

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT IN THE CHILDREN'S CHOIR SETTING

HERDING CATS (idiom) To perform a task made difficult by uncooperative or unresponsive persons.

Ever feel like the above definition is part of your job description? Do you leave choir rehearsal stressed or refreshed? Guess what? You CAN herd cats! Use these techniques to create an orderly environment, allowing children to make music together and manage their own self-control.

I. APPEARANCES MATTER.

- Check your choir space. Are the carpets dirty? Is the counter cluttered? Have the bulletin boards seen better days? Your space reflects your attitude, and the children will respond to it. A messy choir room sends the message that you do not care about yourself, your subject matter, or your children.
 - The same goes for your personal appearance. Dress nicely, yet comfortably enough to do your job well.
 - Turn the choir room into a haven. Consider the colors used, the lighting, the temperature, and even the scent!
 - Remove as much furniture as possible so that the children can spread out on the floor for movement activities.
 - Post your "choir norms" for the children to see so that you can refer to them throughout the choir year. Here are some ideas:
 - Be respectful to everyone.
 - Be a good listener! Raise your hand before you speak.
 - Follow directions the first time you're asked.
 - Be responsible with tools and instruments.
 - Be an encourager! Be a good friend.
- (SOURCE: Growing in Grace Year 3: Younger Children, Activity A)
- Arrive at least 30 minutes early to set up the room. Display visuals, arrange instruments, and lay out supplies within arm's reach.
 - Have an activity ready for the children to do the minute they walk in the door.

2. ESTABLISH ROUTINES.

These are the routines for my choristers:

- The children first check in with the attendance-taker.
- If a child arrives before 5:30, he or she may write his or her name on a slip of paper and place it in the Early-Arriver Bucket. One name will be drawn at the end of choir. That child gets to visit the treasure chest!
- The children retrieve their name tags from the counter. A small sticker on each name tag indicates the child's "color group" for Small Group Time. The stickers are red, yellow, green, or blue.
- The children sit at a table. On the table is an Early-Arriver Activity Page and a pencil. They remain seated and work quietly until 5:30.
- When the children hear the welcome song begin, they place their Early-Arriver Activity Pages in their

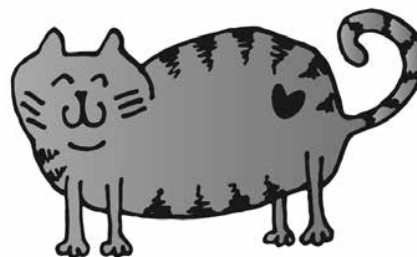
personal file folders (which are kept on a counter), and move to their assigned spots for large group time. These spots are four rows of approximately eight children in each row. Each row is a different color of Velcro...red, yellow, green, or blue.

- For small-group time, the children move to one of four tables: red, yellow, green, or blue. There, a worker is waiting with a small-group activity.
- NOTE: I have four workers. Each worker is in charge of one small-group activity. He or she teaches the same activity four times, rotating through the four color groups over a period of four weeks.
- After small-group time, the children return to their large-group time floor spots for closing activities: announcements, drawing, awarding of a "SHINING STAR," and the closing song.
- The children line up when called, according to where they are going: RA's, GA's, or parent pick-up.

3. CONSIDER LOGISTICAL ISSUES IN ADVANCE.

- Know what you want concerning logistics. What the children do on the first day will be imprinted in their minds for the remainder of the choir year.
- Teaching a circle game? How will the children go to the circle? Take five minutes from your first choir rehearsal and teach them how to form a circle. Be very specific, and have them practice until it is performed quickly and quietly. I like to give my choristers a rhythmic countdown! ("Make a circle in 5...4...3...2...1!") Assigning spots in the circle formation will save you much time in subsequent rehearsals.
- Distributing materials? What is the most efficient method? Choose ONE method and stick with it. I suggest putting the children in charge of their own materials. Passing out materials to the children is not the best use of your time. Consider placing a bucket with materials at the end of each row. The "row leaders" can distribute the materials to the children in their rows so that you can keep teaching.

- Dancing with a longways set? How will the children find partners and form two lines? Demonstrate for the children an appropriate way to find a partner, AND an inappropriate way. Have one child demonstrate, then two or three, until everyone has a chance to practice.
- Set up all technology and arrange all materials before choir begins. If there is dead time during transitions, you will lose their attention and the momentum you have worked so hard to build.



