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# A Guide for Children and Youth Ministry Leaders Working with Children and Youth with Special Needs

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**New Apostolic Church USA**

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## Our Mission

A church in which people feel at home and, inspired by the Holy Spirit and their love for God, align their lives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thus prepare themselves for His return and eternal life.

## Our Vision

Reaching out to all people in order to teach them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to baptize them with water and the Holy Spirit. Providing soul care and cultivating a warm fellowship in which everyone shall experience the love of God and the joy of serving Him and others.

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As disciples of Christ it is our duty to ensure all people, including those with learning, behavioral, emotional, and physical disabilities feel welcomed, included, and at home in our church. Families with children with special needs often encounter challenges in regularly attending church or participating in church activities.

This resource is crafted for volunteers in children and youth ministries, aiming to equip them with insights on how to support children and youth with special needs, and their families. It's designed to help teachers and leaders understand the specific assistance and encouragement children with special needs might require to fully participate in the divine services, Sunday School, Religious Instruction, Youth discussions, Youth gatherings, and church events.

This resource is guided by Jesus' words: ***"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven."*** This extends beyond typically developing children; it includes those with disabilities. Every child, irrespective of their differences, deserves the opportunity to learn about the gospel and experience Christ's love within the fellowship of their faith community. It involves honoring their individuality and offering the essential

support for their spiritual growth in a respectful manner. Many of the strategies outlined in this guidebook are beneficial for all children. It is important to avoid singling out any child and to provide access to supports for all children whenever appropriate. Some children may require additional support, and teachers should respond with flexibility, patience, and consistency.

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*This guidebook was developed by Janie Metzger, drawing on 22 years of experience as an elementary teacher and school administrator.*


*It is grounded in best practices from both general and special education and aims to provide practical, effective strategies for creating inclusive learning environments. It incorporates insights, concepts, and materials from the book "Every Child Welcome" authored by Katie Wetherbee and Jolene Philo, which have been adapted to suit the needs of this resource. Additionally, valuable strategies and support methods have been generously offered by experts in the field of special education, including speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, social workers, special education paraprofessionals, resource teachers, and special education school administrators.*

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## INCLUSION

The foundation of any congregation lies in its ability to embrace diversity and inclusivity, especially when it comes to welcoming children and youth of all abilities. Fostering inclusive practices within our congregations will create an environment where every child, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities, feels not just welcomed, but truly valued and embraced. Inclusive practices in Sunday School, Religious Instruction, and Youth refer to methodologies, strategies, and approaches that ensure all children, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or differences, are actively engaged, valued, and included in the learning process. This includes creating an environment where every child feels welcomed, respected, and supported, while also adapting teaching methods, materials, and activities to accommodate diverse learning styles, abilities, and needs. Inclusive practices emphasize embracing diversity, fostering empathy and understanding, and providing equal opportunities for participation and spiritual growth for all children within the Sunday School, Religious Instruction, or Youth setting.

The strategies and practices outlined in this document aim to promote and facilitate the inclusion of all children in church activities. Ensuring the safety of our children is paramount, therefore there may be rare instances where exceptions need to be considered. However, our ultimate aim remains steadfast: to create an environment where all children, regardless of their abilities, can learn, worship, and engage in fellowship together.



The foundation of any congregation lies in its ability to embrace diversity and inclusivity, especially when it comes to welcoming children and youth of all abilities.



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## GET TO KNOW THE CHILD

Every child possesses strengths and areas for growth. To effectively support families and children with special needs, it's vital to understand each child as an individual and as a learner. Parents are the foremost experts on their children, possessing invaluable insights. Communicating upfront with parents about your commitment to collaborating with them to ensure their child's inclusion and success in church activities is a crucial initial step.

Parents are an invaluable resource and should be actively involved in all decisions concerning their child. When discussing a child's needs and behavior with parents, sensitivity is paramount. Focus on highlighting the child's strengths and what they excel at. Inquire about the child's preferences, interests, fears, sources of joy, and favorite activities or toys. Ask about strategies parents use to help their child cope with challenges and to calm down, as well as ways to bring a smile to their child's face.

Observing a child in their natural environment, whether during playtime, at home, or in school, is a valuable method for discerning their interests, strengths, fears, and challenges. The *Family / Child Inventory* serves as a helpful tool to get to know all students. It can also help facilitate conversations with parents, allowing you to gather more comprehensive information about their child when needed. This information enables you to better understand the child's needs and how to effectively support them. The *Family / Child Inventory* can be found in *Appendix A*.

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## CREATE A PLAN

Good teaching is rooted in careful planning, especially in classrooms with diverse learners, including those with special needs. Once you've gathered information about a child, the next crucial step is crafting a comprehensive plan that prioritizes their learning, communication, social, and emotional needs. This plan encompasses transitions, routines, seating, calming techniques, and engaging activities tailored to the child's needs. While an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) from a school might offer guidance, it's essential to acknowledge the objectives of church and school are quite different. Schools primarily focus on academics, while churches aim to integrate every child into congregational life and God's plan of salvation.

To ensure consistency and support for children with Individualized Education Plans (IEP), it's essential to collaborate with parents and to identify effective strategies or accommodations outlined in the IEP that are successfully used at school, and use them during church and church activities. By asking parents to share these strategies and accommodations, teachers and leaders can tailor the Sunday School, Religious Instruction, or Youth group environment to better meet the child's needs. Additionally, seeking permission to observe the child or youth at school or inviting an education professional to observe them at church can provide valuable insights for creating an inclusive and supportive plan. Ultimately, this collaborative approach ensures that every child receives the necessary support and positive experiences within the congregation.

Good teaching is rooted in careful planning, especially in classrooms with diverse learners, including those with special needs.

