

Ian McDonald

Associate Secretary

Canadian Ministries

The Presbyterian Church in Canada

imcdonald@presbyterian.ca

1-800-619-7301

## When Children Forget How to Behave

Writers: David Phillips, Dorothy Henderson, Mabel Williamson



In church school, as in public schools, those of us who teach must often deal with “misbehaviour” or “discipline.” This is particularly difficult in Sunday school, Vacation Bible schools and camps, because we want to model the example of Christ, and we also want children to enjoy coming to our programmes.

There are many occasions when children forget how to behave - something we describe as misbehaviour. (Let’s face it! Youth and adults forget how to behave at times, as well.)

Sometimes we can prevent behaviour problems within our church programs by being proactive instead of reactive.

Follow these suggestions:

- The teacher should be mobile.

- Especially in classes where children are under eight years of age, there should be two adults.
- Keep constant visual and verbal contact with the group.
- Use variety in activities.
- Always have the class set up before the children arrive.
- Model good behaviour.
- Be positive at all times.
- Do not ignore disruptive or negative behaviour, hoping it will go away.
- Be a good communicator.
- Be friendly, open and accessible.
- Be sure to follow the principles and suggestions in *Leading with Care*, our denominational policy for protection of children. **Whenever possible, have two adults in a learning situation.**

Be liberal in using the game “How do we act at...” Provide examples: hockey games, when *O Canada* is being sung, when a funny movie is on TV, when Grandma is telling us something, when prayers are said in church. Include in this game church school activities. Always do the teaching *before* you need the actions.

Despite this constructive approach, problems may arise. Here are suggestions for handling various situations.

### **Issue #1: You have a high-spirited group.**

When you observe, at the beginning, that there are a lot of high-energy children in your group, it is helpful to make a group covenant. (Even if you don’t have a high-spirited group, this is a helpful practice.) On a chart, list things that are important to help the group function well. Here are some examples: We will arrive on time. We will not call each other names. We will try to help each other. We will not speak when someone else is speaking. These suggestions should come from the children, and if one child suggests something, check with the others that there is agreement. Try to keep the covenant simple. There should never be more than five or six “rules.”

It may be that you will want to think of a consequence if the covenant is violated. Ask the children: What should we do if someone forgets how to act? Try to make the consequence positive and helpful. For instance, rather than say, “Latecomers should sit outside the group for five minutes,” suggest that a group member could work with the latecomer to be more organized in order to arrive on time.

### **Issue #2: A child is disorganized.**

Ask the child to perform one task at a time. The younger the children, the shorter the task should be. Put a sticker or picture showing where scissors, glue, paper go. This helps all the children and avoids pointing out the disorganization of one child.

### **Issue #3: A small child does not respond appropriately to common words such as stop, yes, no.**

Teach the language before you need it. Create a game that all the children can play. For instance, go on a jungle prowl and creep among imaginary trees and step over vines. Say, “Oh, there is a big river ahead.

We must...” Hold up a stop sign and have the children call out “stop.” Continue your journey and pause to say “stop” several more times - as you look at a beautiful valley, step carefully over slippery rocks, or wash your hands in a river. When children hear the word “stop” in your classroom, they will remember to stop their activity until instructions are given to move on.



### **Issue #4: A child needs verbal instructions and questions repeated.**

Give an instruction that involves only one step. Ask questions that have only one idea. Before asking the question or giving the instruction, use the child’s name: “Richard, will you please pass along the crayons?” If you give an instruction, ask the child to repeat it: “Richard, I’m wondering if you heard what I told everyone to do with the yellow paper.”

Remember that all children learn in different ways, as do adults. Some need to see the instructions. Some need to hear them. Some like to see a finished product and figure things out on their own. Some need to act out a story, some listen quietly and imagine it in their head. Some need to draw the main parts. For each activity, provide a choice of methods. Each child will instinctively lean toward their own best method. The role of the teacher is to observe and make sure children have the tools they need to do their best learning.

**Issue #5: A child has difficulty concentrating.**

When speaking or giving instructions, use pictures, diagrams, chalkboard or gestures to hold the child's attention. If giving instructions, make them short and precise. Establish a learning area where there are minimal distractions. If instructions are printed, keep them simple.

**Issue #6: A child does not seem to hear or respond well to verbal directions.**

Use the least number of words necessary to give directions. (It is helpful to record yourself and listen to the recording.) We may think that we speak simply and clearly, but when we listen to ourselves, we often find that we use ten words when five will do.)