4. KNOW THE CHILDREN'S NAMES.

- A child will feel more secure if he or she has an assigned seat. The first day of choir, assign seats and write out your seating chart. This is your most effective management tool. Use the chart to call each child by name until you have all names memorized.
- Seating chart apps are available, such as Smart Seat and Happy Class. You can download a picture of the each child, which helps with face recognition.
- At the beginning of the choir year, try this fun Early Arriver activity! Invite each child to complete a template that includes his or her name, school, family members, friends, and pets. Put a photo of the child's face in the center, and display it on the

wall. This helps the children feel welcome every time they walk in the door.

- Teach the children to sing a roll call! This also allows you to assess their pitch matching.
- Try to contact every new child's parent by phone within the first week. The first contact you have with a parent should be a positive one. Establish rapport with parents right away, and then later if you have to call with a problem, the parent is more likely to be receptive.
- Make or purchase postcards to use for when a child has a birthday, or when a child is absent.
- Consider having a small birthday celebration each month for the children!

5. PLAN ENOUGH MATERIAL.

- The rule is: for young children, one activity for each five minutes of choir. For a thirty-minute period with kindergarteners, plan six activities.
- Be sure to plan plenty of gross motor movement. This is vital.
- Always have one extra activity in case of extra time.
- Pick up your pace so there is no dead time between activities. Keep the flow of the choir rehearsal going.

-In instances where the children need to be still and quiet for an extended period of time, have a few quiet listening games ready. For example, say, "I will sing two pitches. If the second one is higher, *thumbs up*. If it is lower, *thumbs down*." You can also play with rhythmic and melodic patterns... have the children show *same* and *different* signs.

-Mirroring is a good focusing activity, too.

6. KNOW YOUR MATERIAL AND PRESENT IT WELL.

- Know your material THOROUGHLY before presenting it to children.
- Keep your music and your lesson plan close by so you can refer to it in case your nerves get the better of you. However, make a goal to never need to refer to your music and/or your plan.
- Divide a lesson into several small "meals." Feed one meal a day to the children. (Would you drink an entire bottle of OJ at one sitting?)
- Remember that the most complicated piece is a simple song when broken down to its most basic level.

-Find the beauty, or the whimsy, in the song you are teaching! Perform it well! Have appropriate facial expression and energy to "sell" it.

-Consider your posture, tone of voice, and volume. Develop a strong "presence."



7. TELL THE CHILDREN HOW TO RESPOND TO A DIRECTION BEFORE GIVING A DIRECTION.

-When you ask the group a question, preface it with HOW you want them to respond. For example, "Show me with your fingers the number of beats that are in that measure." "Raise a silent hand if you have been to the zoo."

-REQUIRE THE CHILDREN TO RAISE THEIR HANDS AND WAIT TO BE CALLED UPON BEFORE SPEAKING. This teaches children manners, patience, and how to wait their turn. If a child yells out an answer, do NOT reinforce this bad behavior by responding (unless you are correcting the behavior). If a child is raising his/her hand noisily, do not condone this behavior by calling on him/her. Call on a child who is raising his/her hand politely.

-Post "cue cards" in the room, with directions such as "make a circle," "form groups of three," "stand," "sit," "line up," etc. Instead of giving the direction vocally, simply point to the card. Training the children to respond to gestures and cue cards will help immensely when you arrive at choir rehearsal with laryngitis!

-Another idea is to teach the children sign language. For example, "A" to give an answer, "Q" to ask a question, "R" to go to the restroom, and "CONNECT" to let you know that they have a personal "connection" with something you are talking about.

-Instead of telling the children what to do, tell them what YOU will do. For example, "I will start the music when I hear complete silence."

-Children need clearly defined limits. They need to be told exactly *what* to do, then told *what NOT* to do, then allowed to *practice*. Work practice sessions into your lesson the very first day of choir. For example, "When I touch you on the head, go pick up an instrument of your choice, and return to your spot." Demonstrate for them how to do it, then how not to do it (with the instrument making noise). Have each child practice and watch each other.

