

THE WELL EQUIPPED
VOLUNTEER
CHILDREN'S MINISTRY
HANDBOOK



JANELLE HOOS

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CHAPTER 1

VISION

Do you have a vision for the kids in your ministry? Have you ever thought about what you want them to be like when they leave Children's Ministry? Have you thought about what you want them to believe, to think, to feel?

Vision is the anticipation of what may be. When developing your vision you need to answer the question, "What will your children be like when they have gone through children's ministry?"

Why Do You Need A Vision For Your Children's Ministry?

Do you ever wonder if you are accomplishing anything more valuable than babysitting? Do you ever feel discouraged by the lack of volunteers? Do you ever get frustrated by the children's behavior? Do you ever feel like your Children's Ministry isn't "connected" to what your church is doing? Do you ever end up wondering why you even serve at all in Children's Ministry?

Children's ministry is a lot of work. There are a lot of details and juggling. And it can be thankless work.

So in order to stay focused and motivated, you need to keep the bigger picture in mind: Children's ministry is more than education or babysitting. It's about preparing our kids to glorify God throughout their whole lives. You're not just helping Jonny learn to share his toys; you're teaching him a truth about God that will be relevant for his whole life.

A vision for your Children's Ministry can help. Your vision for Children's Ministry is (hopefully) big and exciting – you envision children engaged in various activities, coming to a deep faith in Christ, and graduating to become active members of the church. That kind of vision can be inspiring but it can also be too big to easily communicate. So putting it into a vision statement will help.

A vision statement is a single sentence description of what you want your kids to be like when they leave your Children's Ministry.

A vision is important because it gives all your Children's Ministry volunteers something to work towards.

A Vision Statement Unifies Volunteers From Different Programs

A Children's Ministry vision statement can help volunteers from all the different programs see how the ministry they are involved in connects with and supports the ministries that other volunteers are involved in. VBS volunteers will see how they are connected to Sunday School volunteers. Mid-week clubs will see how they are part of the Children's Ministry team. Volunteers from all Children's Ministry programs at your church will be unified; working towards the same ideal outcome.

A Vision Statement Helps You Decide What to Do With Current Ministries and Potential Ministries

If you have a vision statement for your Children's Ministry, you have a standard to evaluate all programs by. If any of your current programs don't help fulfill your vision then you need to consider letting them go. When considering a new program, evaluate it in light of your vision statement. If it will help you achieve your dream for your kids then it is a program you should strongly consider. For this reason, your vision statement is a very helpful tool. There are a lot of programs and ministry opportunities out there and it is not possible to use all of them at your church. Having a vision statement will help you as you evaluate possible programs.

A Vision Statement Helps You "Promote" Children's Ministry to The Church Leadership and The Congregation

Sometimes the congregation will need help to see the true value of Children's Ministry in your church so that they will participate, support, and pray for this ministry instead of simply ignoring it or treating it like babysitting. A vision statement helps them to see the bigger picture. It will help them to see opportunities to volunteer. It will also show them how to pray for your children and Children's Ministry volunteers. It will help the church leadership as they set your budget. It will also help the church leadership see the connection between Children's Ministry and all of the other ministries in the church.

A Vision Statement Motivates Volunteers And Reminds Them Why They Are Serving

When a volunteer feels mired down in details and discipline problems, your vision statement will help them to see beyond the present frustrations. Knowing that there is a bigger picture will motivate your volunteers. A vision statement will remind your volunteers that the goal is discipleship – children who know, love, and serve Jesus.

Scripture Versus Vision Statement

Some people may ask why we don't use a Bible verse for a vision statement. So let me explain the difference, and why I think a vision statement needs to be something other than a Bible verse.

Children's ministries should have a verse or passage that inspires them in their work as volunteers. A vision statement, however, is a dream of what you want in the future and it is specific to your church and to your children. I believe that a vision statement must always be rooted in Scripture because the Bible gives us everything we need for godly living. So use your Bible as a guide when creating your vision statement, but remember that a vision statement is very specific to how you want YOUR kids to leave YOUR Children's Ministry.

For example, the vision I used for one of the churches I've served in was: "Kids who passionately love God and live out their faith in words and actions."

And, the verse we used to inspire our vision was Psalm 78:4, 7. "We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, His power, and the wonders He has done... Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands." This Bible passage talks about telling the next generation about God and what He has done, with the goal of putting our hope in God.