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## CREATE A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

We aim to create a warm and inviting classroom environment where every child feels secure and valued, fostering a sense of belonging that encourages their return. For children with special needs, the classroom environment plays a crucial role in their learning and participation. A structured and predictable environment enhances their chances of success. When setting up your classroom, consider the following factors:

- Establishing a predictable routine benefits all children, providing them with a sense of security and clarity about what to expect. Create a consistent schedule for your classroom activities and prominently display it for everyone to see. Strive to adhere to this schedule each time children enter your classroom. Include key elements such as Welcome / Check In, Bible story time, snacks, crafts, music, games, videos, and any special events or visitors. For children with special needs, it's crucial to communicate any changes in the schedule in advance. Some children may respond better when informed of changes by their parents, so consider notifying them as well. Ensure that any schedule alterations are clearly indicated on your posted daily schedule.
- Develop 3-5 clear, simple rules to show children what the expectations are while in your classroom. Let the children tell you what they think the rules should be, and then cluster them into 3-5 positively stated sentences. Don't make rules too broad or too narrow. Here are some examples of simple rules that will cover almost all behaviors:
  - *I will keep my hands and feet to myself.*
  - *I will use kind words when speaking to my friends or adults.*
  - *I will keep my classroom safe and clean.*
- Integrate Sponge activities into your classroom environment. Sponge activities are engaging tasks that children can independently participate in, such as working on a class mural, completing puzzles, coloring and drawing,

or reading books in a book corner. These activities should align with children's interests and be easily accessible within the classroom. They serve as valuable resources to occupy downtime or unplanned moments, reducing the likelihood of challenging behaviors. Additionally, Sponge activities offer productive engagement opportunities for the class, in the event the teacher needs to attend to an individual child's needs. Ensure your classroom is equipped with at least 1-2 Sponge activities to support a positive learning environment.

- Establish distinct areas in your classroom, each with a clear purpose communicated to the children. Define these areas by activities and expected behavior. Examples include story / learning zone, snack areas, reading corners, video spaces, calming zones, and toy areas. This structure helps children understand how to engage and behave, fostering an organized learning environment.
- Ensure that classroom materials are easily accessible and well-organized to facilitate independent interaction by children. Organized materials empower children to engage with resources autonomously and contribute to the cleanliness of the classroom. By maintaining an orderly environment, children can navigate materials efficiently, fostering a sense of responsibility and ownership in their learning space.
- When organizing special activities, ensure that materials are prepared and set up in advance of children arriving in the classroom. Additionally, incorporate these activities into the daily schedule to provide structure and a visual reminder for children with special needs. This approach ensures a smooth transition into the activity and maximizes the time available for engagement and learning.
- Plan and develop seating arrangements or the use of preferential seating in advance. See below for more details on preferential seating.
- Utilizing supports can significantly enhance the predictability and structure of the learning environment for children with special needs. Various supports, such as social stories, visuals, visual schedules, quiet zones, fidgets,

preferential seating, and sensory support, play crucial roles in facilitating learning and participation. Let's explore how each support can be effectively utilized:

- **Social / Scripted Stories:** These are personalized narratives that describe social situations, concepts, or skills that are difficult for a child, in a simplified and concrete manner. Social / Scripted stories help children understand and navigate social interactions, routines, and expectations. It typically includes the following elements: a description of the relevant situation or routine, thoughts and feelings that the child might experience, clear and positive guidance on how the child should respond or behave, affirming statements to reinforce positive behavior, and a summary statement of the situation. Samples of *Social / Scripted Stories* can be found in *Appendix B*. These stories should be read consistently with the child to help prepare them for the challenging situation or new event.
- **Visuals:** Visual aids, such as pictures, symbols, gestures, or drawings, play a crucial role in supporting children with special needs by providing clarity and understanding of instructions, concepts, and expectations without the use of verbal language. These visuals offer concrete representations of abstract ideas, making information more accessible and comprehensible for children who may struggle with processing spoken language or abstract concepts. For instance, using a picture depicting folded hands and closed eyes helps illustrate the physical act of prayer, aiding the child's understanding of the solemnity of prayer. It's important to celebrate any portion of the requested action that a child successfully demonstrates, recognizing that each child's level of ability varies greatly. For example, if a child only folds their hands, praise them for that, or only closes their eyes, celebrate that with them. See resources for *visuals* in *Appendix C*.
- **Visual Schedules:** Visual schedules outline the sequence of activities or tasks within a given period, offering a clear visual roadmap for children to follow. Visual schedules reduce anxiety, improve transitions, and enhance predictability by providing a visual preview of

what to expect throughout the day or throughout the task. See resources for using *visual schedules* in *Appendix C*.

- **Timers:** Using timers can be a valuable support for children with special needs, particularly those who find it challenging to transition between activities. Timers with visible displays of the remaining time help children maintain focus on a specific task or area and prepare them for the conclusion of an activity.
- **Quiet Zones:** Quiet zones serve as designated retreats within the classroom environment, providing children with a peaceful and secure space for self-regulation and sensory modulation. These areas are specifically designed to offer a tranquil atmosphere conducive to relaxation, reflection, and rejuvenation. By equipping quiet zones with amenities such as pillows, blankets, fidgets, and stuffed animals, teachers enhance the comfort and soothing ambiance of these spaces, facilitating children's ability to unwind and engage in calming activities. This supportive environment enables children to effectively manage sensory input, reduce stress levels, and regain emotional equilibrium in a safe and nurturing setting.
- **Fidgets:** Fidgets are small, tactile tools or objects that children can discreetly manipulate to help them stay focused, manage anxiety, or regulate sensory input. These items, such as stress balls, textured objects, or handheld gadgets, offer sensory stimulation that supports attention and concentration. It's important to allow children to use fidgets at any time during a lesson, as they may need them to enhance their focus and engagement. While it may seem like a child using a fidget is not paying attention, they are often still listening and absorbing information, even while engaging with the fidget. See *Appendix D* for links to resources to purchase *fidgets*.
- **Preferential Seating:** Providing preferential seating allows children with special needs to sit in locations that best meet their individual sensory, attentional, or behavioral needs. This may involve seating near the front of the classroom, away from distractions, or in a quieter

area to optimize learning and participation. This may also involve different types of seating, such as rocking chairs, cube chairs, or wobble cushions. All children should always remain in full view of the adults in the room to ensure safety. See *Appendix D* for resources to purchase *specialty seating*.

