

Tips for Teaching “Can-Do” Kids¹

By Pat Verbal, M.A.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

ROMANS 15:7

The key to teaching students with disabilities is to believe that each one can learn and communicate in some way or another. This is challenging in any congregation, but it’s also a wonderful ministry opportunity. If you look closely, you’ll see that in every child’s weakness there is a hidden strength. It’s like mining for gold. It’s a lot of work, but oh, how those nuggets sparkle in the sun. For Christian teachers, the nuggets represent the Spirit of God within each child.

Teaching these children is more than accommodating their needs—it’s helping them find that spark of God’s love within themselves. In their book, *Lost and Found*, Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman point children to God’s plan for them. “You are not your body,” they write. “Your body is kind of like a case for your soul, which is what you’re really like. God gave us much more than we need to live, and we can lose some of our parts and still live a great life.”²

Whether students are affected by a disability so deeply that they require a self-contained classroom or function well among their peers, these “can-do” kids are capable of knowing and serving God with your help. Teaching them cannot be summed up in a few pages in this paper, but the following overview will help you better understand the most common disabilities.

Brian Has a Physical Disability

Brian has undergone eight surgeries in six years. Twice he stayed in a half-body cast for six months so he would eventually be able to whiz around in his four-wheel walker. Wheels are Brian’s love, including his Hot Wheel collection and his favorite movie, *Cars!* He even tries to play cars at church, but Brian’s teacher doesn’t let him play. She insists that he participate in every part of the lesson, because she knows he can!

Learners like Brian have a variety of characteristics that help define physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy, spina bifida, and muscular dystrophy. They may have restricted mobility and lack muscle coordination. They can become frustrated over the responses of peers. They often experience fatigue and stress due to their physical difficulties which may also include problems with speech, chewing and swallowing.

As Brian’s teacher or helper, you should . . .

- Provide a safe environment with freedom to move around.
- Allow more time to transition between activities.

- Plan tactile learning activities such as finger paint or water play.
- Adapt games and crafts to his level of participation.

Sadie Has a Developmental Disorder

Ten-year-old Sadie has autism and doesn't talk much, but she knows the lyrics to almost every country western song. Once while waiting for her mother at a cell phone store, she programmed every phone in the display racks to play different country music tunes. She even carries around pictures of singers as models for her behavior at home and at school. Learners like Sadie have a variety of characteristics that help define disabilities such as autism, Rett syndrome, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). They can seem to ignore others and fail to answer questions when they're actually very aware of what is going on around them. Some children react to excessive or insufficient sensory stimuli. Others engage in repetitive behavior as a means of self-comfort and also need consistent routines. Students with developmental disabilities can have high or low intelligence but may struggle with limited language and social skills.

As Sadie's teacher or helper, you should . . .

- Go slowly when introducing new activities to her routine.
- Provide a quiet place for needed breaks.
- Encourage social interaction with a partner or small group.
- Be faithful since she likes to bond with one person.

Andy Has a Learning Disability

Andy is a creative third-grader who loves to fish, but hates to read. His dyslexia causes him to process words differently than other children. Although Andy's IQ is above average, people sometimes treat him as less capable because he takes longer to complete tasks. He has trouble sitting still, but doesn't think twice about hooking a sales clerk into a conversation about rainbow trout. Students like Andy have a variety of characteristics that help define disabilities such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and speech and language disorders. Students like Andy can be distracted, disorganized and frustrated. They struggle with low self-esteem and discouragement. They quickly forget instructions and rules and may be socially inappropriate.

As Andy's teacher or helper, you should . . .

- Channel his energy into appropriate activities.
- Recognize that his behavior is not stubborn disobedience.
- Use hands and eyes to guide him, not harsh words.
- Provide opportunities for him to move, to touch and to do.
- Review lessons with drawing, not reading and writing.

Megan Has an Intellectual Disability

Megan loves her church, and they love her. With her sweet smile and big hugs, she's the official Sunday greeter. People don't seem to mind that they can't understand much of what she says. But at age nine, Megan is still in the first grade, because she was born with Down syndrome (a disorder caused by a chromosomal abnormality and recognizable by slanted eyes and a flat bridge on the nose). In spite of Megan's regular visits with a speech and occupational therapist, her parents fear that she will never be able to read, write

or care for herself. Students like Megan have a variety of characteristics that help define disabilities such as Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, and hydrocephaly. They can learn slowly within their range of comprehension but their attention span is usually short. Some have poor large and small motor coordination and need speech and occupational therapies. Their mannerisms can be childlike with an innocent lack of modesty. Their health issues may include heart disease, seizures, visual impairment and hearing loss.

