

Who's In Charge Here?

By Timothy Brown

Several years ago, I was Sunday School Superintendent and we had a Middler class that was proving to be difficult. The children were rowdy and hard to teach. I tried a couple of different teachers, but each one had the same problems, so I stepped in for a quarter to get a better perspective on the class.

Instead of coming in as an enforcer, I presented the problem in a non-threatening way and offered a solution. Instead of me setting the class rules, their task was to come up with their own and I'd write them out. They listed fifteen rules which we trimmed to ten.

The next step was to decide how the rules were to be enforced and the consequences for breaking them. After some discussion, we settled on a three step plan including a warning, being separated from the group, and as a last resort being sent to their parents.

During that class, I didn't have a single discipline problem and in the course of the quarter we only got to step two once or twice. In developing the list and consequences, the children were actually stricter and suggested more severe consequences than I would have. We posted their rules and whenever anyone acted up showing them the rule they helped develop helped settle them down.

The Importance of Rules

Too many children today are living without boundaries and have become unruly and disrespectful. While outwardly they act as if that's fine, inwardly they're looking for boundaries. When someone sets purposeful and considerate boundaries, it shows they care. While they will test the boundaries, most children do want them even if they don't show it.

For a successful class, maintaining discipline is essential. If you don't control the class, the children will. By setting and enforcing a few rules, the children will know how you expect them to behave. When order is maintained, the Holy Spirit has more freedom to work in the hearts of the children.

Three Basic Class Rules

In the above illustration, the children developed a long list of rules, but you don't need that many. In fact, too many rules can cause confusion and be difficult to enforce. In my classes, I have three rules for the children. If they follow them, it takes care of most discipline problems that may arise. They are:

- No talking while the teacher is talking.
- Respect others in class.
- Stay in your seat.

Setting Class Rules

When setting the class rules, do it from a positive perspective. Focus on the benefits the children will receive when the rules are followed: the class will flow smoother, there will be more joy and excitement, you will learn more yourself, you will allow others to learn by not being a distraction, etc.

If the focus is on how you, the teacher, will benefit when the children follow the rules it will be less meaningful and they will be less responsive. It's a great idea to involve them in the process of setting

the rules. Take their suggestions and focus on the ones that relate to these three or the ones you want established. This gives them some ownership in the rules and helps use peer pressure in a positive way.

Rule 1 – No talking while the teacher is talking.

The children are not to talk among themselves or shout out answers. If they need something or want to answer a question, they are to raise their hand. Also let them know that if you are talking about something important, you may have them wait to ask their question or give their comment until you are finished. “If you are talking to a friend while I’m teaching, you may miss out on an important point and also cause your friend to miss that point.”

Rule 2 – Respect others in class.

You can give the “thumbs up” sign and tell them in order to get a “thumbs up” they need to respect others. The ways to do this are to keep their hands and feet to themselves, don’t poke or hit their neighbor, don’t take things from someone close to them or throw things at someone, etc. While talking about the rule, let them know that they need to be careful to keep their feet from hitting others or the backs of the chairs in front or beside them.

Rule 3 – Stay in your seat.

Encourage the children to go to the bathroom before class begins. Once class starts, you need the children to stay for the whole time period so they don’t miss something. Also, if someone tries to leave, they become a distraction to the other children.

Consequences for Breaking the Rules

Setting the rules isn’t that difficult. What becomes more difficult is setting the consequences and then enforcing them. If you have rules but no consequences for breaking them or no enforcement, it’s actually worse than having no rules. Again, I have three basic enforcement procedures.

Eye contact—When a child is talking or acting up, I’ll look at them. If they don’t look back, I’ll pause until they look up. Many times, that’s all it takes.

Speaking to them—Next I’ll say something to them. Sometimes it’ll be a question asking if I’m interrupting them or if they would like to take over teaching the class. Other times it will be a straight forward statement asking them to stop what they are doing. As you get to know the children and look for God’s help, you’ll learn what works best with each child.

Moving them—If they continue to talk or act up, I’ll move them to a different seat away from the person they were talking to or to a seat by themselves. If it is the latter, the seat is in the back where the other children can’t see the person and he or she won’t continue to be a distraction.

Only as a last resort will I ask a child to leave the class and go to their parents or ask them not to come back for a week. I’ve done it a couple of times because the child was such a distraction it affected the other children. My thinking is that if they are present in the class and hear the word of God as it is shared, God can still use it in their life. He promises in Isaiah 55:11 that when his word goes out it’ll accomplish the purpose he wants. If the child isn’t in class, they won’t hear the word and it won’t impact them.

Discipline is not always easy in class, but is needed to maximize the learning potential. Most children do want to know the boundaries. If you involve the children in the rule setting and enforcement process as I did with the class of Middlers, it can go a long way in improving the overall class dynamic.