- **Sensory Support:** Sensory supports accommodate children's sensory sensitivities or preferences by incorporating sensory-friendly materials, activities, or modifications into the learning environment. These supports address sensory processing challenges and promote comfort and engagement during learning activities. Some sensory supports to consider include the following:
  - **Smells** - Children on the autism spectrum are prone to sensory sensitivity to smells. Be aware of fragrances that might enter your classroom including but not limited to perfumes, colognes, aftershave lotions, cooking smells, etc..
  - **Sounds** - Choose quiet slower music when children arrive. Use soft chimes or bells to gain attention or to signal a transition rather than loud noises or voices. For children with more pronounced sensitivities to sound, consider offering noise-canceling headphones.
  - **Sights** - We want classrooms to be visually welcoming but not overstimulating. Leave some uncluttered space on walls for the eyes to rest. Choose neutral or muted tones if you can, rather than bright colors which can be overwhelming. Fluorescent lights can be overwhelming, so consider dimming, lowering, or turning lights off, if possible or purchasing light-softening filters.
  - **Textures** - Children with sensory processing disorders often struggle to feel comfortable with certain textures, so consider comfortable places for children to sit that are soft to the touch. Give children options during activities that involve touching certain textures such as using markers rather than finger paints.


Allow children to refuse snacks and to bring their own, as eating involves textures too.

- **Transitions** - some children with special needs can have difficulty leaving one activity and moving on to another or moving between activities on the class schedule. This is called a transition. Ways to support a transition might include the following:
  - The use of a universal signal such as a quiet chime or bell that signals the end of the current activity and the beginning of another
  - Giving the child a 2-minute warning that a transition is coming can also help the child transition successfully
  - Offering a preferred toy for the child to bring to the next activity can also help a child when they are reluctant to transition
  - A visual of a pause button (similar to a television remote) paired with the word “pause” is another way to communicate, using limited language, to the child that they can come back to the activity
  - Using a First / Then board. A First/Then board is a picture of what you want the child to do paired with the word First, and a picture of something the child wants to do paired with the word Then. Giving the child a choice of the “Then” item can be highly motivating and supports the child in feeling in control. To use the First/Then board the teacher very calmly points to the “First” picture and says “first”, and then points to the “Then” picture, and says “then”. She then gives the child wait time. Using wait time is very important so the child can process what you’re asking, so allow at least 10 seconds before repeating the request and showing the pictures. If a child will not transition, but is in view of the next activity, move on to the next activity, and oftentimes the child will eventually transition on their own if the


new activity is motivating and of interest to them. A sample of a *First/Then board* can be found in *Appendix F*.

Once you've set up your classroom, be sure to give children a tour of your room, pointing out where the schedule is, where snacks will be served, where lesson time will take place, location of bathrooms, etc. Spending time at the beginning of the learning year practicing routines, creating rules together and making sure supports are in place, will pay off in the long run. By incorporating support thoughtfully and consistently, teachers can create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that empowers children with special needs to thrive and succeed. A well-organized classroom sets everyone up for a successful learning experience and children will naturally want to return and be a part of your classroom.

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## PEERS

One of the most important things you can do for children is to promote the love of Christ through fellowship and relationships. True fellowship begins with relationships, relationships between the adults and children and relationships between children. All children desire to have a trusted relationship with at least one adult in their life. Normally, those relationships are between parents and their children. Sometimes, those relationships are between teachers and children or children and other adults in the congregation. Below are some ways you can support children in connecting with the adults in the congregation.

- *Have the children make cards for adult members and help them to hand them out with a handshake.*
- *Encourage the adults in the congregation to give something to the child/children that they like, such as a sticker, a small toy, or a treat (get parent approval first).*
- *Have the child/children assist with something in the congregation such as straightening books, setting the table, passing out programs, etc.*
- *Provide some basic educational books to help others understand the unique needs and behaviors of children with disabilities. **See Appendix E for recommended books.***

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In the following section, we will focus on developing relationships between children.

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Oftentimes, children with special needs lack critical social skills needed to initiate and develop friendships and so they will need support. Friendship skills in young children depend on several individual skills and the better children are at them, the more likely they will be able to develop friendships with their peers. The skills listed below are important skills when developing friendships and children with special needs may need assistance and support in learning and practicing these skills.

- **Organizing / Initiating Play** - With younger children it's using, "Let's" statements, such as, "Let's play blocks." Often these "Let's" statements are followed by suggestions about what to do (e.g., "You be the teacher.") or specific activities (e.g., "Let's color."). Providing a child with an appropriate "Let's" statement can help them to successfully initiate or organize play with another child.
- **Sharing** – sharing takes many forms among young children. Children with friends make requests when they want something from a friend, such as, "Can I have some pretzels" and they also expect peers to make requests from them rather than things just being taken. Reminders about making requests and assisting a child in making a request can help a child begin to understand the concept of sharing and the things we say and do when we share.
- **Assisting Others** – assisting also takes many forms with children. Children can help each other on or off of an apparatus, they can tell or show a friend how to do something, or they can assist someone in distress. Giving children "jobs" such as paper passer, white board eraser, chair pusher in, etc. is an easy way to develop the idea of assisting or serving others.
- **Giving compliments** – Compliments have a powerful effect on the formation of friendships. Children compliment one another's successes, crafts, and appearances. Younger children need support and encouragement to give compliments. Using visuals to help support children in giving compliments might make it easier for children to develop this skill. Pictures of a thumbs up, or sentence stems that read "I like how you \_\_\_\_\_" where

children can then add their own word at the end like color, share, listen, dress, play, build, etc. are ways you can gently remind children to compliment one another.

