

# ADAPTING LESSONS FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

by Lori Williams

**S**unday school teachers often teach students with special needs. In most places, children with special learning needs are integrated into their public school and Lutheran day school classes to the fullest extent possible; parents expect this practice to be followed on Sundays as well. Even where a church offers special classes for students with disabilities, not all children with learning needs will fit in that class for various reasons. Reaching these children, all children, with the Good News of Jesus' love is easier when we use as many avenues as possible in our teaching. *Movement* and *sensory* activities, while excellent ways to connect with students who have various learning needs, are also great tools for teaching all students.

## Movement Activities

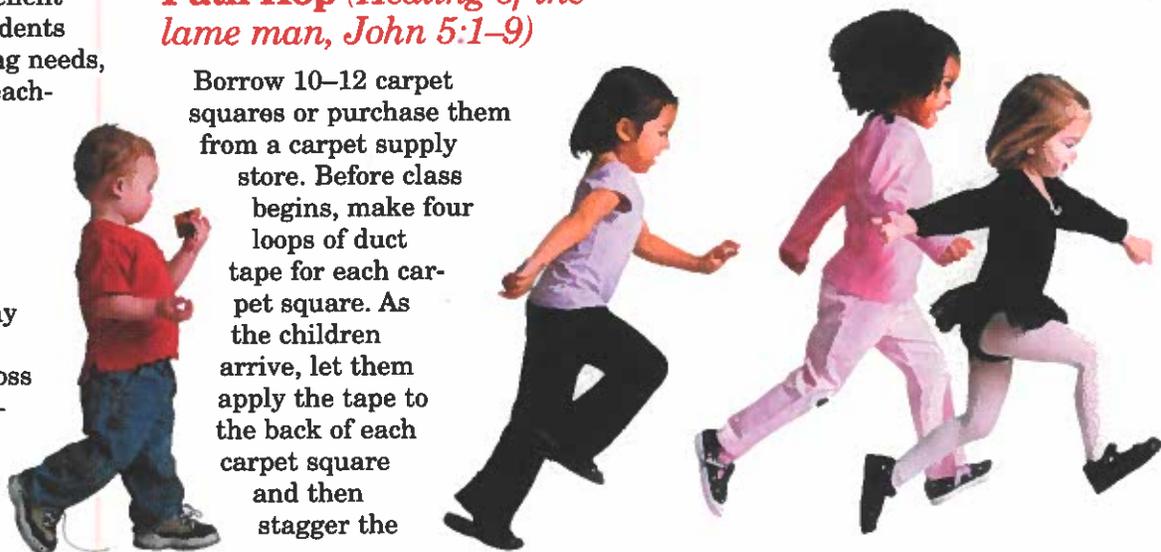
"Let's cross the desert today!" I announced to my Sunday school class. As each child "traveled" across bubble wrap and sandpaper, I recounted the Wise Men's journey to find baby Jesus.

More legwork and less seatwork is often the theme for my "special needs" Sunday school class. Since most of the children in my class have significant learning delays, activities that are sensory and/or movement based are effective teaching tools. Moreover, since all children learn best from an experiential approach to teaching, the following suggestions also work in a regular Sunday school classroom. Use these movement activities in your class—and as examples of other ways you can get your students moving and learning. (The activities marked with an asterisk \* are used in the Winter 2004 quarter of *Our Life in Christ*.)

### Path Hop (*Healing of the lame man, John 5:1-9*)

Borrow 10-12 carpet squares or purchase them from a carpet supply store. Before class begins, make four loops of duct tape for each carpet square. As the children arrive, let them apply the tape to the back of each carpet square and then stagger the

squares about a foot apart in a curving path around the classroom. (Be sure to alternate the direction of the tape loops so they won't all roll and let the square slide on the floor.) Ask the children to hop down the carpet path on one foot. Talk about what it means to be lame. Then have the children crawl down the carpet path as if with one lame leg. Read the Bible story. Ask: How did the lame man walk after he was healed? Emphasize that God, who loves each of us, doesn't always heal at the time and way we desire, but He promises to heal all of us of our sin-sickness, giving us forgiveness, new life, and salvation.