Remember a vision statement is a single-sentence description of the dream you have for the children in your ministry. What will they look like once they leave Children's Ministry?

How Do You Develop A Vision Statement For Your Church?

A vision statement is a single sentence description of what you want your kids to be like when they leave your Children's Ministry.

Another way of looking at it is to call it a target. I learned archery when I was at Bible camp as a teenager. I was taught to use my bow and arrow properly, and then I was shown a target. I aimed my bow at the target and hoped I wouldn't lob the arrow into the air above the bales of hay! The target was something to aim at.

A vision statement is a target. It is what you are aiming for in your Children's Ministry. Having a single target gives all volunteers the same thing to aim for.

How do you find the right target for your Children's Ministry? I'm going to teach you how to develop a vision statement that is specific to your church.

Step 1: Brainstorming

Plan a brainstorming day for the Children's Ministry leaders and volunteers in your church. Brainstorming is possible by yourself but much more fun as a group. Try and have leaders/volunteers from all areas of Children's Ministry involved – Sunday School, mid-week clubs, nursery, VBS, etc.

Pray together. Ask God to give you wisdom and the freedom to dream big for the kids in your care.

If possible, use a whiteboard, chalkboard or flipchart. Draw a child (I'm not an artist – a stick figure will work!) Write "I am 12 years old" above the drawing. Tell the group, "Let's pretend that this is a child who has graduated out of Children's Ministry. What do you want them to be like?" Or use a picture of a baby who is currently in your nursery. Tape it to your work space. "When Julie finishes grade 6, what do you want her to be like?" Ask the group to share what they want kids to be like once they leave Children's Ministry. How do they want the kids to act and speak and think? Write it all down. Nothing is silly or unimportant. It is important during brainstorming to make sure everyone agrees to the rules – all ideas are written down, no idea is made fun of.

(Bonus tip: People often agree to a "no criticism" rule at the very beginning of a brainstorming session but this rule is usually broken part way through the session. One way to help keep criticism at bay is to add another rule: Whenever someone gives an idea, someone else must take that idea and make it even better. This clever trick keeps people thinking positively and collaboratively, and gives some positive direction for the natural critics in your group).

Here are some examples of the types of things that might be shared: love God's Word; have a big picture of who God is and what He is like; understand the gospel; love others; pray for their enemies; love God; follow Jesus.

Run your brainstorming session for as long as people are actively engaged and eagerly delivering ideas. The ideas will ebb and flow periodically but you should sense a point when most of the insights and ideas will have been shared.

Once everyone has shared, look again at everything you have written. Circle or highlight things that are mentioned more than once. This is where the bones of your vision statement will come from. You may notice that the same 1 or 2 ideas keep popping up. Make note of these things. For example, you may find multiple instances of statements like "kids know who Jesus is and what He did" "kids who love Jesus" "kids have chosen to follow Jesus." In that case a vision statement like this might emerge, "Kids who know, love, and follow Jesus."

This is also the time to see if you can group anything into larger

categories. For example, if there are a lot of ideas like, "Love others, pray for your enemies; give generously; think of others..." then they can be grouped into a larger category called "Loving Others," or "Loving People." In this case a vision statement like this might emerge, "Kids who love God and love people."

You are now ready to move on to step 2.

Step 2: Create a single-sentence vision statement

You have completed the brainstorming portion of your session and you have the bones of your vision statement. This is a good time to take a break and let everyone think about what's been written, grab a coffee, and collect their thoughts.

Gather back together. Some people might have additional insights to share, so record those. Now it's time to work with the group to write the first draft of your vision statement for Children's Ministry in your church. Ultimately, it won't be a statement about your Children's Ministry, but about the kids in your ministry.

Take the things you have highlighted and/or the larger categories you have created and use them to write a single sentence. It could take a while to get it down to one sentence, but work at it. Making your vision statement a single sentence is important. A single sentence forces you to focus your dreams. Remember, you are making a target that all your Children's Ministry volunteers are going to aim at. Make it focused.

If your vision statement is to be effective, it needs to be easily recognizable and easily communicated. A single sentence will help you to accomplish this.