In addition to the skills listed above, reciprocity and length of interactions are also important elements of developing friendships. Friendships must involve both parties and time spent with a friend needs to be characterized by frequent, long interactions. Children with special needs will need support with these skills.

Peer models or mentoring can help children with special needs to develop these skills. A strategy known as Peer Buddies is a great way to support children with special needs and their ability to develop friendships. Peer Buddies are a wonderful way to also build the capacity for acceptance, empathy, and compassion in typically developing children while developing the critical social skills in children with special needs.

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### ***Peer Buddies***

- Assigning a typically developing peer to a child with special needs as a Peer Buddy requires planning and training. Any time a Peer Buddy is assigned, parents of both children should be notified and kept informed on how the relationship is developing. Direct training with the typically developing child will be needed and should include information about their peer's disability, the likes and dislikes of their peer, ways to communicate with their peer, and when to ask an adult for help. See the tips from "**How do I Teach My Kids to Interact with People with Disabilities?**" on page 20.
- Typically developing peers will need coaching and support with how to show great respect for their new friend's feelings and behavior. It's helpful to let the typically developing buddy know that their new friend may not make eye contact, may not be able to speak, may get frustrated easily, may not know or understand how to share, may not like being

touched, and may at times be impulsive. Coach the typically developing child ahead of time and encourage them to use positive words, patience, and lots of praise.

- Simple ways for Peer Buddies to interact with each other could begin with something called parallel play, which means Peer Buddies play or learn side by side, doing the same activity, game, or playing with the same toy, independent from each other, but in full view of each other. This type of play can evolve into what's called cooperative play. Cooperative play is where there is some interaction or turn taking between buddies depending on what can be tolerated.
  - The typically developing peer may need help with how to communicate with their buddy. They may need to be taught short phrases, gestures, or how to use visual supports to communicate.
  - Another way Peer Buddies can interact is the typically developing child can support their buddy during snack time, transitions, or with functional skills like putting on a coat, tying shoes, cleaning up, etc.
  - Let all children have a chance to experience the joy of being a Peer Buddy. This may require teaching your class about specific disabilities and how they impact the way children learn, communicate, and behave. If you plan to teach your class about a child and their disability, be sure to discuss this with the parents of the child with the disability. Ask them if it's ok to discuss it with the class or invite the parent to speak to the class about the disability. Using books to talk about disabilities is also a highly effective way to educate your class. There are many wonderful books that can be used to approach this topic. **Recommended books** can be found in **Appendix E**.
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The following tips are ways in which you can support a typically developing child who is fostering a friendship with a child with special needs. These tips are taken from an article titled “**How do I Teach My Kids how to Interact with People with a Disability?**” from [keyministry.org](http://keyministry.org) written by Jolene Philo.

1. **Model disability etiquette to your children and others.** In addition to watching how you employ the tips listed below as you interact with people who have disabilities and special needs, they hear how you speak. They notice your inflection and tone of voice. They can see if you are at ease or uncomfortable, patronizing or respectful, so try to be a good role model.
2. **Talk to the person with the disability** rather than to their caretaker or interpreter even if they give the answer. Doing so shows the person that you value them and want to hear from them.
3. **Start by having your child introduce herself.** Once again, this conveys respect for your child’s voice and helps the person she’s talking to know who to speak with.
4. **Allow your child to ask the person about his disability.** Kids are curious and uninhibited. They will bring up the disability elephant in the room that adults are too “polite” to mention. When that happens, don’t tell your child to be quiet. Instead, go up to the person and say, “My child would like to ask you a question. Is that okay with you?” If the person says yes, encourage your child to ask. If the person says no, move on to the sixth tip in this list. Then when you get home, answer your child’s original question as best you can.
5. **Encourage follow up questions.** We all know how answers result in growing curiosity. If the question was about a disability, your child may want to know about equipment, service dogs, interpreters. Let kids ask them if the other person in the conversation is agreeable.
6. **Encourage questions not related to a person’s disability.** Coach your child to move the conversation in the direction of getting to know one another. Kids can ask about their favorite sports or sports teams, books they

enjoy, movies they like, and so on. These are the beginning steps in getting to know people and cultivating friendships.

7. **Thank the person for answering your questions and say your good-bye.** Have your child follow the other person's lead about giving handshakes, high fives, fist bumps, or hugs. If this is a child to child interaction, you could even ask a parent if it would be okay to text and set up a playdate. Many children with disabilities have very few friends, so your request may well thrill their parents.

Nurturing loving relationships among children is one of the greatest gifts you can give as a teacher or leader. These friendships can last a lifetime and is what knits a congregation together.

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## EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

As Sunday School teachers and Youth Leaders, our mission extends far beyond merely imparting information from lessons or the Bible to our children and youth. Instead, our responsibility lies in transforming that knowledge into living, relevant truths that resonate with their lives today. By fostering interactive and engaging learning experiences, we can breathe life into the gospel message, making it profoundly meaningful for every child and youth. The following collection of teaching tips and techniques is designed to infuse vitality into your lessons, ensuring that the message is not only comprehensible but also deeply impactful for all children and youth under our care.

### ***Bible Story Walk***

A Bible Story Walk is an engaging way to introduce the Bible story to children before reading it together. It helps build anticipation, activate prior knowledge, and set the stage for comprehension. Show an illustration of the story if you have one, and ask questions like “What do you think this story might be about?” “What do you notice in this picture?”. Encourage the children to predict what might happen based on the picture or the title of the story. Write down or discuss their predictions as a group and revisit after reading the story.

Set a purpose for reading the story by sharing why you’re reading the story and what to listen for during the story. For example, say to the children “Let’s find out how Daniel solves his problem.” or “Pay attention to how God protects His people.”

A Bible Story Walk is not about revealing the entire plot or about rushing through the story, but it’s about sparking curiosity and excitement to dive into the story together.

