to love. However, we need to know most of this behavior is directed toward self-protection. Leaders need to be aware that this kind of behavior can have its roots in physical or emotional abuse. The abuse can come from inside the home, from outside forces, through feelings of victimization, or from being bullied as an individual or as part of a social group. This child may be quite familiar with labels—the poor kid, the racially different kid, the foster kid, and other labels.

Teachers can help this child steer clear of his or her tendencies by building a loving, protective relationship. They can often become this child’s champion by teaching him or her to appropriately express fear or hurt feelings before turning to anger. Other strategies include the following:

- Turn these children into helpers before they have a chance to criticize.
- Use teamwork strategies.


**NOTES**

- Help these children identify other ways of behaving that do not get a negative response. "I'd rather you tell me you don't want to do the activity than to say it's stupid."
- Look for and notice things that really do matter to these children and include those topics in the conversation and discussion. If a child loves dogs, talk about your dog. If a child is fascinated with airplanes, imagine what kind of flying escape vehicle might have been useful for Joshua and Caleb.

*Fearful Children:* Life for fearful children appears chaotic because they use all kinds of strategies and dependencies to avoid failing or admitting to failure. Their motto may well be, "If I don't try, I can't fail!" These children can dissolve in tears when challenged or deny actions (even lie about them) adamantly when confronted. These children often will not answer questions or participate (though usually not in a defiant way). Teachers can feel confused, guilty, or just unappreciated. Sometimes, this behavior is caused by unrealistic expectations or the belief that only perfection is acceptable. At other times, a highly competitive environment is to blame.

Teachers can recognize that these children often truly want to succeed. They can succeed when expectations are lowered so that a mistake does not matter as much as they assume. Teachers can try to reduce the stress level by not linking performance to reward and by stopping comparisons within the classroom. Teachers can encourage an "I can" attitude by providing tools rather than finishing the task for fearful children. Other strategies include the following:

- Break down complex tasks into simpler ones ("Take one jump, take one jump, and take one jump" instead of "take three jumps").
- Point to the child's previous successes.
- Teach the child self-affirming, God-centered promises to repeat. ("I can do all things through Christ," or "When I am afraid, I will trust in you!")
- Make mistakes—including our own—"no big deal."
- Talk about learning from the mistakes.

*Other Profiles:* Childhood motivations and misbehavior include a number of other expressions or profiles that teachers may respond to. Enthusiastic children feel they know every answer and can't wait to share them. Teachers might present questions with mandatory wait times. A teacher might say, "I'll call on someone when three people have their hands raised." Teachers can usually appeal to fairness as well, saying "Let's give everyone a chance to think it through."

 **NOTES**

Energetic children can't wait to get on to the next project. They often feel they have completed a project "a 100 times!" and desire to force other children to move on. Teachers can often engage these children as helpers in preparing for the next activity to keep them both occupied and outwardly focused. Some extraverted, relationally-minded children seem to be a friend to everyone and want to chat during instructions. Teachers might ask these children to listen carefully so they can help anyone who has questions. Perfectionist children tend to be demanding of their peers. These children have a clear sense of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Teachers can encourage these children to "model" good behavior. Compliment them in private rather than pointing it out publicly, so other children will not resent this well-behaved child!

When addressing children who misbehave we need to think of proactive, constructive, responses. To help us in our responses, we need to remember these facts:

- Kids who feel liked and appreciated don't need to use negative behavior to get attention.
- Kids who are intellectually stimulated don't need to create their own excitement.
- Kids who feel in control of their own responses don't need to work so hard to control others.

## ESTABLISHING AN ENVIRONMENT FOR SUCCESS



### NOTES

For discipline to be successful, children's leaders must establish an environment that encourages accountability on the part of all members. We often have to create an environment where discipline reflects a goal for success, not punishment. Developing such standards provides a climate where discipline serves the larger goal of spiritual formation.

What must we understand about discipline in order to learn to love or value it? Schools and churches adopt a number of disciplinary strategies. Some strategies seem clearly based on defined rules and punishments. Others are based on clear concepts and consequences. Leaders, teachers, and volunteers tend to express one of three disciplinary styles:

- Permissive—Children should be able to act as they desire.
- Authoritarian—Children should do what an authority figure wants them to do.
- Authoritative—Children should choose their actions within the limits set for them.

Adults tend to follow the style most closely matching the way they were raised or in reaction to their upbringing. Each style includes challenges, particularly toward consistency, when leaders exercise discipline. We need to be self-reflective of our own style.

However, leaders also know the challenge working as part of a team that has many different styles for managing children. Children need consistent discipline that is fair and friendly in order to come to trust and value it. To give children the best kind of learning and growing environment and the best opportunities to learn self-discipline, adults may have to set aside some of their own personal preferences and experiences.

It is important for every church to establish a policy about disciplinary procedures. These are the actions that will be taken by all teachers, regardless of the specific strategies they employ. A church-wide discipline policy must:

- be consistent, but open and flexible enough to allow for the personalities and preferences of each teacher to have a role in the classroom.


**NOTES**

- have spiritual formation as its primary objective. In order to do that, the policies must encourage personal responsibility and thoughtful application of biblical principles in a developmentally-appropriate way.
- have some principles that are “absolute” based on an understanding of God’s value of children and the laws of the land.
- establish lines of accountability between the child, the teacher, the supervising pastor, and the parents.
- be publicized freely, so that all adults can correct children in the spirit of discipleship.