When writing the vision statement it is important to do so from the children's perspective. Remember, it is a statement about the kids in your ministry rather than a statement about your Children's Ministry. An example of a vision statement written this way is, "Kids who passionately love God and live out their faith in words and actions." Beginning the sentence with the words "Kids who" helps to keep you focused on writing it from the child's perspective.

So, on your whiteboard or flipchart write, "Kids who" and look to your brainstorming notes to complete the sentence.

Once you have your vision statement written in a single sentence on the whiteboard from the children's perspective, it's time to evaluate it. (Maybe you want to take a little break first. Vision creation is hard work and it's nice to give your participants a moment to think about what is being developed).

When everyone is ready, gather back together and continue to the next step:

Step 3: Evaluate your vision statement by the qualities of a good vision statement

Read out the draft of your vision statement and then evaluate it against the following points. (Read these points out loud so everyone is evaluating the vision statement against the same criteria). Expect to make some changes and tweaks to your vision statement wording because of this evaluation.

- **A good vision statement is rooted in Scripture.** God's Word is our final authority. It is the foundation that we build our Children's Ministry on. Therefore, any vision for our kids should be based on the truth of God's Word and should express a love for the Word of God (Proverbs 30:5).
- **A good vision statement is inspiring.** A good vision statement is encouraging for the volunteers in your Children's Ministry. Does your vision statement spur your volunteers on? Does it get them excited about what God can do in the lives of your kids?
- **A good vision statement is memorable.** A good vision statement is catchy. It is easy to remember because it is a single sentence, it is focused, and it is relevant to your kids, your volunteers, and your church.
- **A good vision statement is in line with the larger vision of your church.** Children's ministry is part of the larger ministry of your church. Your vision for your kids needs to be in line with the larger vision of your church. If your church has a vision statement, make sure that you and your team know it and write a vision statement that supports it. It is okay if it's not the same vision statement, but it needs to be heading in the same direction. For example, this kid's ministry vision statement (from a previous church I worked at), "Kids who passionately love God and live out their faith in words and actions," is in line with the vision statement of the church, "For God's glory we will have maximum impact in our world by seeing lives changed in their depth of love for God and for people." It's not the same, but it is aiming for a similar target. Also keep in mind your church's statement of faith. Make sure your vision is in line with what you believe.

Step 4: Get the word out

You have finished brainstorming, created a single sentence vision statement, and evaluated that statement. The last step is to make sure that everyone knows the vision for Children's Ministry in your church.

You want everyone in Children's Ministry to know and champion this vision. Gather your volunteers for a training day. Tell them how you arrived at your vision (if they weren't present at the brainstorming session outlined

in steps 1 to 3). Then offer them a tangible reminder of it. Creating bookmarks with the vision statement on them is a good idea. Encourage your volunteers to keep their bookmarks in their Bibles or curriculum binders. Make posters of your vision statement and put them up in the Children's Ministry area. Encourage them to use the vision as they pray for their kids. It is also very important to tell your volunteers how they will be a vital part of seeing this vision fulfilled in the lives of the children in your church.

You also want the pastor, parents, and other members of your congregation to know it as well. Knowing the vision statement shows them how to begin praying for the children of your church. It also shows them the value of Children's Ministry. Arrange a meeting with the pastor and maybe even the board of elders or deacons. Present the vision to them.

Ideas for spreading the word about your vision include putting it on your church website, on bookmarks, on posters, on letters, on registration forms, and in your email signature.

Take some time at the end of your brainstorming day to think of ways to get the word out creatively in your church community. Make it very visible. The goal is to have everyone be able to share the vision statement if asked.

A vision statement is a dream of what you want the kids in your ministry to be like once they leave. But it should be an attainable dream. You should be able to see it working out in the lives of the kids you minister to.

Dream big for your kids and then do all you can to fulfill that vision!

CHAPTER 5

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY SPECTRUM

There are so many options and so many fun things to do with kids and it's tempting to try and do it all. It can be difficult in Children's Ministry to know what programs to run, what programs to continue, and what programs to stop using.

To help Children's Ministry volunteers think about which programs could work in their situation, I developed the Children's Ministry Spectrum, a tool that identifies some of the big picture areas of ministry and aligns programs with those areas.

