

LITTLE ANGELS IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

We have run several parenting seminars at a church not far from our home. After one of those seminars the Families' Pastor told us about the difficulty she was having with some children's behavior in her Sunday school classes. She related how one little boy kicked the teacher and at times other children behaved in very inappropriate ways. She wondered if there was any advice we could give her on how she could handle this kind of behavior and how the Sunday school teachers could be better equipped to handle classroom management and control issues. Since one of the sessions we run is on classroom management, and my husband has been a teacher and school administrator for forty years, I will share with you the advice we shared with the Families' Pastor.

In the first instance, violent behavior is completely inappropriate and should never be tolerated anywhere, let alone in Sunday school. Teachers in the public school setting do receive training in classroom management and also have the manpower resources to have the child removed and dealt with outside the classroom. What usually happens is the following.

Volunteers who often have no classroom management training become Sunday school teachers. They regularly feel ill equipped, powerless and inadequate to manage negative child behavior. They are loath to broach the subject of negative behavior with parents they may not know well, who may be new to the church, or who are personal friends. Sunday school teachers may have been told by the pastor not to upset the parents in case they leave the church. After all, is it not the goal of the church to 'equip the saints' and 'preach to the lost'? Some parents view Sunday school as a babysitting service or a place where they don't have to worry about their kids for the morning – as evidenced by the number of children we see running unsupervised all over the church after the service.

Sunday school is a wonderful opportunity for even the smallest child to learn about Jesus. These treasured people give up their time to prepare lessons that will teach our children the love and care that our Savior has for them. Just as their parents have a quiet place to learn from their pastor, so should each child be able to learn in a positive, respectful environment. For learning to take place, there should be no distractions. Children should be well behaved, respectful and attentive. To reach this goal there has to be a proactive plan in place. Parents, teachers and children should understand what is expected of each of them so that an optimum learning environment exists for their kids. This can be achieved by creating expectations or rules for the classroom. A poster could be created with the following goal written at the top. "In this class we learn about Jesus and how He can change our lives."

Let me state how successful learning will take place. The children should follow the same rules as they do at school. They sit quietly and follow the teacher's instructions. Resources are shared. The children keep their hands, feet and other objects to themselves. They do not shout. They raise their hand to ask a question or tell the teacher something. Children help clean up the classroom at the end of class. The teacher should explain these expectations to the children. Parents should be given a brochure that includes the classroom expectations and rules. It should also describe the process for dealing with disrespectful behavior.

This process may be that the child is told that his behavior is not respectful and is unacceptable. If the child continues to misbehave then he/she is removed from the class and the parent is required to take charge of the child for that day. If the child continues to disrupt subsequent classes, then he/she is excluded from Sunday school until the behavior meets classroom expectations. If the church has a Families' Pastor, then that person should be the one to discuss the behavior problems with the parents. If not, then the Church Pastor should be responsible for this task. This way the subjectivity and awkwardness of teachers having to report negative behavior to parents (who may be their friends) will be averted.

Our Sunday school teachers are living treasures, but should not be expected to be martyrs. It is the parents' responsibility to ensure their child behaves and is respectable anywhere and at all times. The teachers should be respected by their students, supported by their Pastor and receive cooperation from parents. It is what God expects of us all.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.