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KEEPING KIDS IN SUNDAY SCHOOL

By Ms. Angela Marks

In this article, Ms. Marks provides a very explicit blueprint for reshaping the ministry of Christian Education for children. Based on real life experiences, she advises us about the mental and spiritual perceptions of teachers and the strategies for spiritual teaching that are necessary for attracting children to the ministry and equipping them for their lifelong journey with God and this world.

The Christian Education Department at my church decided to make a change to our Sunday School. Attendance was low, and with our church implementing a tutoring program and band academy, it was a great idea to transition the summer months differently to keep those same children coming to the church. Sunday School for children was moved to Wednesday nights, which would be later call KidZone.



Wednesday Night KidZone hosted anywhere from 40 to 75 kids weekly with the majority of them from local neighborhoods and with ages ranging from preschool to high school. My normal routine after dismissal on a Kidzone night was to stand in the front of the Fellowship Hall to be available to listen to any of the children that wanted to approach me with a thought about the lesson, a complaint about a sibling, to show me their new outfit, or to share what happened at school that day. There was one particular conversation with a child I will never forget. We had just finished wrapping up a lesson from the unit I was teaching entitled, “Hearing God’s Voice.” She walked up to me with a puzzled look on her face. She asked, “Why is KidZone so different from Sunday School?” After asking her what she meant, it didn’t take long for her to rattle off the differences between the two. “Sunday School is boring. We listen to some of the same stories we already know, and it feels like school. KidZone is different. We feel good in KidZone.”

I have traveled to many churches and taught children, conducted trainings and workshops, and one particular question has always been a constant, “How do we keep kids in Sunday School?” In response to that question, I always reflect on my own Sunday school experience. I would ride on the church van in anticipation for Sunday’s class. It was typical for my Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Kathy Ransaw, to pop into our class in full costume and use an altered voice to present to us the Biblical character of the day. We would rush to make sure that our activity books were completed just to have her check our work and doodle a picture of her with curly hair, a smile, and those unforgettable dangling earrings. I would marvel at her teaching methods. She would play games and make up songs for the lessons with an enthusiasm and cheerful disposition, which made you never want to miss the class. She knew how to bring the Bible to life, to make application of Biblical narratives and principles real, and teach in a way that you didn’t want to leave class because you could feel the power of God’s word. We would remember every word she said, hanging onto the scriptures as if they were golden treasures—which of course they are.

The Challenge

Today, teaching this generation of children has become difficult. Growing up, our parents made attending Sunday school a priority. Many children are given this option but for some, it’s not even thought of. Oftentimes, parents won’t even attend and demonstrate its importance in their own lives while at the same time while encouraging their children to go.

Sunday mornings are now in competition with sports. During the pandemic, children were not interested in attending Zoom sessions after sitting in front a computer for hours of formal education. Having them

view Sunday School over digital outlets like Facebook or YouTube has its challenges because it is so easy for them to switch to a child making slime or giving toy reviews.

I believe the major challenge in Sunday School is keeping the attention of children. In a digital world with so many distractions, our children are getting bored easily with Sunday School. Secular movies, cartoons, video games, apps and streaming services have become our competition. If we take a look at the secular world, it has always been several steps ahead of the Church in attracting children's attention. To create shows for children, research is conducted to study trends and what children like. YouTube viewers can attest to what is the latest "thing" our children are interested in. Not only has the world become cunning with the types of shows they create for our children with hidden messages and ideas that do not have a Biblical world view, it also is not leaving any rocks unturned when it comes to topics of gender, sexuality, social justice and the supernatural, which are topics that the Church should be the forefront of discussing.

Our Response

Sometimes, even with high quality curriculum, videos, state of the art facilities and Sunday School Rally Days, we are not successful in keeping our kids in Sunday School. Therefore, it is apparent that we need a deeper solution to solve these problems. What did we do about it?

In KidZone that Wednesday night, that child made a statement that was in effect describing a radical change, "KidZone is different!" What did we do in KidZone to see attendance increase from 10 weekly to 60 to 75?

1. *We changed the day.* Sunday School on Wednesday was a hit. Parents and guardians were already coming out for Adult Bible Study, so that made it easier for the transition for children. However, later the Wednesday attendance of children increases so that the adults moved their Bible Study to Thursdays.
2. *We changed the name* from Sunday School to KidZone. Be creative. A name change won't take away from the purpose and effectiveness of the ministry.
3. *We changed how we taught curriculum.* It was more important for our children to know in their daily lives the voice of God that David served rather than how many stones he picked up to the kill Goliath. "Children can't live on Bible stories alone." They must know His voice as sheep know the voice of their shepherd. (John 10:27-30)
4. *We implemented a new teaching model.* We removed the school-teaching model and structured each session with Biblical teaching and application, equipping and activity so that children could use their spiritual gifts, and we included a time of encounter with God's presence.
5. *We changed how we viewed children from birth to teen.* We began to see children after the Spirit and not after the flesh. Their ages had no bearing on our view of them. We saw them as our brothers and sisters in Christ. "Children don't have a junior Holy Spirit" became our motto.
6. *We let children use their voice.* We placed a microphone at the front and allowed them to share a message or testimony, pray, sing or share what God had placed on their hearts.

Why did we make these changes? Because we know that once children reach thirteen to seventeen years of age, the numbers who continue attending church decrease and that even a smaller number will continue to attend church after high school. If we hadn't changed our methods to capture their hearts by the time they were ten, eleven and twelve years of age, we knew it was possible we would lose them when they reached their teenage years. Because we knew that whatever attitudes and associations our children developed early on regarding God and God's Word, these beliefs would stay with them for a lifetime. *We didn't have time to waste.* It was our mission to seriously disciple the children because the world was not letting up. However, we understood that they were very capable of understanding God's word.

