

# Teaching Biblical Truth by Training Behavior

## Key Principles

1. Children are Foolish by Nature

“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,” Proverbs 22:15

We can expect foolish behavior from children in the classroom.

## 2. Responding to Foolish Behavior is an Important Part of Our Teaching

Since we can expect foolish behavior, we can plan how to use foolishness to train children in the biblical truths we hope they will learn from our lessons. Foolish behavior fills the pages of the Bible; and, it often fills the lives of our children. Why? Because foolish behavior is the outworking of foolish, sinful hearts. We enjoy good behavior from our children because it makes our jobs as teachers easier and more effective. But, it is important to remember that our primary objective in all our teaching is to help the children learn about the Creator God, see their sinful, rebellious hearts, understand the consequences of their sin; and turn to Jesus as their Lord and Savior. We can use their foolish behavior and our teaching as opportunities to point out foolish behavior, its consequences and our need for a Savior. As you prepare your lesson, ask yourself: What foolish behavior do I see the people in this story exhibiting? What wise behavior? Do any of these behaviors look like the heart issues or actions of the children in my class? What questions could I ask them to help them see these issues/actions and apply them to their lives? How could I point the children to their own heart issues and their own need of a Savior through this story and the issues/actions highlighted, as well as, of course, through any foolish classroom behaviors?

## 3. Training and Turning of Hearts and Actions

As we address foolish behavior in our classroom, it is important to think about how we change. Any kind of training takes time, even more so the training of behaviors overflowing from sinful hearts. Since children are by nature foolish, then we need to help train them in wise behavior, encourage them to turn away from it. We need to make sure they understand how they are to act (through learning classroom rules as well as through learning biblical truths in our lessons). We also want to lead them to see their sinful hearts, ask God for forgiveness, and for the Holy Spirit's help to change both their hearts and their actions. We need to be praying for God to be at work in the children even during the week. How easy it is to forget the children until Sunday morning when we are faced with teaching them again! What opportunities we waste when we do this!

How important it is that we also remember that changed behavior does not necessarily mean changed hearts! Changed hearts are a work of the Holy Spirit alone! We also should pray that God would make us gentle, wise and consistent in our training of the children.

## 4. Train and Turn Only with Great Compassion, Gentleness and Graciousness

Behavioral problems, especially with “repeat offenders”, can be very frustrating. It is very, very important that we only train and turn with compassion, gentleness and mercy. Not only can this often help a situation more quickly resolve (cf. Proverbs 15:1 “A gentle answer turns away wrath and a harsh word stirs up anger.”), but when we act and speak from a heart of compassion, gentleness and graciousness, we reflect our merciful and loving Father to the children. Pray that God would fill your heart with His mercy and love as you deal with any behavior issues. Then of course there's the work that God will do in our heart and lives as we ask Him to cultivate this attitude in ourselves. Be aware of growing frustration on your part. If you feel that you cannot speak or act towards a child with the right attitude, it would be better to leave the situation to another teacher.

## **5. An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Correction**

### **out of temptation's way**

When you become familiar with the children in your classroom, you will become aware of the things that typically tempt them. You may prevent many mishaps by looking over your lesson plans and classroom for situations, objects, etc. that will tend to draw out misbehavior and adjusting them accordingly. Do you have a group of especially wiggling children? Look for ways to add in more movement. Do you have some very competitive children? Change the games to be group cooperation games rather than team vs. team. Are there things in the room that regularly distract? Find a place to put them away.

### **working as a team**

When one teacher is leading the teaching, the other teacher(s) should be actively looking for ways to facilitate focus and learning. This includes everything from noticing if the lead teacher needs a dry erase marker and bringing it to him, hold visuals, etc. to sitting next to a wiggly child, to quietly pulling aside a child who has a behavioral issue. Whenever possible, avoid the lead teacher interrupting his teaching to deal up with these issues. It will be distracting the other students and be more embarrassing to the student who is struggling.

## **6. Choosing your battles**

Issues which must be addressed each time

- Safety issues
- Pattern behaviors that reflect heart
- Issues that affect feelings of another child
- Deliberate disobedience

Issues in which you can choose your battles

- Classroom training (like raising hands, etc.)

## **7. A Note about the Children of Visitors**

Children of visitors may face extra anxiety in child care. They are surrounded by new teachers, new children and are in a new setting. While the above guidelines are useful for all children--visitors or regular attenders--you may need to spend a little extra time and show an extra measure of patience with the visiting children in most issues. However, issues of safety or physical harm must be treated with the same immediate response as with the children of members.