-If a child purposely disobeys your clear instructions, take immediate action (the instrument goes back in the container, and the child practices with hands only). Use a sympathetic manner: "Oh, what a shame. The mallets need to go into the bucket." The first time this happens, the children may look a little shocked. Just be matter-of-fact about it...don't stop and discuss it, just keep teaching. They'll get it!

-If a child disobeys twice, make sure to catch the parent and discuss the incident in a positive way. ("Fergus is learning how to get an instrument out of the box silently.")

-The first day of choir, teach a quiet signal/attention getter. Have the children practice it. Accept only perfection. DON'T OVERUSE THE ATTENTION GETTER!

ATTENTION GETTERS

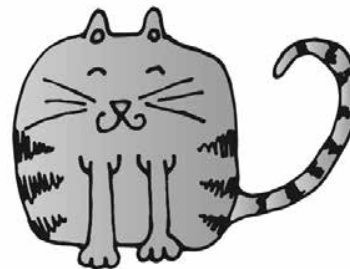
TEACHER SAYS...	CHILDREN RESPOND...
"All set?"	"You bet!"
"Hocus Pocus!"	"Everybody focus!"
"Macaroni and cheese..."	"Everybody freeze!"
"Ready to rock?"	"Ready to roll!"
"To infinity..."	"...and beyond!"
"3-2-1..."	CLAP
"STOP!"	"...look and listen!"
Sing and hold a high note.	The children join in singing the high note.
Raise one hand. (Harry Wong's "Give Me Five") EYES on speaker, MOUTHS quiet, BODIES still, HANDS empty, EARS listening.	The children also raise one hand.
"Marshmallow!"	Children puff cheeks as if eating a marshmallow.

Adapted from a list by Ilbra Israel. For Ilbra's complete list go to <https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Product/Whole-Brain-Teaching-Attention-Please-FREE-1779054>

8. CHOIR ROOM MANAGEMENT & TEACHING STRATEGIES

- Share the objectives of the day with the children. Display them in the choir room. Have the children speak or sing them aloud. This is especially helpful for children with special needs, such as ADHD.
- Try a chant for teaching the children how to sit!
One, two, three, four, place both pockets on the floor. Five, six, seven, eight, cross your legs and sit up straight! (idea from Taralee Bowlin, Pasadena ISD)
- When playing games that require turns, have girls choose boys and boys choose girls.
- Empower children by having them take on leadership roles. If a task can be accomplished by a child, it should be.
- Use code words. For example, "When I say the word *snowball*, you are going to..."
- Use words sparingly. Rely on sign language or short, written instructions when possible.
- After asking a question, do not limit yourself to calling on only children who have their hands raised.
- Do not be afraid of silence. Give the children time to think before responding. When 80% of the children have their hands in the air, call on a child to answer. This gives the children who need more time to process an opportunity to be heard.

- Sing FOR the children, not WITH the children. This builds independence.
- Remember to check your pitch occasionally.
- Give appropriate cues to get the children started on a song. Give them the tonic and the starting pitch, in the appropriate meter, accompanied with a breath and a conducting gesture.
- When practicing skills, begin with whole-group instructions. Then, divide the children into small groups to practice. Lastly, have them show you their skills independently.
- When planning out the process for teaching a song or game, move from the familiar to the unfamiliar...from the known to the unknown.
- Finish large-group time with a relaxing activity so that the children move to small groups calmly, quietly, and ready for learning.



9. PRAISE WHEN IT IS DESERVED.

- LISTEN and WATCH. Do not get into the habit of praising the children if they do a mediocre or poor job, or if they are not putting forth effort!
- Be very specific with your praise. "Good job" is not as effective or believable as "I noticed you used the form we worked with last week in your improvisation. Excellent!"
- Children with low self-esteem will often respond negatively to praise. Saying, "I noticed that you..." may be more effective.
- If you want a different result than what you see or hear, demonstrate what you heard/saw, then show them what you want to see/hear.