In talking to several of the children, they wanted something more. They were bored and no matter how much fun we tried to make our teaching, it didn't capture their *hearts* until we changed our method. They

didn't want to be forced, bribed, or manipulated into coming to Sunday School. Incentives no longer worked. Feeding them didn't work. *All they needed was to experience and encounter the God they learned about in their own lives and learn how to live out loud their faith no matter what their home or school experiences were like.* For our Christian Education Department, that was enough for us to change the way we did Sunday school aka "KidZone."

Where Do You Go from Here?

Now that we understand what this generation of children need, how do we get there? How do we stop the decline in attendance and increase the hunger for God that will keep our kids coming to our Sunday Schools and inviting their friends? Here are a few suggestions:

1. *Change starts with you.* As the Sunday School superintendent, teacher or assistant, the amount of study and care you put into your relationship with God will show how you view Sunday School and your teaching. Kids are smart and they know when you know what you're talking about and when you don't. They know when you believe what you say and when you are just teaching it because you have to. *Your faith must shine through your teaching. Teach because you believe it.*
2. *See the children as Christ sees them.* Think about young Jesus in the temple sitting around the leaders teaching and sharing. Think about children in that same way. They are quite capable of learning God's word and even sharing their hearts. Don't underestimate their potential, and don't use their age or behavior as a means to limit them. *See past their flesh and into their spirits.* They need Jesus, give Him to them, and do it with everything you have!
3. *Bring the Bible to life.* Teach with and from a Bible. Encourage kids to bring and use Bibles as part of your teaching (such as games such as scripture races and Bible sword drills). Allow them to stop and ask questions about the Bible as they read. Provide reading plans or bookmarks to the children and reward their progress. Create reading challenges or allow them to act out parts of the scripture. Make the Bible something you and the children *use* and not just something you talk about. Create a quiet time moment where you can talk about things God taught you through the Word.
4. *Bring Curriculum to Life.* Be enthusiastic! Enhance your curriculum beyond the pages. Use objects, songs and games to reinforce teaching. Theme and decorate your teaching space based on the lesson. Dress up in character. Use puppets and skits. Have children pre-record videos to use as a segment for teaching , share a testimony/story or tell a joke (this can be an opener to the class). Share the Biblical narrative from the lesson and show emotions that are real. Allow the children to share how they feel.
5. *Worship energetically! Be an example!* Get up and dance. Make worship and praise a part of your class. Don't just play a song, engage in the song. Play soft instrumental music during prayer, as you are giving the children the application to "Go & Do" from the word, or as a call to respond to the message. Allow the children to create a playlist of songs they like to use during class. Create that playlist on YouTube and send to families. Share scriptures about praise and the goodness of God, and why we worship him.
6. *Involve Parents.* Parents are the main disciple makers for their children. Children show up to Sunday School when parents encourage them. Make sure you are connecting with parents. Sometimes we talk to the children and give them specific messages to give to their parents from us. We should reach out to the parents weekly via telephone and share the lesson for the week and ask them how we can help partner with them to disciple their children at home. Use social media to create reminders, to send home worksheets, and to download graphics to share the lesson. Table talks or devotionals are good for parents to use at home with their children as well. You can create videos to help parents, also.

7. *Use clear graphics in teaching virtual Sunday School.* Whether you are in Zoom or creating videos, your graphics are important. Find someone that can help you create backgrounds in Zoom for your lesson or graphics to overlay to help enhance your class. Children are visual learners. Make sure your Zoom isn't blurry and clean your camera lens daily for clear viewing. Visit YouTube for tutorials on how to add music and create better presentations for your class.
8. *Have fun!* Kids are naturally born to be active. It helps them to grow. Search online for games, icebreakers and more. You can visit www.kidzmatter.com for tons of children ministry items to use in your lessons.
9. *Equip kids through doing.* Kids do not want to just sit and learn; they want to be involved. Teach them – Show them – Involve them. For example, in teaching them how to pray, show them using scriptures and involve them. Allow them to pray for you and others in the class. Equip them to use their spiritual gifts at the age they are now. *Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you the spiritual gifts of the children in your class and how God wants to use you to help cultivate those gifts in them.*
10. *Include an Encounter Time.* In KidZone, every session had 15 minutes of Encounter Time at the end. That was the most important time of the class. Allow children to experience the presence of God. This is a powerful moment. Turn on instrumental worship music and ask the children to draw what God is speaking to them concerning the lesson, themselves or even others. Children may be given the option not to draw but just to sit still. Make sure you are consistent with this time in your class. It is where you will begin to see change in your children and even in yourself as they share what God is speaking to them about.

Conclusion

There is not a one-size-fit-all model for Sunday school. You should never model or construct your Sunday school to be a replica of another church or ministry. Just because it works for one church does not mean it may work for you. *Prayer is the key.* Pray concerning your Sunday school. Assess the needs of the children that you teach. How do they learn? What methods are effective for them? Evaluate your methods and see what you need to change. Implement changes in moderation, and then evaluate if they are successful, or if you need to get rid of them or make modifications. *Reach out for help.* There are so many resources, and these resources created by talented people can help you enhance the structure of your curriculum and the teaching process. *Remember, you're not teaching public school; you are teaching God's Word, spiritually, that has the power to change and transform the lives of children for generations to come.* You have the best seat in the house and a field that is ripe for harvest.



Sample product

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