



Simple—and surprisingly effective

by Amelia Dress

# *sunday* **SCHOOL** *solutions*





five—  
**solutions** for common *Sunday morning* challenges

**“I have no idea what happened today!”**

The Sunday school teacher—an experienced, committed children’s ministry volunteer—eyed me desperately as she tried to regain control of a mixed-age group gone haywire. Younger kids ran around, the older boys had arm wrestled during the Bible lesson, a handful of girls doodled, and two other girls sat on the overstuffed couch with confused expressions.

The truth is, Sunday mornings can bring a unique set of challenges: unpredictable attendance, a variety of ages or levels of understanding, and often different teachers and volunteers. In short, children’s ministry is often packed with the exact elements we know lead to unsuccessful classes in other educational settings.

By putting some simple strategies in place,

you can meet the common challenges. There are plenty of small adaptations you can make to ensure your Sunday morning settings are child-friendly, learner-centered, and more fulfilling for volunteers and teachers. Let’s take a look at five common Sunday morning issues—and how to effectively tackle them so your time with kids is meaningful and effective.



## challenge 1:

**Lack of consistency means my kids don't bond.**

*"With never exactly the same group of kids week-to-week due to inconsistent attendance, new kids, and family transience, our group of kids never quite gels."*

You might be surprised by the solution to this problem: routine, routine, routine. You may not be able to control who shows up when, but you can manage what happens each week—and a routine will go a long way toward creating community within your group.

The key to making a group gel is to give kids a common, shared experience they know and expect. You can build a strong bond between kids over time by creating a reliable routine. Think about this as building tradition—perhaps singing the same songs, lighting a candle at prayer time, or playing a silly name game each morning. Your routine or tradition is even more important if volunteers and teachers rotate, as they do in many ministries. Taking time to create a common routine for each morning, no matter who's teaching, frees children from the anxiety of wondering what's coming next or trying to remember which teacher does what.

This doesn't mean all lessons are identical in structure, just that the general pattern of your time together is always the same. A good starting place might be to decide on a gathering song you'll sing at the beginning of each class. From there, you can move into the lesson, prayer, and activities for the day.

When you're developing your group routines, focus also on a closing activity. Because parents trickle in and kids fade out, many groups don't take the time to formally close their time together. Instead, make it a priority to schedule five minutes at the end of each class to re-gather as a group for song, prayer, or reflection. This provides an important signal to kids that your time together is over. Keeping the closing consistent lets kids focus more because they won't be expecting that it could end at any moment.

## challenge 2:

**Every week it's like we're starting all over—again.**

*"From the moment my kids arrive until they leave, it feels like the first day all over again. Kids are antsy and don't seem to feel comfortable or confident. They're often confused by why we're doing what we're doing."*

Because kids are only with you on average once per week, it's easy for them to forget what's expected. As a result, they feel and act unsettled. Kids, just like adults, feel safest when they know what comes next. That's why we have church bulletins in worship services; people are more open to an experience when they feel secure in what's going to happen. Even if you already have an established routine in your class, kids will fare better if they have a visual overview. Remember, they're not with you every day, so it takes longer to learn and recall what happens in your class. After your initial gathering activity, take one minute to briefly go over the plan for the day while showing kids a simple schedule.

When you review the routine visually, kids will respond positively and the inherent anxiety (and subsequent fidgetiness) they feel will evaporate—leaving them more present and confident about the experiences that await. For preschool and early elementary kids who don't fully grasp the concept of sequence, a simple picture schedule is especially helpful to mark what you've done and what's coming.





# 3

## challenge 3:

**It's difficult to harness kids' different energy levels.**

*"Kids hit the door running. It's difficult to regroup them to start the lesson, and getting them to calm down is quite a chore. The minute I get half the group settled and ready to go, the other half is distracted and wandering."*

For a lot of kids, Sunday mornings are fun-time. They don't expect to have the same rules and behavior standards they have at school, so it can be a challenge to rein in the "party atmosphere." One sure-fire way to grab—and keep—kids' attention is to lead with an engaging experience at the beginning of your time rather than saving all the activity for the end. We often view the beginning of class as lecture and discussion time, with the main learning experience as a concluding refresher.

Children and adults learn best when they connect instruction to an experience. In *Begin With the Brain: Orchestrating the Learner-Centered*

*Classroom*, author Martha Kaufeldt explores the importance of experience-first learning.

Since experiences deliver the opportunity for dynamic and powerful learning, Kaufeldt notes, "We must create opportunities to introduce concepts to students through hands-on experiences. If field trips lend themselves to the most powerful learning, then we should make them the starting point of the entire unit!"

Now, a field trip every few weeks isn't an option for most Sunday school classes, but the point remains. Even with limited time and money, there are plenty of ways to provide kids with concrete experiences related to the lesson or point you're exploring that day. If you're using a curriculum, it may even be as simple as shifting the order of activities. If your curriculum lacks them, take time to brainstorm engaging opening experiences that complement the lesson. You'll find this becomes easier over time, and your kids will learn to look forward to hands-on learning up front—meaning they'll self-engage rather than wait for you to rope in their attention and energy.

## mistakes to miss

*As you implement tactics to solve Sunday morning issues, avoid these pitfalls.*

- **Don't stick too rigidly to the schedule.** Yes, having a routine is vital, but don't stick to the plan at the risk of losing your kids. If their interest moves in a different direction, adapt and capitalize on their passions. Maybe the lesson plan calls for 15 minutes of painting, but the group is really engaged in something else. Spend more time there and save the painting for another time. Or perhaps spring weather sparks interest in seeds and plants, making a natural segue for the parable of the sower. Seek out real-life connections and let kids explore. When you take advantage of teachable moments, you'll help children grow in excitement for their faith. And when they see you take their questions and passions seriously, children feel valued and loved.

