

*1.2 Relationships*

# Dealing with Difficult Children

**TEACHING BASICS**

## A Hidden Struggle

Serving children in Sunday School is one of the most beautiful and rewarding ministries in the Church. But if we're honest, it's also one of the most emotionally complex. Every servant knows the joy of a class that's responsive, peaceful, and spiritually engaged.

But what happens when that peace is disrupted? When one child dominates the room, another refuses to speak, and a third seems determined to challenge every word? Throughout service, servants will meet children with challenging behaviors, some with diagnosed disorders, and others who are just stressed and act out in class.

But here's the paradox: The kids who are hardest to love are often the ones most desperate to experience real love. The ones who seem spiritually closed may be the ones secretly watching how we treat them, how we react, how we persist, how we pray for them when no one is looking. Dealing with difficult children in Sunday school can be a challenging task, but with patience, understanding, and the right approach, it can be managed effectively.

## Behavioral Challenges in the Classroom

Throughout the service, a servant will inevitably encounter students who exhibit challenging behaviors. These are not disruptions to the mission — they are the mission. Our calling is not only to teach the easy or eager child but also to shepherd the difficult and restless ones with wisdom, patience, and love, just as Christ does with us.

Before reacting to a behavior, pause to consider:

“What is this child trying to communicate?”

Often, difficult behaviors stem from unmet needs, emotional stress, trauma, or a desire for connection.

Below are several common types of behaviors you may encounter, along with possible causes and recommended servant responses.

**Chronic Talking**

**Possible causes:** High energy, seeking attention, anxiety, social needs, lack of engagement in the material.

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|                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Channel their energy:</b> Give them meaningful roles — helping pass out materials, reading verses, or leading short discussions.</li> <li>● <b>Use proximity and gentle redirection:</b> Quietly stand near them or gently place a hand on their desk or shoulder as a reminder.</li> <li>● <b>Create structure:</b> If needed, rearrange seating to minimize distractions.</li> <li>● <b>Teach purpose:</b> For older students, remind them of the sacredness of the time in Sunday School and why attentiveness matters.</li> </ul> <p>“Let all things be done decently and in order.” – <i>1 Corinthians 14:40</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Attention-Seeking Behavior</b>                 | <p><b>Possible causes:</b> Emotional neglect, insecurity, desire for affirmation, or testing boundaries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Catch them doing good:</b> Praise positive behaviors (e.g., “I love how Sarah raised her hand!”).</li> <li>● <b>Avoid reinforcing negative behavior</b> with public scolding, which may reward their need for attention.</li> <li>● <b>Build quiet connections:</b> Speak to the child privately after class to affirm their value and offer personal attention.</li> </ul> <p>“Encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” – <i>1 Thessalonians 5:14</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Physical Aggression or Emotional Outbursts</b> | <p><b>Possible causes:</b> Underlying trauma, overstimulation, poor emotional regulation, unmet needs at home, or medical conditions (like ADHD).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Safety first:</b> If a student becomes aggressive, calmly separate them from others. Seek help from a co-servant.</li> <li>● <b>De-escalate lovingly:</b> Take them for a short walk, offer water, and talk about something unrelated to reset their emotions.</li> <li>● <b>Teach emotional tools:</b> Once calm, talk about what happened and help the child understand their feelings and better choices for next time.</li> <li>● <b>Recap the lesson gently:</b> Ensure they still feel included and valued by reviewing the lesson briefly one-on-one.</li> </ul> <p>“A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out.” – <i>Isaiah 42:3</i></p> |

**Frequent Bathroom Breaks / Repeated Excuses**

**Possible causes:** Avoidance of the lesson, attention-seeking, anxiety, or a legitimate physical need.

- **Establish structure:** Let students use the restroom before class begins and explain that breaks will be limited during the lesson.
- **Stay flexible but firm:** If a child needs to go out, ask them to briefly answer a question from the lesson upon return — this reinforces learning without harshness.
- **Monitor patterns:** If a student is consistently leaving, have a private conversation to understand why.

“Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” – *Matthew 5:37*

Encourage consistency and clarity, but always temper with compassion.

## Understanding Complicated Challenges in the Classroom

### Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting both children and adults. It involves a combination of **inattention**, **hyperactivity**, and **impulsivity**, but each child’s experience with ADHD can look different. Children with ADHD may struggle to regulate focus and activity levels in a way that matches their environment.

#### Common signs include:

- Difficulty staying on task or following multi-step instructions
- Frequently losing or forgetting items
- Seeming not to listen even when spoken to directly
- Excessive talking, interrupting, blurting out answers
- Fidgeting, restlessness, or inability to stay seated

#### Possible underlying causes:

- ADHD is **not** a matter of laziness or willful disobedience — it reflects differences in brain development affecting attention, impulse control, and executive functioning.
- Environmental stress or sensory overload can worsen symptoms.
- Coexisting challenges like learning disabilities or anxiety may also be present.