If you are giving out materials, give verbal directions before the material is handed out.

Use simple vocabulary and match it to the child's level of understanding.

**Issue #7: A child does not listen when other students are speaking.**

Children may *appear* to not be listening when another child or the teacher is speaking, but they often are hearing and taking in information. If you want to check out whether a child is listening, try this. Say, "I want to tell you something. Pretend that you are an echo and, when I'm done, you can say it back to me." Design activities where children must work co-operatively to complete a task while listening to each other. For instance, invite children to draw a co-operative picture of Jesus and the children. Instruct one child to tell the other how to start the picture by saying, "Draw a green hill in the background." Then have the children switch places. Ask the second child to say, "Draw Jesus sitting near the hill," and so on.

**Issue #8: A child does not read independently.**

Children do not begin to read at the same speed. It is entirely possible to find a third grade student who is still not reading well. Encourage interest in reading by having students share interesting things they have read. Make sure the student is reading material on his/her ability level. (Consult with the child's parent for help with this.) Be careful about Bible reading. The NRSV Bible is written at a Grade 7+ level, while *The Message* is the easiest for Grades 4-5. If a child is younger than nine, it is wise to use a story Bible such as *The Family Story Bible*, by Ralph Milton (Wood Lake Books). If you notice that a child has a particular





interest, find resources in that area that are written at an easy level. Sometimes large print resources can be less intimidating.

**Issue #9: A child does not get tasks done during the time allotted.**

When this happens repeatedly, make sure that you are giving directions or instructions before handing out materials. This enables the child to get straight down to the task. Be sure that the assignment or task is presented in an attractive and interesting manner.

**Issue #10: A child does not want to work independently.**

Some children simply do not enjoy working alone on projects. Ask yourself: Why am I expecting this child to work alone? If it is important, give encouraging comments to the child as they work independently.

**Issue #11: A child does not read or follow written directions.**

Provide simple written instructions or pictures presented at the child's reading level. Be consistent in these instructions, always using the same pattern, such as step 1, step 2, etc. Here is an example:

Making colour resist pictures

Step 1: Draw a picture with crayons.

Step 2: Lightly brush with black paint over the picture.

The areas of crayon will resist the black paint.

**Issue #12: A child becomes physically aggressive with teachers.**

We may not think that this could happen within the church, but unfortunately it does. The best approach is to prevent this from happening. As a teacher, you should move a great deal. Stand where the children can see your eyes, and you can see theirs. If a child forgets how to act appropriately, a time-out chair might work. Ask the parent/guardian for advice about how they handle a similar situation. Observe activities that make a child uncomfortable, and avoid those things in the future. Teach all the children ways to express themselves when they are angry or frustrated - slow, calm speaking or walking around the area before they speak. You can also provide a "quiet corner" where children can go voluntarily to think things through. (See suggestions, also, in Issue #15.)

**Issue #13: A child makes inappropriate comments to teacher.**

If a child is angry or displeased, s/he might make inappropriate comments to the teacher. If this happens, give the child words to say that are more helpful. For instance, say to the child, "I want you to say to me, could we talk about this after class?" or "Teacher, I need to talk to you." Avoid saying things like, "That comment really hurt my feelings," or "That statement makes me angry." If this issue occurs more than once, be sure that the child and parent are both informed of the situation. You might also use hand signs to show the children when comments are inappropriate; e.g., put up your hand in a stop signal, touch your ear, etc.

**Issue #14: A child responds to praise or recognition by being boisterous, overly assertive or bragging.**

Older children, especially, may respond to praise or recognition in active ways - by punching their friends, giggling, moving a great deal or waving their arms. They enjoy the recognition even though they often look as if they don't. To avoid this type of behaviour, you may choose to distribute praise and recognition equally to everyone. Or, if you want to individually encourage a child, write a note.

