

Through the Roof and Under the Table

Creating a positive Sunday school experience for all learners

by Katie Wetherbee

Jack peered into the Sunday school classroom with his fists clenched and his eyes filled with apprehension. Several children danced and sang energetically with a praise CD, while others played NERF basketball. The teacher smiled at Jack and put her hand on his shoulder as his parents went to worship. Wincing at the touch, Jack screamed, ran into the room, and hid under a table with his back to the door. The other students stopped their activities and stared at Jack before glancing at the teacher, waiting to see what to do next.

Students like Jack need special attention at Sunday school. Many of these children have been diagnosed with disabilities that make socializing, learning, and transitioning to new activities extremely difficult. Unlike physical disabilities, these "hidden" disabilities often make children appear noncompliant, whiny, or even "bratty." However, their disabilities, which may include autism, anxiety, or ADHD, pose a real obstacle to their spiritual development.

In Mark 2, the Bible tells that accommodations were made for a man with physical disabilities. His friends hoisted his stretcher onto the roof of the home where Jesus was visiting, and they dug a hole into the roof so that their friend could be lowered in. Just as this man was given access to Jesus, children with hidden disabilities can also gain access to Jesus in churches everywhere. Proactive planning, along with the implementation of several proven strategies, can create a Sunday school experience where all learners grow in their faith.

Go to the Head of the Class

As children file into your Sunday school classroom, their faces might be unfamiliar to you, but they're not unfamiliar to God. He created each one of them. He knows their strengths, needs, interests, and fears. He's even counted every hair on every head! Cover all that you do in prayer, asking God to be present during your lesson.

Cultivate Culture

In public schools, teachers spend much of September creating and reinforcing the classroom's culture. Simply put, classroom culture is the way a class does things. To create a positive Sunday school culture, teachers should emphasize the values and routines that make the class work effectively for all students. This is an excellent opportunity to teach students how to be the body of Christ! Most students, not just those with disabilities that affect behavior, benefit from instructions on how to encourage, express patience, and extend grace to others.

When creating classroom culture, teachers should emphasize desired behaviors. Making an acronym or a class mission statement is one way to reinforce the class's culture. For example, all students will respond well to these kinds of statements:

In our class, we are the CHURCH! We:

- Celebrate our blessings
- Help each other
- Use kind words
- Respect our teachers and friends
- Carry each others' burdens
- Hope to be like Jesus

Take a few minutes at the beginning of each class to review expectations, or focus on just one of the behaviors that make us the church.

Rearrange for Positive Change

The physical arrangement of a classroom can have a profound effect on students' learning. Many students with hidden disabilities struggle when the environment is unpredictable. Providing strong visual supports can help students make sense of their surroundings. For example, a printed schedule helps students know what to expect during their lesson time. This also reminds them that their parents will be coming back to get them at the end of class. These visual supports should also extend into the hallways. Clear, consistent signage helps everyone know where to find classes, restrooms, and information.

In addition to visual cues, take a close look at the physical arrangement of the classroom. Be sure that the layout of the room provides strong cues to the learners. A large space with bright lights can be over-stimulating to a student with hidden disabilities. In contrast, rooms with clearly defined areas for play, quiet time, and table work allow the student to see what is expected. Students should also be able to identify spaces to which they can go when they need some time alone. Pay close attention to lighting and color as well. One congregation found that taking out half of the fluorescent light bulbs in each Sunday school classroom made the environment much more manageable to students with sensitivity to light. This congregation also recruited volunteers to repaint the walls, changing bright colors to softer shades that elicited calmer, quieter behavior.

Tap Your Human Resources

Many children with hidden disabilities need extra support and attention during the Sunday school hour. Transitioning to new activities, managing an unfamiliar schedule, and coping with crowded rooms and loud noises can be extremely challenging for these children. Often, the best solution is providing "buddies" who can offer immediate assistance, comfort and support. A buddy is an adult or a responsible teenager who has been trained to support children with special needs. As buddies become acquainted with the children, they will be able to predict which activities require extra support. For example, if a child routinely begins to cry as she transitions to large-group worship, the buddy might stand with her in the hallway, so she can worship in a quieter, less-crowded space. Similarly, if a child has tantrums during craft activities, a buddy can provide extra materials or prepare the craft so that fine-motor frustration is eliminated. Most importantly, the buddy provides consistency and predictability.

Accentuate the Positive

Even with a strong classroom culture and sufficient volunteer support, many students with hidden disabilities need additional help managing their behavior during Sunday school. Interventions that focus on teaching and increasing positive behavior are often necessary. When designing behavioral interventions, teachers should always identify the problem behavior and teach a more appropriate behavior in its place.

To reinforce turn-taking, for example, a teacher can model appropriate behavior, allow the child to practice with his buddy, and then reinforce successful turn-taking with a ticket or sticker. For a child who frequently tries to leave the classroom, a teacher might create a contract that emphasizes staying with the group:

I pledge to stay in the Sunday school classroom. When I need a break, I will ask my buddy to go with me. My teachers will always know where I am.

Student's signature

I pledge to keep my student safe. I will allow her to take a break with her buddy when she asks politely and calmly. If she follows our contract, I will give her a prize.

Teacher's signature

Teachers who use these kinds of strategies often find solutions that benefit all students in the classroom—not just those who have been diagnosed with disabilities. Children will learn ideals, such as inclusion, patience, and grace, while growing in their own faith.

This was the case with Jack and his classmates:

Aware that all eyes were on her, the teacher quietly sat on the floor near the table where Jack was hiding. She motioned for the rest of the children to join her. "It's a bit loud in here," she said softly, "and I notice that the noise is bothering some people. Let's have our story here . . . where we can enjoy God's Word together."

And, under the table, they did.

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