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## ***Pre-read Strategies***

Pre-reading strategies help children engage with a Bible story, prepare their hearts and minds to receive the message, and connect with its themes. Here are some effective pre-read strategies:

- **Introduce the Setting:** Briefly explain the historical or cultural background of the story.
- **Define Key Terms:** Teach any unfamiliar words or names they'll encounter.
- **Ask Questions:** Encourage children to connect the story to what they already know.
- **Recall Previous Lessons:** Tie the story to other Bible stories or lessons they've learned.
- **Highlight the Theme or Lesson:** Share the big idea of the story without giving away details
- **Pose a Question to Answer:** Create curiosity about the story.
- **Show Illustrations:** If using a children's Bible or storybook, preview key images to spark interest.
- **Give a Quick Overview:** Mention the key people or groups involved in the story.
- **Relate Characters to the Children:** Help them see connections.
- **Preview the Conflict:** Briefly describe the problem the story addresses.
- **Encourage Predictions:** Ask children to guess what might happen.

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## ***Reteaching Strategies***

Traditional teaching methods, effective for visual or auditory learners, may not suit children with special needs or other types of learners for that matter. All children thrive through hands-on experiences, sensory engagement, visuals, or music. When information isn't grasped initially, reteaching can be crucial. However, it's not just about repeating the lesson; it's about presenting it in new and varied ways. While not every concept requires reteaching, your core learning objectives do. Here are some methods for effective reteaching:

- **Music Fun:** Utilize music as a tool to convey the message effectively. Incorporating songs that feature scripture, essential gospel concepts, or retell Bible stories can leave a lasting impact. Through repetition, these songs become ingrained in the memory, easily recalled even years later. To enhance retention, consider incorporating movements or gestures that complement the lyrics, further solidifying the information in the minds of the listeners.
- **Draw Pictures:** Retell a story using various visual aids such as pictures, felt pieces, puppets, or objects to help illustrate the narrative. Afterward, provide the children with an opportunity to express their understanding by drawing pictures or using the visual aids to retell the story. This hands-on approach encourages engagement and reinforces comprehension as the children visually represent the story in their own way.
- **Interactive Storytelling:** Before recounting a Bible story, provide the children with props, pictures, or gestures to hold or perform while you narrate the story. By actively engaging them in this way, the story comes to life, making it more vivid and captivating for the children.
- **Play a Game:** Using modified versions of popular games can be an effective method for reinforcing Bible stories or concepts. For example, Charades provides a platform for children to express their understanding of characters or events from the Bible in a creative manner. Additionally, organizing a scavenger hunt around the classroom or church, where participants search for objects related to a specific Bible story or concept, offers an engaging and active approach to learning. Another interactive game is Hot Potato, where

children pass an object while music plays, and the child holding the object when the music stops must recall or retell a part of the Bible story or concept. These adapted games provide enjoyable opportunities for children and youth to interact with and internalize key teachings from the Bible in a fun and memorable way.

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All children thrive through hands-on experiences, sensory engagement, visuals, or music.

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## ***Reinforce the Objectives and Goals***

The cornerstone of your lesson lies in the learning objectives and goals. These objectives are typically stated at the outset of the lesson and outline what children should understand and accomplish by the end. A helpful practice is to express these objectives in child or youth-friendly language right at the beginning of each session. This allows children or youth to mentally prepare for the lesson ahead. Moreover, breaking down each main objective into no more than three sub-objectives can further clarify the learning focus. For instance, you might communicate to the children or youth:

"Today we're going to read the story of creation from Genesis. Here are three important things I want you to listen for and be able to tell me by the end of the lesson:

- 1. God made everything in the universe by simply speaking.*
- 2. God rested on the 7th day after creating everything.*
- 3. God created man and woman to take care of His creation together."*

Additional strategies to reinforce the learning objectives and goals include:

- Teachers should have a clear understanding of the learning goals and objectives in advance to help maintain focus during the lesson. Teachers will then naturally prioritize parts of the lesson that align with these objectives. This focused approach streamlines lesson planning as teachers will want to select and emphasize elements that directly support the learning goals.
- Clearly stating or writing these objectives for children ahead of time provides the children with a focus during the lesson. When you reach parts of the story that relate to the objectives, you can point them out or remind the children. To further engage them, consider introducing a signal or gesture they must perform when they hear these parts of the story. This helps reinforce the connection between the lesson objectives and the content being taught.

- For children with special needs, having pictures alongside the learning objectives can greatly aid their understanding and focus. Consider providing each child with a set of three pictures that represent the learning objectives. Instruct them to hold up the corresponding picture when they hear the objective mentioned during the lesson. This visual support helps reinforce what they should be listening for and encourages active participation.
- Repeating the learning objectives and goals throughout the lesson is an effective strategy to ensure that children and youth grasp and understand the information being taught. Encouraging children and youth to repeat the learning objectives whenever they are encountered in the lesson further reinforces their understanding and retention of the material. This active engagement technique helps to solidify the key concepts and ensures that children and youth are actively learning throughout the lesson.
- Asking questions throughout the lesson related to the learning objectives helps assess children/youth's understanding in real-time and address any misunderstandings. Open-ended questions, which require explanation, are especially effective for gaining insight into their comprehension. For instance, "Why do you think God rested on the 7th day?" or "What does this mean for us?" These questions also help children connect the lesson to their lives, aiding in retention and understanding of the objectives and goals. Making these connections is crucial for reinforcing learning.
- Children with special needs often engage in concrete thinking rather than abstract reasoning. Concrete thinkers prefer to count items and deal with tangible, visible objects. For instance, they might count apples or blocks rather than conceptualizing quantities as "more than" or "less than" each other. To accommodate concrete thinkers in teaching, it's important to avoid using sarcasm, complex jargon, or theological concepts that may be challenging for them to grasp. Instead, focus on simpler, more relatable concepts such as "Jesus loves us," "Jesus forgives us," or "We want to be with Jesus." Utilize stories from the Bible that exemplify these broader concepts, using language and vocabulary that children can easily understand. For example, you might share the story of the Good Samaritan to illustrate the concept of caring for others and showing compassion. In this story, you can

emphasize how Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves and how the Samaritan showed kindness to the injured man, regardless of their differences. This narrative exemplifies the broader concept of showing love and compassion to others, which children with special needs can easily grasp and relate to. By using relatable stories and simple language, we can effectively convey important biblical concepts to all children, regardless of their cognitive abilities. This approach ensures that children with special needs can fully engage with and comprehend the lessons being taught.

