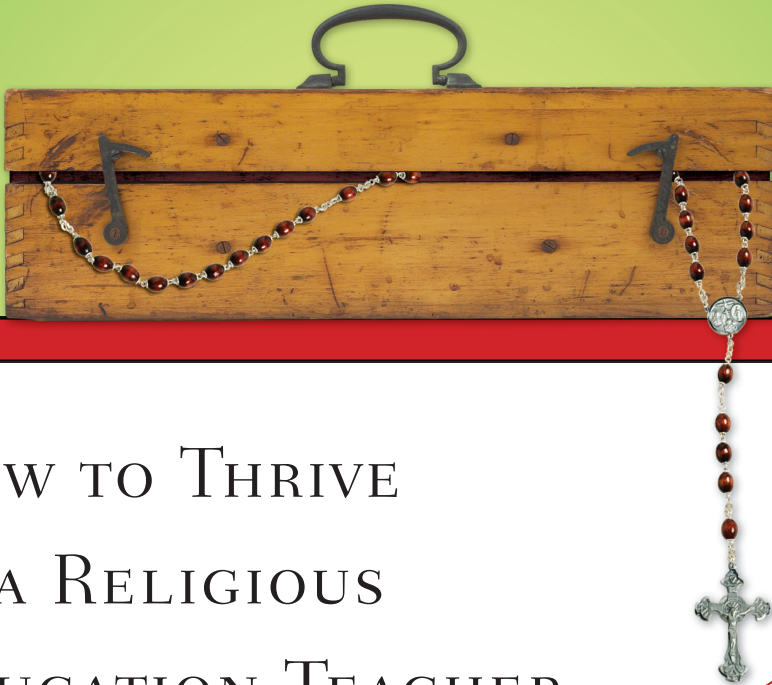


JOE PAPROCKI

THE CATECHIST'S TOOLBOX



HOW TO THRIVE
AS A RELIGIOUS
EDUCATION TEACHER

Skills, Tips,
and Practical
Advice You Can
Use Today

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 Shop-Talk: The Language of Catechesis	1
2 Blueprints: Planning and Preparation	7
3 Socket and Wrench Set: Finding Activities That Fit	13
4 Color Charts: Selecting Learning Activities	17
5 Different Types of Wood: Adapting to Learning Styles, Special Needs, and Diversity	25
6 Drop Cloths: Preparing for Things That Can Go Wrong	35
7 Applying Primer: Preparing the Learning Environment	43
8 Spotlights: Shifting the Focus onto Learners	51
9 Extension Cords: Plugging into the Power of Prayer	57
10 Sandpaper: Smoothing Out Discipline Problems	71
11 Furniture Polish: Polishing Your Technique	81
12 Instruction Manuals: Using Textbooks and Catechist Manuals	89
13 Samples and Illustrations: Looking to the Bible for Vision	95
14 Power Tools: Using Technology	101
15 Scrapers: Using Questions to Get beneath the Surface	109
16 Tape Measures: Assessing Progress	115
17 Apprenticeship: Teaching and Learning by Doing	123
<i>Conclusion: Looking for Results</i>	131
<i>Appendix 1: A Guided Reflection</i>	132
<i>Appendix 2: Reliable Catholic Web Sites</i>	134



Chapter Ten

Sandpaper: Smoothing Out Discipline Problems

When doing home improvements,

we want our finished products to look smooth and neat. However, many of the materials we are working with are rough and rugged. After filling cracks in a wall, we still find that the surface is rough and needs to be smoothed out.

After cutting a piece of wood, we find that the edges are rough and need to be smoothed out.

This is where sandpaper comes in. If it were not for sandpaper, we would run the risk of bumpy surfaces and splinters. When we use a sander to smooth down a surface, it seems like a miracle is taking place.

“Young people today . . . will be very likely to reject some of what they learn, or to refuse to integrate it in their lives, if it is not taught in ways that make sense to them emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually.”

