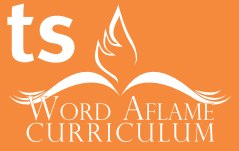


Creating Kid-Friendly Environments in Church Camps, Revivals, VBS, and Sunday School



Teacher Training Article • Spring 2021 • Stephanie Gossard

Many times we know nothing about the children we minister to during Sunday school, vacation Bible school, or church camp. We don't know if they're rich or poor, hungry or full; if they live in a home with an abusive parent; if they have recently suffered trauma; if they have autism, or . . . All kids have the potential for less than desirable behaviors when they are overwhelmed, tired, or hungry. Sometimes we don't know what to do or how to respond when we witness such behavior.

The purpose of this article is to give Sunday school teachers, youth workers, or anyone involved in children's or youth ministry a brief overview of frequent challenging behaviors and how some of them may be caused by an underlying disability. Along with a description of commonly encountered behaviors, helpful tips are offered as to how we might better understand possible causes and respond with love.

Sometimes due to a fear of being rejected, parents may send a child to a church event without disclosing a child's diagnosis or challenges. At other times, a parent may be hesitant to seek a diagnosis for a child with unusually challenging behavior due to a stigma of being labeled or some other reason. Regardless of the situation, the following tips can help all kids (including cases in which there is no underlying disability) overcome some obstacles, particularly in large group settings

If you see children:

Refusing to do an activity or saying something like, "That's dumb." This behavior might be due to not understanding the rules or what is expected of them. Some children are visual learners and need to learn by watching others, or they might simply be hesitant to jump right in. Give them a chance to watch and learn, and then invite them to join the fun.

Hitting people or objects. Hitting can be a way of releasing frustration or a way of saying, "I can't handle this right now!" Give these kids some space or a break and allow them to calm down. Brainstorm with others to figure out what is triggering their behavior.

Behaving oddly. Flapping arms, rocking back and forth, or jumping when excited or overwhelmed can be calming activities for children affected by disabilities. Repeating phrases or humming can help some children focus on something other than the stressful environment around them.

Getting fixated on specific objects. Some children become fixated on specific toys or objects. They may want to hold them, wave them, or arrange them in a particular order. As long as it isn't excessively disruptive, allow children to use these items as security blankets or fidgets. Fidgets can keep their fingers busy and allow their brain to more effectively listen.

Talking about the same topic again and again. These children may lack the ability or social skills to carry on a conversation, or it may be a sign of stress. Children can get mentally "stuck" on a topic when they are frustrated. Try to redirect them verbally. If this doesn't work, give them a change of environment. A break or even a task to focus on can help break this cycle. Allow them to be helpers and give their mind something else to focus on.

Having a meltdown, crying in a heap, or falling apart emotionally. This behavior can be due to children's senses being overloaded. Often our church services or kids' activities are filled with noise, emotion, and movement. Watch for kids who cover their ears, cower, or try to leave the room. For those who have overly sensitive senses, a break in a designated quiet space can go a long way. Make sure everyone knows the rules surrounding taking a break—partner with someone, ask an adult, and so on. Noise-cancelling headphones, earplugs, or even sunglasses can help reduce the amount of sensory input.

Refusing to move on to the next activity. At times transitions can be hard, especially when the activity is enjoyable. Provide a printed schedule or a picture schedule. Visually seeing and talking through the schedule throughout the day can be helpful. Some kids may need their own personal copy to refer to. Give a five-minute and two-minute verbal warning before moving to the next activity.

Wanting to be done or move on to the next activity. Often the words *first* and *then* can be helpful when reviewing the schedule. For example, "First we are going to sing two songs, and then we are going to have a snack."

Wandering off. Leaving the room can be a sign that children are overwhelmed. Provide a designated safe, quiet area where they can go to regroup. This spot can be created within the same room by using dividers. At times it may be helpful to provide a one-on-one partner to take a walk with them and return when things are calmer.

Refusing to make eye contact. Children on the autism spectrum often lack typical social skills. Making eye contact can increase stress. If we ask a child to look at us, it may reduce the child's ability to listen and follow instructions.

Not responding or not following directions. Use concrete language and examples when communicating with children. Some children with autism have difficulty reading facial expressions and body language. If you give a child directions and he is not following them, he may need additional time to process the request and comply. Try silently counting to ten while waiting for a response. Then rephrase or repeat the direction calmly. Avoid repeating directions over and over in quick succession.

Responding in a way that is younger cognitively than their physical age. These children could simply be immature, or they could have a developmental disability. If you notice a child who needs extra attention or help with an activity, she may need support that a child of a younger age would receive.

Staying on the edges and not interacting with others. Making friends can be difficult for children who are on the autism spectrum or those who struggle with anxiety. In these cases, assign a peer who can be a helper. When doing activities, modify them so they include partnering with others, which can help them interact and build friendships.

Refusing to go to the altar or letting someone pray for them. Children who have experienced trauma or abuse may shy away from our typical altar environment. Others may avoid the altar because of the loud volume, large crowds, chaos, or some other negative experiences. In these cases, meet them where they are, and do not force them. Be sensitive and understanding of their fears and anxiety.

At the end of a week of camp or a few days of VBS, be mindful that everyone—even adults—can be tired, volatile, prone to wild fits of uncontrollable laughter, or bursts of frantic energy. Extend grace to those around you. It is amazing the difference it makes when you come alongside and partner with a child.

Children affected by a disability may need extra support, but when you reflect back on the event, your most treasured moments may be provided by these kids.

Connect with ABLE

If you have questions, contact ABLE Ministry, a program of Ladies Ministries, United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI). ABLE encourages churches and communities to Accept, Believe, Love, and Embrace individuals and families affected by disability. ABLE is committed to increasing awareness about disabilities in the community, the church, and the world. They strive to provide the strength, support, and assistance necessary to meet the needs of those affected by disability—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Facebook: ABLE Ministry UPCI

Website: <http://ladiesministries.com/programs/able>

For further information about ABLE Ministry:

Email: ladies@upci.org

Call: 636-229-7895



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