

ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD)

Q: I think a child in my class may have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—he wiggles non-stop and can't stay focused on the activities. What can I do?

A: ADHD is not a discipline problem in itself, though the symptoms of this condition can lead to discipline issues. ADHD is a medical condition that may require medication and professional intervention, and therefore must be diagnosed and treated by medical professionals.

Don't assume a child who fidgets or has trouble focusing has ADHD; these are common traits in young children. If you have serious concerns or witness excessive distractibility, address it with your leader first. It may be prudent for the leader to point out specific examples of behavior to the parents while encouraging them to have the child assessed medically. But keep in mind—it's not your role to diagnose a child.

Be very careful about labeling children, even if the label comes from the child's parents. Many respected authorities don't believe certain psychological, emotional, and learning difficulties can be adequately diagnosed in the early years, so proceed with caution. Always ask, "Has your child been diagnosed with this condition after a thorough evaluation by a trained specialist, or is this a lay-person's opinion?" If the child has been properly diagnosed, the child's parent and a medical professional can give you excellent guidance in how to deal with this situation.



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DO ✓	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer a child who's fidgety a toy to handle during times when kids need to be attentive. • Kindly redirect the child when he gets off track. • Encourage and affirm the child's positive behavior and attentiveness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insist that children under age 6 sit still or be quiet. This often isn't a viable option for young children; they're developmentally wired to move. • Say "no," "stop that," and "don't" to correct the child or prevent him from becoming distracted. Constant verbal correction loses its effectiveness quickly with all kids and doesn't address the core issue. • Focus classroom attention on the child's lack of attention or fidgeting.

✳️ GENIUS TACTIC

If a child who's been diagnosed with ADHD finds it especially challenging to focus on classroom activity, try playing soft music in the background. Doing "two things at once" when one of those things doesn't require a lot of concentration, such as listening to music, actually helps the child to focus on the main activity.

ANGER

Q: What do I do for a child who's full of anger and unforgiving of others?

A: Talk privately with the child. First, clearly communicate that while it's okay to be angry, it's not okay to be mean or harsh to others. Tell the child that you love him, and ask if there's something he feels angry about and you can help with. Be a

compassionate listener, but reinforce your expectations for kind behavior.

Establish classroom guidelines that reinforce love, respect, and forgiveness. A child's negative demeanor challenges teachers to love unconditionally. Model Christian love and forgiveness to the children in your class and remind kids that no one's perfect—but God forgives each of us.

If a child's anger is an ongoing problem, seek help. A child who's been physically or emotionally abused or severely traumatized often exhibits a need for control and a pent-up hostility toward others.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about emotions to help children understand their feelings. • Encourage children to label their emotions by giving them words to express how they feel: <i>angry, mad, sad, scared</i>. • Provide appropriate outlets for kids to express anger, such as drawing an expressive picture or shaping modeling clay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame a child for expressing anger. • Expect children to learn new coping strategies immediately. You may have to remind kids numerous times about unaggressive ways of expressing anger. • Fight anger with anger; don't let your temper escalate in a tense situation.

EXPERT TIP

Communicate with parents to enlist their assistance in helping children learn to express emotions in healthy ways. For example, include tips about learning to use words to label emotions in your newsletter to parents.

Q: **What's happened to one of my favorite preteens? She says everything's okay, but she acts like she's angry.**

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A: When a child's behavior changes suddenly or is out of character, ask yourself:

- **When did the behavior first change?**
- **What happened in the child's life just before that change?**
- **Is there an issue that may've upset the child that's gone unresolved?**

In some families, expressing anger while working through a conflict is unacceptable or unsafe. Children may learn to suppress anger, but their feelings eventually ooze out. This often results in subversive defiance (or passive-aggressive behavior) toward authority—including you.

Passive-aggressive behavior is unhealthy at any age, but preteens often don't have the ability to confront their feelings head-on. Give preteens space to work through their anger as long as they're doing so in ways that won't harm them or others and they're making progress toward leaving passive-aggressive strategies (such as saying things are okay when they're clearly not) behind. If preteens fail to move forward, intercede by having frank discussions about anger and how to express it constructively.

DO ✓	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebrate the preteen's positive behaviors. • Let her know you're there to help her deal with problems and feelings. • Provide a safe environment where kids can express their feelings openly, honestly, and without fear of retribution. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure the child to talk about what's wrong. • Call attention to negative behavior. • Allow the preteen to bully others through her actions or words.

ATTENTION SPAN

Q: My preschoolers can't sit through the Bible lesson. It's almost a weekly occurrence that half the class gets up and wanders off before I'm done teaching. Can you help me?

A: Discipline standards must be based on reasonable expectations of kids—and of ourselves. Understand that your preschoolers...

