

The Discipline Tools You Already Have – And Just Don't Know It

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Darryl, for the third time this morning, gets up from his chair and wanders over to the box of toys near the wall in the classroom. Keeping one eye on the Sunday School teacher, he defies her to stop him...again! He knows he is supposed to be listening to what she's saying, like all the other kids, and part of him even wants to participate – it looks like fun! But he chooses to test her once again. After all, last time she gave him a piece of candy to keep him in his seat. What will it be this time?

Carol stands in the hallway outside her Sunday School class. As she fidgets against the wall, the Children's Pastor walks up and asks her why she's out there. As she searches for an answer, the Children's Pastor is distracted by another teacher and walks away. The truth is, she doesn't really know why she's out there. She's only been here twice, and doesn't quite know what she did wrong. She does know she won't be coming back!

Jim is exasperated. As he sits alone in his classroom, having just dismissed all the kids, he decides he's done. He must not be able to handle this kind of teaching ministry. Oh, he loves kids, but he can't seem to keep control of the class while he's teaching. Actually, it's just a couple of kids, but week after week they seem to overrun what he's planned and he just can't take it anymore. He gets up and makes his way to the Director of Children's Ministry office and quits. Discouraged, he walks away and decides it's time for a break from all ministry for awhile. Maybe sometime down the road he'll think about getting involved in some other ministry.

Can you relate to any of these scenarios? None of them are what any of us want in our ministry, but in children's ministry, "discipline" is an issue that each of us must deal with. It can be one of the most challenging – and frustrating. Not only for leaders, but for kids, too! In order to effectively minister, we must understand the issue of discipline and be able to use it effectively.

Ephesians 6:4 says, "And now a word to you fathers. Don't make your children angry by the way you treat them. Rather, bring them up with the discipline and instruction approved by the Lord." Paul tells us that fathers are to be careful how their kids are brought up. Specifically, fathers are not to frustrate, or anger, their kids by the way they are disciplined and instructed. Rather, use techniques and ways that are "approved by the Lord." In other words, discipline and instruct in ways that are appropriate, that are effective, and that honor God. While this verse is specifically spoken to fathers, the principle of effective discipline and instruction can be applied further, including to children's ministry.

How do we discipline in children's ministry? We can try bribes, or embarrassing children, or "blowing our stack", and we might get immediate results that we are looking for. But is that discipline? Is that appropriate and truly accomplishing what discipline should be – disciple-making? No. In the end, it is not instructing effectively, it is manipulating, punishing, or simply getting our way.

True discipline is, in reality, a continuation of our efforts to instruct. The difference, in most cases, is that the opportunity is generated by a child's misbehavior instead of a planned teaching situation. Regardless of when it occurs, however, most of us find it a challenge to do, or at least to do effectively! But we all possess tools available to us to allow us to instruct in situations where discipline is necessary. These are tools that require no props, no equipment, and no preparation (except a little practice!) – they are tools we already have! With these tools, we use discipline as an opportunity to I.N.S.T.R.U.C.T!

Infectious enthusiasm

Enthusiasm, as a discipline tool? You bet! As the leader of the class, we set the tone. How do you think kids respond when we are not excited about what we are teaching? Of course, they will not be excited either. Why should they be? But if we have enthusiasm, and let it show, we can fully expect it to be contagious. This can be a deterrent to misbehavior right from the start, but it can also curtail it if it creeps in. Take for example, little Johnny getting a little restless in class and starting to misbehave. As the teacher begins to notice this, a change of activity with an extra dose of enthusiasm can go a long way toward redirecting, and reigniting, little Johnny's interest in what's happening. "Discipline" takes place without any kind of confrontation, and leads to *instruction*.

Natural consequences

Natural consequences can bring kids into step real fast. You've let everyone know that the class can have extra game time only when the lesson is complete, but Mary doesn't seem to be keeping this in mind. A quick reminder to the class in general will usually lead to other kids "reminding" Mary (natural consequences) of what she might be costing the class.