*NATIONAL DIRECTORY
FOR CATECHESIS, 4C*

Rough Edges in Catechesis: Discipline Problems

We tend to have a somewhat romantic notion of being a catechist. We picture ourselves speaking eloquently as participants interact joyfully and enthusiastically with us and with one another. And then, of course, there is reality. In catechesis, we encounter any number of rough edges. One of the rough edges we face is that of discipline problems—especially in catechesis with children and adolescents. Left unchecked, discipline problems can be like pieces of wood that are not sanded—they can cause some pain. A good catechist learns how to smooth out discipline problems. Maintaining discipline in the catechetical setting allows the beauty of the participants and the power of God’s word to show through: just




as sanding down a surface brings out the true beauty of a piece of wood. Rather than giving up when faced with discipline problems, learn how to use some tools to smooth them out.

Discipline is a necessary part of faith formation. Each Lent, we practice the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and giving alms. The idea is that, in order to be a disciple of Jesus, one needs discipline. Remember, our God is “not the God of disorder but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). When you maintain discipline in your learning environment, you are acting in the image of God—in whose name you teach.

★ ★

Jesus himself faced some rather difficult situations.

- ★ *Matthew 13:57*(Jesus is rejected in his hometown.)
 - ★ *Mark 11:28*(The crowds challenge Jesus' authority.)
 - ★ *Luke 4:29*(Jesus is thrown out of the synagogue and dragged to a cliff.)
 - ★ *Luke 9:52–53* (A Samaritan town refuses to receive Jesus.)
 - ★ *Luke 19:7*(The crowds grumble when Jesus announces he will dine with Zacchaeus.)
 - ★ *John 6:66*(Many of Jesus' followers find his teaching too difficult and leave him.)
 - ★ *John 8:59* (Crowds pick up stones to throw at Jesus.)
 - ★ *John 9:14* (The crowds challenge Jesus' healing of a man born blind.)
 - ★ *John 10:31* (More stones!)
- 
- A cartoon-style illustration of a megaphone. The megaphone is white with a green interior. The words "THE GOSPEL" are written on it in black, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Several small black stars are shown flying out from the mouth of the megaphone, suggesting a loud announcement or proclamation.




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By the way, have you noticed the similarities between the words **discipline** and **disciple**? They both share the same root word, which means “to learn.” In other words, as a catechist, you are responsible for keeping discipline so that disciples can learn how to follow Jesus.



Skills, Tips, and Practical Advice for Maintaining Discipline

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.



The role of good discipline is to remove any obstacles from an effective learning experience.

2. **Identify the Improper Behavior**—

One doesn't need to sand down an entire wall before painting. Only the rough spots need to be sanded down. By the same token, 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 causes of improper behavior:

- ◆ boredom
- ◆ immaturity and ego needs (seeking attention, trying to impress peers)
- ◆ hostility toward either you, other participants, the church, or 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. Avoid Interrupting Your Lesson**—One of the reasons children and adolescents misbehave is because they know that their disruption 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 the participant's desk or tabletop, 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 by giving the participant a task to perform. By keeping your participants busy and on task right from the start, you eliminate a great deal of potential trouble.

**"Be ever engaged,
so that whenever the
devil calls he may find
you occupied."**

—ST. JEROME

- 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. Walk around the room as you teach and keep your eyes moving around as you speak. If you are answering one participant's question, move your eyes around

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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 that person.

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 he or she can “hide” from you, he or she will take advantage of the situation. Make sure visual lines are open. Likewise, if a participant is misbehaving, it could be that he or she is sitting with others who are egging the participant on. Moving a participant’s seat can effectively reduce bad behavior.

“ **How a room is arranged can have a great impact on behavior.** ”

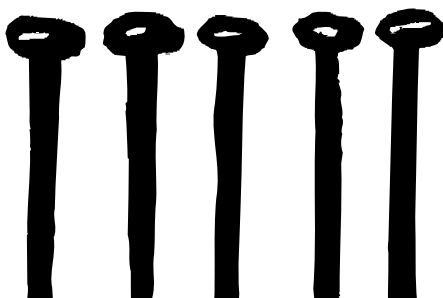
8. Reinforce Good Behavior—Don’t just focus on the negative. Learn to focus attention on good behavior, and reinforce it. When participants are behaving properly, you can reward them with affirmations. When a participant who is prone to misbehaving shows the proper behavior, be sure to reinforce it with a 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 the age of your participants, you should be able to ask them what rules they will need to make the gatherings go well and to create a good learning

“ **You will accomplish more by kind words and a courteous manner than by anger or sharp rebuke, which should never be used except in necessity.** ”

—ST. ANGELA MERICI

environment. Later, when enforcing the rules, you can remind them that these are their rules. Be sure participants know clearly what the rules are. Also, you should enforce them in a consistent manner so the participants know that the rules are to be taken seriously.