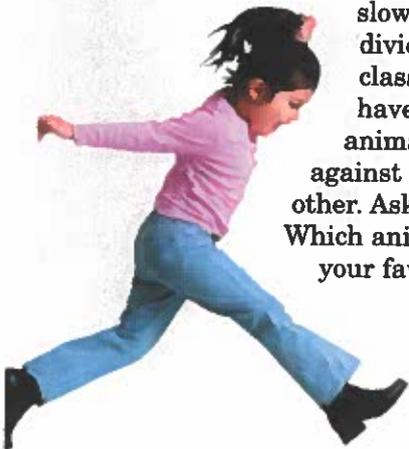
## Naaman Knees (Naaman healed of leprosy, 2 Kings 5)

Use a Bible picture book to tell the story of Naaman, emphasizing a paraphrase of verse 14, "Naaman dipped in the Jordan seven times." Have the children do seven deep knee bends, as if dipping in the Jordan. Ask: Which was easiest, the first or the last deep knee bend? Then ask them to repeat the verse as they do seven more deep knee bends. Ask: Would it be easier or harder to do deep knee bends in the water? Do you think the water was warm or cold?

## Animal Walk (Creation, Genesis 1:20-25)

Use colorful pictures cut from magazines to illustrate God's creation of the animals. Then choose six children to help demonstrate the following "animal walks": caterpillar (crawl on tummy), duck (grasp ankles and waddle), flamingo (stand on one leg), dog (walk on hands and knees), bird (fly with arms outstretched), and crab (walk on hands and feet, tummy up). Let the children choose an animal to imitate, and organize a relay race. Ask: Why did God make some animals fast

and others slow? Then divide the class and have the animals race against each other. Ask: Which animal is your favorite?



## \*Desert Journey (The Wise Men, Matthew 2:7-11)

Gather supplies: duct tape, squares of fine sandpaper, and squares of bubble wrap. Make 3-4 dozen loops of duct tape before class begins. (Check a "dollar store" for inexpensive supplies). Use colorful pictures of camels, desert scenes, and the three Wise Men to tell the story. Pass out sandpaper and bubble wrap squares and let the class feel the different textures. Then let the children put 3-4 pieces of duct tape on the back of the sandpaper and bubble wrap squares. Alternate and stagger the squares around the room. Ask: "Would you like to travel like one of the Wise Men? Let's remove our socks and shoes and walk across the desert!" Let the children hop, walk, and stomp to their heart's content. Ask: How did the sand feel when the Wise Men walked across the desert in the daytime? Let the children demonstrate how to walk, then run across the "hot

sand." Ask: How would loose sand feel under the Wise Men's feet? Would it be easy or hard to walk across a "desert" of bubble wrap? Show me how you would walk across a desert of loose sand. Ask: What is the longest journey you have ever taken? How far would you travel to see baby Jesus?

On many Sundays, an eight-year-old with cerebral palsy attends my class. Although David cannot actively participate in most movement activities, he rings a bell to signal the beginning of relay races, controls the timer during games, and appoints team leaders and members. David can use a bat to bop balloons, pop bubbles, and so forth. Such accommodations place emphasis on David's abilities, not his disability.

At least two of the above movement activities can be adapted for other Bible stories: "Animal Walk" for the story of Noah's Ark (Genesis 6) and "Desert Journey" for the Queen of Sheba's journey to see King Solomon (1 Kings 10). Substitutions, or a simple review

of the past week's lesson, come in handy when a child asks, "Can we do this again next week?" After all, repetition is a good way to emphasize pivotal concepts from the Bible.

## Sensory Activities

"Are we eating pig food again today?" Robbie asked as he walked into Sunday school. "Sure, I have plenty left from last Sunday!" I said as I pulled out a bag of cornhusks. "Yuck," said Chuck, "that stuff is awful!" Everyone in class recalled that the husks tasted bad, but they also remembered the Bible account of the prodigal son *and* the Bible verse "God is love," (1 John 4:16).