Think of a child's spiritual life across 5 phases: Unreached, Pre-Christian, Growing Christian, Serving Christian, and Evangelizing Christian. You should have programs that connect with children in each of these phases and help them advance. So the Children's Ministry Spectrum broadly divides Children's Ministry into 5 areas (and you'll see that they match the 5 phases above): Outreach, Evangelism, Discipleship, Service, and Missions. This spectrum covers the life of a disciple from unreached to solid, growing follower of Jesus.

Using the Children's Ministry Spectrum will help you identify programs you should consider starting and it will even help you identify whether you need to make the tough choice and shut a program down. Do you have something for kids in each area of the spectrum? Do you have lots of programs and events in one area and none in another?

Below is a simple chart of the Children's Ministry Spectrum. Create one like it on a piece of paper or get your free downloadable copy at www.wellequippedvolunteer.com/book.

Outreach > Evangelism > Discipleship > Service > Missions

Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). As Children's Ministry volunteers this is our commission. The Children's Ministry spectrum uses this verse as a foundation.

Let's look at each of the areas of ministry and talk about some of the ways you can create programs to address each area. Note: I give some

specific programming suggestions but none of the lists are exhaustive. I should also point out that just because I mention a particular program in one area, doesn't mean you can't use it for another area. For example, you might find that clubs or VBS serves more than one area. It's important to know this and intentionally construct your program and choose curriculum that works for whichever areas the program will be used for.

Outreach

The first step in the process is to go. There are children in our communities who need to hear of the love of God and the gift of salvation that is offered to them.

Outreach events are the first stop on the Children's Ministry spectrum. Outreach involves meeting the kids in our communities, building relationships, and meeting their needs.

Outreach ideas include: Breakfast Club at the local school, mom and preschooler drop-in, homework club, Lego(R) club, sports camps, drop-in programs after school, mid-week clubs, after school care, drama camps, Christmas programs/parties, and spring break events.

Mid-week clubs are a popular program in many churches. Although club time can be used for discipleship (for example, Awana), they are a great opportunity for outreach.

Choose club material that allows lots of time for relationship building. Give the kids a chance to have fun together. During quiet times, introduce the kids to Jesus. Give them lots of opportunity to ask questions.

Outreach allows you to build relationships with your community so get involved! If there's a community garden, get involved. If there's a community parade, make a float for your Children's Ministry or a specific event.

Get to know your community. Who are you reaching? Are there a lot of single-parent families in your community? Is there a significant immigrant population in your community? Take the time to get to know your community and tailor your outreach events and program to meet their needs.

It is so important to build relationships with kids and show our love by meeting their needs, but the command to make disciples requires us to share the gospel. That is the next stop on the spectrum.

Evangelism

You have been building relationships with the unreached kids in your

community but at some point you need to share the gospel with them. Especially when working with kids, the gospel needs to be shared more than once and in different ways. The truth of the gospel stays the same, of course, but the opportunities for sharing it are many.

Evangelism opportunities include: VBS, day camps, gospel-focused sports camps, backyard clubs, Christmas and Easter services, and one-on-one conversations.

Are you sharing the gospel with the children in your church and community? Do your volunteers know how to share the gospel with kids?

Discipleship

Next up on the spectrum is discipleship. Our prayer is that children who are given the opportunity to hear the gospel through evangelism will make a decision to follow Christ.

New believers need to be given opportunities to grow in their faith and to fellowship with other believers.

Discipleship opportunities include individual or group mentoring, Sunday School, Children's Church, prayer meetings, mid-week clubs, corporate worship, and fellowship.

Service

Disciples need the opportunity to discover the gifts God has given them, develop them and then use them to serve in the church.

We need to give the kids in our care the opportunity to learn about spiritual gifts, discover their gifts, and use their gifts in the church and community. So make sure you are teaching your children about service and giving them the opportunity to serve.

There aren't a lot of formal programs for service so you will need to look at your own church situation and determine what will work for you. A couple of service opportunities you can implement quickly include: Junior helpers, where some of the older children occasionally help out in a younger class, or junior ushers or greeters, where some of the children are paired with an usher or greeter to help people find a seat in the sanctuary. I'll talk about these ideas in chapter 22.

Missions

Disciples need the opportunity to go and make disciples themselves by

being involved with missions. We need to give our kids opportunities to learn about missions, support missions, pray for missionaries and missions around the world, and be involved locally and globally.