- **Like to move**—Plan movement into your time together, and don't be overly concerned about losing one or two kids' attention during the lesson.
- **Need lots of attention**—Have assistants who can guide distracted children back into the story or lesson. Don't stop the story to personally address these kids, or you'll lose the rest of your group.
- **Have limited attention spans**—Plan for what kids can handle, which correlates to age (one minute for each year). A story or lesson for a 3-year-old can be longer than three minutes, but the focus must change every two to four minutes with techniques such as changing visuals, adding voices, using more than one storyteller, or having a puppet share the story.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know the story well enough to make constant eye contact with the children. Don't read to preschoolers—talk with them. • Let children color or play with a toy during story time. • Show kids illustrations and point to things of interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insist that all kids sit; instead let kids stand and listen if they want. • Have unrealistic expectations of what preschoolers can do. • Become distracted (or frustrated) and lose your enthusiasm.

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✦ GENIUS TACTIC

If you've got a persistent wanderer or a child who's especially disruptive, give him a responsibility, such as Page Turner or Supplies Helper. Giving the child a specific purpose will help keep his attention focused and redirect aimless behavior.

BAD LANGUAGE

Q: What should I do when one of my preschoolers uses bad language?

A: Preschoolers are great mimics, and they repeat words they overhear. They often don't understand what they're saying or understand a word's meaning. If a preschooler says a bad word once, ignore it. Calling attention to it may cement it in the child's vocabulary, especially if it gets a reaction from you.

However, if the child repeats the word, take him aside and ask him what the word means. If he doesn't know, gently ask him not to repeat the word because it's not a nice word. If the child understands the word's meaning, explain how it makes you feel and that he can't use it in your classroom. Then talk to his parents to make them aware of the situation.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure you've heard the child correctly; preschoolers' language skills are still developing and they often pronounce words differently. • Gently remind kids that certain words aren't good words—and give them acceptable alternatives. • Be patient; you may have to remind preschoolers numerous times not to say a certain word. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overreact. Doing this will actually encourage kids to use the forbidden word more because it gets a rise out of you. • Scold. Kids aren't bad for saying bad words—in fact, preschoolers rarely understand why a word is unacceptable. • Shame a child for using bad language.

Q: We have a preteen who uses foul language a lot. Should we tell her she can't come to church if she continues? Help!

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A: No child should be allowed to ruin your class for others. There may be a time when you must finally tell a child not to return. This, however, should be the extremely rare exception (read: almost never). Exhaust all other possibilities before excluding any child.

Try talking with the preteen first. Explain how her words offend others and God. Tell her specifically which words she isn't to use. Some children hear their own parents use foul language and have no other way of knowing that these words are objectionable. Then ask her to repeat back to you what you've said to her to ensure she understands.

If she agrees to avoid the foul language, be patient as she tries to learn new behavior patterns and unlearn old habits. Be ready to forgive slip-ups and teach her to ask God for forgiveness.

If, however, she doesn't respond, it's time to consult with her parents. In a meeting that includes the child, explain that you need help communicating to her that foul language won't be tolerated. Ask the parents and child for suggestions to handle the situation.

Pray for this child regularly. Foul language is a sure sign that something's wrong in the child's life. It could be a small problem or a huge one, but either way the child needs God's intercession in her life.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage every effort she makes to not swear. • Logically explain how foul language makes others feel and can affect her relationships with others. • Ask, "Why do you use these words?" to initiate a conversation about the underlying cause. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume that a child knows how to behave according to your standards. • Embarrass a child by singling her out in front of peers. • Assume a child is bad because she made a poor choice.

EXPERT IDEA

Many preteens adopt foul language because they think it's cool. So point out that being cool means a person has control—especially, control over the words they use to express their emotions.

BITING

Q: One of our toddlers is a biter. What do I do?

A: Realize that children bite for different reasons. Younger children bite to "experience" the other person, explore their oral sensations, and soothe sore gums. For some children, biting is playfulness gone wrong. Others bite out of frustration or aggression when they're unable to express themselves verbally. No matter the situation, your reaction helps the child understand that biting hurts.



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When older children bite, pay attention. Often they do it to protect themselves or to control another child. Watch these children carefully at all times, and involve the parents so they're aware of the situation. Occasionally a child who bites must be separated from other children until he overcomes the tendency.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • React strongly whenever the child bites by saying, "No biting, Bobby! Biting hurts! Ow!" • Show compassion for the child who's been bitten in view of the biter. • If the child has bitten more than once, assign an adult to provide one-on-one time with the child to protect other children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the biter bite a wedge of lemon. • Make the offender bite himself. • Bite the child to show him how it feels.

EXPERT TIP

Biting is frequently the result of fighting between toddlers over one toy. So invest in duplicate toys for your room. Two of everything will cut the fights in half.

BORED KIDS

Q: This boy isn't really a problem, but he seems so bored. He's very smart and knows a lot about the Bible. How can I help him?

A: Regroup your class so children of various developmental stages and abilities learn together. Make sure this child is in a position where he can help other children learn so he uses his knowledge and skills. Children love to give and they learn more when they teach. Keep in mind that asking him to help another

child might not work if their social skills and friendship levels aren't a good match. Give the child specific responsibilities in the classroom. Ask him to set up chairs, pass out supplies, take attendance, or anything the child is skilled or gifted to do. Sometimes this means being a scorekeeper rather than participating in the game. Sometimes it means helping prepare for the next part of the lesson while the rest of the class finishes.

