

Dealing with Disruptive Children in Sunday School

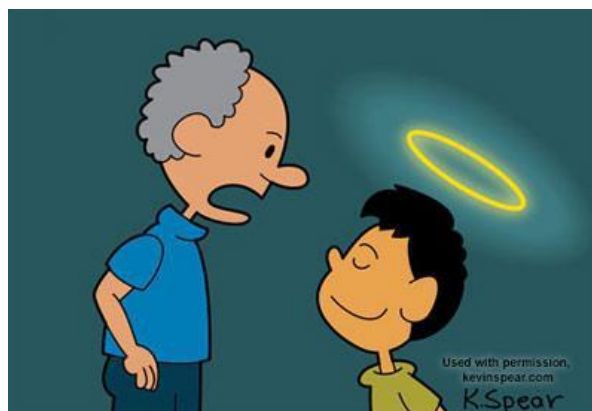
*A Teacher Training article by Heidi Weber and Neil MacQueen for Rotation.org.
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Few problems in Sunday School are as frustrating as having to deal with disruptive children. One repeat offender can ruin even the best lesson plan and ultimately drive away both teachers and others students.

To be clear, in this article we are not talking about special needs children or the occasionally rambunctious rascal, though all of the following strategies will help with them too. **We're talking about children who REGULARLY engage in one or more of the following behaviors:**

- Talking out of turn.
- Distracting other students.
- Intentionally not following instructions or rules.
- Showing disrespect for classroom activities, property, and people.
- (Your disruptive example here)

They may be the class clown or a clique creator, the bully or quiet instigator, the kid no one likes, or the kid everyone looks up to, a child dealing with temporary pain, developmental issues, or trouble.



"I want to thank you. Ever since you joined my Sunday School class, my prayer life has skyrocketed."

Three Key Strategies

As we consulted resources, interviewed Christian educators, and searched our own experiences, these three key strategies rose to the top for dealing with difficult children in Sunday School.



Key #1: Form a friendly relationship with your difficult student *outside* of class, and before and after. Once they feel part of your team, many will play like a teammate instead of the opposition. And you will also gain insights into what is making your student difficult.



Key #2: Be loving but firm --giving clear directions, options, consequences, and positive reinforcement. (More on this in a moment.) The worst thing you can do is be sarcastic or angry. The second worse is doing nothing. How we treat others, including disruptors, is part of our curriculum. It's an opportunity to model Christ-like behavior to both the disruptor and the eager eyes and listening ears of our other students.



Key #3: Have a helper present to catch problems before they become disruptions, and to step-in to deal with disruptors so that the teacher can continue teaching the other children. These days, churches should have a "two adult" policy, so it's only a matter of making sure both leaders know how to use positive discipline.

**Helpers should see their role as one that is especially directed toward the well-being and participation of each student --and especially those who need extra care. They should be able to spot problems early, move in a gentle and positive manner, and if needed, quietly pull the difficult student aside for some loving intervention. Helpers are also excellent sources of feedback on how they think you handled the situation.

Understanding the Roots of Disobedience

Every child of God (young or otherwise) suffers from occasional disobedience, and every teacher will have the opportunity to demonstrate both to the mis-behaving child and watching children God's love and the proper way to respond to mis-behaving. Whether the trouble is temporary or chronic, the teacher's response toolkit is nearly the same.

Chronic disobedience can have many roots: unresolved anger, low self-esteem, family troubles, poor impulse control, diagnosed or undiagnosed learning problems, ADHD, anxiety issues, attention-seeking, and even depression.

But not all chronically difficult children have these problems. They may just have poor examples set for them at home or at school. They may simply be the extroverted kid who lacks self-control, a verbal filter, or a volume knob. Some are emotionally immature for their age or are going through early puberty. For many it's a phase, and for some it's a personality trait.

Unfortunately, some adults make the mistake of taking disobedience personally, and that can create animosity and over-reaction. In addition to spending time trying to understand the source of a child's difficulties, you should spend time examining your own responses to mis-behavior, especially *after the fact* when another adult may be able to see things you were unable to see about yourself and the student in the heat of the moment. Being open to change will help you see yourself and the mis-behaving student as Christ sees them and you, *with compassion*. And it will give you insights into how you can meet their unmet needs and discipline them appropriately.



The Triggers to Disruption

Sometimes, the difference between a child's obedience and disobedience is something teachers CAN control.

- Un-engaging lessons and lack-luster teaching can trigger a difficult child's desire to show their disapproval, as well as, fail to hold their attention. This is especially true if they lack attention-skills and verbal filters.
- Un-prepared teachers and those who fumble with materials or an activity can create openings that some disruptors seek to fill. A sense of chaos can send the wrong signal that "anything goes."
- Teachers who are unaware of a child's issues and needs can mistakenly discipline in a way that is inappropriate for the child, and accidentally escalate it.
- Teachers who have poor discipline skills or lax discipline often get exactly what they don't want. We all know them --the teacher who lets their kids get away with everything, and the teacher who's always barking at their kids. To the chronically difficult child, poor discipline is as bad as none.
- Teachers who don't have enough help or enough time to meet the personal needs of their students. Having someone there to help you, especially if you know you have a chronically difficult child, can be the single greatest solution to helping the child and the rest of the class.