An example of this kind of policy includes the following:

- Adults will never physically discipline a child.
- Adults will not yell at or degrade a child. A raised voice is appropriate only to get the attention of a child who is in immediate danger.
- If adults can no longer manage the behavior of a child in the classroom, they will contact the children’s pastor (or director) who will take one of the following actions at his or her discretion:
  - Remove the child from the classroom for conferencing.
  - Assign a personal mentor to the child so he or she can remain in the classroom.
  - Request the parents to make a decision on what the child should do instead of being in class that day.
- Adults will never ban a child from a class or worship session. Commitment to this principle may demand that parents participate in the classroom, or that special arrangements be made on a regular basis.

This particular policy places responsibility on children’s leaders and parents to make sure to address the real disciplinary needs of the child. The policy allows the teacher to focus on the responsibility to look to the interest of the whole class. The guidelines are corrective in nature and not punitive. The policy doesn’t define punishments, but it does suggest that there will be appropriate consequences for actions based on the child’s real needs.

Many churches also find it helpful to have church-wide rules of behavior for the children. Some guidelines for this strategy include the following:


**NOTES**

- Make the standards simple and few.
- Post the conduct guidelines and remind everyone about the rules regularly.
- Share the principles with parents, students, and the greater church community.
- Make the standards narrow enough to be agreed upon by the whole team and broad enough to allow team members to be themselves in managing their own classrooms.

Also, in many cultural contexts we should use terms like behavior standards, Christlike conduct guidelines, powerful principles, or something else. Most of these terms work better than “rules.” Reasons for not using the term “rules” may seem culturally arbitrary. However, observation in western culture teaches that the term “rule” often invites a “legalistic” mindset and even playful attempts to find strategies (“loopholes”) around the standards. Since adults can rarely create enough “rules” to cover every situation, hopefully, they can employ general guides that encourage children to engage in thoughtful personal responsibility for their actions.

As an example, one district camp based its discipline policy on the English acronym SAFE: The policy reads:

**Secure**

Focus on physical, emotional, and spiritual safety  
 Base rules on physical and emotional safety  
 Make kids aware of God’s love through your love

**Affirming**

Affirm the individuality of each child, as he or she is created by God  
 Affirm that God is at work in each child’s life whether [they] understand how or not  
 Affirm the child’s desire to please, belong, and be accepted

**Fun, Fun, Funny**

Kids love to laugh  
 Lots of problems are avoided through humor  
 The same things aren’t fun for every child; focus them on participation for the sake of others’ fun

**Encouraging**

Encourage relationships  
 Encourage committed practice of biblical truth  
 Encourage connections to Christian life  
 Encourage habits and experiences that can be taken home



### Only Two Simple Rules

Safety First

Respect Always

The two-standard approach allows leaders to be consistent without getting locked into a plan that doesn't allow for the direction of the Holy Spirit. It allows leaders to administer discipline in a way that teaches, rather than punishes. The camp staff still had to help children understand specific guidelines for safety. (Everyone must wear closed-toe shoes. Pinecones are not for throwing.) These guidelines were framed in the context of teaching rather than controlling.

Within a church-wide policy, there is still room for specific behavioral standards in each class or worship setting based on the developmental level of the children, the personality of the teacher, the needs of the specific children, and the planned activities. These standards tend to be temporary based on specific circumstances and still reflect the goals and objectives of the larger church policy. Ultimately, discipline serves an educational goal as both teachers and students learn to follow the Holy Spirit in shaping Christlike character.

## APPLICATION

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**NOTES**

1. Talk with parents about how they were disciplined as children. What was successful or unsuccessful? How do they apply these strategies today with their children, and what is the outcome?
2. Interview teachers about strategies for classroom discipline and how they vary them based on the nature of the child.
3. Write a church-wide—or at least children's ministry-wide—disciplinary policy.



## EXAM


**NOTES**

1. Children misbehave because of:
  - A. Needs.
  - B. Will.
  - C. Personality.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
2. Children often need limits to know where they stand.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
3. Other reasons children misbehave include:
  - A. Lack of cooperation of other children.
  - B. Speech patterns.
  - C. Inconsistent parenting.
  - D. A and C.
  - E. All of the above.
  
4. Children who misbehave may need to see a doctor.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
5. Discipline's primary role is controlling the child so that children can return to learning.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
6. Matching:
 

\_\_\_\_\_ Teachers can give the child choices to sit out certain events.

\_\_\_\_\_ Teachers can lower expectations for a chance at success.

\_\_\_\_\_ Teachers can to focus on building a protective relationship.

  - A. Desiring Attention Children
  - B. Dominant Children
  - C. Melancholy Children
  - D. Fearful Children



7. The primary focus in discipline is the needs of the whole group.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
8. Adults should focus on setting rules to make sure children know exactly what is expected.
  - A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. What steps can we take to help us understand why a particular child misbehaves?
2. Are there particular approaches to children's ministry that might communicate unreasonable expectations or cause children to feel disrespected and so misbehave?
3. How can we train teachers and leaders to recognize and respond appropriately to the different personalities children possess?
4. What are some sound guidelines we might establish to help create an environment of success?

*Review your answers with your mentor, then respond to the following:*

*How many responses focus on supporting children (particularly in areas where they are not yet fully self-reliant), and how many answers focus on empowering children?*

*Which of these answers support the goal of living Christlike relationships? Why?*

*What do we need to add to our list to make our approach more comprehensive, more faithful? Which do we need to incorporate into the role of the children's leader as one who both supports and empowers Christlike relationships with children?*