DO ✓	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge the child so he isn't tempted to entertain himself by distracting classmates or annoying you. • Talk to the child and let him know you'd like to find activities more challenging for him. • Pair the child with an adult volunteer. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sk the child to draw two pictures instead of one to fill his time. • Disregard his unique interests or areas of knowledge; instead, tap these obvious strengths. • Ignore the situation and hope the child will adapt.

EXPERT TIP

Don't worry about "playing favorites." Tapping one child as a junior leader is a good move, though it may feel strange at first—and you may hear some squawking from other kids who feel the child gets special privileges. Just keep in mind that ultimately it's more disruptive for one child to, out of boredom, impede learning than to redirect that child to facilitate learning.

BRIBES

Q: My kids behave better if I give them a piece of candy at the end of class, but some parents complain. Am I wrong to use candy as an incentive?

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A: Discipline's goal is to help kids develop self-control with long-term results. While offering candy as a reward for good behavior may result in your temporary control of their behavior, it doesn't build lasting change. Over time this technique has diminishing returns even for securing short-term changes because the reward eventually loses its allure. Years of educational and brain-based research has proven this to be true.

Promising children a reward for good behavior is really bribing them to act a certain way. Research suggests that bribes backfire because kids value the bribe more than the positive behavior. And over time, the bribe loses its appeal. And when the bribe ceases to exist, kids have no motivation to respond. Values develop through relationships—not bribes, and when kids feel loved by you they're likely to incorporate your values.



Perhaps the most damaging aspect of bribes is their power to change how a child relates to God. Bribes unintentionally offer an economic metaphor through which kids misunderstand God. The message of the Cross is that friendship with God isn't something we earn—it's a free gift from God. Bribes contradict reality: The "points" we accumulate are worthless currency in God's economy. God simply loves us, in spite of our flaws.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate the hidden messages kids get when you give them rewards. • Stop giving rewards, but add in surprise elements like a pizza party for everyone. • Explain your new philosophy to children and teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be afraid to give up the power and control bribes give you. • Manipulate children into better behavior. • Give in to pressure because your church has always used rewards or because people say, "It really works."

EXPERT TIP

If you want kids to behave a certain way, tell them. Simply outlining your expectations for their behavior is a powerful motivator for kids. They don't want to let you down.

BROKEN HEARTS

Q: How do I handle broken hearts when preteens "split up"?

A: During the preteen years, kids have multiple fractured relationships—whether in standing friendships or in budding romances. You can't prevent these painful experiences, but you can help kids through them.

- **Listen.** Don't pry for information, but when preteens talk, pay attention.
- **Focus on understanding.** Avoid sarcasm or trite responses. Yes, we adults may know that "this too shall pass," but for preteens, the world has just come to an end. Making light of the situation may embarrass and keep kids from coming back to you in the future.
- **Pray.** Rather than try to give "right" answers, simply offer to pray for God's comfort. Encourage kids to lean on God for emotional support.

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DO ✓	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give preteens space. • Be alert for signs that a preteen is having trouble coping after a breakup. • Offer many opportunities for preteens to build friendships at church. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize what kids are going through. • Try to “fix” the broken relationship. • Talk about your own preteen experiences—this isn't about you.

 **DECODER**

You may never even realize two preteens are a “couple;” often these kids may all but ignore one another. Despite a lack of physical proximity or obvious relationship, the breakup is still traumatic. Don't downplay it because you didn't “see” it.

BULLYING

Q: I'm having problems with a boy who's a bully. What's the best way to handle this situation?

A: Most bullies operate under the assumption that behavior is wrong only if it results in punishment. To counter this, establish a set of clear, firm rules that define behavior expectations, and then point out exactly where the bully has crossed the line and why his behavior isn't tolerable. Be especially vigilant during active games where lots of noise and movement can obscure deliberate acts of aggression. Your correction must be reasonable, appropriate, and purposeful.

Bullying is a deep-rooted problem that affects everyone—not just the kids getting picked on. You need a zero-tolerance policy that communicates bullying will not be accepted—this includes all forms of verbal harassment, such as gossip, put-downs, and ridicule, as well as physical aggression.

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confront bullying head-on. • Demonstrate loving concern for the aggressor and the victim. • Let kids know they need to get help from an adult if they're being bullied. • Use role play to develop children's ability to be empathetic—and assertive. • Encourage bystanders to take a stand for the victim. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use excessive correction; it ingrains the idea that a position of power gives a person the right to be cruel or domineering. • Hesitate to involve a child's parents if a problem persists. • Tell children to ignore a bully.

✳ GENIUS TACTIC

After you clearly define bullying, help kids remember these three principles:

1. *We will not bully others.*
2. *We will help kids who are bullied.*
3. *We will include kids who might be left out.*