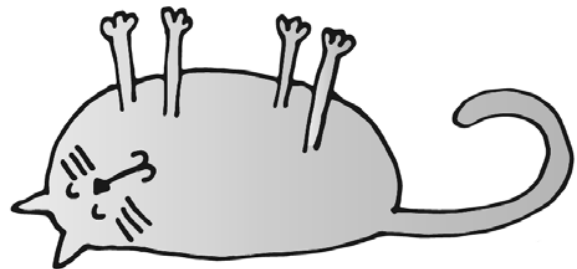
- Choose a child who is performing correctly demonstrate for the group. This also works for behavior: "Everyone take a look at Jerry's mallets, and make yours look like his." Or: "If your hands look like Tara's, you are ready to begin."
- Teach the children to evaluate themselves. Give them a list of criteria to think about, such as tone, articulation, watching the conductor, dynamics, cut-offs, etc. Have them rate their performance of each criterion by a show of fingers.
 - 4 = I did great!
 - 3 = Pretty good!
 - 2 = Hm...not so good.
 - 1 = I blew it that time! Re-do!

10. FOLLOW THROUGH

- When first teaching a choir room procedure, tell the children what they are to do, AND what they are NOT to do. Demonstrate. Have a child demonstrate. Have a small group demonstrate. Lastly, have the entire choir perform the direction.
- Hold them to the highest standard. If one child is disobedient, tell them that you must not have explained the directions clearly enough and start the entire process over.
- If the children know that a consequence will follow a certain behavior, they need the security of knowing that you will be consistent. For example, if you instruct the children to walk quickly around the circle when playing singing games, and a child runs, STOP THE GAME.
- If one child continues to disobey, have him/her demonstrate the correct way to do it...with everyone watching.
- Another tactic is to praise a child doing it well, and (depending on the group) giving that child praise, or even a treat, such as a sticker. (Use tangible rewards rarely.)
- Give a child a choice to learn the game by playing correctly, or by watching the others play it.
- The teacher's job is to teach. The child's job is to learn. Ask a child who is off task, "Am I doing my job? Are you doing your job?"
- Sometimes you may have a chorister who is dealing with a behavioral disorder or emotional disturbance. If a child needs to sit out from the group for a while, offer him a chance to "compose himself" by going to a special spot in the room. You could give this a clever name, such as "Cooling Off Spot," "Composure Corner," or "Oasis." He or she can return to the group when ready. This empowers the child, and lets him/her know you trust him/her. Sometimes offering a small plush animal to cuddle works, too!
- The most important thing to remember when correcting the children is to smile and show an attitude of LOVE and EMPATHY. What you teach now will have an impact of what kind of adults they become. Remind them that a part of your job is to help them become good citizens.

11. ALLOW THE CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS IN AN APPROPRIATE WAY

- This is a skill that must be carefully taught. TEACH them the words to use in certain situations. For example, when children are playing a game and one child skips another child's turn, instruct the student to say calmly, "Excuse me, but it is my turn now." Tell them what NOT to say as well: "Hey! Cheater! You skipped me!"
- Let the children know that it is OK to feel frustrated, angry, or disappointed, but that it is not OK to be rude or to hurt another child's feelings. For example, if the children are playing a game in teams, and one teammate loses a point, his/her teammates are not to complain. They are to support their teammate by saying encouraging things, such as, "You'll get it next time," or "Nice try." If you hear anything negative, stop the game and correct this behavior immediately.
- ANTICIPATE that these things are going to happen and discuss them carefully beforehand with the children. Take plenty of time to do this it is an investment that will reap great rewards over the course of the choir year.



12. WORKING IN GROUPS

-Occasionally, you will want to have the children practice skills or create something in small groups. In general, follow this rule: first graders form groups of two, second graders form groups of three, third graders form groups of four, etc.

-Give each child in a group a specific job. Display the jobs and the descriptions for them to see.

Team Leader—Facilitates the project. Encourages everyone to offer ideas. Leads the rehearsal. Makes the final decision on the product to share.

Supply Gatherer—Brings instruments and other supplies to the group's area. Ensures that everything is put away correctly.

Time Keeper—Watches the clock. Reminds teammates to stay on task. Alerts everyone when it is time to stop and clean up.

Secretary—Writes down all of the team's decisions and ideas.

Reporter—THIS IS the ONLY person in the group who should talk to the director if someone needs help or has a question.

13. CONTINUALLY TEACH AND REINFORCE AUDIENCE AND PERFORMER ETIQUETTE.

-After independent practice, divide the children into two large groups to perform for each other. (This helps to keep the children on task when they are practicing independently.)

-Give the PERFORMERS and the AUDIENCE specific jobs.

