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Classroom Management for Catechists

- *Discipline strategies for building teacher confidence*
- *Solutions for challenging situations*
- *Sample classroom routine*

JENNIFER FITZ



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2

THE ELEMENTS OF DISCIPLINE

How do I get these kids to behave?! It's a question we may struggle with as parents, and it's no less a problem in the classroom. There can be no lesson if students are not able to focus on learning.

Some teachers have a natural leadership presence—they walk into a room, students behave, problem solved. I wish I had that magic, but I don't. And there's nothing more frustrating than having a fellow teacher or staff member say, "Well, just make them behave!" as if calming a roomful of rambunctious children were as simple as remembering to pay the water bill or feed the dog every morning.

If you're like me, vague admonitions to "stay on task" or "plan ahead" don't really mean much. Stay on what task? And I made a plan—why isn't it working? Natural leaders may not be aware of what it is they do so well because they just do it automatically.

But just because you and I don't magically know how to manage classroom behavior doesn't mean we're doomed to a life of pencil wars and paint on the walls. We can choose to learn how to use the tools of good discipline as part of an active strategy to make our class run as smoothly as possible.

Meet the Six E's

In order to think strategically about discipline, I organized what I call the "Elements of Discipline" into six E's: Example, Environ-

ment, Engagement, Explanation, Enforcement, and Encouragement. We're going to look at each one of them in detail.

One of the challenges of classroom discipline is choosing methods that are both effective and appropriate in the classroom setting. Certain types of discipline that are an important part of parenting may be ineffective or harmful when used by a teacher. As we walk through the six elements, we'll look at some specific actions that work well and some traps to avoid.

As you tackle behavioral problems in your classroom, ask yourself: Which element is needed here? What's missing? When faced with a new situation, you might not know exactly how to respond. Ask yourself what type—what category—of change is needed. Do students need me to set a better example? Did I fail to explain what I expected? Is there a distracting environment I can modify to make it easier to behave? Once we've identified the types of changes we need to make, it's easier to choose specific actions that are likely to help.

ELEMENT #1

Set the Right Example

Human beings are created to learn from one another. We naturally adopt the language, ideas, manners, and habits of the people around us, even without thinking about it. As a teacher, I need to make sure I'm using that copying instinct to teach my students how to behave well.

Consider the example you are setting for your students, both in and outside of class. Are your students struggling with their behavior in part because of what they are learning from you? Is it possible that your own struggle with some aspect of Christian life has caused you to give up on your ideals—and students are following your pattern? Let's do a quick Catechist's Examination of Conscience.

Catechist's Examination of Conscience

Do I take my religious-education class seriously? Do I come to class prepared, with my materials organized and a plan in place? Do I stay focused during class time, or am I tempted to chat with the other adults during class hours? I can't expect my students to be serious about class if I myself don't treat my class as a serious commitment.

Do I treat others with respect? Am I kind? Do I control my temper? Do I avoid sarcasm and gossip? Do I show respect for others both in what I say and in how I say it? Do I give others the benefit of the doubt or do I always assume the worst?

Am I devoted to prayer and the sacraments? What kind of example do I set at Mass and during prayer times in class? Am I reverent and respectful? Do I pray, sing, and receive Communion attentively and devotedly? Are my students likely to see me in line for the sacrament of confession?

How committed am I to my own faith? Am I doing my best to live out my Christian vocation all week long? Do I make a serious effort to cultivate my prayer life, to serve others, and to learn more about the faith? Have I given up on holiness, or have I made it my goal to keep cooperating with the grace of God until I get there?

What I do sends a powerful message: *This is how Christians behave. This is how you should behave.* Sobering, isn't it?

But wait a minute! *I'm still a long way from being a model Catholic.* Maybe you aren't 100 percent perfect either. Does this mean we shouldn't be catechists? No, usually not. But it does mean this: I need a Savior. And that's good news, because my students do, too. I can use my own failures as an opportunity to show my

students how to apologize, how to ask for forgiveness, and how to make amends for my sins.

As a catechist, it's important I remember that humility and holiness are two sides of the same coin. Humility doesn't consist of setting low standards and resigning myself to being something less than holy. It consists of recognizing what holiness looks like in my state of life and being honest about where I still have some growing to do. In many cases, I stand side by side with my students, sharing the same struggles they face. The important thing is that we don't look at our own weaknesses and decide that's good enough. Instead, I need to point them to Christ, and we can look together toward him as our model and goal.

