

Creating the Conditions for a Disciplined Classroom

Discipline is not one of the purposes of religious education, but rather, a pre-condition. Children innately need limits and guidance in order to feel secure and comfortable. In a new environment, children instinctively respond by trying to understand it, find its limits, and make it their own. They will test to see how far they can go with the person in authority. This testing process will occur whether you are strict or lenient, and you should allow the process to unfold. Until the children understand you and the way that you direct your class, you are an unknown to them. Children normally do not do well with unknowns.

Classroom management techniques are meant to help the students and catechist work together to promote the students' growth in faith. Discipline should not merely restrict; it should also free. Catechists should offer students enough structure to free them to be themselves within the context of the group. They need to know their place and feel secure within the classroom.

It is necessary for you to consider the approach you will use in regard to discipline in the classroom before you meet with your students for the first time. There are various approaches to maintaining discipline. Whatever yours is, be sure it is clearly communicated and consistent. This is necessary if you are going to have the order and attention you and—more importantly—your students need for learning to take place.

For most catechists, maintaining classroom discipline is not an automatic ability, but is, rather, a skill that takes time to develop. Note especially all of the following issues.

Know Your Students

Even though most catechists spend only limited time with their students, they should learn as much as possible about each student. There can be valid reasons for a student's misbehavior. The following are some examples that you can watch for in your students.

1. *Family problems.* Family problems can weigh heavily on a student and influence his or her behavior in the classroom. If a student is not getting attention at home, he or she may elicit attention in class by misbehaving or not paying attention.
2. *Family influence.* The family's influence is always a factor. Positive influences work in catechist's favor, negative ones work against the classroom. If the parents show no interest in faith development for themselves or for their child, the child will often assume similar values, failing to see the importance of religious education or of paying attention in a religious education class.
3. *Well-being.* How a child feels will influence his or her behavior. Fatigue can cause listless, disinterested behavior. Children who are not sufficiently well rested or well fed will often act badly out of this lack of sleep or nourishment. Children who have

been inside all day without a proper outlet for their physical energy will eventually release that energy, often in your classroom.

4. ***Tired after a long school day.*** Students do not relish another “school” experience, especially if they have sat in a classroom all day. One of the challenges for catechists is to “de-school” the religious education experience for their students. This can be done most effectively through creative lesson planning.
5. ***Learning problems.*** Some students may have reading or other learning problems. Find out about your students’ needs and provide alternative methods for conveying information. See your program director for ideas on alternate methods for conveying information.

You do not have to solve these problems alone. Most students with persistent behavior problems in religious education also cause problems during the week for their regular schoolteachers. You can gain a better understanding of these students and the causes of their behavior, along with suggestions on how to cope with the problems, by contacting their parents, your program director, or their regular teacher.