

The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Coaching kids through respectful communication

A Sunday school teacher announced to her class, “Since you can’t sing very well, Lester, you can read the scripture.” Lester discovered many years later that he could indeed sing, but the teacher’s remark left an indelible negative mark.

Before children learn to speak they pick up through conversation, body language and tone whether or not they are valued and respected. Good conversational skills cultivate constructive communication. Many adults unwittingly engage in inappropriate and unhealthy conversational habits copied from parents, the marketplace, media, television and other sources.

The dynamics of *diplomatic dialogue* hinge around listening creatively. But knowing when and how to speak and learning to edit speech require intentional effort. Following are some faulty dialogue habits sometimes present in Christian education settings.

Searing Sarcasm. “How many times must I repeat the same thing? Are you deaf? You think this is a circus?” Sarcasm is a humorous statement or remark made with the intention of embarrassing or injuring the self-respect of someone, usually by drawing attention to a weakness or failure of that person. There is something witty and clever about hurling our opinion or judgment all rolled up in unique observations or possibilities about a person. It makes others laugh and still gets our point across. Eliminating sarcasm is almost as hard as giving up chocolate — or peanut butter, if that’s your passion.

Crushing Criticism. Criticism is censuring or finding fault — a cousin to put-downs and sarcasm. Children are easily crushed by destructive criticism. Accusatory statements such as “you never,” “you always” and “you can’t” wound and discourage children. This type of negative communication may intimidate young students to read or respond out of

fear rather than out of respect. Encounters such as these may result in hidden anger that does not emerge for years — usually until someone is grown like Lester.

Lopsided Lecture. “I’ll do the talking; you listen.” This is the mantra of many teachers at church. Instead of lecturing, we should endeavor to listen to ourselves, and identify and eliminate senseless, damaging speech, and in the process stimulate appropriate dialogue with children and youth.

But before we can dialogue intelligently with children, familiarity with their unique God-designed *temperament preferences* is the best platform for respectful and diplomatic responses.

Extroversion/Introversion. Since introverts rarely volunteer answers or comments quickly, teachers will do well to solicit the opinions of quiet students — perhaps after extroverts have voiced theirs. Also, drawing attention to an introverted student’s lack of a smile injures him/her unnecessarily. Just to say “I’m so glad to see you this morning” is all that is needed. Likewise, joking about an outgoing student’s constant chatter or disorganization is counter-productive. Rather than saying to a child at the scene of a classroom mishap, “Look what you did” or “There goes all our hard work,” a wise teacher would say “I’ll help to clean this up” or “I’m sorry you had that accident.”

Sensing/Intuition. Students who have a sensing or hands-on preference learn easily, can recall facts of Bible stories/characters and enjoy cleaning up the room. Intuitive students — the minority — excel in remembering principles and seeing “big picture” ideas. When working with children and youth, teachers need to understand that the intuitive processes may not be well developed until 7th grade. However, some children are already so intuitive that focusing on a

hands-on project is difficult. Intuitive children want to be constantly upgrading and improving whatever they’re working on. Teachers are wise to allow students to choose the activities they feel comfortable tackling. Some prefer to work alone while others function better in a group setting.

Thinking/Feeling. With the average classroom population being 50 percent thinking and 50 percent feeling, a teacher needs to be equipped to relate to both types of students. Feeling students — those who decide with their heart — take criticism seriously. Sensitive boys make up a large segment of our nation’s population, so there’s nothing wrong with them. They’ll just have to learn to manage their need for harmony and approval. If you don’t greet them with a smile, they may think they’ve done something wrong or that you don’t like them. Thinking students — those who decide with their head — naturally ignore seeming neglect. They pay more attention to content than to body language; they’d rather be right than nice.

Structured/Spontaneous. Structured children must finish projects to be fulfilled, whereas spontaneous children enjoy the process but often do not finish the product — at least on time. Commenting to a structured child, “You’re right on time — 10 minutes late again,” accomplishes nothing. Since children cannot drive, they suffer much embarrassment as well as anger when they are late to anything. On the other hand, feeling children dislike being the first to arrive. Extroverted kids are frustrated when they enter an empty classroom, so teachers should be disciplined about arriving 15 minutes before class time.

... We’re all delightfully different. Our goal is not to think alike but to think together. We want to celebrate rather than criticize differences. **BT**

THE RESOURCE PAGE is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with *Baptists Today* and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month’s page was written by Ruth and James Ward, who recently celebrated their 50th anniversary. They live in York, Pa., where Ruth is a marriage and family therapist and James is a pastor. They are co-authors of *Coaching Kids* (Smyth & Helwys).