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*The cornerstone of your lesson  
lies in the learning objectives  
and goals.*

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## ***Increase Attention and Participation***

The average attention span for typically developing children aged 5 to 12 ranges from around 5 to 20 minutes. However, it's essential to recognize that attention span can vary widely among individual children within this age group, influenced by factors such as developmental stage, temperament, and environment. Given this, how can we effectively maintain the attention and active participation of children and youth with special needs? Here are several strategies to help keep their attention and keep them participating:

- **Give Them Something to Hold:** Children and youth tend to stay more focused and engaged in lessons when they have something tangible in their hands that relates to the topic being discussed or serves a purpose during the lesson. For example, providing them with a picture of a person from the Bible that they can hold up when that person's name is mentioned helps keep them attentive and actively participating. Additionally, incorporating fidgets, as discussed in the "Creating a Welcoming Environment" section, can also help children maintain attention by providing them with a tactile outlet for energy or sensory stimulation. These strategies not only enhance engagement but also create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all children and youth.
- **Get them Moving:** Children and youth often learn best when they are engaged in movement. Incorporating activities that involve physical movement, such as high or low-energy games, role-playing, gestures, and other movements, can significantly enhance their attention and focus during lessons. When children are actively involved in moving their bodies, it helps to stimulate their minds and maintain their interest in the information being presented. For example, playing games that require physical activity or using gestures to illustrate key concepts can make learning more interactive and memorable for children. Additionally, movement-based activities can cater to different learning styles and preferences, making the learning experience more inclusive and enjoyable for all participants. Overall, integrating movement into lessons can improve children's engagement, retention, and overall learning outcomes.

- **Get them Talking:** Include something called “Choral Response” when asking questions or when asking children/youth to repeat or respond to information. Choral response refers to a teaching or learning technique where a group of individuals responds together in unison to a prompt or question posed by the teacher. In choral response activities, the entire group answers simultaneously, often aloud, reinforcing learning concepts, fostering engagement, and encouraging participation. This method is commonly used in educational settings to assess understanding, review material, or promote active learning.
  - **Get them Interacting:** An effective method for maintaining engagement among children and youth while fostering relationships is through the use of "Turn and Talk." This strategy involves the teacher posing a question and instructing the children or youth to turn to a nearby peer to discuss the question and share their answers. After the discussion, the teacher may select one of the participants to share their response with the larger group. This method fosters active involvement, peer engagement, and the exchange of ideas within the classroom environment. It also offers an opportunity for children and youth who may feel uncomfortable speaking in large groups to express themselves in a smaller, more secure setting. In this setting, they can share their knowledge with a partner, who can then relay their ideas to the larger group. This creates a supportive space for all participants to contribute and be heard, regardless of their comfort level with public speaking.
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The average attention span for typically developing children aged 5 to 12 ranges from around 5 to 20 minutes.

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## ***Wrap Up Effectively***

The final impression we want to leave on children or youth and their families at the end of a Sunday School, Religious Instruction class, or a Youth discussion is that they want to come back. Children and Youth, especially those with special needs should leave feeling, loved, safe, and happy. Take this step by step approach to ensure “all's well that ends well”.

**Step 1.** Stay proactive and anticipate the needs of children, particularly those with special needs, who find transitions challenging. Consider implementing a visual or auditory cue to signal the end of the lesson or discussion time. Whether it's a soft chime, bell, or a special closing prayer routine with specific words or gestures, these cues help children understand that the class is concluding and prepare them for the next activity. Consistency and predictability in your closing routine are key to ensuring a positive ending for all children.

**Step 2.** Ensure you understand the independence level of each child or youth under your care in advance. If there are children who require support or supervision during transitions, arrange for assistance beforehand. Recognize that not all children can transition independently. You can ask parents to meet their child at the door or assign a volunteer to accompany the child to their parent. Consistency is key, so ensure the same volunteer assists week after week. Prioritizing the safety of children is paramount, and it's our duty to ensure appropriate support is available for those who are less independent.

**Step 3.** Involve the children or youth in wrapping up the class. Assign each child or youth a task at the end of the session, such as cleaning up the space and preparing it for the next meeting. This routine fosters a sense of ownership among the children and youth, helps develop their ability to serve and lead, and provides the teacher with some relief from having to manage everything alone. Make this a consistent part of your closing routine for maximum effectiveness.

**Step 4.** A successful conclusion hinges on a well-structured beginning. Ensure you have activities planned for the entire duration of the Sunday School, Religious Instruction, or Youth hour. Prepare Sponge activities to fill any unexpected gaps if lessons conclude earlier than expected. Unplanned or idle time often leads to challenging behaviors. Initiate your wrap-up or closing routine consistently at the same time each lesson. Avoid ending early, as both children and parents rely on the full duration of the session. Remember, aim to make this hour the highlight of a child or youth's week, fostering their eagerness to return to church each week.

**Step 5.** Maintain open communication with parents to keep them informed about activities and developments during the Sunday School, Religious Instruction, or Youth hour. Utilize methods such as Take Home Sheets, text messages, or emails to relay important information. In case of challenges, address them promptly with parents, employing sensitivity, honesty, and a collaborative approach aimed at resolving issues together. This ensures that every child can have a successful and fulfilling church experience.