Natural consequences might include not being able to answer a question because some kids haven't been paying attention. It might mean missing a favorite activity because they chose to misbehave instead of following the guidelines. Or it might be simply being separated from their best friend when they can't seem to pay attention to what's going on in the class.

Silence

As the presentation rolls on, you lean over to make a comment to your friend next to you. The noise of what's happening is loud enough that you speak in a normal speaking voice. But, just as you begin to speak, the noise stops, and you're caught making your comment to...everyone! You've had it happen before, haven't you? And how did you feel? Slightly embarrassed? A little silly? Silence seems to highlight activity that really isn't appropriate for the time, doesn't it? Now, embarrassing a child or making them feel silly isn't our goal, but simply being silent can go a long way toward bringing kids back into line. Sometimes, when I teach our Kids' Church (which I try to do with a lot of enthusiasm!) I'll simply stop talking. Kids realize something isn't right, and they pay special attention – even the ones who haven't been paying attention. When they all focus on what they should be focused on, I simply begin "instructing" again.

Silence can also be effective in dealing with other situations. Last Wednesday, when I saw a kid trying to hide a handful of candy, I walked over and asked him what he had in his hand, and patiently waited. He looked at me and said, "Nothing." to which I simply smiled and kept silent. As he thought about what was going on and realized I wasn't going to accept that answer, he finally told me that he had "borrowed" the candy from a room that he wasn't supposed to be in. I asked if he believed that was his candy to take, and he answered, "I don't know." Again, silence. He *did* know, and I wanted to give him a chance to think about what he was telling me. After a minute or two, he simply held the candy out for me to take and said, "No...and I'm sorry." A quick high five and a reassuring "Jesus is smiling because you did the right thing", and we were on our way. Silence can be used to instruct very well!

Touch

As I led the music time for Kids Church, a friend of my 8 year old son, Taylor, was trying hard to distract him. Poking him in the side, blowing on his face and telling little boy jokes were having no effect (I was really proud of my son!), but I knew it was probably only a matter of time until Taylor responded. So, still playing and singing, I meandered over to where the boys sat. As everyone continued to sing (including me!) I simply reached out and gently squeezed my son's friend on the shoulder. He hadn't seen me coming, and as he whipped his head around, I could tell I had made my point. Without embarrassing him, I had communicated

the importance of what we were doing. He started paying attention, and within a few minutes he had joined in the upbeat singing and all the motions that all the other kids were involved with.

Physical touch can be used in a variety of ways (always being careful to be appropriate, of course). This might include a firm but gentle grip on the shoulder as you speak “wisdom” (ok, discipline) into a child’s life. Or, you might use an open hand on the back to gently steer a child back to walking in the right direction as they try to veer off into the land of misbehavior! High fives, pats on the head and side-hugs can all be used to build a relationship, which is the cornerstone of effective instruction.

Reasonable expectations

Our expectations of a child’s behavior must be reasonable. Kids are kids, and are not capable of behaving in an “adult” manner. As we instruct, we must keep this in mind. A good general rule of thumb is that kids have about one minute of attention span for every year of their age. When that time is up, it’s time to move on to a new activity. Active learning and reasonable expectations of behavior are important parts of the process. At a church I served at, one of my preschool teachers came to the department coordinator after the service and said she was frustrated with the boys in her class. She mentioned that these 4 and 5 year olds were just so rowdy and energetic, and she had a hard time controlling them. When the coordinator observed her class the following week, she discovered a youth volunteer who initiated “wrestling time” with the kids. The expectation of the kids was that it was a time for wrestling which, unfortunately, extended into all other times of the class. My coordinator suggested that, instead of wrestling, the youth volunteer could be more helpful by sitting and doing other activities with the kids, like using playdough to create a scene from the story that was to be told. When this was done, the boys in the class immediately calmed down, and the entire class time was transformed!

