Difficult Children in the Classroom Setting

By Miss Linda

Over the years I have worked with many children who are considered “difficult” and I have developed a few behavioral modification plans and ideas that help to control many of the difficulties these children have. However, the question that I am most asked is, “how does ***my child*** deal with the difficult child’s behavior?” It is a relevant and appropriate question.

In every year, and at every age, there is going to be children that will be at one extreme or the other behaviorally. Some will act out their difficulties with inappropriate words, aggression, and disruptive behavior. This type of behavior is socially unacceptable and so it is up to the teacher to curb these behaviors while protecting the other children’s need for a safe place to learn. By positive role modeling and example, all children can benefit from the lessons being taught to the difficult child. These lessons are better learned while a child is young and impressionable, instead of waiting until a child is older. By accepting the fact that all children will eventually need to know how to deal with a difficult child in their class, we can recognize the need to teach them the tools they will need to positively handle the situation instead of trying to isolate or remove them from interaction with a child that is struggling behaviorally.

With this in mind, a four or five year old child’s burgeoning ability to develop empathy and to care about others is one of their greatest tools. I always ask the children to realize that the difficult child is new in learning how to be kind and they don’t know how to follow the rules. This means that we all need to help them and teach them how to do this. The children understand this without question because they realize they also are learning new things every day. I ask the children to help and be “teachers” by praying for the difficult child and by celebrating when they have a great day. This can easily be done by recognizing good behavior instead of focusing only on the bad. As an added benefit, by saying, “Good job, we are proud of you” it helps the difficult child desire more positive outcomes instead of negative or unpleasant ones. This also focuses children to care about and love the difficult child instead of teaching them that is okay to dislike, judge, isolate and condemn others. Parents and teachers can help by showing empathy for the difficult child, using words of praise and never using words of judgment (like “he’s a bad kid”), or instructing children “not to play with” the child who is struggling.

Of course, children can become the targets of negative behaviors like hitting, pinching, shoving, etc. This is the perfect age to teach a child to use their words to express themselves in their own defense. I prefer to teach the children to use the words, “please, don’t do that” but since this does not always work, they are also allowed to say, “STOP”. If the negative behavior does not end, I encourage them to immediately ask for the teacher to help. If they have not used their words first (and effectively stood up for themselves), they are tattling instead of *talking* and I will ask them to try *talking* (or using their words) while I observes the interaction. The difficult child is instructed to apologize and express that they will not act in the offensive way again. If the negative behavior continues, I use the current behavioral modification plan; which will have a consequence for inappropriate behavior. This is also a wonderful learning tool for because by observing the consequences of negative behavior, the other children learn what will happen to them if they also engage in an inappropriate way.

Although many variables to this philosophy will crop up, as a basic plan of action in dealing with young children, I have found these techniques to be effective and positive for all. Remember, we all are created by God’s loving touch and although some of us take longer to mature and make good choices, we can always encourage and love each other.

***"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”***

***John 13:34 NIV***