Most of the children in my Sunday school class have significant learning delays. Yet the class is able to learn the Bible's message through activities that use the five senses, particularly taste, touch, and smell. In fact, since all children benefit from an experiential approach to learning, the following sensory adaptations can be used in any elementary Sunday school class.

### Spicy Smells (Jesus anointed, Mark 14:3-5)

Gather supplies: apple-sauce, a blindfold, and 6-8 different bottled spices. Tell the Bible account. Ask: Why did the woman anoint Jesus' head? How do

you think the perfume smelled? Let the children smell the spices. Ask: Which spice is your favorite? Why?

Blindfold each of the children in turn and let them try to guess which spice they are holding. Ask: Why did the woman anoint Jesus with her most expensive perfume? What valuable gift can you give to Jesus? Let the children sprinkle cinnamon on applesauce for a snack.

### \*Stormy Waters (Jesus calms the storm, Luke 8:22-25)

Gather supplies: A deep dishpan, plastic cups, a vinyl tablecloth, small plastic boats, and straws. Use a Bible picture book to tell the story. Then spread the vinyl tablecloth on a table, and let the children use the cups to fill the dishpan with water. Demonstrate how to make stormy waters: put the end of the straw on the surface of the water and blow into the other end. (Tell the class that the water is not for drinking!) Let two or three children at a time practice with their straws. Ask: Why did Jesus fall asleep in the boat? Now put two or three boats in the "lake" and take turns with the straws again. Ask: Could Jesus have slept through the whole storm?

### Edible Maps (Philip and the Ethiopian, Acts 8:26-40)

Gather supplies: a road map, hoagie buns, butter or peanut butter, and 3-4 of the following toppings: fruit preserves, sunflower kernels, coconut, mini chocolate chips, candy sprinkles, cinnamon sugar, licorice whips. Use a road map to tell the story, pointing out the road lines and mountain markings. Emphasize a paraphrase of verse 35, "Then Philip . . . told him [the Ethiopian] the Good News about Jesus." Ask: Did Philip want to go to Gaza? How did he travel? Let the class make edible road maps: Give each child half of a hoagie bun and let him spread it with butter or peanut butter. Set out bowls of toppings. If necessary, give suggestions. Use licorice whips or lines of chocolate chips to make roads. Make mountains with "piles" of coconut, sunflower kernels, or cinnamon sugar. Mark the spot where Philip met the Ethiopian with fruit preserves. After the maps are devoured, ask: Do we have a roadmap to direct us to unbelievers?



## Lazarus Clothes (*Lazarus raised from the dead, John 11:38–44*)

Gather supplies: A large, soft blanket, a tie or rope, and Limburger or Parmesan cheese. Tell the story. Ask: Did Jesus notice the bad odor in the tomb? Let the children smell and comment on the cheese. Ask: Would you like to pretend to be Lazarus raised from the dead? Choose a volunteer, and let him roll up in the blanket so that his face is covered and his arms are pinned to his side. Loosely tie the blanket closed. Have the rest of the class shout, "Lazarus, come out!" (If necessary, help "Lazarus" to get up). Role-play the story so that each child can be Lazarus. Ask: Lazarus's face was covered, but did he know that Jesus was calling him to get up? Was anyone else ever raised from the dead?