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The final impression we want to leave on children or youth and their families at the end of a Sunday School, Religious Instruction class, or a Youth discussion is that they want to come back.

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## ***Teaching vs Learning***

A good teacher understands that the focus at the end of the hour is not on teaching but on learning. Assessing whether children learned the intended objectives for the day is crucial. Here are some quick ways to gauge their understanding, enabling you to make necessary adjustments for children with special needs. Remember, your teaching approach is within your control, and even small changes can positively impact children's learning outcomes.

**Draw What We Did:** Offer each child or youth a blank sheet of paper along with crayons, markers, or other drawing materials. Prompt them to reflect on what they enjoyed, learned, and remembered from the lesson. If time permits, allow each child to share their drawing and provide an explanation to the class. This exercise serves as valuable feedback for the teacher, enabling them to identify areas of the lesson that may require improvement or adjustment.

**Videos:** Recognize that each child has a unique learning style, and not every lesson may cater to that style. By providing information through various modes, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, learning becomes more accessible to different types of learners in your classroom. Offering a short video of the main Bible lesson provides an additional opportunity for children to engage with and absorb the message.

**Learning Stations:** Children are not only capable of learning from adults but also thrive in self-directed learning environments. Enhance their learning experience by setting up 4 or 5 learning stations in your classroom. Each station should offer a different activity related to the Bible lesson, which should be taught first, and then children could choose a station they would like to visit for 10-15 minutes.

These stations would not replace the Sunday School or Religious Instruction lessons. These stations would complement the Sunday School or Religious Instruction lessons by utilizing the components of each lesson to create the activities for the Learning Stations. Teachers will guide children as they visit a

station, facilitating conversations and asking questions to reinforce the lesson's teachings. While children interact with the materials at the station, teachers can continue teaching and deepening understanding through meaningful interactions. Possible stations could include:


**Reading Station:** This station features picture books related to the main Bible story taught during the lesson. Children can explore these books to reinforce their understanding of the lesson's message through engaging visuals and storytelling.

**Puzzle Station:** At this station, children can work on puzzles that depict scenes or characters from the main Bible story or puzzles that are included in the lesson. Puzzles offer a hands-on way for children to interact with the lesson content while developing problem-solving skills.

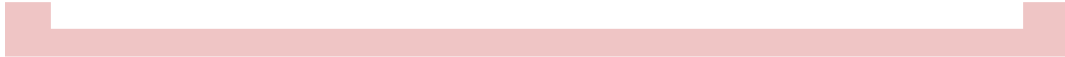
**Game/Video Station:** Here, children can participate in interactive games or watch videos related to the day's lesson. Games/videos provide an engaging and enjoyable way for children to deepen their understanding of the lesson. There are several Bible apps that can provide a fun way for children to learn Bible stories and interact with scripture in a positive way. Videos from the lesson could be shown at this station. See *Appendix G* for *Bible app* resources.

**Art Station:** This station offers an opportunity for creative expression. Children can recreate scenes from the lesson using various art materials or engage in ongoing art projects such as creating a mural related to the lesson theme. Through art, children can visually process and internalize the lesson content. If a craft is included in the day's lesson, it could be placed at this station.

**Blocks / Building Station:** At this station, children can use blocks, Legos, or other building materials to construct scenes from the main Bible story. Incorporating accessories like small dolls or animals will bring their creations to life, fostering imaginative play and hands-on engagement with the lesson. Teachers can engage children in a conversation about their buildings, assessing how well the child understood the Bible story for the day.



A good teacher understands that the focus at the end of the hour is not on teaching but on learning.



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## MANAGING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

Despite our earnest endeavors to create welcoming classrooms, organizing our space, providing schedules and visuals, offering special seating, and clearly communicating rules and expectations, teachers may still encounter challenging behaviors. These behaviors not only disrupt the learning process for the child involved but can also impact the entire class. It is our solemn responsibility to address these behaviors in a manner that upholds the child's dignity, preserves their enthusiasm for attending church, and ensures the safety of all children. Below are practical tips on managing challenging behaviors, aimed at fostering a positive outcome for everyone involved.

- **Use Proximity:** You can effectively address disruptive behavior in the classroom by simply moving closer to the child and gently touching their arm or shoulder (ensuring the child is comfortable with physical contact). This subtle action can alert the child and assist them in refocusing, while allowing you to continue teaching without disruption. Importantly, this approach respects the dignity of the disruptive child while also honoring the learning environment for the rest of the class.
- **Be discreet:** When challenging behaviors arise, always address the child individually (not in front of peers) first to preserve their self-esteem and to not embarrass them.
- **Understand Triggers:** Identify what triggers the challenging behavior. A behavior trigger refers to any stimulus, event, or situation that elicits a specific behavioral response in an individual. Triggers can be internal (such as thoughts or emotions) or external (such as sights, sounds, or interactions), and they often can prompt challenging behaviors or negative emotional reactions. Identifying behavior triggers is crucial in understanding and managing behavior, as it allows teachers to anticipate and eliminate potential triggers when possible.
- **Establish Clear Expectations:** Set clear and consistent expectations for behavior. Provide constant reminders of what the expectations are. Use

visual cues or social stories to reinforce these expectations and practice, practice, practice them.

- **Positive Reinforcement:** Use a system of rewards and praise to encourage positive behaviors. Use time with a preferred toy or peer as a reward. Anytime you see positive behavior provide specific praise (“I love how you’re sharing the markers with friends.”). Celebrate small victories and progress.
- **Provide Structure:** Create a structured environment with predictable routines. This helps reduce anxiety and provides a sense of security. Be sure to refer to your visual schedule every time you move to the next activity.
- **Offer Choices:** Provide choices whenever possible to empower the child and give them a sense of control over their environment. By offering options within reasonable limits, teachers can guide children towards positive outcomes while still respecting their individuality. (ex. “Would you like to hold my hand or would you like to be the line leader?”)
- **Use Redirecting Techniques:** Redirect the child's attention to more appropriate activities when they exhibit challenging behavior. Use something that interests them to refocus their attention, such as a picture in the Bible, or a small toy they can hold, or an opportunity to be your helper.
- **Teach Coping Strategies:** Allow the child to use coping strategies such as deep breathing or taking a break when feeling overwhelmed. Prearrange with another teacher or adult at church to send the child on an errand to deliver a “message”. This break from the classroom may be all that’s needed for the child to get back to a calm state.
- **Communicate Effectively:** Use clear and simple language to communicate expectations and consequences. Ensure the child understands what is being asked of them. If a child is distressed or stressed, limit the amount of language you use and use visuals, pictures, or gestures as an alternative way to communicate.