## **8. We Serve the Children Best by Partnering with Their Parents**

The Lord has primarily given parents the honor and challenge of nurturing and admonishing the children we teach in our classroom. By gleaning from their knowledge and experiences of their children, we can learn how to best teach them and train them. By sharing with them both encouragements and concerns, we may be able to help them to better understand and shepherd their children.

### **engaging with parents**

Parents appreciate a report on how their child did during class, so don't be afraid to touch base with them with a one-sentence feedback. "Mikey did a great job answering questions during Circle Time." "I could tell Katie really liked our songs today." "Ask Lewis to tell you what grasshoppers had to do with our story today."

If you had a discipline issue that warranted time out, you should tell the parents about it, even if you feel like the issue was resolved.

Don't be afraid to ask parents for advice about their children. If you have had trouble with a particular child (be it girl drama, throwing, not participating) or if you simply feel perplexed, share your observations with the parents and humbly ask if they have any suggestions on how you can help their child.

When a parent has left a child in your care, they have temporarily transferred their authority to you in the care of their child. However, the teacher is still not the primary caregiver or the one primarily accountable to the Lord for the shepherding and training of that child. We can partner with the parents helping to train, encourage and correct (when needed) a little one, but sometimes, you may find a "tough cookie" who does not respond to your correction. In these situations, where you cannot help turn their heart from sin, or their behavior from a behavior that is persistent and distracting or even harmful to the class, it is very appropriate that you have the hall monitor call the parents to your room to help. While we, as teachers, of course want to extend grace and understanding when possible, we also need to realize that we do not benefit the child (or his/her parents) when we ignore consistent issues, hardening hearts, etc.

### **encouragements**

Dismissal time can be a particularly wonderful time to share encouragement. Share signs of spiritual growth or turning away from tempting behaviors. Tell the parents what their child learned that day. Even if you had trouble with behavior earlier in class, share ways that the child acted positively during your time with them. If possible, make these encouragements with the child present. Even small comments make a big difference to a parent and a child. An encouraging e-mail or a card to your children or parents can have an even greater impact.

### **concerns**

Dismissal time can also be a time to share lesser concerns (or give a brief behavior update for on-going issues already addressed). However, since conversations about behavior concerns may bring up delicate issues that are usually better discussed out of earshot of child or other parents, a brief comment after class, followed up by a conversation at a later time is often best. Sharing concerns about the children we teach can be difficult. Perhaps you are not a parent yourself and have little experience with behavioral issues except as you volunteer at church. Perhaps the child is new to the class or a visitor and you do not know the child or the parents. Perhaps you think you observe a serious problem. Perhaps the thought of talking to any parent, no matter how well you know them, is a terrifying thought. While you are right to humbly consider your shortcomings, we would encourage you to ask God to help you speak to the parents. Pray that He would give you the right words to say and that your words would be well-received. Use words that describe what you have observed of the child instead of those that make judgments about the child or the parents. Make sure to express your gratitude for the parents and the child and your desire to serve them. Feel free to talk to the Pastor for Families about concerns you have either about the child or about speaking to parents. He is here to help you.

### **insights**

Since the parents spend most of the week with their children as we have them for an hour or two a week, it is easy to see how we can greatly benefit from their insights into their children. They very likely have already observed issues or giftings that we see in the children and can give us helpful tips in how to train or encourage the child. Their insights can help us teach the children better and often save lots of time in figuring out how to train them.

### **prayer**

Nothing is done well without prayer! We are God's servants and need His Holy Spirit to work in both our hearts and the hearts of our children and their parents. He delights in the praise of children. He gives parents their children as a good gift. And He gives us the opportunity to glorify Him in speaking

words of truth and living that reflect Him. And, for a few hours each week, He gives us this opportunity to do before and to serve children and their parents. We need His Spirit to be at work in us all. He is the One True Turner and Trainer of Hearts. He is the Shepherd who shepherds the parents and the children. He is the Giver of Wisdom and the Producer of the Fruit of Love, Gentleness and Patience. Pray with the other teachers before class for both the instruction and the behavior and hearts of the children. Pray during class with the children, that God would be at work in you all. Pray after class, to thank God for how He answered your prayers and about insights into the children you received during the time. Take home your class list and pray for the children and parents during the week. Look ahead to the topic of the next week's lesson and begin to pray it for all of you. In conclusion: PRAY!