As Megan’s teacher or helper, you should . . .

- Respond to her developmental level—not her age.
- Show—don’t tell.
- Simplify learning activities and use repetition.
- Expect proper behavior and praise her often.
- Be firm and loving.

Art Is FUN for Children with Special Needs

Ask Brian, Sadie, Andy or Megan what’s their favorite part of class and they may say, “ART!” Here are some teaching tips for successful art projects.

Physical Disability	Intellectual Disability	Learning Disability
Tape materials to the desk or tabletop.	Begin with simple two-step directions.	Limit the length of task.
Use squeeze bottles for paint.	Sequence steps from simple to more difficult.	Provide breaks.
Wrap paint brushes, crayons and pencils with foam hair rollers for easier grip.	Watch for special perceptual problems, such as difficulty with left-to-right or up-down distinctions.	Have kids work with partners.
Use felt tip pens that require less pressure.	Use concrete examples for demonstration.	Allow the child to stand while working.
Use adaptive scissors.	Take into account developmental stages to understand what children are able to do.	Give verbal and visual directions.
Raise or lower table as needed.	Use pictorial cues, mnemonic devices or color-coding to help memory.	Reduce the number of materials.
Watch for signs of fatigue.	Have the child repeat directions in his or her own words.	Have an alternative plan for another art activity.
Use large materials rather than small.	Allow longer time for completion on an activity.	Be alert for signs of restlessness or inattention.
Combine art with new technology.	Praise the child for his or her work.	Avoid stressful situations.

Learners with Visual and Hearing Impairments

The biggest mistake people make with visual or hearing-impaired students is acting as though they have limited intelligence. Adults tend to talk about them instead of speaking directly to them. While each child is unique, these children can usually enjoy most church activities with a little adaptation. For example, children with learning impairments may be very articulate in sign language. So, using a sign interpreter is ideal, but sitting a student near a friend who can take notes on a laptop can also work. Students who lip read should sit or stand directly in front of teachers in order to allow them to see his or her face. The key here is to speak clearly using a normal speed.

Students with visual problems may be partially or totally blind. Some do well with large print Bibles and enlarged lesson materials. Others benefit from lessons on tapes and sensory learning activities. Bible lessons and hymnals are also available in Braille. It’s good etiquette to say your name when greeting a blind child or adult and to offer your arm as a guide if needed.

Frequently Asked Questions

“What can I do when a student is distracted?”

Make eye contact. Encourage listening skills with a gentle tap on the shoulder and phrases like “Beth, get ready!” or “I need to tell you something.” or “This is important!” Use picture schedules and sequence charts to help her refocus on the task at hand.

“What if I can’t understand a child’s speech?”

Children know when you only pretend to understand them. So, it’s better to ask them to repeat what they said. If that doesn’t work, ask them to act out what they want. You may need to say, “I’m not sure what you’re trying to tell me. Let’s ask your mom to help me understand when she gets here, okay?” This will help ease a child’s frustration and let him know that you care about what he thinks. In some cases, students can communicate by pointing to symbols on a poster or using hand signals for “yes” and “no.”

“When children ask questions about someone’s disability, how should I respond?”

Your class will look to you as a model of how to behave around a student with a disability. Your confidence will put them at ease. When they ask questions, don’t give a long explanation. Say, “Billy’s in a wheelchair because his legs don’t work like yours. He might like you to push his wheelchair, if you ask him.”

“What’s the best way to help students with special needs learn God’s Word?”

Music! Bible verses set to music stick in the hearts of all God’s children (including adults). Choose songs with repetitive choruses and use picture charts to emphasize the words. Add rhythm instruments, marches and sign language for fun. But be aware that some children may simply enjoy listening to quiet music.

Million-Dollar Teachers

You may never get rich teaching children with special needs, but mining for gold pays off. As I walked into the sanctuary one Sunday, a little girl who has autism spotted me. Emily ran up to me with a big grin. She threw her hands in the air, waving. I felt like someone had handed me a million bucks! When Emily was born, the doctor said she would never walk or talk, so watching her surpass their expectations has been one of my greatest joys as a teacher.

He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. –Colossians 1:28–29

Providing the Right Tools

Teaching God’s Word is always a privilege, but it’s especially meaningful with students who have disabilities. “I’m emotional about teaching children about God,” says one teacher. “I know how I feel when I study and feel close to Him. So, to be able to share that with the children in my special education class is powerful. And to see how they respond overwhelms me with joy.”

