

Ten Tips for Maintaining Discipline

by Joe Paprocki

1. Understand the Role of Discipline

Good discipline is not an end in itself. The goal of your session is effective learning. One can have good discipline but still have a poor lesson. The role of good discipline is to remove any obstacles from an effective learning experience.

2. Identify the Improper Behavior

Be sure to clearly identify the discipline problems that you need to address. As the old saying goes, choose your battles wisely. Once you have clearly identified the discipline problems that are most troublesome, you can develop a plan for addressing them. When identifying discipline problems, consider the following reasons for the improper behavior:

- Boredom
- Immaturity and ego needs (seeking attention, trying to impress peers)
- Hostility toward either you, other participants, the Church, parents (some hostility can be considered natural for certain age groups)
- Personality clash (with you or other participants)
- Emotional problem (family situation, drug related, guilt, inner conflict)
- The “nature” of religious formation (young people, especially pre-adolescents and early adolescents, don’t want their peers to think that they enjoy religion)

3. Don’t Panic

When discipline problems arise, strive to remain calm and in control. Communicating a sense of authority while remaining calm is not only effective, but also necessary in developing a long-term strategy for combating discipline problems. Losing your cool may work for the moment, but it undermines your credibility in the long run.

4. Don’t Interrupt Your Lesson

One of the reasons children and adolescents misbehave is that they know it will interrupt the flow of the lesson, frustrate you, and bring attention to them. A good catechist learns to deal with discipline problems without stopping the lesson. By using eye contact, placing a hand on their desk, or standing next to the “culprit” while you continue to facilitate the lesson, you can minimize the behavior without interrupting the flow of your lesson.

5. Keep Participants Involved

When participants get bored, they try to create their own stimulation. When you see that a participant’s attention is wavering, involve him or her in the lesson by asking a question or giving a task for him/her to perform. By keeping your participants busy and on task right from the start, you eliminate a great deal of potential trouble.

6. Ride Your Eye, Use Names, and Move Around

If you are completely stationary as a catechist, you invite participants farthest away from you to engage in misbehavior. Stay on the move, walking around the room as you teach, and keeping your eyes moving around as you speak. If you are answering one participant's question, move your eyes around the room so that it is clear you are still speaking to everyone. Most importantly, learn and use your participants' names. One of the most effective ways of getting a participant's attention is to call his or her name out loud, pause, and direct the question or task to them.

7. Check Your Seating Arrangement

How a room is arranged can have a great impact on behavior. Your seating should be arranged in such a way that no participant feels separated or remote from the hub of activity. If a participant feels they can "hide" from you, they will take advantage of the situation. Make sure visual lines are open. Likewise, if a participant is misbehaving, it could be that he/she is sitting with others who "egg them on." Moving a participant's seat can effectively reduce bad behavior.

8. Reinforce Good Behavior

Don't just focus on the negative. Learn to focus attention on good behavior and reinforce it. When a group is behaving properly, you can reward them with affirmation. When a participant who is prone to misbehaving shows the proper behavior, be sure to reinforce it with positive affirmation without going overboard.

9. Make a Few Rules, Explain, and Enforce them Consistently

When you first begin meeting with your group, it is a good idea to formulate some rules with the help of the participants. Depending upon their age, you should be able to ask them what rules they will need to make the gatherings go well and create a good learning environment. Later, when enforcing the rules, you can remind them that these are their rules. Be sure participants know clearly what the rules are and enforce them in a consistent manner so that they know the rules are to be taken seriously.

10. Get to Know the Age-Group You Work With

Be sure to get to know about the developmental characteristics of the age group you are working with. Some behaviors can be more easily understood and dealt with if you have a working knowledge of the physical, psychological, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual characteristics of the age group. Most catechist manuals include an overview of these developmental characteristics.