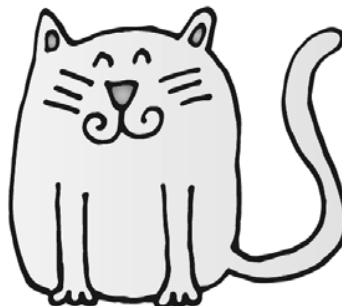
-The performers are to stay "in character" and contribute to the success of their group's performance. Begin from the first day teaching that a good performance begins and ends with SILENCE, STILLNESS, ENERGY, and FOCUS.

-The audience members are to look at the performers with an interested, encouraging

expression, keep hands and bodies still, and keep mouths silent. As they watch the performance, they are to think of at least two things that they liked—ideas that worked well—to share with the performers when they finish. After the performance, they are to clap enthusiastically!

-Invest time into this valuable process.

-Teach the procedures and expectations in a musical way! (Janet Gardner wrote a clever piece titled "The Concert Etiquette Rap." Create a similar "procedures song" of your own.)



14. GUIDANCE TECHNIQUES

-When possible, word your statements positively.

NEGATIVE WORDING	POSITIVE WORDING
Shhh!	We use our quiet voices inside.
Don't leave that mess.	We take good care of our choir room and our materials.
Don't throw the bean bags.	Place the bean bags nicely on the floor.
Don't push!	Treat your choirmate nicely... the way you want him to treat you.
Don't put your feet on the wall.	Our feet stay on the floor.
You hit Jim. Tell him you're sorry.	Can you use your words to tell Jim you are angry, rather than your fists?

-There is a difference between punishment and discipline. Punishment produces fear: "What will s/he do if I mess up?" Punishment usually doesn't relate directly to the problem. It implies that adults don't make mistakes. And lastly, it teaches children to be good only when the teacher is around.

Discipline develops self-control and maturity, for which children can be proud.

Always remember that, for some children, choir is the safest and most secure part of their week.

BEFORE WE CAN TEACH, WE MUST MEET THE CHILDREN'S NEEDS OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, RESPECT, AND SECURITY.

RESOURCES

LOVE AND LOGIC | loveandlogic.com | Love and Logic is a philosophy founded in 1977 by Jim Fay and Foster W. Cline, M.D. It is the approach of choice among leading educators, parents, and other professionals worldwide for advice, guidance, and techniques.

BOYS TOWN | boystowntraining.org | Boys Town began a century ago as a home for orphaned, abandoned, and abused children. Today, Boys Town is a national leader in the care and treatment of children. The Boys Town Education Model® is an extension of the organization's philosophy of care and is used in education settings to create safer and more effective learning environments for children.

HENRY WONG | effectiveteaching.com | Harry K. Wong Publications is the life work of Harry K. Wong and his wife, Rosemary T. Wong. Harry and Rosemary are the visionaries, lead authors, and creative designers of everything the company produces, as well as the owners of the privately held company. They are both former award-winning classroom teachers who share with the profession through a variety of media what it takes to be an effective teacher.

KAGAN COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRUCTURES | kaganonline.com | Kagan's publications and workshops are based on a research program conducted by Dr. Spencer Kagan beginning in 1968. Dr. Kagan's book, Kagan Cooperative Learning, is the single most comprehensive and most popular book in the field of cooperative learning. Kagan Structures are now used world-wide from kindergarten to adult education, in all academic subject areas to boost student engagement and learning.

CLASSROOM SIGN LANGUAGE | newmanagement.com | Rick Morris created a website with terrific teacher tips called New Management, Inc. Download the sign language posters directly from the website.



Darla Meek Darla Meek is the Music Education Coordinator at Texas A & M University-Commerce, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate music classes and supervises student teachers. Darla came to TAMUC after teaching music and movement in elementary schools for fifteen years. She earned a Bachelor of Music Education from Dallas Baptist University, and a Master of Music at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. Darla serves as a national teacher trainer for the American Orff Schulwerk Association in both pedagogy and movement for Orff Levels courses. Darla directs the second grade Music Makers at Park Cities Baptist Church. She has published children's choir curricula for Lifeway Christian Resources and for Celebrating Grace, Inc, and often presents sessions for teachers at conferences and workshops at the district, state, and national levels. She is married and has two children, Gregory (21) and Aubrey (20).