

Consistency

The Key to Keeping Order in Your Classroom

by Rob Favero

Imagine if you woke up one morning to the following headline in your local newspaper:

Speed Limits Gone Police Chief Announces End to Enforcement

Do you think that announcement would result in more people driving over the speed limit? Or do you think fewer people would push past the limits?

I think it's pretty clear that driving speeds would rise — that habitual speeders would go faster and that occasional speeders would become more habitual.

I'm guessing you'd agree with me that any action like this by the police chief would be a big problem. I further bet you'd hope for a quick reversal to the new policy.

What About Limits in the Classroom?

Yet I've seen something very much like this action taken by teachers in their classrooms.

It happens when a teacher announces a rule, maybe something like, "The next person who speaks without first raising her or his hand will have to sit by me for the rest of class."

Then, a couple minutes later a child speaks out of turn. Now we're expecting some sort of action by the

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teacher. But the action never comes. The teacher does not follow through on the threatened penalty. What's going on?

An Idle Threat

Many times when a teacher fails to follow through with a threatened penalty, it's because the teacher just can't bring himself or herself to actually penalize a child for inappropriate behavior. The teacher may have a "soft" spot that brings on bad feelings if a threat is actually enforced.

Certainly it's great for teachers to have a soft spot for kids. It indicates a love for kids that helps create a nurturing environment — a safe place — where kids can learn and mature.

But when that soft spot extends to a point where a teacher cannot follow through on enforcing a limit, it is quickly recognized by the children in the class as an idle threat.

And an idle threat is like a headline that reads:

Classroom Limits Gone Teacher Announces End to Orderly Classroom

The more that threats are made but not enforced, the more children will come to understand that real limits are mostly non-existent.

Then if your classroom has any children who naturally test limits, you're in trouble. The children's realization of your enforcement policy is an open invitation to push past your *stated* limits and look for your *actual* limits.

If you want to maintain an orderly classroom — one that nurtures learning in a fun and memorable way — you've got to **say what you mean AND mean what you say**.

Now I'm guessing that at this point some of you reading this article are experiencing a negative reaction to this idea of limits and penalties. You may be picturing a harsh disciplinarian running a joyless classroom with an iron fist, a classroom that builds resentment in children and interferes with their learning.

But here's the reality. It may be common for consistency in limits and penalties to walk hand-in-hand with harsh discipline. But they are not inseparable companions. Order in your classroom can be maintained through **gentle** but **determined** consistency.

So what does gentle, determined consistency look like?

Well, first off it has an absence of harshness.

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But to understand what an absence of harshness is, we first have to understand what it means to be harsh.

What It Means to Be Harsh

I think harshness consists of any or all of the following things:

1. Yelling or screaming at a child.
2. Punishing a child when the child had no reasonable way of knowing that his behavior was out of bounds.
3. Singling out a child and her behavior in a way that creates *excessive* embarrassment.
4. Punishing a child for behavior he can't control.
5. Belittling or berating a child with insulting words.
6. Punishing a child with penalties that are excessive when compared to the inappropriate behavior.
7. Acting with an attitude in class that feels to the kids as if you're always angry or in a bad mood.

So the absence of all of these things is what I have in mind by an absence of harshness.

Now here's the deal. Even with all of these things excluded from your classroom, it is still possible to set limits and enforce them consistently.

The Proper Role of Limits and Penalties

But I don't want to be misunderstood here. I don't mean to be saying that limits and penalties are the primary way to maintain order in a classroom. There are many positive things besides limits and penalties that you can do to help children stay within the limits you set. The greater your ability to keep children's interest through the activities you do in class, the easier it will be for you to keep your class orderly.

I certainly think positive activities form the foundation for your your classroom order.

But in this article I am focusing exclusively on those times when limits are crossed and you must take direct action to keep your classroom order intact.

So if you have trouble consistently enforcing limits — and I believe that's the biggest problem that many teachers have when they fail to maintain classroom control — I expect that a big part of your trouble comes because you fear that you'll come across as a harsh disciplinarian.

And if that's your fear, it's important for you to really get ahold of this idea I'm presenting — that's it's possible to enforce limits through gentle, determined consistency while maintaining a positive, learning atmosphere.