Before selecting the right tools, you must assess the skills of the students in your program. When a child with a special need visits your church, arrange to meet the family in the foyer. Introduce yourself, “Good morning, I’m the director (or teacher) of our special needs ministry. May I meet with you for a few minutes before the service and assist you in placing your child in a classroom?” Give them a welcome packet about the ministry with forms to complete at home regarding their child’s needs. Then, call the parents the following week to answer their questions and get their input, because parents are your best resource.

Many children and adults with physical or emotional disabilities can use the same curriculum as other students. Those with hearing or visual impairments may need sign language, CDs, large print Bibles, or materials in Braille. But for optimal learning with students who have intellectual disabilities, Bible lessons must be adapted to their level of comprehension.

A Word of Caution . . .

- Don’t draw attention to a student’s disability.
- Don’t neglect a student’s dislikes or fears.
- Don’t overly control or protect.
- Don’t take rejection personally.
- Don’t use harsh words such as cripple, deaf and dumb.
- Don’t tolerate any teasing of other students.
- Don’t stereotype or label.

How to Select and Adapt Curriculum

Only a small number of Christian publishers are addressing the alarming lack of special needs curriculum for churches. I believe the fault lies with churches as much as with publishers. Imagine the outcry for more teaching tools if 85 percent of U.S. churches had intentional special needs ministries for families affected by disabilities. However, there is good news. Some excellent resources are available for children without disabilities that can be easily adapted with a bit of practice.

What do you tell leaders regarding curriculum?

One size doesn’t fit all! There is a great range of learning abilities within the scope of individuals who have intellectual disabilities. If you want teachers to be successful, provide them with practical training on how to teach God’s Word. Good teaching practices can apply to all types of learners. For example: 1) Know and respond to students’ needs, 2) involve the senses in learning activities, 3) teach for response.

In selecting curriculum that is adaptable, what criteria do you use?

1. Are the lessons true to God’s Word? Some curriculums use a portion of Scripture and then pull out an application from it that doesn’t reflect the true meaning of the passage.
2. Are the lesson visuals true to God’s Word? Are pictures shown in Bible sequence?
3. Are the lesson visuals and activities age appropriate? For example, in a lesson on prayer for preteens, don’t use childish pictures or songs.
4. Do the lessons offer a variety of teaching methods and activities geared to all learning styles?

What works best when adapting curriculum for various learning styles?

Intentionally plan something for everyone. Involve all the senses. Use music, drama, role-play, object lessons,

etc. Make sure all activities reinforce the aim of the lesson. Alternate activities that require sitting with activities that involve movement. Use buddies or teacher’s aides to put students in groups doing different activities geared to their style of learning and comprehension.

How do you personalize lessons to work in a group or with private instruction?

Know your students well. Talk to parents and teachers at school if possible. Know your students’ interests, hobbies and routines. Adapt your Bible teaching to their strengths and weaknesses. Never underestimate the simple joys of reading God’s Word aloud to students and modeling prayer.

Church should be a place where we celebrate the faith journey of children with special needs. Just as public schools design learning goals for students with disabilities, churches can set discipleship goals with the help of parents. These children have a tremendous spiritual capacity to know God, primarily when their questions are heard and answered by God’s Word. Here are some keys to making your teaching more effective:

- Identifying information: name, age, parents/guardians
- Assessment information: present level of religious awareness
- Learner’s community activities: experiences, likes and dislikes
- Learner’s strengths and limitations: fears, level of directions
- Learner’s family involvement: church attendance, desires for child
- Goals: long-term goals with several short-term goals
- Methods for including the child in the community and church; spiritual development and service

One father who helped develop an ICEP for his son said, “I dream that my son will one day be able to sit next to me in church and take communion. Thanks to his ICEP he has learned to control himself while sitting in a chair for five minutes during story time. I hope that eventually he will be able to get baptized and become a member of the church.”

In many churches children all go through confirmation classes. One mother worried that her son, who has Fragile X syndrome, would be left out. So his ICEP included goals such as picking out four Christian symbols from the ten pictures of symbols which were part of their church’s confirmation class requirements. Eventually he was confirmed.

How to Adapt Resources for Diverse Needs

When selecting a curriculum, meet with your Christian Education Directors, who probably orders quarterly Bible lessons from a traditional publisher that reflects your church’s theology.