Catechist: Arturo, didn't you promise to behave?

Arturo: Yes.

Catechist: And didn't I tell you there would be consequences if you misbehaved?

Arturo: Yes, but since I broke my promise, you don't have to keep yours.

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.

11. Avoid the Following:

- ◆ When working with children, never send a child out of the room alone and unsupervised, lest he or she wander off or even leave the building.
- ◆ Be careful not to use God as an “enforcer.” Some catechists use the “good cop/bad cop” routine and make God the “bad cop.” This creates a theology of God that is not consistent with our heritage. Children do not need an image of an angry God waiting to dish out punishment for bad behavior.
- ◆ Avoid being overly tough: you run the risk of alienating your participants. They may be so intimidated by you that they will either not respond at all or will simply parrot back to you what they think you want to hear. Recall that religious education is, for many participants, their most significant experience of the church. If it is a negative experience, or one that they fear, they may carry that with them for years to come.



“I need you to line up by attention span.”

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12. Working with Small Groups—Discipline problems often arise when participants are arranged in small groups to complete a task. Here are some tips for working more effectively with small groups:

- ◆ Explain the purpose for arranging your participants into groups. Provide clear instructions and directions before arranging them into groups and before distributing any necessary supplies. Ask for volunteers to repeat the instructions and directions out loud so that you know they understand their task.
- ◆ Employ creative and fun techniques for grouping your participants so as to engage them in the process. Use groups as a way for participants to get to know one another and to move out of their usual circles. Groups of four are ideal for effectiveness. Arrange the room so that groups can work together without disrupting other groups.
- ◆ Give brief and concise time limits for completing the task. Create a sense of urgency by allowing slightly less time than might be needed to complete the task. You can always allow an extra minute or two if the groups are not ready when the original time is up.
- ◆ Provide a signal that will indicate when the groups are to quiet themselves and return their attention to the large group. Keep the participants on task by walking around and asking groups to tell you how far along they are.
- ◆ Be sure that the group work cannot be completed by any one participant but truly requires each one to assume responsibility for a task. Assign roles such as leader, recorder, reporter, monitor (keeps track of time), and collector (collects materials and supplies). Include a high level of individual accountability. For example, if a group of four is to brainstorm a list of ten things, make sure every member contributes at least two suggestions. If one participant appears to be dominating a group, gently intervene to invite other members of the group to contribute.
- ◆ Provide ongoing feedback (affirmations and challenges, as needed) as they continue their work. Likewise, provide time estimates so that the participants know how to pace themselves. Tell them where they should be in completing their task and encourage them to arrive at definite conclusions.

**Create a sense of urgency
by allowing slightly less
time than might be needed
to complete assigned tasks.**

- ◆ Make sure that the results of the group work are observable and concrete. For example, if participants are to brainstorm lists, make sure that each group has someone recording the list on a piece of paper. Allow groups to report on their work and make use of their findings. Bring closure to group activities by asking volunteers to summarize what was accomplished by group work.

Glossary

Discipline problems may be cataloged into three distinct categories.

Minor Discipline Problems—These are the most typical problems that a catechist faces, such as wavering attention, distractions, and side talking. While none of these may seem overly serious, they can wear down a catechist. Furthermore, left unchecked, they can erode the discipline of a group and lead to more serious problems.

Moderate Discipline Problems—These are problems that can seriously disrupt the flow of your lesson, such as participants who set themselves off from the group and refuse to participate, simple mischief such as throwing small objects or paper airplanes, and talking out of turn. Although it is more difficult to deal with these problems without interrupting the flow of your lesson, you can still deal with these situations effectively without bringing your lesson to a grinding halt.