You might not have large, formal missions-only programming in your church but you could create mission events and smaller missions programs such as: Opportunities to pray for missions, community mission projects, fundraising projects, or a letter-writing project to a missionary.

The Children's Ministry Spectrum provides a way for you to look at the Children's Ministry of your church and see how you are doing in each area. Do you have something for each phase of a child's spiritual life? Should you start a new program to address the un-met spiritual needs of children' in your community or church? Are you putting a lot of effort into programming that you don't need? The Children's Ministry Spectrum will help to illuminate the answer to these questions.

Download a free copy of the Children's Ministry Spectrum chart and a wall poster at www.wellequippedvolunteer.com/book.

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:18-20

CHAPTER 24

ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERS

People work at a job because they want to be paid. People volunteer for other rewards. In church, volunteers give of their time and energy because they want to contribute to the growth of the church and because they want to put their gifts into action and obediently serve.

Aside from the joy of service, there's another "reward" that volunteers should receive, and that is encouragement and appreciation from Children's Ministry leaders. Volunteers may not expect it but it sure means a lot when it is given.

Encouragement also helps to brighten a volunteer's spirit, especially when they are frustrated or worn out from the effort.

In this chapter, I want to give you some ideas to help you encourage your volunteers.

Show Appreciation

There are many ways to show appreciation to your volunteers. The most important thing is to do it! Here are some ideas for showing appreciation to your volunteers:

- Send a thank you card. Write a personal note to each of your volunteers. If you have a lot of volunteers, consider spreading this task throughout the year. Think about each volunteer individually and write a specific appreciation note. Maybe something you noticed about their service or an area of their character that has made an impression on you. Mail these thank you cards to their home address. Knowing that you have taken the time to write a personal card and mail it to them will mean a lot to your volunteers.
- Appreciation banquet. Plan a special evening just for your volunteers. It doesn't have to be really expensive in order to be meaningful to your volunteers. The appreciation evening can be formal or informal. It can be a banquet or a potluck. But take the time to plan out the evening.

- Here is one idea: offer an appreciation evening where the kids in your Children's Ministry prepare, serve, and clean up the meal and plan a program. If the kids are talented musically they may play an instrument or sing a song. Ask a couple of the kids to share why they appreciate their teachers. This appreciation idea shows that you are thankful for your volunteers and that the kids they serve appreciate them too!
- Seasonal appreciation. You could send out seasonal appreciation gifts. These can be serious or humorous. Let your personality shine in the way you show appreciation to your volunteers!
 - At Christmas you could ask some of the kids to decorate Styrofoam cups. Then add a specialty hot chocolate package and a small packet of mini-marshmallows. Simply wrap it in tissue paper and tie it with ribbon. Add a tag with a simple message "Thank you for serving."
 - For Valentine's Day you could send Valentines cards to your volunteers or package up some Hershey's Kisses in a treat bag tied with a ribbon. One possible verse you could write on the tag would be Ephesians 3: 16-19.
 - For spring you could send your volunteers packets of flower seeds. In an attached note tell them that you are so thankful for them and their commitment to growing disciples of Jesus.
- Take them out for coffee. Again, this may depend on how many volunteers you have. Take them out in groups or individually. Use this time to get to know them. Let them know that you appreciate what they do. Be specific if you can.
- Give them a break. This appreciation idea is especially significant for those volunteers who have served faithfully over the years. Offer to take one of their teaching days so they can have the weekend off or find a sub who can teach one Sunday for them. This idea works for all scheduling options – year-long or rotation schedules. Make sure your volunteer understands why you are giving them a break. Let them know that you are thankful for their faithful service and what to encourage and reenergize them by giving them a little teaching holiday.

Be Specific

When you want to encourage individual volunteers, be specific. Maybe you are aware of something going on personally, so encourage them with a

note that you are praying for them in that situation and will stand with them. Maybe you hear through a child, parent, or other congregation member that your volunteer was really creative or did something noteworthy, let them know about it and encourage them to keep it up!

Encourage your team as a group as well. Not all of the emails you send need to be informational; send emails to your team on a regular basis whose only purpose is to encourage them. Leave notes for your volunteers in their classrooms.

CHAPTER 32

TEACH ONE THING

Did you watch *Sesame Street* growing up? I did. At the end of every show they would say, “This episode has been brought to you by...”

