



Teaching Children With Disabilities

by John Horner, with Julie Horner

John is a third grader who is physically impaired. Julie, his mother, is the promotions coordinator for Radiant Life Sunday School curriculum.

Hi! I'm John. I love Jesus, and I like going to Sunday School to learn more about Him. But I'm not like all the other kids in my PreTeen class. I have cerebral palsy. I wear leg braces, and sometimes my body doesn't do what my mind wants it to. There are lots of kids like me who have disabilities, and some of us come to Sunday School. Just like our classmates, we want to learn all we can about Jesus.

More than ten percent of school-age children have a disability, so most likely you have or will have a child with a disability in your class. Some disabilities are easy to spot, like my friends who use wheelchairs. Others may have disabilities that are harder to identify, such as difficulties with learning or paying attention. Most teachers want to help kids like me feel welcome in Sunday School, but they may not know how. Here are things my teachers do that I appreciate:

My teachers love me.

Jesus wants us to love everyone. Having kids with disabilities in your class gives you a special opportunity to minister. The most important thing you can do is show them how much Jesus loves them.

My teachers see *me*, not my disability.

I like it when teachers treat me just like the other kids and help me participate as much as I can

in the activities. I appreciate when they call me by name and do not refer to my disability unless it is absolutely necessary. When talking to or about children with disabilities, they use people-first descriptors. That means I'm a child who is physically impaired (not a cripple). No doubt you have noticed that the Bible uses old-fashioned terms to refer to people with disabilities. You can raise awareness by using appropriate people-first descriptors during the lessons too.



My teachers talk to my parents about my special needs.

Most parents won't mind if you ask them questions about their child with disabilities, especially when they know you care. Parents are able to give you lots of helpful ideas on how their children can get the most out of the Sunday School hour. You may develop a registration form that asks parents to share special concerns and other helpful information. Here are some things you

might want to ask:

- How long have we attended Sunday School? Has it been a positive experience?
- Do we have special medical needs?
- What are our special interests?
- What accommodations are made in school for our education that may be helpful in the church setting?
- How do we communicate?
- How do we show frustration?
- How can teachers help us avoid frustration and enjoy learning?

My teachers know when to ask for extra help.

Sometimes kids with disabilities may just need an extra helper—a buddy—to make participation possible. In fact, almost all children with disabilities will be able to enjoy the regular Sunday School class with a little extra help. Ask another adult or older student to help out in your class. Their only responsibility would be to help kids like me get more out of the lesson.

My teachers know that students learn in different ways.

For example, I have a hard time writing and cutting, but I love to listen to stories. Some kids with disabilities have difficulty learning memory verses or paying attention in class. Well-planned lessons with a variety of activities help us learn by seeing,

listening, speaking, and moving around. We need clear instructions, and you may have to help us follow them step by step. Please ask our parents or a school teacher in your church for more specific ideas.

My teachers help my classmates understand my disability.

Kids with disabilities often struggle with feeling like they don't fit in. As a Sunday School teacher, you can minimize this. Make sure kids don't tease us because of our disabilities. Try to avoid placing us in situations that are difficult or embarrassing. For me, that means helping me avoid physical difficulties. For children with learning disabilities, you might make reading aloud optional. You will discover some of these helps by error, and that's OK. Just apologize and remember to help us more next time.

My teachers know they are blessing my parents.

Having a child with disabilities can be very stressful, so parents need to be reminded that God loves them too. These parents appreciate churches that reach out to kids with disabilities. This lets them enjoy going to Sunday School themselves. Sometimes families of children with disabilities go through very difficult times together, like when doctors or teachers share disappointing news. You can help by praying and listening during those times.

My teachers help me develop and use my talents for God's glory.

First Corinthians 12:22 says, "Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable." By focusing on what kids with disabilities can do well, you can help them glorify God with

their talents and abilities. You will discover that we have great strengths, not just weaknesses.

My teachers pray for me.

I'd love to be healed, and I want my teachers to ask God to heal me. But I have other prayer needs too, just like all kids. Thanks for praying for all our needs, not just our obvious need for physical, mental, or emotional healing.

My teachers know that God has a special purpose for children with disabilities.

My family's favorite passage is Jesus' ministry to the blind man in John 9. Just like him, I know I was created so the work of God could be displayed in my life. What a great way to view kids with disabilities! As a Sunday School teacher you play a key role in helping us fulfill God's purpose in our lives. Thanks for making us feel welcome in Sunday School.

Questions For Further Study—

1. List some common misconceptions about ministry to children with disabilities.
2. What can you do to make your children's ministry team more effective in ministering to children with disabilities?
3. How can you make your children's ministries environment and resources more user-friendly for children with disabilities?