Major Discipline Problems—These are problems that can bring your lesson crashing down around you. For example, you might have a learning activity that dissolves into total chaos due to lack of clear directions; a participant “sabotaging” a lesson by interfering with a piece of equipment such as a VCR/DVD player; or an incident of dishonesty or disrespect such as stealing or racially motivated graffiti. In all instances, it is important to remain calm and in control. You need to be able to deal with the specific behavior in a manner that will maintain self-respect for you and for your group.

Catechist: Kim, I hope I didn't see you copying from Nikki's paper!

Kim: I hope you didn't see me either!

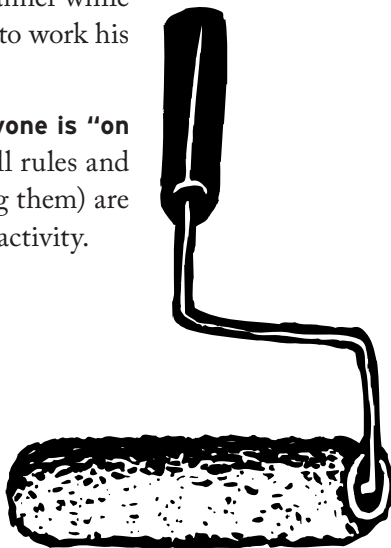
Troubleshooting

- + In a serious situation, it is crucial that you consult your catechetical leader, principal, pastor, colleague, or any other person of authority. This way, you will not have to face the situation alone.
- + On the other hand, you cannot run to these people every time some discipline problem arises. Be sure the situation warrants it.
- + In a serious situation, be fair and flexible, and always give the participant an opportunity to redeem him- or herself. Negotiating a contract is a way of dealing with the behavior in a concrete and authoritative manner while providing the participant with an opportunity to work his or her way out of the bad behavior.
- + Make sure that no activity begins until everyone is “on the same page.” This means being sure that all rules and directions (as well as consequences for violating them) are understood and clarified before you begin any activity.



What do the words *discipline* and *disciple* have in common?

*They both came from the Latin *discere*, meaning “to learn.”*



Scripture

“Endure your trials as ‘discipline’; God treats you as sons. For what ‘son’ is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it.”

(HEBREWS 12:7, 11)

Prayer

Sometimes I get worried about facing challenging situations in my teaching. Lord Jesus, you faced some pretty tough audiences in your day. Yet you stayed focused on preaching the Good News of the kingdom of God. Grant me the patience, fairness, and perspective that I need to maintain my focus, and to face up to these challenges and handle them with calmness and authority. In all things, allow me to show love, no matter how frustrated I may become. Help me to acquire new skills to handle challenges so that your word may come to life in my participants.

For an opportunity to companion with other catechists and to nourish our vocation, visit www.catechistsjourney.com.



Build up your skills and confidence with the right tools!

Each year, roughly one-third of the more than five hundred thousand volunteer catechists in Catholic parishes are new to the job. Most of these catechists receive little formal training for their work, yet it is vitally important that they know how to prepare a lesson, lead a discussion, supervise children, apply discipline, and help kids grow in the faith.

The Catechist's Toolbox is an invaluable collection of methodologies, techniques, and tips that provide on-the-job training for any new catechist. Master teacher Joe Paprocki shares the wisdom he has gleaned in two decades as a catechist, religious educator, and high school teacher. Employing the metaphor of a homeowner's toolbox, Paprocki explains what every catechist must know and do to develop the skills he or she will need in order to thrive as a religion teacher for many years to come.



Visit www.catechistsjourney.com

In addition to the wealth of suggestions in *The Catechist's Toolbox*, readers can get specific answers to their questions about catechesis and other faith-related topics by visiting Joe's blog, Catechist's Journey, at www.catechistsjourney.com.



Joe Paprocki has served in many teaching capacities in the Chicago area for more than twenty years. His books include *God's Library* and *Living the Mass* (Loyola Press). He is currently associate director of the catechetical services department of Loyola Press.

