



Welcoming the Special

HOW DO YOU REACT WHEN HYPERACTIVE HARRY, sullen Sally, or clingy Clara visit your Sunday school class? Are you unprepared, fearful, even panicky? Who are special-needs children? They may be physically, emotionally and mentally challenged. Such children may also suffer from unstable backgrounds, that is, an unconventional caregiver, or unreliable family support; and their numbers are on the rise. Consider the data compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2003: From 1991 to 2000 there was more than a 30 percent increase in the number of disabled children and youth who were served by selected public school programs. Since God cares deeply about the needs of such fragile children, intuitive Sunday school teachers should as well.

Such intuition often leads to a disruption in a planned schedule. This is especially true when a child's comment leads naturally to a teachable moment or a child's prayer request merits extra attention.

Backup Plans

Three brothers from a foster home attended my class regularly. One Sunday, the brother named Brian timidly asked, "Would you pray that I'll see my dad again?" Brian knew his dad was serving a prison term for child abuse. As Brian talked further, he revealed how abandoned and insecure he felt. The rest of the class listened closely. Soon three other students shared concerns about unchurched grandpas and delinquent dads. That morning, child-initiated and Spirit-led prayers for better male role models took precedence over my lesson plan.

Brian's 12-year-old brother, Ben, liked to announce, "I have a new girlfriend!" Soon the other boys wanted to compete with Ben. On one memorable Sunday, five boys took turns bragging about their new girlfriends. This, I decided, was the time for a teachable moment.

"Ben, why do you have a girlfriend?" I asked. Ben rolled his eyes and said, "It's fun." "Class," I wanted to know, "do you ever think about marrying your girlfriend or boyfriend?" The class shouted, "No way!" before Ben added, "I have to wait 'til I'm 17 'cause that's when my dad married my mom."

I knew Ben was speaking the truth. I also knew that most of my students came from broken homes. So I challenged my class to begin thinking about future spouses. Over the next few months my students answered questions like, "What qualities should I look

Consider these simple strategies for implementing a flexible schedule.

Needs Child to Sunday School by Lori Williams

for in a spouse? Why would I date someone who isn't marriage material? What does the Bible say about marriage?" Still I wondered, *Could an occasional marriage discussion in Sunday school repair years spent living in a dysfunctional family?* I was doubtful until I realized that God can multiply the time to fit the needs of each child.

Snack Time

Addressing a child's spiritual needs is essential to a flexible Sunday school schedule. Incorporating a regular snack time is equally important.

1. A snack is needful because many children do not eat Sunday breakfast. (An informal survey is all it takes to determine how many kids come to Sunday school on an empty stomach.)
2. A snack break is useful because snacking children can listen to a Bible story, give prayer requests, or answer discussion questions. Therefore, snacking children are a captive audience!
3. A regular snack time is helpful. At-risk children find comfort in a routine. Such children crave stability and, yes, even predictability. Consider Brian, who had three strikes against him: His needs made him crave sweets, his birth parents deprived him of regular meals, and he was entering adolescence. In short, Brian was always hungry! When I decided Brian was worth the effort it took to provide a snack for the whole class, I wished I had done so sooner. Before long the whole class eagerly anticipated snack time, and I reaped the benefits of a happy, attentive group of kids.

Answer the following questions: Does welcoming special-needs children to Sunday school require hours of extra planning? No. Special training? Not really. Flexibility and compassion? Absolutely. Will the rest of the class benefit by including Brian and Ben? Unequivocally, yes.

Flexibility

You can't wait to use the new long-lasting bubbles to teach this Sunday's lesson on forgiveness. But when your class members finally arrive 15 minutes late, Shawn is in tears because his mom ran over a stray cat on the way to church. What do you do?

- Try to distract Shawn with the new bubbles, although you postpone the plans for a lesson on forgiveness.
- Gather the class together for an impromptu discussion of pets who have died or been injured.

- Forge ahead with your carefully planned lesson.

You have a class full of picky eaters! Robbie refuses to eat peanut butter, Sonya is lactose-intolerant, Zach complains loudly unless he gets chocolate every Sunday—and the list goes on.

How do you handle this situation?

- A. Bring a variety of snacks every Sunday so that everyone will be happy.
- B. Provide one snack that everyone can eat.
- C. Tell the class to be quiet unless they have something good to say.

Score Yourself

If you chose all A's, are you giving your class what they need, not just what they want? All B's indicate you are striving to be flexible! Now relax and enjoy teaching! If you chose all C's, you must remember that your goal is to love your kids, not your lesson plan. ¶

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