

Christian School Management The Child Principle

“For Jesus; Through Mission; With Students.”



The Christian School – The Child Principle

Matthew 19:14

“Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’”

Mark 10:14

“When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’”

Luke 18:16

“But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.’”

Matthew 18:3-5

“And he said: ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’”

As the Christian school strives to implement the Child Principle, it recognizes that all three of the Synoptic gospels tell adults to stop getting in the child’s way. The Child Principle requires the Christian school to:

- Put the child first (be student-centered, the object of the school’s mission purpose).
- Instruct adults to meet and support the child where the child is first, and only then to challenge the child to meet the adult where the adult is.
- Recognize that authority is there to serve the child, not to lord it over the child.

We are clear that child-centeredness means operating with the child at the center under the authority of God. Being child-centered should never be considered outside of the context of God’s love and grace. First comes the recognition that we believe / trust in God and that knowledge of God is primary: “Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them” (Deuteronomy 4:9). The cry to not forget is key to our status as a faith embedded in a teleological history centered in incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

But when we think of the child within the context of the Christian school, we quickly recognize that adults create school often to their own benefit, not to the primary benefit of the child. Let’s think of a couple of actual examples:

- We create schedules that fit the convenience of teachers and administrators rather than the clear needs of the child.
- We teach in a way that is comfortable for me and reflects my particular style rather than fitting and meeting each child's unique needs.
- We allocate time to meet bureaucratic requirements and arbitrary rules (such as the 120-hour Carnegie Unit) rather than considering how much time – more or less – makes sense from the child's point of view.

We must remember that school is a mandatory place for children but an optional place for adults; it is a place where children have little or no power and adults have much. Children continually move through and have no necessary sense of permanence, while adults might stay for an entire career / vocation. It is often, to our shame, a place where well-meaning disciples “hinder” the children from coming to the Father.

Being child-centered helps make us sensitive to our adult self-centeredness. Indeed, it is only within the context of God's love and grace that leaving the self-centeredness of adults behind makes any sense and, indeed, is possible. When we are able to stop being self-centered as adults, we are freed to become immersed in the lives of our children. Then, we can “teach (the laws) to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 11:19). This all-encompassing embrace of the teaching life is what turns it from mere career into vocation.

Being child-centered is deeply Biblical. God takes the same approach, considering us His children, embracing us and being with us (Emmanuel) through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, through the law written on our hearts, through the reality of knowing we are created beings, and teaching us (Psalms 25: 4-5; 27:11; 32:8; 86:11; 94:10; 119). He was with us at the beginning of time teaching the man (Genesis 2:16) while in Eden and apprenticing the man and woman in the making of clothing (Genesis 3:21). He came to us in Jesus, a child teaching in the Temple (Luke 2:46) and a man teaching the multitudes. We note that God the Father came to Adam and Eve within His creation, Jesus came to us in the context of embodied human history, and the Spirit comes to each of us within the context of our own lives. This is our Biblical model of how we should approach children – within the context of their own lives, teaching them in the place they are, and being with them in a way they can understand.

Child-centeredness thus asks us to leave behind our own adult selfishness (which scripturally is always attached to ambition, cf. 2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20; Philippians 2:3; James 3:14). It asks us to come towards the child within the child's own context and in a way that makes sense to the child. And it asks us to exercise authority in order to serve the child, not to dominate the child.

We are reminded in our speaking of authority that Jesus remarked that we should receive the kingdom of God “like a child” (Mark 10:15) or not enter in. His last evening with his disciples was spent teaching them about foot washing. “Do you understand what I have done for

you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:12-14). Our authority is then to serve, a paradox in any age but no less in our own – where authority means to lord it over others and exercise privilege.

None of this is to take away the difference between an adult and a child, the person who has been trained and the one who has not, the administrator who has been promoted and the one who has not. All these reflect our talents and gifts (given to us) and their developmental growth. It is not to take away the authority that has the sense of judgment – there are plenty of places to go in Scripture to demonstrate the validity of that. But in our schools, the dominant impulse is always to look at education from the child’s point of view, through the child’s eyes, and with the child’s best interests at heart. The dominant impulse is, thus, to love.

In our schools, that means actually paying deep attention to what we say we are doing and what we are actually doing; to recognizing our missions as being almost exclusively and correctly about helping the child; to asking children their thoughts, fears, dreams, aspirations and finding them of value and acting on them; to beginning each conversation with the admonition to keep the child at the center; to coming to decisions and asking the question as to whom the decision primarily benefits; to running meetings that focus on mission delivery to the child, whatever the topic of conversation.

Schools with children at the center are fun, happy, high achieving, extraordinary places. Adults in them are vocation driven, selfless, wise, pure. James warns against being a teacher, noting how many pitfalls there are. But for those who know that is their calling, he also encourages in James 3:13, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” That is the Child Principle.