- We can also control our "responses" to disruption, **...letting our words and actions be both the "balm" to those in need, and a lesson to our other students** about how to behave when disruptions and disruptors happen.

Rotation.org is an online non-denominational community of Sunday School teachers, pastors, and Church educators sharing their lesson plans, ideas, and teaching insights for Sunday School. We are also the home of the Workshop Rotation Model, an exciting and problem-solving way to organize and teach on Sunday mornings. We are a 501(c)3 non-profit led by volunteers and 100% supported by our members.

10 Tried and True Practices for Handling Disruptive Children in Sunday School

In addition to the three keys to dealing with disruptive children described above (establish a relationship, be firm and loving, and have help in the classroom), there are a number of "tried and true" practices that can help students avoid their triggers or turn problems into solutions before things get out of hand.

1. **Preparation:** Unprepared teachers often lead to lessons and kids who fall apart.
2. **Arrival:** Some difficult students children "need something to do" when they arrive, not only to keep them focused, but to feel part of the team.
3. **Proximity:** Most difficult children do better when they are closer to the teacher or helper. Move in a non-threatening manner.
4. **Problem-solve** instead of punish or argue: Initial discipline is best delivered calmly and with clear directions. *"John, I can see you're in a good mood today, but I really need you to focus on...."*
5. **Humor and Re-direct:** Humor, not sarcasm, combined with Re-direction can interrupt disruptive behavior before it gets out of hand. For example, instead of simply asking them to "pay attention" for the tenth time, you might say the second time, *"John, you're as jumpy as a frog today, would you mind jumping over to get us..."* (handouts, Bibles, glue, popcorn, whatever).
6. **Be a fount of positive reinforcement:** Many disruptors are seeking affirmation, so give it to them.
7. **Draw disruptors into positions of responsibility:** *"John, when we get the lesson started, I'm going to call on you to be one of our readers."* (or game leaders, or supply runners)
8. **Develop a kid-friendly code of behavior:** These are sometimes called "Classroom Commandments" (with "do" as well as "don't" statements) and invite every student to sign it. Some kids just need more reminders than others.
9. **Identify and Share:** Talk to other teachers, leaders, and the child's parents to gain insights and find out what has worked for them.
10. **And last but not least: PRAY for your difficult student and for yourself.** Raising up children in the way they should go is NOT easy, and you are not alone.



Watch Your Vocal Tone and Body Language

The tone of the teacher's voice and body language are really important. Some children will respond negatively to aggressive postures and accusatory-sounding instructions. A firm "sit down!" can trigger their combative response, or set them on a retaliatory course. You have to know what works with each student. Your best bet is to be "positively firm" -- without a hint of disdain or confrontation. Use humor but be careful it isn't sarcasm. Give them the quiet attention many of them crave.

Many teachers don't know how they "come across" to some students. What sounds like humor to us can sound like belittling sarcasm to a child who gets it at home. Making eye contact can feel threatening to some and other may recoil at a gentle touch. Disciplining is not one-size-fits-all.

Training Tip: Practice your vocal and body language responses to disruptive situations with other teachers and listen for feedback. Some people are not aware of how they appear to others. Typically, they are surprised to hear they are "scary" or "too passive."

When to Bring in the Parents

If disruptions continue, you should follow up with the child's parent(s) to alert them to the problem, and discover if there are "other things" you should know or be concerned about. Just be careful not to trigger a punishment from the parent, or the parent's embarrassment or anger. Be sure to let your leader know you are going to talk with a parent.

- Make sure the parents see you encouraging their child.
- Invite the parent to assist in class from time to time.
- Do some problem solving with them.
- Suggest other opportunities that the child and their parent can do together as a break from Sunday School. This can include, helping prepare for worship or the setting the fellowship table.

*Many parents will be defensive regarding their child's behavior so it is important that you approach them with the same compassion and positive attitude that you gave their child. Reassure them that you're working with them and ask them for insights into how you might better work with their child. Look for ways to ease their embarrassment and encourage them to help you in the classroom.



Be aware that some parents may punish their children upon hearing that they have been disruptive, and that can undermine your relationship with their child. Let the parents know you love their child and the ways in which you are trying to diffuse disruptive behavior. In that way you may also be teaching the parents how they can deal with things differently at home. If possible, talk to the parent with the child present, so that the child hears what you have to say and knows you are in their corner.

If things remain unresolved, or you are increasingly concerned for the child's welfare (or your own or that of another student), involve the pastor or Christian educator who (should) have training in counseling and conflict resolution. Follow up.

If at any point you feel that the child is suffering from any form of abuse or mistreatment, or you think the child is a danger to themselves or other students, immediately report it to your pastor and follow up with them.

We hope this Rotation.org teacher training article has been helpful to you. Please feel free to share it with your team and reply with your insights and suggestions at Rotation.org.

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