

Dealing with Difficult Students

Problem Behavior in the Adult Classroom

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// **I** THOUGHT THIS WAS an adult teacher book! What do you mean difficult students? Adults aren't text-messaging, trash-talking, disrespectful teens and tweens!" Reality check: difficult students exist in learning environments at all age levels. While adults may not be running around the room or overtly and intentionally misbehaving, nevertheless they can be a distraction in the classroom.

Generally speaking, there are five types of difficult students you may encounter in adult classrooms. Deciding what approach to take in dealing with a difficult student first involves a diagnosis of which problem-type is presenting itself.

The Know-It-All

The Know-It-All uses the class setting of the Sunday school hour to demonstrate his or her "superior" knowledge and understanding of the subject. The Know-It-All often appears to be in competition with the teacher. Know-It-Alls may feel the need to comment on every statement made by the teacher, add "deeper" insights to the lesson, or (at worst) directly oppose the teacher's ideas. A Know-It-All may try to set himself or herself up as the definitive voice of truth for the class. This becomes a distraction to other adult learners as it tends to change the class discussion or lecture into a debate.

There are several options for handling this type of difficult student. One method is to design your class with a time designated intentionally for discussion, particularly in small groups. This may limit the Know-It-All's opportunities to interrupt.

Another tactic is to recruit this kind of student to be a teacher. However, some Know-It-Alls will not accept the call to teach. They may prefer to snipe at the teacher rather than assume the teaching role itself—a role that would put the Know-It-All in a vulnerable position of being on the receiving end of the sniping!

A third tactic is to get the Know-It-Alls out of your classroom by having them "promoted" to administrative positions that require them to be elsewhere during the Sunday school hour. Some may view this tactic as "chickening out," since it works around a problem without dealing with the real issue of the Know-It-All's character flaw.

That character flaw is addressed by a fourth tactic: gentle, one-on-one confrontation. This involves a spiritually mature person taking the Know-It-All aside outside of class and asking, "Do you realize what you're doing in the classroom?" The resulting discussion can be very productive if the confronter is skilled at dealing with defensive reactions that may pop up.

Caution: it is usually not wise for you, the teacher, to try to neutralize the Know-It-All by countering his or her "deeper" insights with "even deeper yet" insights of your own. This tactic can deteriorate quickly into a tawdry game of one-upmanship.

The Grumbler

The Grumbler uses the classroom as a platform for expressing complaints. Regardless of the topic being discussed, the Grumbler is able to turn it into an occasion for a negative remark about the congregation, minister, or Christianity in general.

You the teacher must realize that this is a spiritual matter that originates beyond the walls of your Sunday school classroom. The Grumbler is obviously feeling some kind of pain, has unresolved issues, or has been hurt by someone. Dealing with a Grumbler requires a pastoral approach.

Hence, the best way to deal with a Grumbler is outside the class, one-on-one. That meeting does not necessarily have to include you, the teacher, but it should involve a respected leader of your congregation. Such a meeting will try to pinpoint the specific issues with which the Grumbler has concerns.

Taking an open, non-defensive posture toward Grumblers is often helpful in getting them to open up and share concerns. Many times they simply want to be heard. The fact that someone is taking time to listen to the Grumbler affirms that his or her concerns are being heard. The Grumbler needs to be made aware, however, that he or she should take the concerns directly to the church leadership rather than to your class.

The Light-Shiner

Light-Shiners use the classroom to show how they exemplify the points of the lesson. They set themselves up as a paradigm for the Christian life and tend to interpret the Scriptures in terms of

their personal lifestyle. For example, when hearing a lesson on giving to the poor, Light-Shiners feel compelled to share with the class all their involvement with the homeless, everything they've given to the Salvation Army, etc. As a result, Light-Shiners can alienate others by making them feel spiritually inferior. Class members become annoyed by the self-promoting personal testimonial that occurs in every class session.

One method of dealing with the Light-Shiner is to ensure that all your learners have opportunity to share how they demonstrate the topic of the day in their lives. You can do this by asking each student, one by one, to identify how he or she practices the biblical principle at hand. In this way you end up making the Light-Shiner one candle among many rather than the solitary light.

Light-Shiners need to balance Matthew 5:14-16 with Matthew 6:1-4; thus a lesson in that regard may be in order. If they can understand that the focus is not to be on themselves, Light-Shiners can become wonderful mentors.

The Café-Goer

I have an affinity for coffee and fellowship! But I also realize that Sunday school is more than coffee and coffee talk. I enjoy my time at the local coffeehouse and the opportunity it brings for discussion and even spiritual support. But I also know that Sunday school classrooms are not coffeehouses.

However, Café-Goers don't share this awareness. They spend an inordinate time around the class coffeepot conversing with friends, and they may have to be reminded more than once "It's time to start class." Even then they may continue chatting throughout the lesson (typically about anything but the lesson topic).

One tactic to deal with the Café-Goer is to voice a gentle hint such as, "I see some discussions going on—am I way off course on this? Questions, comments, concerns?" This should draw everyone's attention back to the topic under discussion.

Café-Goers often are simply unaware of the distractions they are causing. They may view Sunday school primarily as an opportunity for fellowship rather than as a teaching venue. A gentle hint as suggested may be all that is needed.

The High-Maintenance Individual

Do you have folks in your class who are always expressing personal issues for prayer requests, identifying themselves as examples of misfortune, or even openly crying in class? If so, you may have High-Maintenance Individuals on your hands. These are people who always seem to be in a state of spiritual or personal crisis.

Such folks need intentional pastoral support. A primary function of the church is to provide such support, of course. But an adult Bible fellowship (Sunday school) classroom usually is not the best place to provide it. Yes, the church exists to help troubled souls. But to allow your classroom to become a crisis counseling center is to change the design of the Sunday school hour into something other than a Bible-teaching venue.

None of this is meant to be insensitive to the genuine needs of people in crisis. Members of your Sunday school class can indeed serve as crisis counselors and crisis responders in times of death, spiritual doubt, financial problems, etc. These are normal and expected ministries of class members with one another. But that is not to say that the Sunday school hour is the best time for such ministries to occur.

The key response in such cases is referral. A person going through crisis often needs more and different help than is available during the Sunday school hour. Make arrangements for your troubled individuals to get counseling from an appropriate source, such as your minister, an elder, or Christian counselor. Referral addresses the issues of the troubled individual in the best way possible while helping minimize the chance that your Sunday school hour will become something it is not designed to be.

Why This Is Important

As you read the five descriptions above, images of certain individuals probably entered your mind. (Maybe you even saw yourself!) Teachers cannot avoid difficult students; it is part of the call to the teaching ministry.

Remember: your goal as teacher is to keep your lesson aims at the center as you teach the Word and help your students apply it. The behavior of difficult students takes you away from this goal. In effect, such behavior, if left unchecked, will change the purpose of the class. The more mature members of the class realize their responsibility to the class as a whole. Difficult students, by contrast, use the classroom as a means of fulfilling a personal agenda, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Many teachers simply tolerate the behavior of difficult students. This is not really an option, since such behaviors are counterproductive to a learning environment and actually may do harm to other students. Newcomers to the class may end up with a poor experience and may choose not to return as a result. In short, the teacher must deal with difficult students. The problem will rarely correct itself if ignored. Recognizing the problem is the first step toward fixing it.