#### Servant Approach:

- **Be patient and flexible:** Expect movement and interruptions, but gently redirect rather than scold harshly.
- **Break tasks into smaller steps:** Give one instruction at a time and check for understanding.
- **Use their energy positively:** Let them help pass out papers or act out parts of a Bible story.

- **Minimize distractions:** Seat them near you or away from doors and windows if possible.
- **Incorporate movement breaks:** Allow them to stand or move appropriately during longer activities.
- **Offer consistent structure:** Post and review class rules regularly. Predictability helps reduce impulsivity.
- **Communicate with parents:** They can offer strategies that work at home or insights on what triggers or calms their child.

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” –  
*Ephesians 4:2*

This verse reminds us that patience is an act of love, not a sign of weakness.

ADHD is a lifelong condition, not a phase. Our goal is not to “fix” these kids but to create an environment where they can engage, learn about God, and know they are deeply loved as they are.

## Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is a behavioral condition typically seen in children and adolescents, characterized by a consistent pattern of angry, irritable mood, argumentative or defiant behavior, and vindictiveness toward authority figures.

### Common signs include:

- Frequent temper tantrums or angry outbursts
- Refusing to follow instructions or rules
- Deliberately annoying or upsetting others
- Blaming others for their own mistakes
- Being easily annoyed and spiteful

### Servant Approach:

- **Avoid power struggles:** Remain calm and composed. Don’t match their tone or enter into arguments.
- **Set clear and consistent boundaries:** Explain rules ahead of time and enforce them with kindness but firmness.
- **Reinforce positive behavior:** Acknowledge and reward even small acts of cooperation.
- **Stay relational:** Kids with ODD often feel misunderstood. Work to maintain connection and express genuine care. A simple, “I see you’re upset. I still care about you, and I want to help,” can go a long way.
- **Work with parents or leadership** when behaviors escalate or become unsafe. The servant is not alone in this.

*“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” – Proverbs 15:1*

King Solomon here encourages us to remain gentle and calm in the face of opposition, choosing peace over power struggles.

## Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is more than just worry. For some children, it can be persistent and overwhelming, interfering with their ability to engage in class activities, social interactions, or transitions.

### Behaviors you might see:

- Constant worrying or asking repetitive questions
- Avoiding participation or refusing to attend class
- Physical symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, or crying
- Panic attacks or freeze responses during certain activities
- Fear of separation from parents

### Servant Approach:

- **Create a calm, predictable environment:** Avoid sudden changes. Let the child know what to expect in class.
- **Validate their feelings:** Say things like, “It’s okay to feel nervous. You’re not alone.”
- **Offer gentle encouragement:** Help them take small steps to engage without forcing participation.
- **Assign quiet responsibilities:** Let them pass out papers or help with setup to give a sense of belonging without pressure.
- **Communicate with parents:** They may provide insight or coping strategies that work at home.

*“When I am afraid, I will trust in You.” – Psalm 56:3*

Children struggling with anxiety need reassurance that God is their safety, and that we reflect His presence through our patience and calm.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects how a person perceives the world and interacts with others. Children with autism may experience challenges in communication, social interaction, and exhibit repetitive behaviors or have strong preferences for routine.

### Common traits:

- Difficulty making eye contact or reading social cues
- Limited verbal communication or highly literal language use
- Repetitive movements (e.g., hand-flapping) or fixations on specific topics
- Sensory sensitivities (e.g., sounds, textures, lights)
- Trouble with transitions or unexpected changes

**Servant Approach:**

- **Use simple, direct language:** Avoid figurative speech unless explained.
- **Support transitions:** Give advance notice when class will shift activities or end.
- **Offer sensory accommodations:** Be mindful of classroom noise and allow breaks if a child is overwhelmed.
- **Celebrate their strengths:** Children with ASD often have unique gifts—strong memory, attention to detail, deep interests. Incorporate these into the lesson when possible.
- **Be patient with social interaction:** Don't pressure eye contact or verbal responses. Connection may come differently, and that's okay.

*“Each of us has one body with many members... and these members do not all have the same function.”*

– **Romans 12:4**

This verse beautifully affirms the unique ways God has made each child and reminds us to value every gift, even when it looks different.

While there are a wide variety of complex behaviors, these children are not trying to be difficult, they are *trying to cope*. These conditions are not excuses for misbehavior, but explanations that help us understand the heart behind the struggle. Our role is not to “fix” them but to **minister Christ’s love and patience**, shaping our expectations and strategies with both **wisdom and warmth**. Their healing may not come in one lesson or another, but the memory of being loved in their uniqueness may last a lifetime.

