

Discipleship as the Root of Classroom Management: A Diagnostic Guide

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“People can’t blame children for fooling around. Kids migrate to the least effective form of management.” Fred Jones

“Relational trust is built on movements of the human heart such as empathy, commitment, compassion, patience, and the capacity to forgive.” Parker Palmer

Managing the Health of Your Classroom: Developing a Healthy Heart

Classroom management is about creating an atmosphere where a student’s heart and mind can develop.

Preventative:

- A. Pray: Pray for specific students daily.
 - 1. “Teach me your way, Lord ... give me an undivided heart” (**Psalm 86:11**)
 - i. “If you are going to get to heart issues of your students you need to begin with your own heart” Paul Tripp, *Your Christian School: A Culture of Grace*.
 - 2. **Suggestion:** Sit at specific student’s desks/spots or use your attendance sheet. Choose 2-3 students to pray for each day.
- B. Be you. Students can sniff out a phony. It’s not about being their buddy. The students have enough friends. They need a teacher.
- C. Set your expectations on day 1. Lay the foundation for cooperation.
 - 1. We each have different expectations based on the types of classes we’re teaching, grade level, and class personality.
 - 2. Have 3-4 points of emphasis. Too many rules reveal a control issue.
 - 3. **Suggestion:** Discuss with older students. How do you create an ideal learning environment? Guide them. They should take ownership of the rules. For all students, how do your rules cultivate virtue? Do students have opportunities to learn through their failures?
- D. Points of Contact: Connect with your students daily.
 - 1. **Suggestions:** Move! If possible, set up your classroom so you can weave through it.
 - i. Changing the focal point keeps students engaged.
 - ii. Take time to hand out individual worksheets (allows for quick conversations).
 - iii. Keep a list of 3-5 students per week to chat with (can be brief—2 min).
 - iv. Stay away from your desk during class time.
 - v. Wander out into the hallway at lunch and between classes.
- E. Build Relationships with the parents.
 - 1. The first contact should not be negative if possible.
 - i. A generic “welcome back e-mail” does not count. “I care about your kid and look forward to the year” seems disingenuous when it’s part of a form letter. As a parent, I would hope you look forward to teaching my child—why else are you a teacher?

2. **Suggestion:** Look for opportunities to connect and build relationships.
 - i. Mingle with the parents at school events and don't hide with your colleagues.
 - ii. Send handwritten notes. Even thank you cards can go a long way. Try to send out positive communication about each of your students throughout the semester.
- F. The Law of Teaching: "Excite and direct the self-activities of the learner, and tell him nothing he can learn himself." John Milton Gregory
 1. Don't drive your students to boredom (within reason).

Dealing with the Initial Inflammation:

- A. Shift tones, not temper. Avoid the pitfalls of anger.
 1. Sometimes silence is a powerful tool.
 2. Avoid sarcasm.
 3. When you move, you have more flexibility to handle situations quietly and quickly.
 4. Public admonishment is fine for certain offenses (blurting, disrespect, disruption) but be careful not to engage in a verbal tug-of-war.
 5. If you fracture the student-teacher relationship it will take some time for that student to trust you once again.
- B. Assess the situation. Discipline (personal) versus punishment (impersonal).
- C. Inflammation is the way for the body to let you know something is wrong. Passivity invites inactivity, rewards inappropriate behavior, and spreads inflammation.
- D. Avoid the "war of attrition." You can't die on every hill.

Diagnosing the Root Cause of Inflammation:

- A. It's the heart of the issue that matters, not necessarily the infraction.
 1. Plagiarizing a document is a lazy or slothful issue. There may have been a deceitful motive. The student may have been lazy and deceitful.
- B. Private rebuke: Sometimes there are underlying issues you can't see or don't know about. Calling out a student for not turning in their last 2 assignments is, in my mind, not appropriate. A sudden shift in behavior could be due to a divorce, the death of a treasured pet, social media issues, etc.
- C. Learn the visual cues of your students. Everyone has a nervous twitch. Everyone displays physical cues when annoyed, scared, anxious, or embarrassed.
- D. If you don't have a solid teacher-student relationship, disciplining the students well is going to be difficult. Likely, you'll not determine what the root cause of the problem is and miss an opportunity to disciple well.
- E. Historical Context: Is this behavior in line with what I've seen over the past several months? Even good students have bad days.

Chronic Inflammation and side effects:

How do you know if you've hit the proverbial discipline "wall?"

- A. You feel resentful.
- B. Your morning coffee comes with a scoop of cynicism.
- C. "Resistance is futile."
 - i. It's them against me
 - ii. Kids are just different than my generation

- iii. I don't run a military school. Kids need to be kids.
 - iv. Video games and cell phones are ruining my students.
 - v. I don't want to end up on that tweeter insta-face social media thing.
 - vi. My Job: present material; Their job: learn it.
- D. You fear the 4-paragraph parent e-mail.
- E. You find yourself either using the phrase, "That's it! I've had it!" or negotiating with your class. "If you're good, I'll let you wander around campus for the last 10 minutes."

Recommendation: Time to talk to veteran/mentor teachers about what you're going through. You should also have grade-level and/or department meetings frequently where best practices are discussed. Also, don't be afraid to talk to your administrator about what you're dealing with. All have dealt with a multitude of scenarios and likely have wise advice. I watched many teachers throughout my career make the mistake of trying to figure it out on their own. This inevitably leads to at least one of the following: teacher burnout, parent/student frustration (loss of classroom control), students developing the opinion that the teacher "hates them," tense parent-teacher conferences, or poor performance review from the administrator.

Treatment of a flare-up:

- A. GOAL: Repentance → Forgiveness → Reconciliation → Restoration
- B. Talk to the student after class/at lunch/after school.
- C. Public sin, public rebuke. Use a direct, assertive tone. "You can have excuses or results but not both."
- D. Remove the student from the learning environment (never the 1st option).
- E. Lunch detention with a purpose.
 - a. Homework: Students can complete assignments while you determine the root of the issue (i.e. laziness, organization, poor time management, lack of understanding, etc.)
 - b. Cleaning: I use this for a variety of reasons including a lack of self-control.
 - c. Discussion: Sometimes student "drama" spills into the classroom (which I quickly deal with initially). This allows students to work out their differences while I'm able to serve as a moderator. I also use this time to talk to students who suddenly seemed to have checked out or are doing poorly in my class. I'm careful not to pry too much—it's more to let them know I care and to encourage them.
- F. Contact parents right away: Don't let the student dictate the narrative. You're to foster a partnership with parents and keeping them out of the loop is unwise and will lead to mistrust. I find that most parents want to work in lockstep with teachers.
- G. Be humble enough to apologize to your class if you cross the line. We are all living in Christian community and you need to model repentance when appropriate.
- H. When to contact a specialist (principal/dean):
 - a. Escalation**
 - b. Repeated disrespect**
 - c. Multiple offenses with no or insincere repentance**
 - d. Cheating (any form)
 - e. Fighting

f. Substance abuse or Technology abuse (porn, etc.)
***Should be a last resort. Essentially you are relieving yourself as the primary care physician for this situation. For some of these, parental notification should have occurred previously.*

Suggested Readings/Videos:

The Seven Laws of Teaching by John Milton Gregory

Your Christian School: A Culture of Grace? by Paul Tripp (DVD)

Positive Classroom Discipline by Fredric H. Jones

To Know as We Are Known by Parker Palmer

The Conviction to Lead by Albert Mohler (Esp. chapters 6, 11, 14, and 16)

Communicating for a Change by Andy Stanley (Create tension when you teach)