

Classroom Management and discipline: Setting Biblical Rules

How do I keep them all under control? What are the rules? What do I do when someone disobeys? What does discipline look like in the classroom?

These are all great questions and should all be answered individually, but let me focus on just one of them for a few minutes and that is setting boundaries or rules in the classroom.

Just a cursory look through the Bible will remind you of the importance of boundaries...and we don't have to go far into God's Word to see authority and boundaries. I think this should tell us a little something about human nature and our need for boundaries. In Genesis 2, verse 5 to 14, we read of the creation of man and the creation of the garden, along with the specifics of the garden. In verse 15, the man is put in the garden and then in verses 16-17 the first boundary is put in place... 'don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you will surely die.' And we all know how well that one went over!

Boundaries continue to be a theme throughout Scripture...the cherubim with the flaming sword in Genesis 3, consequences for murder in Genesis 9, circumcision in Genesis 17, the giving of the law in Exodus 20, the most holy place in Exodus 16, and on and on and on. God is defining what it means to be His people. God is giving rules and consequences. And thankfully God is showing mercy and grace to undeserved sinners like you and I by sending the Only One who could live the perfect life and pay the penalty for our sin.

The point of God's boundaries is to show us the holiness and righteousness and love and mercy and faithfulness and goodness and and and... of God. We want kids to know why to behave even more than we want them to behave. Leviticus 19:2 tells us to 'be holy, because God is holy.' The motivation for following God's rule is God Himself. That's the attitude that we want to foster in the children under our care.

So, how do you set boundaries for your classroom that will do that? How do you create rules that will show kids God and His holiness compared to their sinfulness? How do you create rules that keep kids safe and promote learning, but ultimately point children to the majesty of God?

You could go the Leviticus route and make a list of hundreds of do's and don't for your classroom... don't poke people with pencils, don't stand on chairs, don't tear pages out of Bibles, don't throw toys at people's heads, don't take your shirt off and run around screaming, don't hit, kick, punch, slap, spit, and on and on and on and on. But, as soon as you make the list, you'll have to add to it, because children are nothing if not creative when it comes to the way they find loopholes in rules.

In our church, what we decided to do was adopt a simple three rule system that works in every age group and every situation and hopefully points kids to God and His Word instead of just pushing them into a mold of 'good' little boys and girls. For each rule we have a motion we use to teach it, a Biblical basis for the rule and simple explanations of the rule. We review these rules at the start of each class and refer back to them often in teaching or in times of discipline.

Our three rules are...

(1) Respect God & His Word

- This rule is based on Deuteronomy 10:12-13 and reminds us that rules come from God and that everything we do about God.
- The motion for the rule is to point up
- This means that we listen when someone is reading the Bible or praying.
- This means that we remember that we're here to learn about God.

(2) Respect Teachers & Leaders....

- This rule is based on Hebrews 13:17 which reminds us that God instituted authority over us.
- The motion for this rule is to salute one of our teachers
- This means that we listen when an adult is talking.
- This means that we participate and do what we're are told to do.

(3) Respect Each Other....

- This rule is based on Hebrews 10:24-25 which teaches us the importance of the gathered church.

- The motion for this rule is to point to our neighbors
- This means that we need to be kind, loving & encouraging to our classmates.
- This means that we need to keep our hands & feet to ourselves and refrain from distracting each other.

After two years of using these simple rules, we've seen a huge improvement in our classes. In all classes from 2 years old and up, teachers are encouraged to start the class by reviewing the rules and then use the rules to correct behavior throughout the class. The way the rules are worded and the examples given vary by age, but the general concepts are the same. Here are some examples of the rules at work.

- A 2 year old pushes a classmate – "John, do you remember rule #3 (point to others)? Rule #3 says we respect (or love) our friends. Is pushing showing respect (or love) to your friend?"
- A 3 year old talks about her cat during the story time – "Hannah, right now I'm reading the Bible, is talking about your cat respecting God's Word? Rule #1 says we respect God's Word (point up). Let's listen to God's Word right now."
- A 4 year old refuses to clean up the toys – "Sam, a teacher asked you to do something. We show respect to our teachers, which is rule #2 (salute) by listening and obeying when a teacher asks us to do something."
- A 6 year old is trying to get her friend's attention during your lesson time – (this one could be any of the rules...) – "Julia, rule #3 says that we respect our friends. Right now, Sarah is trying to listen to God's Word. Please respect her and respect God's Word by not distracting her."

The examples could go on and on...fighting in class, saying mean things about someone in another group, making light of the lesson, not participating, etc. The point is that one or all of these rules will apply to all classroom situations and will help you to point the kids in your class to God with the boundaries that you give them instead of simply teaching them to behave a certain way for your approval.

Let's strive together to be developing disciples who know and love God and His Word and not simply little pharisees who look cute on Sunday morning and mimic back to you the actions you desire without any real heart change.