Why am I talking about *Sesame Street*? Because the teaching skill I am about to share with you is one they did really well.

And that teaching skill is...

Teach one thing. It sounds so simple and it can transform your teaching.

On *Sesame Street*, each episode focused on a letter, a number, and a principle. The theme is revealed at the beginning of the episode and then they proceeded to present that theme in a variety of ways – live action, singing, videos, cartoons, drawings, talking, etc.

Good teachers want their students to learn. Good Sunday School teachers want their students to learn and apply Biblical truth. One of the best ways I know of reaching that goal is to focus your teaching to one Biblical theme each time you teach.

What Does It Mean To Teach One Thing?

When I was a young, inexperienced teacher I attempted to cram my Sunday School lessons full of content. There was so much I wanted my students to learn! I would allow myself to get distracted with tangents and would end up trying to teach multiple concepts in a single lesson.

This is an example of my dedication and my desire for students to learn and grow. It is not an example of good teaching skills, though.

The result of that kind of teaching is students who become overwhelmed... and then discouraged. They become overwhelmed with information and discouraged by not being able to fully understand what was taught. If their parents had asked them, “What did you learn in Sunday School today?” they may not have been able to give a good answer.

As I continued teaching, and as I continued learning how to teach, I realized that good teachers restrict themselves to teaching one central theme each time they teach. Especially when you have limited time (like in Sunday School), teach only what a student can take in and then use. This kind of teaching is practical.

Why Should You Teach One Thing?

1. Teaching one thing provides focus

One central truth allows you to teach a succinct, focused lesson.

First, it provides focus when planning the lesson. Sometimes curriculum contains lessons that are extra-long on purpose. The curriculum writers put in multiple Scripture passages or multiple activities or multiple illustrations. As a teacher plans, they need to focus in on activities that highlight their main theme. By trying to cover all of the themes in a lesson, teachers can find themselves overwhelmed, confused, and even burnt out from the lesson well before they have to teach it!

Second, it provides focus when teaching the lesson. When the teacher knows the main point, it keeps them from getting distracted by tangents. The teacher can stay on track. When the teacher tells a Bible story as part of the lesson, the main point will inform how they tell the story. For example, if the main point of the lesson is that Jesus is the Son of God and the story is the feeding of the 5000, the teacher will focus on Jesus and how Jesus could multiply the bread and fish because He is the Son of God. Although there are other interesting things about that story, the teacher can stay on track and tell the story to support the main point of the lesson.

2. Teaching one things helps with choosing a hook

The beginning of the lesson is the teacher's opportunity to grab the attention of their students and focus it on the main point of the lesson. When you know your main point, you can choose a hook that is interesting and sure to keep your students' interest and attention.

Some curriculum gives more than one hook for each lesson; some curriculum doesn't include a hook for any lesson; and some curriculum includes a hook but not the main point. When a teacher teaches one thing, they can make use of any of these curriculum formats or create their own hook that will help to get kids thinking about the main point of the lesson.

3. Teaching one thing helps when choosing Bible verses

Sometimes curriculum will include a Bible story and some follow-up verses or multiple Bible verses to study. When you teach one thing you can more easily choose the Bible verses you will study during the lesson. All Scripture is useful (2 Timothy 3:16) but kids can only take in so much at any one time. Focus in on the verses that will help the kids discover the Bible truth for that lesson.

4. Teaching one thing helps when choosing illustrations

When you teach one thing you have a great tool to evaluate the illustrations provided and choose what will help to explain the main point

of the lesson. Some illustrations provided might be really cool but will only distract the kids from the main point. Choose your main point and then use that to help you choose any illustrations you will use.

5. Teaching one thing helps with application time discussion

It would confuse the students to hear a lesson that focuses clearly on one theme and then to join an application discussion that focuses on something else entirely.

The central theme should be your jumping off point for application time. Do the application questions in the lessons use the central theme? If not, you may need to come up with some questions of your own. The central theme of the lesson should inform how you direct the conversation during application time.

Let's consider this example – a lesson with the main theme of “God always keeps His promises.”

During application time, you want to first find out if your students heard and understood that main point.

Then you want to help them see how they can apply it to their lives. The fact that God always keeps His promises means that He is trustworthy. Talk about that with your students.

Then make it personal by asking, “What does it look like to put your trust in God?”