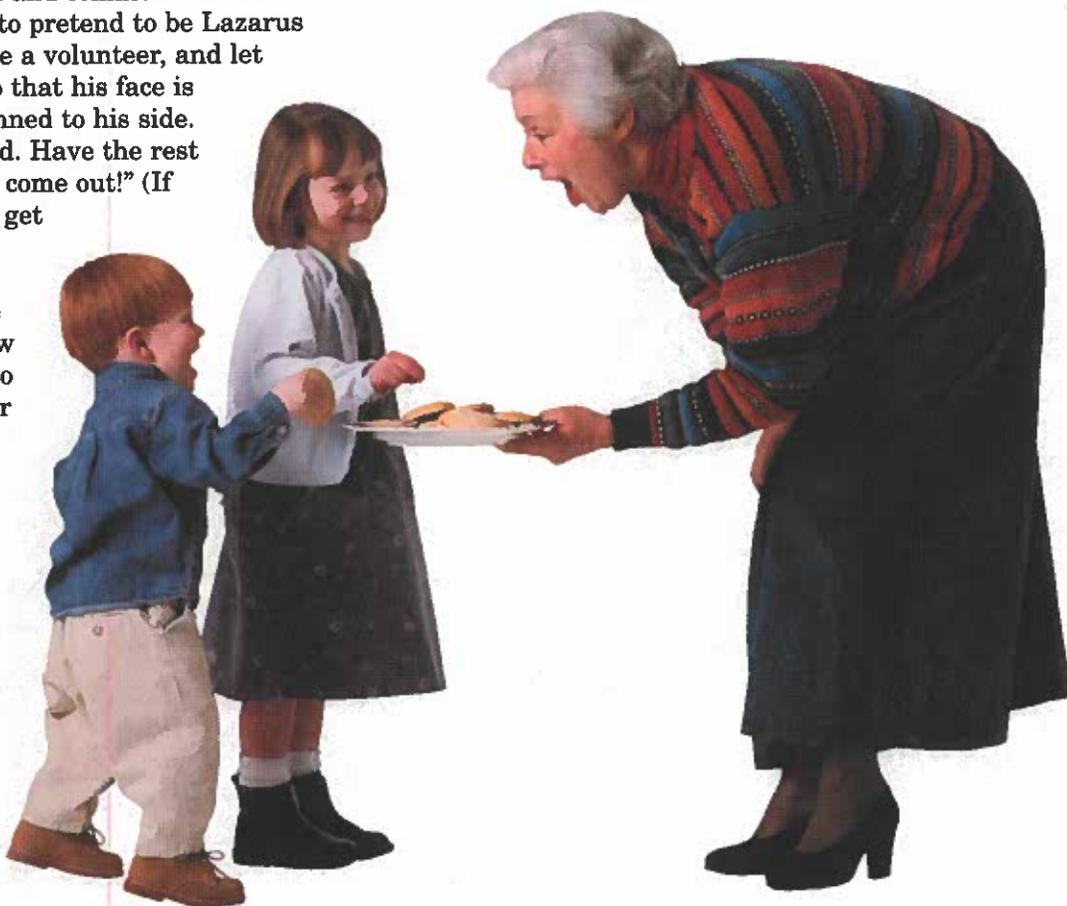
## Pig Food (*The prodigal son, Luke 15:11–32*)

Gather supplies: cornhusks and cupcakes. (Bags of cornhusk are available in the ethnic food section of the grocery store.) Ask: What do you most like to eat when you are really hungry? Let's hear about a man who was so hungry he wanted to eat pig food. Use pictures of a young man, an older man, and a herd of pigs to illustrate verses 11–16. Pass out the cornhusks and invite the class to feel, smell, and—if they wish—taste the "pig food." Recount the story from verses 17–32. Ask: Did the prodigal son go home only because he was hungry? Pass out the cupcakes and say, "The father in the Bible account celebrated when his son came home. Let's have a party of our own to celebrate how much God loves us!"

There are multiple benefits to providing a snack during Sunday school: (1) All children enjoy snacks, (2) children often come to Sunday school without breakfast, (3) learning delayed children benefit from a routine that includes a consistent snack time, and (4) lesson-specific snacks are particularly memorable.

With minimal adaptation, four of these sensory activities could complement other Bible stories: "Spicy Smells" also highlights the Wise Men's gift (Matthew 2:7–11); "Lazarus Clothes" illustrates

Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 28); "Edible Maps" could illustrate Jesus' journey to the temple at Passover (Luke 2:41–52); and "Stormy Waters" adapts to the story of Jonah. You can probably think of many other ways to incorporate your students' senses as you teach.



1 John 1:1 offers inspiration for the teaching of children with special needs: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." Targeting as many of the five senses as possible helps a child become a participant, not just an onlooker, in each Bible lesson. Such participation leads to our ultimate goal of asking each child to accept God's plan of salvation.

*Lori Williams began teaching a Sunday school class for children with special needs after the adoption of her daughter, Aurelia, from Romania. She lives in Bethany, Oklahoma, and often writes about international adoption and the special-needs child.*