Geneva School of Boerne

PHILOSOPHY OF DISCIPLINE

Summary Statement

Discipline is conducted at Geneva School of Boerne with an eye toward developing disciples of Jesus Christ. Behavior is understood as the outward expression of the underlying heart condition (see Luke 6:43-45). Corrective actions have the immediate aim of stopping the problematic behavior as well as the ultimate goal of addressing the heart. However, the school, being neither the family nor the church, does not have God-given authority for such actions. Instead, faculty and staff conduct discipline with authority derived from parents. During the school day, faculty and staff stand in loco parentis, temporarily taking the role of the student’s parent. This delegated authority is the basis for the partnership between the school and the home, a partnership that keeps responsibility for the student’s upbringing with the parent. Therefore, successful resolution to behavioral problems requires parental intervention. For the school personnel to stand in loco parentis, the school and the home must be in agreement regarding goals and desires for the child. When the school and the home do not agree, the relationship between the two is strained and the child is not well served.

Introduction

Christ’s admonishment in Matthew 18:6 is relevant to a discussion about discipline: “but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.” A number of ways in which faculty and staff may cause a student to stumble are evident. Too great a focus on behavior to the neglect of the heart may lead the student to believe that the Christian life is simply one of outward conformity to a set of rules. On the other hand, laxity in supervision may allow students to lead each other astray, thereby making folly the real curriculum. Strong reactions to wrongful behavior, especially when accompanied by anger, provide powerful and unwanted examples of immaturity and lack of self-control. Finally, a dismissive attitude to the offending behavior leads students to believe it is inconsequent. Every action by faculty and staff is instructive and the lessons can be beneficial or destructive. For this reason, discipline has a direct bearing on the school’s mission.

Teachers strive to provide a safe and peaceful classroom environment knowing it is essential for instruction and learning. Even experienced teachers realize how ineffective instruction becomes when order is not maintained. Teachers must learn the “tricks of the trade” to provide the necessary environment. These include commanding and keeping student respect and attention, use of transitional activities and prompts, and attention getting and substantive lessons. Discipline, often understood as the application of punitive or corrective measures, is only part of successful classroom management. At Geneva, these measures include visual reminders to the younger students of difficulty they have had that day, regular communication between the teacher and the parent, feedback in the form of a grade for
behavior or participation, and recognition of exemplary behavior. These measures, while effective in restoring or maintaining order, do not address underlying heart issues that contribute to problematic behaviors. Given the heavy workload that teachers carry, heart-to-heart conversations about recurring problems are often difficult if not impossible to conduct during the school day. Therefore, it is necessary that parents address the heart issues at home. More importantly, parents must address heart issues as they carry the God-given responsibility for raising their children. Enrolling children in Geneva does not release parents from this responsibility. The school exists to assist parents in their life-long duty of instruction. Parenting requires time-consuming, daily, diligent, and caring interaction that results in a lasting influence.

**In Loco Parentis**

Parents have the responsibility of raising and educating their children. Many Scriptural passages, including the following, prove this point:

> Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words that I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. – Deuteronomy 6:4-7

> And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. – Ephesians 6:4

The school does not have such a biblical mandate. Instead, the school derives its authority from the parent. During the school day, the faculty and staff stand *in loco parentis* (Latin for “in the place of a parent”). For school personnel to fulfill the role of working *in loco parentis*, there must be shared desires and goals between the school and the home. While there cannot be a perfect fit between every family and the school (i.e., the school works *in loco parentis* with an established set of desires and goals, not with each individual family’s desires and goals), there must be a core set of desires and goals about which all are in agreement. These are expressed in the school’s admissions materials and discussed in the parent interview.

**Parent Education**

The admissions process, though, is limited. Combining the open house, tour of the campus, and family interview, the school leadership may spend 3-5 hours with a prospective family. This amount of time is inadequate for exploring all of the implications of the school’s philosophy of education or for examining the parent’s wishes and dreams for their children. Nor does it allow adequate time for discussing the school’s or the family’s theology and how it is practically carried out, the school’s and the family’s view of popular culture, or even the school’s or the family’s understanding of child development. These and many other issues are left for another time, often a time triggered by some unpleasant event.

The parent education that begins in admissions must continue in order for parents to understand the implications of the school’s philosophy and mission with regard to behavior
and discipline. Parent education takes place both formally and informally. The formal occurs in assemblies, lectures, Q & A sessions, and newsletters. The informal parent education occurs in the warp and woof of the daily life of the school – in parent-teacher conferences, visits with the administration, and discussions on the board walks. An important occasion for such parent education takes place with an office visit. The discussion between school administration and parents of the offending child often helps the parents examine their goals and desires for their child as well as further their understanding of the school’s philosophy and mission.

School personnel seek to help students with recurring behavioral problems grow in maturity. This is accomplished through confronting the sin and pointing the way to forgiveness and restoration. This approach to discipline follows the manner in which God disciplines His children. How the school responds to the bad behaviors – the evidence of the heart issues – determines the lessons students learn. Biblical lessons are taught through biblical methods. Many schools adopt a non-biblical approach that views education as a commodity. In such schools, discipline is nothing more than a tool for maintaining order, relying on punitive measures or behavior modification. Attempts at discipleship are negated as a result of a dependence on rules and an emphasis on outward conformity. Schools gravitate to these as they are immediate and assessable. However, rules and conformity applied without heart acceptance merely produce an empty rigidity. The heart issues do not go away but rather expresses themselves in more insidious ways.