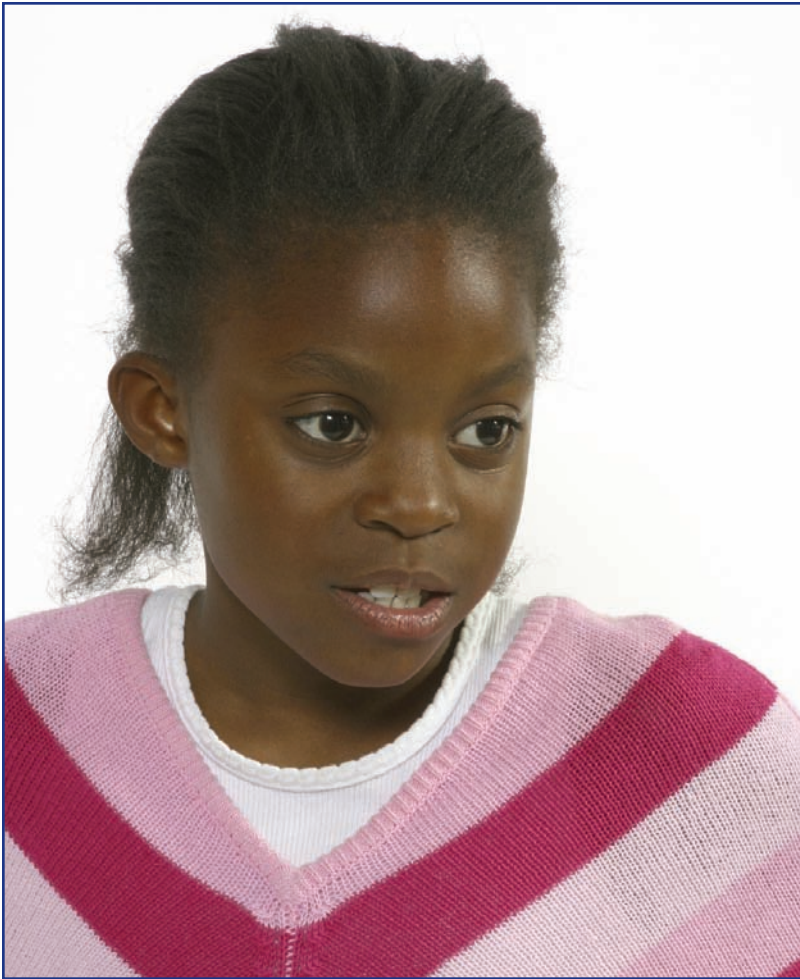
**Issue #15: A child is easily angered, annoyed or upset.**

Be sure to talk with the parent or the person who brings the child to church. Are there things that happen at home before coming to church? Depending on the age of the child, you might suggest some of these things: engage the child in laying out his/her clothes for church on Saturday evening; enjoy a slow leisurely breakfast with some fun activity like colouring at the breakfast table or special pancakes; declare Sunday morning a no-cartoon, no-TV time since children often hate to be interrupted from cartoons. Allow the child to wear comfortable clothes and shoes. In the class, maintain a positive, calm environment. Give children choices. For instance, say, "After the story, you may work at the painting easels or build a biblical house with Lego."

Teach children a five-step pattern if they feel angry:

1. Breathe. Breathe deeply and slowly five in-and-out breaths.
2. Feel. Identify where you feel your anger - in the stomach, neck, chest?
3. Notice. Say to yourself, "Yes, I'm feeling angry."
4. Relax. Move your shoulders up and down. Roll your neck. Wiggle your arms.
5. Think. Decide what you choose to do to handle the situation in a good way.





**Issue #16: A child does not seem to enjoy interacting with peers.**

If this happens, find other children who seem to be closest to this child. If you notice that there are certain situations where the child does interact, try to set up those circumstances. To avoid leaving one child alone, form groups or pairs by picking colours of paper, or using birth months or animals. As children grow older, boys often want to work with boys and girls with girls. They are usually quite vocal in making their wishes known.

**Issue #17: A child does not share with others.**

This happens more frequently with young children. Encourage children to take turns. If both want a particular toy, put on a minute timer for three or four minutes and tell the children that, when the timer goes off, it is time for the child to give the toy to another. If possible, provide enough materials and activities so that taking turns will not always be necessary.

**Issue #18: A child is not accepted by other children.**

Do everything you can to avoid competition and criticism. If you are always correcting a child, the other children will pick that up and repeat your behaviour. If possible, help the child develop a friendship by carefully pairing him or her with another child.

**Issue #19: A child does not participate or show interest in activities in the room.**

Give the child responsibility - helping someone, tidying, fetching supplies. Encourage the child to share things of special interest with others. Make positive comments about participating in church events.

**Issue #20: A child expresses concerns or worries about school, home or personal situations.**

This is a difficult issue and should be handled with extreme care. If a child expresses a concern or worry about a personal issue, it is good to simply listen. It is likely that it is beyond your control and is a bigger issue than you can deal with in church school time. Talk with a reliable person about whether or not you should share the information with the parent/guardian.