Understanding

Closely connected with reasonable expectations is a clear understanding of why kids might misbehave. There are lots of reasons, but understanding some of the more common ones, and addressing them, help us meet the needs that a child might be expressing through their misbehavior. When we address these needs, discipline usually is taken care of, and environment conducive to instruction is restored.

Clear guidelines, or boundaries

Though kids are notorious for pushing the limits of our boundaries, they are usually just doing one of two things: first, they are trying to figure out where the boundaries are and, second, they are seeing just how serious we are about them. Providing clear guidelines for your class is important. If kids don’t know

Some Reasons Why Kids Misbehave Include:

- **Because they are kids!**
Proverbs 22:15 (NLT) says “A youngster’s heart is filled with foolishness...” Enough said!
- **Because they have not received clear guidelines or boundaries** – kids need guidelines, and even want them. Without them, insecurity creeps in, which often leads to misbehavior.
- **Because they are bored** – when we teach inappropriately (lecturing, not age-appropriate, inactively, etc.) kids get bored. Boredom leads to misbehavior as they try to find something to engage their mind.
- **Because of outside issues** – I put these issues in four categories:
 - *Hunger* – some kids come to church hungry. They either didn’t eat enough or they didn’t eat nutritional food before arriving.
 - *Health* – parents will often drop off kids that should be home in bed!
 - *Home* – some kids deal with so much at home that it inevitably comes out in their behavior.
 - *Helplessness* – kids often just don’t know how to deal with things that happen, be it the death of a pet or being bullied at school. This helplessness can lead to misbehavior.

what they can or cannot do, how can we reasonably expect them to obey? Each week in one of our programs we review the guidelines, trying to put a fun spin or two on them. But, simply put, the guidelines we give are:

Pay attention – you might miss something important!

Participate – we want you to be part of the group, and what you contribute is important to us.

Put your hand up – we want to hear what you have to say – it’s important – but we can’t hear if everyone just speaks out of turn.

Of course, when we give guidelines, we must follow through on our part, like providing something worth paying attention to, giving them well-prepared activities worthy of their participation, and giving them a chance to speak when they put their hand up.

Turn it over

The single greatest tool that we have that leads to instruction is the ability to turn it over to our Father in heaven! I saw this dramatically illustrated early in my ministry with a boy named Adrian. Adrian was “nothing but trouble” when it came to his behavior. Of course, when I discovered what his home life was like, I understood, but that didn’t help in the classroom. Nothing seemed to work! No matter what, our teachers dreaded seeing Adrian dropped off on Sunday morning. After trying everything we thought we knew how to do, we decided to simply pray. The teachers and I made a covenant to pray for Adrian every day, and to ask God not only to do a work in his life, but to do a work in ours. So we prayed, and after only two weeks, we began seeing a difference in Adrian’s life – something was happening! On the third Sunday, as I was cleaning up after church, Adrian quietly came in behind me and, in almost a whisper, said “Pastor Greg, I want to say I’m sorry.” Once I picked myself up off the floor and composed myself, I asked him what he wanted to apologize for. Again in a very quiet voice, he said “For all the things I’ve done to hurt Jesus, and for all the things I’ve done to hurt others.” As I bit my lip to hold back the tears, I had the wonderful privilege of sharing the gospel and leading Adrian to Christ that day, and seeing a life transformed. Over the next few months, as part of our church family, Adrian became a leader in the Sunday School because of his behavior.

We must be praying for our kids. Prayer is practical! Prayer should be as much a part of our preparation and presentation as any other component. And prayer can dramatically affect our discipline (instructing) situations. Prayer also changes our hearts, increasing patience, compassion, and understanding in all of our teaching efforts.

As we seek to “discipline” the kids God has blessed with, let us also seek to *instruct* them. These tools, which all of us possess and can refine with a little practice, can be a great starting point.

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