

Handout 29

Discipline in Sunday School: What Would a UU Do?

By Abby L. W. Crowley, Ed D.

We believe in the right of every teacher and child to teach and learn in a safe, supportive and (relatively) distraction-free environment, thereby making the Sunday school experience a positive one for all concerned.

What do you get when you put 10 - 15 bright, talkative, enthusiastic and sometimes reluctant kids together in a room with two eager, but not professionally trained teachers for seventy-five minutes on a Sunday morning? Depending on the teachers, the kids, the content, the space and maybe even the weather or what the kids had for breakfast, the result can range from chaos to ecstasy. With training and support from the Religious Educator and the Religious Education Committee, we can increase the chances that the experience will be largely positive and keep teacher frustration and burnout to a minimum.

What follows are the seven principles of teaching in a Unitarian Universalist church school that can make classroom management and discipline reflective of our principles and can make Sunday school worth getting up early for.

Principle 1: Prepare, prepare, prepare.

Hopefully those responsible for selecting curriculum have done a good job and you have an age appropriate, experiential and interesting curriculum to work with. Become intimately familiar with your curriculum, perhaps getting it in the spring and having all summer to read it through. Make notes in the margins or with sticky notes of ideas you have, special materials or resources you will need and questions you have. Make adaptations and choices from among recommended activities based on what you know your class has responded positively or negatively to in the past. Each week, come early enough to have everything set up and ready to go for the entire session before the children come in. Confer with your assistant or co-teacher to be clear as to who will do what. If you see in advance that the children may need extra help on a project, line up a

few extra warm bodies for the morning. Advance preparation will eliminate many of the behavior problems that occur in a less prepared classroom.

Principle 2: Build Relationships and Community

One teacher I know who works with troubled teens told me that she believes that 90% of discipline is relationship, and in my 25 years of working with kids with emotional and behavioral disorders, I would have to agree. In addition, research has clearly shown that classrooms where a strong sense of community is forged have the fewest behavior problems. Get to know your kids. Wear nametags every week. Celebrate the diversity that exists in your classroom. Find out what the kids like, what they do outside of church. Sunday mornings can be hectic and rushed, so you might want to take the time and effort to arrange a social gathering of kids and parents early in the church year such as a picnic, sleepover, or bonfire. In addition, help the children form friendships with each other. Ask the Religious Educator if you can get a list of names and phone numbers to distribute to the kids in the class. I have gotten my own reluctant child to attend by having a Sunday school friend sleep over on Saturday night. Once the friendship was formed, my son became eager to go to Sunday school on subsequent Sundays to see his new friend.

Another trick that may work for you, especially with preteens and older elementary children who are losing their interest in Sunday school, is getting them involved in service activities in the community and in the church. Do the AIDS Walk as a group. Plant a flowerbed in the parking lot. Give them responsibility around the church in areas such as ushering and helping with the younger children. These kinds of activities have the power to transform a reluctant group into a cohesive, involved one.

Principle 3: Create Class Standards

In the first session or two, take time to generate a list of no more than 5 class standards for behavior. The way I find this most effectively done is to have the kids suggest standards that they write on a large piece of newsprint. All ideas are accepted. After a list has been generated, work with the class to hone the list into a more concise list. For example, if you have "no hitting" and "no teasing" on the first list, ask the children if there is a general rule (i.e., "respect each other") that would encompass both. Make sure that in

your final list, all of the rules are stated positively. For example, instead of “don’t misuse the materials”, suggest “take care of the materials”. For older kids, have them look at the UU principles and see if there is anything there they would like to include as a standard. Make a final poster of the rules to be posted every week. Send a copy home. When misbehavior occurs, simply ask the child, “Are you breaking a rule? Which one?” When problems occur reflecting behavior that is not addressed in the rules, have a class discussion asking the students if they would like to add a new rule. Overall, make sure that the kids take ownership of the rules and facilitate their encouragement of each other in following them.

Principle 4: Respond clearly, supportively and consistently to misbehavior.

What is the process for responding to misbehavior in your classroom and church school? If you do not have a clear process, work with your teaching team and Religious Educator to develop one. For example, for younger children, we might rely heavily on distraction, redirection and one-on-one support. For older children, chronic misbehavior may have to be referred to the Religious Educator. The Religious Educator can then intervene non-punitively with the child to find out what is at the root of the problem and what can be done to resolve the issues. At times, it will be necessary to bring the parents of the child into the process for additional information and support. For example, in my intervention with a family of a child who had been quite disruptive, I learned that he was not taking his medication on the weekends. We decided (after consulting with his doctor) to try giving his medication to him before Sunday school and to involve him in helping out with snacks (to give him a break from the classroom). Our adjustments made a world of difference! Overall, I urge all of my teachers to let me know about problems while they are still small. It is much harder to resolve these issues when anger and resentment has built up over a number of weeks.

Principle 5: Talk so kids will listen; Listen so kids will talk.

When you think back on the teachers that you have had or observed that were the most effective, you will probably recall their respectful attitude, the positive choices that they constantly gave their students and the active way that they listened to what their students had to say. Effective teachers describe the problem (“there are crayons on the floor”) and

offer choices (“would you like to pick up the crayons or put away the snack?”) instead of making demands (“pick up the crayons”). They give information (“that paint is not the kind that can be washed out of your clothes”) instead of giving orders (“put on a smock”). They describe how they feel (“I feel frustrated when kids interrupt each other because I want to hear what each one of you has to say”) rather than blaming (“you are being very rude”). They involve children in problem solving individually and as a group. Adele Faber and Elaine Maislich have an excellent book that describes these techniques clearly for home or classroom use titled *How to Talk so Kids Can Learn*. Put it on your reading list!

Principle 6: Ask questions

Now that should be easy for a UU! When you don't understand, need ideas, or simply need to vent, seek the support of another teacher, your Religious Educator or ask to have a Religious Education Committee member as liaison to your class. Although you are probably very busy, take advantage of any training opportunities that are offered in your church or district. You will gain a great deal of information and have a wonderful opportunity to network with other teachers. Church school is a dynamic process, a true village where we can come together to create wonder and joy with the children. Be part of the village. Don't try to go it alone.

Principle 7: Remember why we are there.

You planned that lesson all week. You spent seven hours cutting out game board pieces and rubber banding them in packets for each student. You went to three libraries before you found the right book on about friendship. You invited an origami expert to come and make paper cranes with the children she decided to give birth to twins last night instead. It is the first day of spring, the birds are singing, and you did not plan time to go outside and play in the creek. What should you do? Change gears. The real value of Sunday morning is the feelings between teachers and kids and the positive memories created. Sure, the curricula are terrific, but you will know when it is time to let go of it because it isn't working or something else draws the attention and passion of the children. Trust your gut. The more you do, the better you will get at it.

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