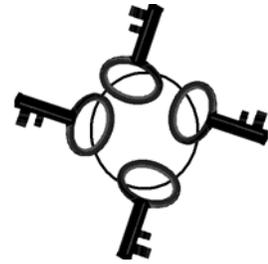


Four Keys to Great Teaching

By Joyce Riffe



People are Primary

When I lead workshops with teachers, I ask them their most vivid or important memory of childhood Sunday school. Almost invariably the answer involves a particular teacher, "my smiling second grade teacher" or "my teacher in fifth grade who told wonderful stories." **People usually do not recall specific lesson content or learning experiences, but they do remember special people** who were there every Sunday to express love and concern for them and who lived their faith in the presence of children.

We know that preschool children experience faith as they live with and relate to adults. In fact, **parents, caregivers, and teachers "model God" for children.** Elementary children are receptive to the authority of adults and want to join and be part of the faith community that teachers and other church members represent. **We can plan a perfect lesson** with exciting learning experiences; but if we have not forged a respectful, loving bond with the children who come, **if they do not feel good about coming to church or to our classrooms, then the perfect lesson is useless.**

It is, therefore, important to **get to know the children in your class (and their parents) as well as you can.** Part of this involves becoming familiar with the age group characteristics of the children you teach.

- ✘ Do they read well?
- ✘ How long is their attention span?
- ✘ What projects are they capable of doing?
- ✘ How long can they be expected to stay with any one activity?
- ✘ What behavior is normal for your age group?

Get to know each child individually. Develop an awareness of his or her special gifts and needs. In a small church you may know a great deal about the families and backgrounds of the children; this is possible but more difficult in a larger church. Sunday school curriculum often provides information sheets for parents to fill out about younger children: Use them. Teachers of all age groups should take time and make the effort to know each child.

Because people are primary, teachers are important too. **If you teach with another teacher or as part of a team of teachers, do your part to foster a cooperative working relationship.** Pool

your interests, resources, and talents with others to provide the best possible classroom community of faith and learning.

Space Teaches

Whether you teach in a corner of the sanctuary (Nave for Orthodox Christians) or a large classroom filled with all of the equipment you could possibly [have] **be aware that your space teaches.**

- ✘ Is the space welcoming? Is it clean?
- ✘ Are there enough chairs and tables?
- ✘ Is the furniture the appropriate size for your students?
- ✘ Are there bulletin boards? Are they current?
- ✘ Do they contribute to the teaching and learning? Is there clutter?

Your visual teaching aids can get lost amidst outdated materials and storage boxes. Both children and adults will feel overwhelmed and distracted by a cluttered room or teaching space. This distraction and sense of disorganization can contribute to a higher classroom noise level, and to children whose attention must continually be redirected toward what you are trying to teach.

On the other hand, **if your teaching space or classroom is bare, you miss a great opportunity to focus children's minds, to catch their interest, to stimulate ideas, and to provide the learning opportunities** that pictures, charts, and mobiles provide. Even a corner of the sanctuary or fellowship hall can be brightened with relevant materials taped or propped at the child's eye level. (Good curriculum will provide visual aids to go with the lesson.) **Arrive each week with sufficient time to design and set up the learning area.**

The arrangement of your room or space is important too. If you teach in centers, separate active from quiet activities.

- ✘ Can you set aside a space for story time?
- ✘ For singing and musical activities?
- ✘ For crafts and activities?
- ✘ For games and play?
- ✘ Can everyone move about easily? Are there barriers?

Your space also teaches parents and church members.

- ✘ Create an improvised bulletin board (a piece of corrugated cardboard covered with bright fabric) outside your room to display children's work for those who pass by.
- ✘ Decorate your door or set class projects outside it for others to consider and enjoy.

Know the Nuts and Bolts

Familiarize yourself with the following "nuts and bolts" of your teaching task:

Curriculum-Look at the plan for a session to understand the structure of your curriculum. First find the Bible passage [or Church teaching *PMO*] upon which the lesson is based. Then find the purpose, aims, or main idea. Find the learning activities that will carry out the purpose or aims. What schedule is suggested for the session? **Having the "big picture" in mind will help you as you sit down to plan your first session.**

Supplies-Is there a supply closet or room where you can obtain supplies? When is it unlocked? Is there a procedure for requesting supplies? From whom? Or will you purchase supplies on your own, saving your receipts for reimbursement?

Resources-What other resources are available? Does your church have a library? Is there a picture file or a music collection?

Contact People-Whom should you contact if you wish to use the church kitchen, fellowship hall, or outdoor play area for part of your session? Who do you need permission from if your class wishes to plant something on the church grounds? It is helpful to seek answers to these questions before you sit down to plan your first session. It's easier to omit an activity now, than to add an activity on the fly.

Plan Well, Be Flexible

To plan well is to plan ahead. Whether you are planning to teach by yourself or with other teachers, [you need] time to learn the songs and stories, try the crafts, prepare the displays, and collect the supplies. If you are planning for a session with other teachers, divide responsibilities according to each person's interests, abilities, and experiences.

Plan a varied classroom schedule. Young children need alternating active and quiet times. Think through your session:

- ✘ Will you sing familiar songs before learning new ones?
- ✘ Are you reviewing what you have learned in previous weeks?
- ✘ Are you pacing your activities according to the learning abilities of this age level?
- ✘ Is there time to practice what has been learned?

Remember that the lesson begins when the first (not the last) child walks through the door.

- ✘ Plan to greet that first child and involve her or him from the first moment of arrival.
- ✘ Let the sound of music welcome the students.
- ✘ Have books, puzzles, or games ready to grab children's attention.

Immediately after your first session, take time to evaluate.

- ✘ What went well? What went as you anticipated?
- ✘ What could have gone better?
- ✘ What did you learn about your students?
- ✘ About the Scripture? [the Orthodox Faith? *PMO*]
- ✘ How will you plan for the next week?
- ✘ List some ways you can improve: not only your teaching, but the setting, the participation, and the atmosphere.

The planning process is a circle-from planning to teaching to planning.

Once you have carefully planned your lesson, take it to class and then prepare to be flexible!

Be willing to change your plans. If class is interested in a particular activity, adapt your lesson plan to capitalize on the children's interest. Don't worry if you don't get to every activity you had planned for a session. A child's question may take you down a different path from the one you planned. **It is important to be open to "teachable moments,"** those times when the spark of a child's curiosity or interest lights a flame that must be nurtured into a glowing fire while your best laid plans are saved for another day.

By agreeing to teach children, you have embarked on an exciting adventure.

- ✘ You have made a pledge to live your faith in their company, to witness to God's love through your own love and care.
- ✘ The wonderful surprise is that, in return, you will find that the children will witness to you and that you will be blessed by them.

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