## **Common Behavior Scenarios by Age**

### **TWO YEAR OLDS**

#### **separation anxiety**

Separation anxiety is a developmentally normal and expected part of being a two year old. Follow the parents lead when they know what is comfortable, though most experts recommend that "sneaking off" is not always helpful for teaching a child to make a healthy transition.

#### **Tips for easing a child into a classroom**

- Tell them what they're going to be doing in class
- Have a specific toy or book in mind that you think they'll like. Tell them about it, or show it to them before they come into the class.
- Stoop down to communicate w/ them on eye-level. You are less scary when you aren't so big
- Invite parents in to help them settle their child into an activity. Generally, parents should make their exit within about 5 minutes, so as to not prolong disruption of class/teaching that may occur when they leave.
- Don't forget about the windows in your room. If the distractions of the toy shelf hold no interest for an upset child, try walking them to the window and point out cars, trees, people on the street, animals, houses, colors, etc.
- If a child grows increasingly inconsolable after 5 - 10 minutes, have the hall monitor page the parents for assistance.
  
- If a child is brand new to the class and struggling with separation anxiety, invite to stay in the room for the duration of class to help them get used to their environment (but do not leave a parent alone with the other children)
- When Sunday School transitions to Church Hour, teachers should try to overlap for at least a few minutes and make the departure of Sunday School teachers as quiet as possible.

#### **a child won't participate**

If they're not being disruptive, but quietly listening, consider what might make them feel more comfortable to participate.

#### **a child refuses to come to circle time, especially if they want to play:**

Give a child two choices: "You may come sit on a carpet square with the group, or you may sit in a chair at the table. But, it is not play time and no one may play with the toys. Would you rather sit on the carpet or on a chair?"

### **a child disobeys**

As with all things, consider the heart. Did the child disobey because they were confused or didn't understand what the teacher was asking? Teacher should clarify. Did they understand and willfully disobey? Start by explaining the problem and giving a warning. "Timmy, Mrs. Miller said it was Katie's turn to play with the dump truck, but then you took the truck away from her. That made her sad AND it was disobeying Mrs. Miller. We are learning to share, and if you will not share, Mrs. Miller will need you to sit in time out." If a similar thing happens again, repeat your little speech, and say "Mrs. Miller warned you that if you took toys from someone else again that you would sit in time out. Please come sit in this chair until I tell you it's time to play again."

### **note about time outs for two year olds**

**Two minutes** is an appropriate amount of time for a 2 year old time out. Longer than that and you lose the teachability of the moment.

Before letting a child return to the group, have a conversation. "Timmy, do you remember why you sat in time-out?" "You took a toy away from Katie, and then you took a toy away from another friend. This is not good sharing, and one of the ways we can show love to other people like God has loved us is to be kind. Are you ready to play with your friends and share? Let me pray for you that God would help you to obey God, thank you for giving us friends to love. Please help Timmy to love his friends and share with them. Amen." Dismiss Timmy to play, and then (hopefully within 5 minutes or so), "catch" Timmy being good and encourage him in the way he is obeying and sharing with friends.

## THREE YEAR OLDS

### **a child won't participate:**

If they're not being disruptive, but quietly listening, consider what might make them feel more comfortable to participate. Would giving that child a special role help them? Perhaps you can ask them to be your special helper and let them sit next to you and hold up the big question signs.

### **a child refuses to come to circle time, esp. if they want to play:**

Give a child two choices "You may come sit on a carpet square with the group, or you may sit in a chair at the table. But, it is not play time and no one may play with the toys. Would you rather sit on the carpet or on a chair?"

### **a child disobeys**

As with all things, consider the heart. Did the child disobey because they were confused or didn't understand what the teacher was asking? Teacher should clarify. Did they understand and willfully disobey? Start by explaining the problem and giving a warning. "Timmy, Mrs. Miller said it was Katie's turn to play with the dump truck, but then you took the truck away from her. That made her sad AND it was disobeying Mrs. Miller. We are learning to share, and if you will not share, Mrs. Miller will need you to sit in time out." If a similar thing happens again, repeat your little speech, and say "Mrs. Miller warned you that if you took toys from someone else again that you would sit in time out. Please come sit in this chair until I tell you it's time to play again."

### **note about time outs for three year olds**

**Three minutes** is an appropriate amount of time for a 3 year old's time out. Longer than that and you lose the teachability of the moment.