ELEMENT #2

Create an Environment That Makes It Easy for Students to Behave

It's a Friday during Lent, and you're starving. You open the fridge. There's a piece of leftover steak, a box of fried chicken, and a brand-new package of your favorite cold cuts. How easy is it going to be to keep that rule about no meat on Fridays? Not so easy. We do ourselves a favor if we empty the fridge of the stuff we're supposed to avoid and fill it with better options.

The classroom is the same way. We help our students by creating an environment that makes it easier to behave from the moment they walk in the door. Sometimes you will be able to prepare your teaching space before class begins. In other situations, you will have to quickly assess the room and make a snap decision about how to make the most of the setting you've been given. Cultivate the habit of identifying potential distractions, obstructions, and annoyances, and of finding ways to eliminate them when possible.

Match the physical environment to the activity. You can't always control this, but do your best. Is it possible to dim the lights for meditative prayer? Can you shut the classroom door to keep out noise from the hallway? Use background music selectively—make sure it is a help and not a distraction.

Sometimes you have to be creative to work around an unchangeable situation. Our parish gym is a giant echo chamber. Once you add thirty restless children, there is no hope of being able to teach a lesson everyone can hear. If we plan to use the gym for games, we first gather the students in another, quieter location where we can give instructions and answer questions.

Decide ahead of time where and how your students will pray. Standing is a reverent way to do a short set of opening and closing prayers, but sitting works better for long prayer sessions, especially meditative prayers. You may wish to gather everyone around a prayer table. Is there room to do so? Will the process of getting to and from the prayer station take more time than the prayer itself? Walk it out ahead of time and adjust your plans as needed.

Use seating arrangements to your advantage. Easily distracted students need to sit front and center, close to the teacher. This helps them stay focused on the lesson and helps you monitor any soon-to-erupt situations. High-energy students are often helped by doing extra classroom chores such as passing out papers, so having them at hand makes it easier to put them to work.

All students benefit from sitting near neighbors who help them stay focused on their work. Observe and use your judgment. Sometimes allowing best friends to sit next to each other means constant chatter and notes sent back and forth. But it can also mean a team of students who help each other stay on track or engage in friendly, productive competition for good grades.

Pay attention to the friendships, jealousies, and rivalries among your students. If you see a student being left out, rearrange to give

that student a compatible tablemate. Both out of kindness, and to prevent the inevitable explosion, don't try to force a friendship between two students who obviously annoy each other or whose personalities are clearly at odds.

Give students the proper amount of space for the activity under way. Move students farther apart from each other during test-taking or meditative prayer. Put students closer together when they need to share books or work on a group project. When rearranging, teens may be able to choose their own spaces, but younger students will need guidance. Plan to actively assist students for any direction such as “get into groups of four” or “find a partner.”

Use visual and physical cues to communicate expectations. If you need children to sit in a circle, use masking tape X's to show them where to sit or set out rugs and direct them to find one. If you want students to focus on a particular part of the room, arrange desks and chairs so that students are naturally looking in that direction. When showing a video, make sure all students can see and hear clearly.

Set up the room in a way that accommodates all students. If the arrangement of the room makes it impossible for a student with a disability to fully participate in class, or the planned activities exclude a student, plan again. If you aren't sure of your student's needs and abilities, ask. See chapter 6 for specific ways to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Remove temptations. How would you feel if your friends welcomed you to their home, showed you to a comfortable seat, and placed a giant tray of freshly baked brownies in front of you—only to scowl and stamp feet if you dared to taste one? Students likewise assume that whatever items you place on their desk or table are meant for them and will naturally help themselves. They may “get to work” in ways you had not anticipated, unless you give clear instructions on when and how the supplies are to be

used. Particularly tempting items should be stowed out of sight when not in use. If you bring interesting visual aids or props, keep them put away except when you want students to look at them.

You can use the power of distraction to your advantage by displaying or leaving within reach the items you want students to explore. Bibles, a crucifix, the words of a prayer displayed on a poster—these “distractions” are lessons in themselves—especially with older students, for there will be times when you need to teach material that some students have already mastered. Consider discreetly allowing advanced students to read from their Bible, work on an assignment, or read the textbook silently. When you again need all eyes up front, direct students to close their books, stack them in the center of the table, or stow them under their desks.

Your parish may have a policy on cell phones and other electronic devices. If you collect student phones during class time, make sure that the dismissal routine includes “The Returning of the Phones” as a specific checklist item. I find it effective to have a clearly marked “Cell Phone Prison” (a brightly colored shoe box) near the door, but to let students know that as long as I don’t see or hear their digital device, I would rather they kept the device themselves—turned off and stored in a book bag or pocket.