- **Don't have unclear expectations.** As with setting up a routine, setting up behavior guidelines is an upfront investment with a significant payoff. No teacher wants to be mean or strict. We often hesitate to set rules because we want kids to have fun and leave excited. Actually, setting guidelines will help kids enjoy your time together more, not less. A few simple rules let kids know where boundaries are. With those established, you'll spend less time keeping everyone safe and more time enjoying kids. Ask kids to help decide what the rules should be. Even young kids can come up with ideas, and they love having the chance to weigh in.

- **Don't neglect set-up.** With all the hustle of Sunday morning, who hasn't faced the temptation to rush in just in time to greet the kids? It's easy to imagine we can set up while we introduce the lesson, or maybe let kids visit a few minutes as they settle in. Without something to grab their attention, though, kids look for other things to do. After even just a few minutes of play, it's harder to get them back on topic. Also, setting up while kids play sends the message that they aren't important enough for our full attention. Make time to set up early; activities will run more smoothly and you'll have time to focus on kids.





## challenge 4.

**It's next to impossible to get kids to remain attentive.**

"Two minutes into our Bible lesson, three kids are rolling on the floor, shooting rubber bands, picking at each other, or crinkling up their papers."

Kids are little balls of energy, and it's natural for them to wiggle and squirm. When properly directed, though, their surplus of energy can benefit learning and exploration. Harness kids' energy and attention by including active-learning opportunities. Ensure that the lesson and discussion time is appropriate for the age of children. The best rule of thumb is to remember that kids can stay focused for about one minute for each year of their age. So a 5-year-old can stay focused for five minutes or less. In any case, limit your direct instruction, or "teacher talk," to no more than five minutes; then switch to something active.

In addition, take a cue from early-education teachers and provide "fidget toys" for kids during less active times. One of the cornerstones of education research is that people learn in different ways. For kinesthetic learners, the brain works better when hands are occupied. (You know that volunteer who brings her knitting to every meeting? It actually helps her focus.) This is especially true for younger children. To help these kids learn, keep a basket of simple things for kids to fidget with while you're doing less-active things. Small pieces of fabric with different textures, stress balls for squeezing, yarn for braiding, or paper for doodling are all great options. Most teachers find this technique requires an adjustment period, but over time the children settle into using these materials as they're intended. If this idea is new to your group, start by introducing the option of having a fidget toy. Expect that all kids will want to try out this new thing for the first few classes. You may also need to lay some ground rules. Something as simple as "We keep our listening toys to ourselves" usually covers the bases.

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**challenge 5:**  
It's difficult to bridge different understanding and age levels between the kids.



*"In a mixed-age group, the younger or less-experienced kids are lost when I do a complicated lesson, but my older kids are bored when I focus on the basics."*

The challenge of differentiating instruction, or meeting the needs of kids on different levels, is one of the most difficult things about teaching in any setting. A good way to meet this challenge is to set up a variety of centers or stations for different ages or levels of understanding. This strategy lets you work with one set of kids while others work at their own pace. For example, you might begin by having older kids work their way through stations while you talk about the Bible passage with younger kids. Then you can switch and let younger children choose between a couple art projects while you

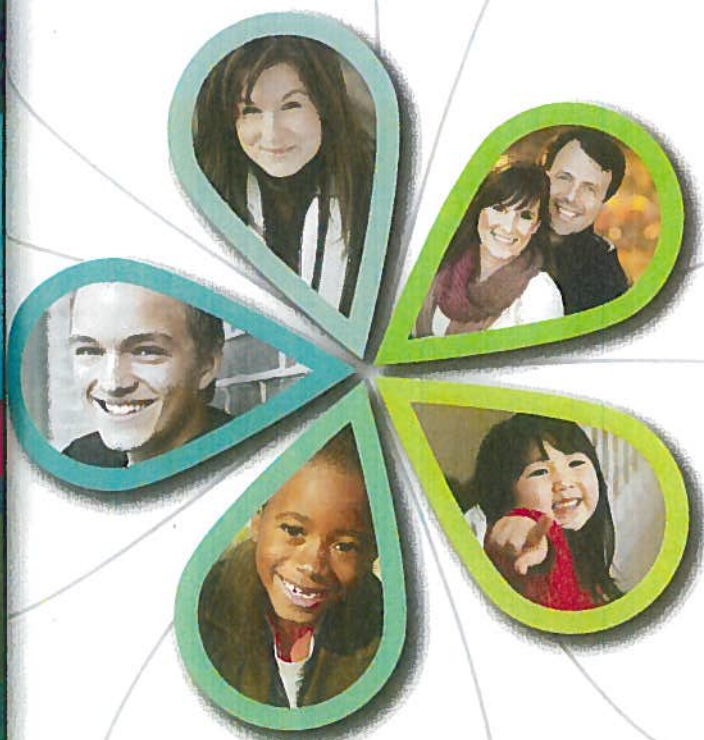
do a more in-depth reflection with the older kids. A bonus to this approach for mixed-age groups is that learners engage more deeply with material when they have choices that allow them to tap into their learning levels, preferences, and passions.



It's undeniable that sometimes the best-planned Sunday morning lessons get derailed. No one can prevent the occasional burst of chaos. But by structuring our classes so they're child-friendly, we can prevent common issues from overtaking our lessons and taking the joy out of teaching kids about God. With a little creativity and patience, you'll see a cohesive, engaged group emerge. **cm**



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