



What Can We Learn From Third Graders?

By M.J. Clark, M.A., APR

I teach Sunday school to a lively, curious and talkative group of third graders. One thing I have discovered about them is that if I ask a question that leads a child to mention his or her pet, I immediately see about 10 other hands go up, because all of the children want to tell me a story about their pet. These additional stories are often completely irrelevant to the topic, and sometimes I let these kids go on too long because they are so darn cute to listen to.

During the open house this year, a parent commented that she noticed my husband is my teaching assistant. She asked what role he played in the classroom. I told her that he sits at the back of the room and makes a circular motion with his index finger to tell me to speed it up every time the kids get off track. We laughed about that, but it ultimately led to an “ah ha! moment” for me, because just days earlier I was conducting a workshop in which a few participants got off topic, and I let the discussion go off course a bit too long.

I journaled about why I allow this to happen in these various places in my life and why it’s tough for me to assert myself in those situations. I still struggle from time to time with people pleasing behavior, so this is certainly part of the problem. I want my Sunday school kids and the workshop participants to like me, I suppose. And in both settings, I encourage a lot of participation so I worry that not letting everyone have a chance to speak might seem disrespectful, even if they are taking the discussion from our focus. I do find myself frustrated though when the discussion takes a turn and we lose focus.

Often times I tell my coaching clients to practice new behaviors in safe places, like with their kids or spouse or people they know love and care about them. So I decided to take my own advice and practice the behaviors I want to display in workshops on my Sunday school kids.

A few days after the open house event, the first day of Sunday school arrived. After going over some ground rules and explaining what they could expect during our time together, I explained to them how I recognized that each thing they wanted to share with me and their classmates was important to them. But I said that our main goal is that we are here to learn, so there will be times when we start going off topic in which I will have to let them know that and that I may not be able to let everyone who has their hand up at that time speak.

My husband did not have to employ his index finger that day.

I challenge each of you to look for instances in your personal life that mirror sticky situations you have in the workplace. When you identify a similar situation, such as the one I just shared with you, make a decision to use the safe environment to practice the new behavior you hope to adopt permanently in your business environment. If you accept this challenge, please e-mail me (mj@integratedleader.com) with your progress during the process. Best of luck!