## Lesson Workshop

Every servant has encountered a child who challenged their patience, defied expectations, or quietly slipped under the radar. Sometimes it’s the hyper child who seems to be everywhere *except* where he’s supposed to be. Other times it’s the quiet girl no one notices, or the teenager who seems more interested in challenging your faith than hearing about it.

These moments can leave us feeling frustrated, helpless, or even tempted to give up. But each of these children has a story—and a soul deeply loved by God. Behind the behaviors are wounds, fears, unmet needs, or hidden cries for connection.

This section offers real-life scenarios—not just to help you “fix” problems, but to slow down, reflect, and grow in how you **see** and **serve**. For each child, we’ll offer reflection questions, spiritual insights, relevant Scripture, and simple takeaways rooted in Christ’s way of dealing with us when we are difficult.

These stories are fictional, but they’re based on the real challenges you will likely face. More importantly, they are opportunities to train your heart to respond like Christ: with wisdom, courage, patience, and love.

## Scenario 1: "Mark, the Disruptive One"

*Mark is a 7-year-old boy in Grade 2 Sunday School. He constantly gets out of his seat, talks while you're teaching, pokes the kids next to him, and runs around the room if you ignore him. You've tried separating him, giving warnings, even asking him to sit with another servant. Nothing seems to work. Some servants have begun saying, "He just needs discipline at home," while others are simply ignoring him.*

### Discussion Questions:

- What assumptions do we tend to make about children like Mark?
- What might be behind Mark's behavior emotionally or spiritually?
- What would Christ see in Mark's behavior that we might overlook?
- What are some proactive (not reactive) strategies we can use?
- Spiritually, how can we respond differently next Sunday?

*"A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." – Proverbs 15:1*

Children like Mark often reflect a heart overwhelmed by inner restlessness or unmet emotional needs. When we react with irritation, we escalate the chaos. But when we choose gentleness and consistency, we become a calming presence. Christ never responded to people with mere discipline, He saw past the surface into the storm within.

### Ideal Takeaway:

Instead of labeling Mark as "the difficult one," ask: *What would gentleness and understanding look like if I truly believed he was hurting inside?*

## Scenario 2: "The Child No One Notices"

*Andrew is a 6th-grade boy who never speaks in class. He always shows up, sits in the back, never raises his hand, doesn't participate in activities, and leaves as soon as class ends. He doesn't misbehave, but he also doesn't seem connected. When you ask a question directly, he shrugs or says, "I don't know." No one in class seems to be friends with him.*

### Discussion Questions:

- Why do quiet or withdrawn students often get overlooked?
- What could be going on in Andrew's heart?
- What are simple ways to build bridges without pressuring him?
- How can we spiritually serve students who don't seem "hungry" for God yet?
- How did Jesus deal with those on the margins or spiritually passive?

*"When I am afraid, I will trust in You." – Psalm 56:3*

Some children hide behind silence because it feels safer than being vulnerable. While others fight for attention, Andrew disappears quietly. But silence does not mean absence of need. Jesus always

noticed the overlooked (Zacchaeus, the Samaritan Woman, etc...) and reached out **before being asked**.

### **Ideal Takeaway:**

Ask yourself: *Who didn't speak in class? Who didn't laugh? And how can I reach out to them one-on-one this week?*

### **Scenario 3: "Julie, the Skeptic"**

*Julie is a high school junior. She comes to Sunday School irregularly and sits at the back with arms folded, rolling her eyes during discussions. When asked questions, she responds with sarcasm:*

*"Yeah, sure, because God is definitely listening to my prayers."*

*She often brings up topics like evolution, science, or moral questions to derail the lesson or corner the servant. Other youth laugh with her, but you sense it's more nervous than supportive. You later find out that her father is emotionally distant and critical.*

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What is Julie really saying with her sarcasm?
- How do we typically react to a teen who challenges us publicly? Is it helpful?
- What's the difference between defending the faith vs. winning an argument with a teen?
- What are some wrong assumptions we might make about Julie?
- What would Christ do if He was in your servant chair?

*"Each of us has one body with many members... and these members do not all have the same function."*  
– Romans 12:4

Julie's sarcasm is often a mask for spiritual confusion, pain, or unmet questions. Jesus never silenced the honest doubter, He drew near. Even when Thomas demanded proof, Christ didn't rebuke him. He invited him to touch His wounds. Teens like Julie don't need us to win arguments, they need us to stay present, listen longer, and love unconditionally.

### **Ideal Takeaway:**

Instead of being provoked by sarcasm, ask yourself: *What is she afraid of believing? And can I earn her trust enough to ask her, gently?*

## **Beyond the Challenges**

As servants, it's easy to focus on managing behaviors, quieting the classroom, and delivering a lesson. But our deepest calling is far more spiritual than logistical. Teaching a lesson may take 30 minutes—but forming a soul takes a lifetime. To stay faithful in this holy work, we must learn to see our students through the eyes of Christ—especially the ones we find most difficult.