These lesson plans can be adapted by limiting the amount of material to be covered in one class period and preparing pieces according to the abilities and interests of your students. Special aides or buddies can pre-cut crafts and prepare visual charts or communication boards. Stories can be broken down into shorter segments and told using repetitious, hands-on activities.

Your lesson plan should dictate your room environment. A creative space with activity stations can clue your student’s behavior. For circle time with young children, bean bag chairs work well when placed away from toys, puzzles, and craft areas. Provide a cozy corner or a separate room for free play for children with sensory issues. For hundreds of teaching strategies, see Joni and Friends’ book *Special Needs Smart Pages* (Gospel Light Publishers, 2009).

Music is a powerful tool in your teaching toolbox. Use happy music to welcome children into class, but keep it soft if you have students with auditory sensory issues. Songs help children remember stories and Bible verses, especially when taught with various activities such as rhythm instruments, hand motions, visual signs, clapping hands, and waving streamers. Singer and songwriter Mary Rice Hopkins has been

a featured guest at Joni and Friends retreats for many years. Her lively, sing-a-long tunes bring the love of Jesus to hurting children and their parents. Subscribe to Mary’s fun YouTube channel. www.YouTube.com/MaryRiceHopkins

If the curriculum you’re adapting has limited options, check out the Big Book series from Gospel Light Publishers. These resources categorize games and crafts by skill level. In the Big Book of Bible Skills, you’ll find Books of the Bible cards that can be printed on card stock, laminated, and cut apart. Each card has the book’s name in bold print, a simple graphic of the book’s content, and a subject reference. These cards aid in memory and sequencing games.

Beyond Play (www.beyondplay.com) is a good source of manipulative toys for young children with special needs. This company combines products from various manufacturers, such as toys for sorting, dramatic play, sensory exploration, and language.

As you consider resources for your ministry, keep your eye on the big picture. Make a one-to-three-year shopping list, and ask God for financial blessings. At one church where I served, a caring volunteer died suddenly, and her husband gave a large donation to our special needs ministry in her name. Our Heavenly Father delights in providing good gifts to his children.

For more stories on inspiring your church to serve families affected by disability, see the book *Special Needs Ministry for Children* by Pat Verbal (Group Publishing, Inc. 2012).

A Word of Encouragement

In the church where I grew up, a huge portrait of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, hung above the altar. As a child, I pictured myself curled up in Jesus’ arms like the little lamb. But as my faith grew, I realized that Jesus was calling me to be a shepherd not a sheep. He gave me an overwhelming love for children that continues to grow after 25 years in children’s ministry.

But I didn’t always understand how to feed all his lambs, especially the ones with disabilities.

Looking back, I see how God prepared me for this ministry. One of my best friends in high school had a sister with Down syndrome. My son had a good friend in grade school with cerebral palsy. Then, in 1990 I became the children’s pastor at a church with a thriving special needs ministry. A few years later, two children with disabilities became part of our family. All these precious children became my guides and together we’ve traveled the depths of God’s love and grace.

If disability ministry is a new road for you, you can be excited about what God will show you. If you’ve been on this path for a while and feel discouraged, keep close to the Good Shepherd who knows your heart and can use you to meet the needs of the children in your ministry.

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Notes

1. Pat Verbal, *Practical Pathways: Reaching and Training Volunteers for Ministry with Special Needs Children* (Agoura Hills, CA: Joni and Friends, 2007), 17–24.
2. Marc Gellman and Thomas Hartman, *Lost and Found: A Kid’s Book for Living Through Loss* (New York, NY: Morrow Junior Books, 1999), 20.

About the Author

Pat Verbal is the former Sr. Manager of Publishing and Ministry Resources at Joni and Friends Christian Institute on Disabilities, where she served as managing editor and contributor for their cornerstone curricula: *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry* (2011), *Beyond Suffering for the Next Generation* (2015), and *The Beyond Suffering Bible* (2016). Pat is a well-published author and featured speaker and has served in leadership with the National Day of Prayer, the World Prayer Congress, the International Network of Children’s Ministry, and the Billy Graham School of Evangelism. Her passion for disability ministry comes from twenty-five years as an associate pastor, school administrator, and caregiver for family members. Pat authored or coauthored *The Gospel in Hard Times*, *Real Families Real Needs*, *Special Needs Ministry for Children*, *Special Needs Smart Pages*, and *Life in the Balance*. She graduated from Azusa Pacific University and holds an M.A. in pastoral studies from the School of Theology, where she served on the Council of Church Leaders.