So I'd like to suggest that you look through the "harshness" list above again and firmly fix in your mind that limits really can be enforced without harsh actions.

I know that enforcing limits with “soft” discipline can be done, because I used to be somewhat heavy handed in my classroom discipline.

But as I’ve grown older and worked through various classroom situations, it’s become clear to me how limits can be enforced while taking a soft but firm approach to handling inappropriate behavior.

I’ll give you an example of a technique I sometimes use. It’s something I do when I’m helping out in the classroom of another teacher.

Let’s say there are two boys sitting next to each other who are being a distraction. They are whispering, showing things to each other, handing stuff back and forth, and laughing. To say they are ignoring what the other teacher is doing is an understatement.

The Goals for This Situation

To handle a situation like this, I have several goals in mind:

1. The distraction needs to be mostly or completely eliminated. Ideally I want the boys to focus their attention on the material being taught, though I don’t necessarily expect to be able to make this latter part happen.
2. If possible I want the boys to end up sitting next to each other in their same seats. This is the end goal. In between I may end up temporarily moving them from their seats.
3. I want to minimize how much my actions disrupt the whole classroom. Not only do I want to disrupt — as little as possible — what is being taught while I interact with the boys, I want to avoid creating a prolonged bad mood among the other children. If I end the distraction of the boys but leave the other children unable to focus, the result will defeat the purpose of my actions.

With those goals in mind, my first step is to approach the boys and quietly tell them something like, “You guys are being very distracting. You need to settle down and stop talking.”

Then I might move back from them to give them some “space” to either settle down on their own or to continue to act up. But I also keep a close eye on them.

If their distracting behavior continues, I decide which boy I think is the primary instigator. I then approach him and make him come and sit by me. I do all of this discreetly to avoid unnecessary embarrassment. Being discreet also minimizes how much I disrupt the class.

With this step I have ended the distraction. But I have not done much to encourage either boy to take responsibility to control his own behavior. At this point the boys are kept from distracting behavior only because they are physically separated.

So my next step is to let the boy sit next to me for a few minutes. Then I attempt to “strike a deal with him” (though I don’t actually say that). I ask, “Would you like to go back and sit by your friend?”

Almost always the boy nods an anxious “yes.”

Then I say, “OK. I’ll let you go back. But . . . if you start talking or messing around again, you’ll have to come back here and sit here by me again — for the rest of the class time. Do you want try that?”

Assuming he agrees, I send him back to his original seat. And I've been surprised how well this "deal" works. Every once in awhile it makes no difference. But often the two children will stay acceptably still for at least 15 to 20 minutes and many times for the rest of class.

Of course if the distracting behavior starts up again, the boy ends up sitting with me for the rest of the class.

Enforcement without Being Harsh

With this method I've avoided harsh measures while still setting and enforcing limits. Further I've provided a positive reward for good behavior: keep from messing around and you can sit by your friend. This has also challenged the boy to develop a little more self-control while in a challenging situation — keeping acceptably still and quiet while sitting next to his friend.

Now I'd like to tell you that the practice of gentle, determined consistency is easy. That once you've become aware of it, there's nothing hard to doing it.

But it's just not that easy. Unless you are a person who naturally is used to enforcing limits consistently (and if you were, I bet you wouldn't be reading this article), the fact is that it will take time and concerted effort to learn to do this.

To help you learn to enforce limits in a gentle, consistent way, I want to list some hurdles you many face with suggestions about how to deal with them. Prayerfully consider them and ask God to help you overcome any hurdles that you find present real challenges to you.

1. Old Habits — If you're not used to enforcing limits, your first attempts to do so may make you feel uncomfortable. In turn you'll find it easy to revert back to familiar ways and be tempted to let inappropriate behavior slide.

But swallow hard and set your mind to tolerating the discomfort of your new ways of following through with enforcing your limits. Remind yourself that each time you do this, it will get easier. Also, stay focused on the fact that an orderly classroom is good for everyone, including the student on whom you are enforcing limits.

2. Fear — As we touched on earlier, you may fear that if you begin enforcing limits, the children in your class will come to see you as a harsh, joyless disciplinarian.