### **How Does God Deal with "Difficult Children"?**

Throughout Scripture, we see spiritual children who resisted, doubted, fled, or failed—yet God never gave up on them.

- **Jonah** ran from God's call, angry and resentful—even at God's mercy for others.
- **St. Peter** denied Christ three times, despite walking on water just chapters earlier.
- **St. Thomas** refused to believe unless he could touch and see.
- **The Rich Young Ruler** walked away from Jesus with sorrow, unable to let go.
- **Israel**, God's chosen people, repeatedly grumbled, disobeyed, and abandoned their covenant.

And yet, in every case, God responded not with abandonment, but with **patience, discipline, mercy**, and above all, **eyes of love**. He pursued. He corrected. He waited. And He continued to call them His own.

*“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” – Psalm 103:8*

## The Spiritual Danger of Giving Up

When a child is disruptive, defiant, withdrawn, or skeptical, we are tempted to label them, ignore them, or emotionally withdraw from them. It often doesn't feel like sin—it just feels like survival. But the Lord takes this seriously.

*“You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured.  
You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost.”  
— Ezekiel 34:4-6*

God's judgment in Ezekiel was not toward teachers who were "bad at lessons," but toward shepherds who stopped caring. When we give up inwardly, even while showing up outwardly, our service becomes hollow. The enemy rejoices when we start acting like employees, not fathers and mothers in Christ.

## Faithfulness Over Outcome

We are not called to fix every child. That is the Spirit's work.  
We are called to love faithfully—even when we see no change.

Remember: Jesus wept over Jerusalem knowing it would not repent. He still went to the Cross.

*“So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” – 1 Corinthians 3:7*

We may never see the fruit of our labor. But we are called to plant with love, water with tears, and trust the Lord of the Harvest.

Sunday School is not just 30 minutes of content. It is the fruit of a weeklong offering: of prayer, preparation, repentance, and relationship.

The lesson you deliver is only as powerful as the heart it flows from.

Just as confession is only effective when born of love and honesty, our service is only truly spiritual when rooted in Christ Himself. In Confession, we teach that there is efficacy to the mystery by itself, to truly benefit, confession begins in our rooms, in our prayers and repentance and our constant struggle. Confession is the completing point. Likewise, the Sunday School lesson is the end of the journey of service. It is only of true benefit when we establish individual connection with the children and see them personally.

And so, when you are tired, misunderstood, or tempted to withdraw, remember His eyes upon you. The same eyes of patience, mercy, and love that watched over Peter, Jonah, and Israel are watching over you now.

And through you, He watches over His children.

*“He will tend His flock like a shepherd;  
He will gather the lambs in His arms.” — Isaiah 40:11*



### *Review Questions*

1. What is the main paradox a servant in Sunday School might face when dealing with children?
  - a) The children who are the most engaged are often the most disruptive.
  - b) The kids who are the hardest to love are often the ones most desperate for real love.
  - c) The most well-behaved children are the ones who need the most spiritual guidance.
  - d) The mission is to teach, but the reality is managing behavior.
2. Before reacting to a child's challenging behavior, a servant should first consider:
  - a) What the child's parents are doing wrong.
  - b) What is the most effective discipline method.
  - c) What the child is trying to communicate.
  - d) How to quickly get back to the lesson.
3. Which of the following is a recommended servant response for a child with chronic talking?
  - a) Publicly scold them to set an example for the class.
  - b) Ignore their behavior completely until it stops.
  - c) Give them a meaningful role, like helping pass out materials.
  - d) Immediately send them to sit outside the classroom.
4. A child who frequently seeks attention by acting out may be struggling with:
  - a) ADHD.

b) Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD).

c) Emotional neglect or insecurity.

d) Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

5. When a child with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is being argumentative, the recommended servant approach is to:

a) Engage in a power struggle to show who is in charge.

b) Remain calm and avoid matching their tone or arguing.

c) Immediately send them to a higher authority for discipline.

d) Publicly criticize their defiance to the rest of the class.

6. For a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a servant should:

a) Force them to sit still for the entire lesson.

b) Avoid communicating with their parents about their behavior.

c) Expect movement and interruptions, and gently redirect them.

d) View their condition as willful disobedience.

7. What is the spiritual danger of giving up on a difficult child?

a) It makes the lesson less effective for the other children.

b) It reflects a servant's inability to manage a classroom.

c) It's similar to the shepherd who stops caring for the weak, sick, and lost lambs.

d) It may cause the servant to become an employee, not a father or mother in Christ.