Teach one thing during application time. Use the central theme of the lesson as a jumping off point for starting a discussion with your students.

6. Teaching one thing helps with planning activities/games/crafts

When you know what your one thing is you can plan activities and games and crafts that will help to explain, illuminate, or make practical that main point. Teaching one thing helps you as a teacher ensure that everything that happens in your class is intentional. Everything has a purpose and that purpose is to teach that one thing.

How Do You Choose A Central Theme?

When you are preparing for the lesson, the first thing you need to do is to choose a central theme. What will be the one thing you teach this lesson?

When you are looking at the lesson you need to decide, “What's the point?” The Bible is rich in truth and the lessons are rich in content. We can't possibly teach everything we want in the time we have. If we overwhelm the kids with information, we will lose them. But we can engage and keep the interest of the kids if we teach one thing.

Here's how to decide what one thing to focus on while preparing a lesson:

Pray – Prayer should be a huge part of lesson prep. Ask God to show you the one central truth He wants you to teach. Ask God to grip your heart with that truth. Once you have wrestled through it, you are ready to teach it. Pray, pray, pray.

Read through the lesson – Read everything: all the suggested Scripture, the entire lesson, the application, any additional material.

Look at the themes – Most curriculum will list one or more key themes at the beginning of the lesson. These may be called key themes, themes, aims, objectives, goals, truths, points, etc. You may be able to take your “one thing” directly from here or use one listed as a base to build on.

Consider the needs of Your class – You know your students. Keep them in mind when choosing a central theme. You know their personalities and needs.

Decide on one central theme – Once you have prayed and read through everything, you now have to decide what the one thing is you want to teach in this lesson. Don't worry about getting it wrong. Different teachers will choose different themes and you may even choose something different the next time you teach this lesson. The Bible has so much to teach us – so choose one thing. Once you have decided the primary truth you want to teach, write it out in a single sentence. Then, spend some quiet moments reflecting on the main point. Ask God to make that truth real for you. When truth has changed your life; you are ready to teach it to the children in your class.

Once you have identified your central theme, write a single sentence that concisely states the lesson's primary truth you want to teach.

Go back through the lesson – This is the time to be ruthless. Get rid of everything that isn't about your one thing. Yes, it's okay to cross stuff out of your curriculum for this lesson: It may be the truth, it may be Biblical and God-centered, it may be something you want the children to learn, but if it isn't about the one central theme then it shouldn't be in this lesson.

Insert your one thing throughout the lesson – Your one thing should be repeated often throughout the lesson but that won't happen unless you put it in. Repeat the one central truth often throughout your lesson. For younger kids, repeat the same “one thing” phrase over and over. For older kids, find different ways of stating that truth. Show where that truth is found in the Bible.

Focus the application - You may need to change the application a lot depending on what you have chosen for your one thing. The one thing as stated will be a truth – about God, about us, and/or about the Bible. During application, your job is to take that one truth and move it from head knowledge to heart response.

Here's a question I'm sometimes asked: "Is it okay to choose a central theme that is not listed in the curriculum?" So, you sit down to prepare your lesson from the curriculum you have been given to use. You read through the lesson; you read the bible passage; you consider the children in your class and you realize something – the one central truth you feel should be taught is not the same as the one listed in the curriculum. What do you do?

Evaluate the theme you have chosen.

- Does the theme you have chosen come from the Bible passage being studied?
- Does the theme you have chosen agree with all the teaching in the Bible on that subject?
- Does the theme you have chosen simply set out a principle of Biblical truth?

Remember, you know your class and its particular needs and you need to follow the prompting of God when you teach. Lesson preparation isn't just about reading through the lesson as written and preparing visuals and activities. It is reading the Bible passage; asking God to move in your heart and asking, "what does this passage say about God?" and then being faithful to God's Word.

It is okay to choose a central theme that is not listed in the curriculum as long as it is true to Scripture.

Remember, teach one thing. When you focus your lesson on one central theme, your kids will be able to follow you, remain focused, and walk away having learned that one thing really well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janelle is a Children's Ministry coach from Winnipeg Manitoba Canada with over 17 years' experience in Children's Ministry. She has worked in both large and small churches; directed, designed and wrote VBS material; and served in almost every capacity in Children's Ministry. Janelle specializes in empowering Children's Ministry volunteers.

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