While this is certainly a possibility, you can avoid this becoming a reality. What it takes is for you to commit yourself to remaining calm and in control of your emotions as you enforce limits. As much as possible treat your enforcement actions nonchalantly. If you can keep your emotions under control, you'll be much more likely to avoid harsh behavior.

Don't let fear hold you back. The advantages are worth the risk.

3. Failure with Early Attempts — You may try being consistent and find that your attempts are ineffective. There are two dynamics possibly in play. If your class is used to inconsistency, it will take time for them to adjust to your new way of enforcing limits. At the same time it may take practice for you to get good at taking your new approach.

Don't let your disappointment in some early failures keep you from continuing to try. Just remind yourself that proficiency in any new skill takes practice.

4. Difficulty with Extremes — Maybe you have a personality that tends to deal in extremes. If you try to enforce limits, you may find yourself being too harsh. But if you back off, you may find yourself enforcing almost no limits.

Just like the previous item, practice will improve your ability to take a more balanced approach.

As you try to enforce limits, if you find yourself starting to lose your cool, pause a few seconds and focus on regaining your composure. Then as calmly as you can, gently but persistently follow through on enforcing your classroom limit.

5. Lack of Energy — Enforcing limits can be a real drain on energy, especially if your class has several children who constantly challenge your authority.

If you find that trying to maintain an orderly classroom is sapping your energy, you should feel free to ask for help. Don't be afraid that asking for help makes you look weak. And don't feel bad if your request is met with disappointed surprise.

Just keep in mind that some classes are harder to control than others. And some teachers have a more natural ability than others to control a class.

So what?

We all have our strengths and weaknesses. But what's important here is to make your classroom the best learning environment you can. And if that means you need someone to help you keep order with some of the children, then ask for help. And if you actually get the help, make good use of it.

6. Unreasonable Limits — Sometimes we can have limits in mind that are impractical, either because the limits we want to impose are too hard for the age of children we are teaching, or because we have children whose family situations or background make it very hard for them to be able to follow our limits.

Therefore, I suggest that you give careful thought to the limits you have in mind. Clearly you need to minimize distractions in your classroom so that learning can take place. But consider if you're expectation will be for everyone to learn everything that you are teaching. Or is it more reasonable to expect that every child will avoid being a distraction but will not necessarily learn what you teaching.

Ideally we want every child to learn everything we have to say. But if you set limits that are too strict and then end up focusing most of your attention on enforcing them, you'll get very little actual teaching done.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm all for setting challenging expectations for children, but I also believe we need to be realistic. Some classes can live with stricter limits than others. My rule of thumb is this. If one or more children are persistently a challenge, I try to set classroom limits that focus on keeping those children from being a distraction. By setting a limit at this level for the entire class, I only have to focus on enforcement when children's behavior distracts others. I then rely on presenting my lessons in a fun and interesting way to try to engage *every* child's mind in what I'm teaching.

7. Inappropriate Penalties — It's important that any penalties you impose to enforce limits are appropriate. There are three ways to ensure that they are appropriate.

First, they must be strong enough. If a penalty is too light or is something that does not matter to the student on whom you are enforcing the limit, the penalty will not provide sufficient motivation to stick to the limit.

Second, penalties must not be too severe. An overly harsh penalty will build resentment and discourage a child from any desire to stick to a limit. Your goal should be to penalize just strongly enough to motivate the student to want to stay within the limit.

Third, penalties need to be something you can actually carry out. For example, if you decide to make a student stay after class but his parents are not willing to wait around for his penalty time to expire, the penalty will have very little effect. In the heat of trying to enforce a limit, it's easy to overreach with the penalty you choose and then find yourself in a situation you can't enforce. So choose carefully.

Your goal as a teacher of children in your church is to create a classroom with a positive environment that nurtures learning. It's easy to undermine this environment if you set limits but then enforce them in a hit-and-miss way.

If you are inconsistent with the way you enforce the limits you set, you'll be like a police chief who announces the end of speed limits.

Consistency is the key when it comes to keeping order in your classroom. Be consistent in the way you enforce your limits. You'll create a fun and positive setting for effective learning.

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Rob Favero is the creator of the Baptism for Children web site, a site devoted to preparing younger children for baptism by teaching them about the meaning of baptism in a fun and memorable way. Rob has been involved off and on with children and teen ministries in a variety of capacities over a period of many years.

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