Biblical discipleship (see Hebrews 12:1-13) requires difficult, even painful, experiences at times. For this reason, God created institutions through which His Spirit works – the church and the family. It is clear that Geneva is not a church. The school’s mandate to teach and train up students is an extension of the biblical mandate given to parents. The school views education as a relational activity – a triadic bond between parent, teacher and student. The school administration exists to serve this bond and to help it function to the best of its ability. However, there are times during which this bond cannot be forged or maintained.

**Limitations of In Loco Parentis**

A healthy relationship between the school and the home is built on shared goals and desires. Difficulty arises when the goals and desires of the school do not match the home. Differences may exist for a variety of reasons. Common differences concern the matter of self-control and respect for authority. When a child is not trained in self-control or respect, she or he likely will end up in the school office. If the lack of training is a result of a conscious decision by the parent, then conversations between the school and the home are not likely to be productive. In such cases, goals and desires are not mutually shared. As a result, the heart is not addressed.

When underlying heart issues are not addressed, then the best that can be hoped for is behavioral management. While behavioral management techniques are effective in managing a student’s behavior, they fall short of the goals of a discipleship approach – to address the heart. Attempts to address the problematic behavior and underlying heart issues, when not supported by the parents, violate the principle of in loco parentis. In this case, the school is
not operating in partnership with parents but in opposition to them. In such situations, recurring behaviors consequentially lead to behavioral probation or expulsion.

**Toward Discipleship**

A discipleship-oriented approach considers difficult events (relationship problems, failures in the classroom, defeat in competition, etc.) as essential for spiritual growth and maturity. The temptation exists to ramp up structure and supervision, schedule competitions, and set the academic bar in such a way to shield children from difficult outcomes. However, such actions, while possible when children are young, do not allow for heart issues to come forward to be addressed. A reliance on structure and accommodations does little to prepare students for living on their own and dealing with inevitable difficulties later in life.

The discipleship approach provides a process for dealing with heart issues. However, it does so with the expectation that through partnership with parents, the matter will receive necessary attention. This approach does not expect perfection. Children are given freedom to interact with one another, make choices, and face the consequences for those that are poor. They are properly supervised but not oppressively so. Students who need a heightened level of supervision because of their behavior are not a good fit for the school. To increase the level of supervision to meet the needs of these students is to manage their behavior while depriving those who don’t need it opportunities for growth.

Discipline is not a pleasant topic. It is normal for parents to feel embarrassment, disappointment and anger with their child’s behavior. However, if viewed properly and handled correctly, an offense and subsequent disciplinary action can become an important point of growth for the child. It is a great source of encouragement when parents support corrective actions and provide necessary discipline at home. When students experience such unity between the school and the home, the behavior and underlying condition are likely to be corrected and the partnership between the school and the home is strengthened.

**Practical Suggestions**

Here are a few suggestions related to the school’s Philosophy of Discipline:

1. Re-examine your goals and desires for your child(ren). Are they biblical? While it is natural to want your child(ren) to be happy, successful, popular, smart, etc. (that is, to have it all), at what price are you pursuing these on behalf of your child(ren). If your desires and goals do not line up with the school’s, discuss with the school administration.

2. Understand that discipline is for the sake of the child. Get past the embarrassment, anger and fear that parents naturally feel when children misbehave so that you can be a source for change in your child’s life. Excessive embarrassment, anger and fear stifle necessary actions and make matters worse.

3. While praying that your child will grow, mature and resist sin, also pray that your child is caught when he or she does sin. This is not to wish pain upon your child but rather with the understanding that some issues are better dealt with earlier in life than later.
4. Resist the urge to judge parents based on the behavior of their child. It is bad enough when a child misbehaves (Pr. 29:15: “... a child left to himself disgraces his mother”). To sit in judgment is to miss the opportunity to help another. Also, keep in mind that “those who live by the sword die by the sword”, including the sword of judgment. A better, more humble and honest response is, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

5. Read the Geneva Guide and Student Handbook (for Logic and Rhetoric students). These documents give details as to how disciplinary matters are handled by teachers and administrators.

6. Develop a healthy relationship with your child’s teacher(s). She or he is your partner. Keep in mind that teachers also have a number of parents with whom they partner. Develop open channels of communication between your home and the school and use regularly to avoid the buildup of frustration. Also, fact check with the teacher before jumping to conclusions.

7. In addition to attending to your child’s academic progress, also pay attention to her or his participation and behavior in class. Many office visits can be avoided with early detection and intervention. Understand that Geneva has a high standard for behavior. In Grammar School, a grade of “M” (“Meets Expectations”) or above is a positive mark. On the other hand, grades of “N” (“Needs Improvement”) or “U” (“Unacceptable”) are not positive and require action.

8. Treat the office visit with a proper level of attention. This is not a call to panic but a call to action. Find out what is contributing to the behavior and address it. If the student perceives the matter as inconsequential, then additional office visits are likely. Additional office visits lead to Behavioral Probation and expulsion.

9. Don’t expect perfection from your child, teacher, or yourself. Perfection comes after death. Realize that discipline is an imperfect pursuit in which sinners (parents and teachers) guide and instruct smaller sinners (children). Take hope, though, that God’s Spirit is at work, producing good fruit in our lives as well as the lives of our children (see Galatians 5:16-26).