**Issue #21: A child indicates that no one cares about him/her.**

Take time to listen so the child realizes your concern and interest. Give the child responsibility in group situations so other children may view the child in a positive way.

**Issue #22: A child does not smile, laugh or demonstrate happiness.**

Some children are just naturally more sober than others, so do not read too much into this. You may want to observe the parents, who also may be sober people. If so, this child has this in his/her genes! Take time to talk with the child individually to discern if the child is unhappy or is just a naturally sober per-

son. Sometimes children are shy or uncertain of themselves in a particular setting, and this makes them appear sombre or even moody.

### **Issue #23: A child throws temper tantrums.**

Young children (usually ages one to three) may throw a temper tantrum (lie on the floor, kick, scream, hold their breath) when they are hungry, tired or frustrated. If possible, prevent situations that stimulate temper tantrums. Ask the parent/guardian about how they effectively handle the child who throws a tantrum. Try the following prevention strategies. Give the child positive attention. Establish the habit of catching the child being good. Give young children control over little things - ask questions like this: "Would you like the blue truck or the red ball?" If there are off-limits objects in your class area, remove them. Use distraction - replace a new activity for a frustrating or forbidden one. Change the environment by directing the child to another space.

The best response to a temper tantrum is to keep cool. Take deep breaths and try to think clearly. Do not hit or spank. Try to understand what's going on. Tantrums may need to be handled differently for various situations. When a child throws a tantrum being refused something, do not try to reason. You may ignore the tantrum if it poses no threat to the child or others. Continue your activities, paying no attention to the child, but remain within sight. If children might hurt themselves or others during a tantrum, they should be taken to a quiet, safe place to calm down.

If older children have a tantrum, they should be sent off by themselves until they have regained control. Do **not** reward a child after a tantrum. This will only prove to the child that the tantrum was effective. Instead, verbally praise a child for regaining control.

### **Issue #24: A child becomes overexcited.**

If you notice that a child is becoming overexcited, steer the child to a calmer activity. Remain calm yourself. Provide children with a predetermined signal reminding them that they need to calm themselves. For young children, designate a comfortable chair in your class as the "cuddle chair." When children need to calm down, suggest a visit to the cuddle chair. (Add soft stuffed animals.) With older chil-

dren, create a "Freeze" game. Call out instructions like these: "Stand tall," "Touch toes three times," "Reach for the sky," "Sit and relax." End with "Freeze." The children will learn, after several repetitions, that "Sit and relax" ends with "Freeze" and will become more adept at calming themselves. (Alternately, you could call this game, "Be calm" instead of "Freeze.")

### **Issue #25: A child lies, denies, exaggerates or distorts the truth.**

This happens! Young children (ages four and older) often make up stories and tell tall tales. This is normal activity because it is fun. Young children often blur the distinction between reality and fantasy. Older children may distort the truth for a number of reasons. They may want to escape punishment. They may be imitating another child or an adult. They may need a self-esteem boost.

It is important, as teachers and role models, that we never tell a "little white lie" ourselves. If you suspect that a child is repeatedly lying, talk with him or her about the importance of truthfulness, honesty and trust. Ask, "Is this make believe or reality?"





### **Issue #26: A child reacts in fear.**

Especially for young children, fear is a big problem, because their frame of reference is quite limited and they cannot use rational powers to diffuse their fear. Bear in mind that fear has a healthy side. Fear of heights protects us from falling. A fear of bees can remind us to avoid being stung. Don't make fun of the child's fear. That will make them more fearful. Gradually expose the child to the thing s/he is fearful of. For instance, if you know that a guest clown is frightening to a child, seat the child next to you. Invite the clown to come close wearing ordinary clothes and carrying the clown suit. Ask the clown to put on the suit near the children. Ask, "Would you like the clown to put on her green hair?" If a fearful child says no, wait until the next week, repeat the process, and ask again, gradually adding hair and makeup.

### **Issue #27: A child does not follow rules for the class or church.**

With older children, spend some time at the start of your program year to write together a class contract entitled *How we want to be when we're together*. Invite children to contribute ideas like these: We will not make fun of each other. We will not call each other names. We will not run, because we might bump older members. We will not speak when someone else is speaking, etc. For younger children, post two or three simple rules with pictures and repeat them as needed: We will share. We will be kind to others. We will be quiet when others are thinking about God or praying.

### **Conclusion**

The same root word is used in "discipline" and "disciple." What does this tell us? That, as Christian teachers and leaders, it is our responsibility and privilege to help children grow in learning how to be disciples of Christ.