

TIPS FOR GUIDING BEHAVIOR

Some days I wish kids would walk into the church, sit down, open their Bibles, quietly listen, and actively participate. But then I remember that I'm a kids minister. Should kids learn how to follow classroom rules and engage? Of course. But part of what makes Kids Ministry fun is that kids act like kids. Kids wiggle, giggle, squirm, and talk. Those are the very reasons the disciples tried to keep the kids from getting to Jesus in Matthew 19.

Sometimes it can be frustrating and distracting, but before we address a particular behavioral issue, there are three things we need to remember:

1. **Kids are kids.** When we expect kids to act like adults, we set unrealistic expectations on them.
2. **Kids are people.** Kids have their own needs, wants, likes and dislikes, emotions, good days and bad days, just like the rest of us.
3. **Kids are developing and are individually unique.** Every child is unique and is beautifully and wonderfully made. No two children are the same.

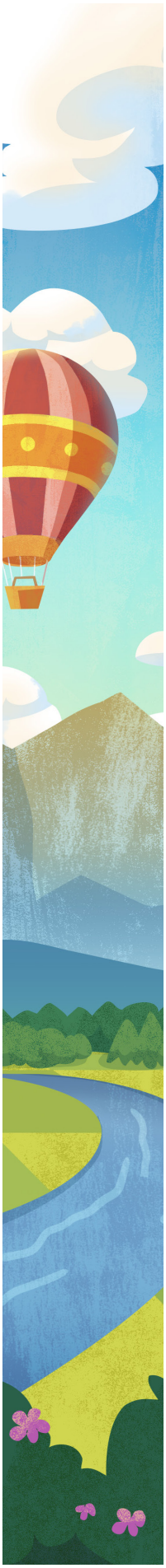
SO WHAT IS BEHAVIOR?

Behavior is how we respond to our internal and external experiences. Behavior is communication—so what is misbehavior communicating?

- I'm hungry.
- I'm excited to see my friends.
- I'm lonely.
- I'm overstimulated.
- I'm nervous.
- I'm tired.
- I need attention.
- My big brother hit me on the way to church.
- My parents were fighting again last night.

There are a myriad of reasons why kids misbehave. Some kids just have an off day. As distracting and frustrating as misbehavior can be, we need to remember that there is ALWAYS something underneath it, especially when it is a pattern of misbehavior. That isn't to say that misbehavior doesn't require correction, but it should give us a lens of grace by which we address each child and situation.

For kids who have a pattern of misbehavior, I like to think about it like a check engine light. The pattern of misbehavior is a warning light that there's likely something going on underneath the hood that we need to give attention to.



7 P'S OF GUIDING BEHAVIOR

1. Prayer—Begin praying during preparation. Pray for the kids you will teach. Pray for yourself and the other leaders in the room for patience, grace, wisdom, and discernment.
2. Preparation—Plan thoroughly and keep learning styles and shortening attention spans in mind.
3. Patience—Show patience and give grace when kids struggle to pay attention and follow directions. Remember that we don't always know what's going on in the life of a child beyond the walls of the church. A few years ago, one of our regular, well-behaved, and respectful boys started misbehaving and showing a lack of interest in being at church. When I asked his mom about his behavior, she shared that she and her husband were going through a divorce. By the time we hear about an issue at home, it has often been an issue at home for a while.
4. Participation—Involve kids in the lesson through discussion, hands-on activities, role-playing Bible stories, and games that require movement and teamwork.
5. Praise—Positive reinforcement can be a game changer. Many kids who have behavioral issues rarely hear encouragement and positive reinforcement because a lot of adults easily get frustrated and overwhelmed.
6. Personal Approach—Relationships cultivate respect. It's important to know the kids we lead, what makes them tick, what they're interested in, and who they really are. Knowing the kids who are entrusted to us and our ministry builds trust, fosters engagement, and makes correction more palatable.
7. Parents/guardians—No one knows a child better than their parents or guardians. They are a great resource for understanding how to best engage with a child who is having a hard time in the classroom. If we want to successfully disciple a child, we need to partner with parents and guardians. Many kids who have behavioral issues at church often have behavioral issues everywhere else. A lot of their parents or guardians are constantly being told that their child is causing issues. We want kids AND parents and guardians to feel welcome and wanted at church. Communicate to them that we want to partner with them to ensure their child has a meaningful and welcoming experience at church.

Remember—our ultimate goal as kids ministry leaders is not a perfectly behaved classroom. Our ultimate goal is discipleship. Discipleship is a long, slow, and sometimes messy endeavor. But kids are amazing and pointing kids to Jesus is a joy and privilege. It's worth the extra effort.

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