Before letting a child return to the group, have a conversation. "Timmy, do you remember why you sat in time-out?" "You took a toy away from Katie, and then you took a toy away from another friend. This is not good sharing, and one of the ways we can show love to other people like God has loved us is to be kind. Are you ready to play with your friends and share? Let me pray for you that God would help you to obey 'God, thank you for giving us friends to love. Please help Timmy to love his friends and share with them. Amen." Dismiss Timmy to play, and then (hopefully within 5 minutes or so), "catch" Timmy being good and encourage him in the way he is obeying and sharing with friends.

### **a child throws something**

This warrants an immediate time out. Kneel down so you are eye level with the child and explain "we never, ever throw things in our classroom. It is not safe and someone could get hurt. Because this is very serious, you need to come sit in this time out away from your friends for a little bit so you can calm down. Mrs. Miller will come back in 3 minutes and see if you are ready to go back and play." After 3 minutes, go back to the child and see if they can articulate why they are in time-out (this can be hard, especially for young 3 year old, so you may need to help them with the words.) Remind them that we do not throw toys in our classroom and that if it happens again, you will call Mommy or Daddy right away. If they are ready to go back and play, briefly pray with them that God would give them kindness toward their friends as they play.

## **FOUR/FIVE YEAR OLDS**

### **a child won't participate**

If they're not being disruptive, but quietly listening, consider what might make them feel more comfortable to participate. Would giving that child a special role help them? Perhaps you can ask them to be your special helper and let them sit next to you and hold up the big question signs.

### **a child refuses to come to circle time, esp. if they want to play:**

Give child two choices: "You may come sit on a carpet square with the group, or you may sit in a chair at the table. But, it is not play time and no one may play with the toys. Would you rather sit on the carpet or on a chair?"

### **a child disobeys**

As with all things, consider the heart. Did the child disobey because they were confused or didn't understand what the teacher was asking? Teacher should clarify. Did they understand and willfully disobey? Start by explaining the problem and giving a warning. "Timmy, Mrs. Miller said it was Katie's turn to play with the dump truck, but then you took the truck away from her. That made her sad AND it was disobeying Mrs. Miller. We are learning to share, and if you will not share, Mrs. Miller will need you to sit in time out." If a similar thing happens again, repeat your little speech, and say "Mrs. Miller warned you that if you took toys from someone else again that you would sit in time out. Please come sit in this chair until I tell you it's time to play again."

### **a child throws something**

This warrants an immediate time out. Kneel down so you are eye level with the child and explain "we never, ever throw things in our classroom. It is not safe and someone could get hurt. Because this is very serious, you need to come sit in this time out away from your friends for a little bit so you can calm down. Mrs. Miller will come back in 4/5 minutes and see if you are ready to go back and play." After 4/5 minutes, go back to the child and see if they can articulate why they are in time-out (you may need to help them with the words.) Remind them that we do not throw toys in our classroom and that if it happens again, you will call Mommy or Daddy right away. If they are ready to go back and play, briefly pray with them that God would give them kindness toward their friends as they play.

### **girl drama**

By age four, the girl-drama phenomenon begins to emerge (sometimes even earlier). Whereas a four year old boy is more likely to just chuck a dump truck at his friend when he's mad, the ways of a girl are much more under-the-radar and catty. Because there's no blood with a hurled word or attitude, it's easy to let this slide, but we do our little gals no favors when we don't address it.

### **note about time outs for four/five year olds**

**Four/five minutes** is an appropriate amount of time for a 4/5 year old's time out. Longer than that and you lose the teachability of the moment.

Before letting a child return to the group, have a conversation. "Timmy, do you remember why you sat in time-out?" "You took a toy away from Katie, and then you took a toy away from another friend. This is not good sharing, and one of the ways we can show love to other people like God has loved is to be kind. Are you ready to play with your friends and share? Let me pray for you that God would help you to obey God, thank you for giving us friends to love. Please help Timmy to love his friends and share with them. Amen." Dismiss Timmy to play, and then (hopefully within 5 minutes or so), "catch" Timmy being good and encourage him in the way he is obeying and sharing with friends.

**Proactive measures**

If you have a few girls known for their drama with each other, proactive separate them, especially during lesson time. When you do see them being kind to each other, encourage them in it. It is good to even pray with them and praise God that you see them reflecting his kindness in the way they are treating each other.

**Reactive measures**

When something does happen (usually it is an unkind comment or exclusion), take the time to teach the girls about what God-honoring friendship looks like. Speak to them individually, and try to help them see how their words and actions affect others. Try to help them identify how they would feel if their friend treated them that way. Encourage apology and reconciliation AND then give them instruction on how to play together in kind way (be it sharing toys, taking turns, listening to each other, etc.)