Take care of drink and restroom breaks at designated times. If possible, have students go to the bathroom before they come into class. If your class lasts long enough that a second restroom break is needed, plan one into your schedule. This is a good time for students to work on independent activities such as a craft, worksheet, or journal.

Use “rhythm and routine” to map out a workable plan for your class. We’ll delve into the details of this in the next chapters, but here’s a preview of the three big ideas: (1) choose engaging activities appropriate for your students’ ages and abilities; (2) order your activities so that the class runs smoothly; and (3) use routines

to help students know what to expect and when to expect it.

This isn't an exhaustive list! Keep your eyes open for situations that are distracting to your students. Sometimes you can eliminate the distraction, sometimes you have to work around it. But to the best of your ability, make it as easy as possible for your students to behave.

ELEMENT #3

Students Should be Engaged in a Specific Activity at All Times

This is in many ways part of “Environment,” but it is so important it deserves an “E” of its own. Here’s a rule you can count on 100 percent of the time:

**If your students have nothing to do,
they will think up something to do.**

Plan your class so there is a steady flow of activities, including some extra tasks for students who finish work early.

“Keep them busy” does not mean entertaining students with a circus and acrobats! Classroom keep-me-busy activities include additional assignments, silent reading, cleaning up supplies, or praying a formal prayer with the help of a holy card or prayer booklet. But always have something for your students to do, and give clear instructions on what that something is.

Because effective planning is such an important part of classroom discipline, we’ll be spending the next several chapters walking through the details of how to build a class that eliminates pockets of idle time. Sometimes, however, you the catechist will not be able to control your class schedule. You may find yourself stuck, sitting and waiting. Perhaps there’s a special presentation about to begin, but the presenter is five minutes late. Or your class

was supposed to meet the deacon in the church halfway through the class period, but the previous group of children is still finishing up, and you've got twenty-five kids jammed in the vestibule waiting their turn. If you don't quickly think of something to fill those five minutes, there will be a game of tag under way before you can say, "Quit playing with the choir robes!"

It's your job to be the leader. Pick a no-supplies-required, open-ended activity. This could be anything: Lead the class in impromptu prayers for pets, family members, and upcoming tests at school; play I Spy or Twenty Questions; quiz the kids on Bible trivia, or lead them in a discussion that allows them to share short answers to fun questions about themselves. If you have a talent for music or puppet shows, now's the time to lead the class in song or whip out the finger puppets and perform. This is also a great time to take open questions about the faith. Even if you don't know the answer, you can make a note of the question and follow up later.

Can an Old-Fashioned Catechist Compete in a Digital World?

There's much hand-wringing in religious-education circles these days about how to hold the attention of children who spend their days flitting from one high-tech activity to the next. Is it necessary for catechists to have the latest teaching technology? It's the rare parish that can match the digital amenities students find at school and home.

Let this be your secret weapon. Instead of trying to fit in with the digital crowd, stand out by offering human interaction—a chance for students to learn and explore in the real world, using their own imaginations, sharing their own ideas, and being given the attention of an adult who cares about them and is eager to

listen and to share real-life experiences.

Be careful, though, as you find ways for students take an active role in class, to resist the temptation to let students run the class. You the adult should lead most activities—you have the knowledge, presentation skills, and sense of timing that lets you keep the class moving as you respond to student cues. Limit student presentations to about five minutes of class time per session. That’s ten second-graders showing off their baptism pictures, five fifth-graders giving you their saint’s top three facts, or two high school students sharing what they did for their service project over spring break. Give just enough time for students who long for some limelight to show their stuff, but not so long that you’ve exhausted the patience of the classmates politely doodling in their journals while they wait for the more polished teaching to resume.

ELEMENT #4

Students Need Clear Explanations of What You Expect

No one is born knowing exactly how to do everything. Even simple skills like taking turns or saying “please” and “thank you” must be taught. And once we have learned what to do, sometimes we need reminders. As a catechist, you will have to explicitly teach your students what you expect in your classroom. You will also sometimes have to coach students on social norms that you think they should already know. In the next chapter, we’ll look at the importance of using standard procedures, or classroom routines, to simplify your class time. Right now let’s look specifically at concerns about misbehavior.

Don’t wait for students to misbehave before you begin communicating your expectations. At the beginning of the school year, *have the students develop a list of classroom rules*. Building their