- **Collaborate with Parents:** Work closely with parents or caregivers to develop a consistent approach to managing challenging behaviors. Parents are the experts when it comes to their children and they may have practical solutions for you to use.
- **Practice Patience and Empathy:** Remain patient and understanding. Recognize that challenging behaviors are often a form of communication (“I’m angry, sad, lonely, stressed, bored, sick, scared, etc.) and we need to respond with empathy and compassion.

Be sure to use the strategies that may be outlined in a child’s IEP or behavior plan from their school, if you have access to that information. Remember, each child is unique, so it's important to tailor your approach based on their individual needs and abilities. Flexibility and creativity are key when managing challenging behaviors in children with special needs. We want the Sunday School hour and time spent in church to be the very best part of a child’s week.

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## ***Talking to Parents about Behavior***

When addressing concerns about a child's behavior, it's crucial to collaborate with parents for effective solutions. However, it's essential to approach parents thoughtfully and with sensitivity. Framing concerns as observations paired with requests for information, infused with love and grace, can foster productive communication. For instance, you might say, "I noticed that Joshua sometimes hits his peers when he sits with them. Is there anything I could do differently to support him in these situations? We want to help Joshua connect with his peers and build friendships, as he is such a valued part of our class." Often, parents will provide helpful strategies from home or school experiences. If they indicate that such behavior doesn't occur elsewhere, invite them to collaborate in understanding why it may be happening in the church setting.

Always express positive sentiments both before and after discussing behaviors, reassuring parents that their child is valued in the class and that you're committed to their success. This approach emphasizes the importance of partnership, empathy, and showing the love of Christ toward others when addressing behavioral concerns.

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**We want the Sunday School hour and  
time spent in church to be the very  
best part of a child's week.**

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## IN CLOSING

The strategies and recommendations in this book are designed to benefit all children. Children thrive in environments where they feel safe, are well-organized, and know what to expect. When children feel secure, they are more open to learning, participating, and forming connections with both adults and peers. It's important to support any child who may struggle, regardless of the reason. Give a new strategy 4-6 weeks of consistent use before determining its effectiveness and if a strategy proves successful for one child, consider applying it to others or the entire class.

As followers of Christ, we are called to love and serve all of God's children with compassion and equity. Every child is a unique creation of God, deserving of dignity, respect, and the opportunity to thrive. In our classrooms, this means providing necessary supports for all children without singling out those with special needs. Just as Jesus welcomed and cared for the least of these, we too must consistently provide the additional supports required for every child to succeed. Let us embrace our role as teachers with a heart full of Christ's love, ensuring that every child feels valued and supported in their faith journey.

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## RESOURCES

### APPENDIX A

[Child - Family Inventory](#)

### APPENDIX B – SCRIPTED STORIES

[Cleaning Up My Toys Scripted Story English](#)

[Cleaning Up My Toys Scripted Story Spanish](#)

[Social Story for Holy Communion](#)

[I Am a Super Friend English](#)

[I Am a Super Friend Spanish](#)

[Making a Scripted Story All Ages Making a Scripted Story for Young Children English](#)

[Making a Scripted Story for Young Children Spanish](#)

[Some Days Are Different Scripted Story English](#)

[Some Days Are Different Scripted Story Spanish](#)

[Tips For Making A Scripted Story](#)

[Use My Words Scripted Story](#)

### APPENDIX C - SCHEDULES

[Church Visual Schedule](#)

[Check Box Visual Schedule Template](#)

[Sunday School Visual Schedule and Graphic](#)

[Visual Task Strip Handwashing - Bathroom](#)

[Visuals for Church](#)

[Visual Supports and Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

## **APPENDIX D - RESOURCES FOR PURCHASING FIDGETS AND SPECIALTY SEATING**

### **Fidgets**

<https://tinyurl.com/3pe8bdu6>

### **Inflated Wobble Cushion with Hand Pump**

<https://a.co/d/eg3z7fl>

### **Chair Bands for Kids with Fidgety Feet**

<https://a.co/d/9PUidwo>

### **Cube Chairs**

<https://tinyurl.com/3pexy2bb>

## **APPENDIX E - RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON DISABILITIES**

“He’s Not Naughty! A Children’s Guide to Autism” by Deborah Brownson

“Since We’re Friends” by Celeste Shally

“I See Things Differently” by Pat Thomas and Claire Keay

“Autism Is...?” By Ymke Wideman-van der Laan

## **APPENDIX F – FIRST / THEN VISUAL**

### **First/Then Visual**

## **APPENDIX G - BIBLE APPS (These recommendations come from ministrysparks.com)**

Superbook Kids Bible App

Right Now Media

Noah’s Ark: Bible Story Book

Jesus Bible Trivia Challenge

PureFlix

Bible Coloring Book

Guardians of Ancora

The Bible Word Match Game

Bible Songs for Kids

The Bible App for Kids

Noah’s Elephant in the Room

God for Kids: Bible Devotional

### **Websites with resources for creating visual supports:**

<https://connectability.ca/visuals-engine/>

<https://do2learn.com/picturecards/overview.htm>

## **REFERENCES**

Wetherbee, K., & Philo, J. (2015). *Every Child Welcome: A ministry handbook for including kids with special needs*. Kregel Publications.