So, you’re either thinking of becoming a Sunday school teacher or you already are a Sunday school teacher. Congratulations on even considering such a wonderful call. Children’s ministry workers are among the most important volunteers on the globe. Children form beliefs and practices that will guide them for the rest of their lives thanks to these dedicated folks. They provide the best friends that children can find by opening eyes and hearts to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

“8 Teaching Secrets Every Children’s Ministry Teacher Needs to Know” will give you two things. The first is a bird’s eye view of the position which will help you remember the important goals when you’re deep into the details. It also will provide you with some fast insight into challenging situations that Sunday school teachers across America face each week. Consider it almost like an FAQ; many of the foremost questions from new Sunday school teachers are addressed in these eight points.

We hope to give you confidence that you can enrich your students’ lives…and you are not alone in facing a challenge when you do.

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Secret #1

UNDERSTAND WHAT YOUR MOST IMPORTANT JOB IS (and it’s not passing on information).

Ever wonder why Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader is such a funny TV show? It illustrates how many facts we adults have forgotten after our hundred-thousand-dollar educations. What do we remember most about school? Favorite teachers and friends, statistics say. To get the big picture, think of one of your potential students thirty years from now. When he answers the question, “What do you remember most about Sunday school,” the answer could be your name. It could be your name probably more easily than anything you taught to him.

We’d be hard pressed to remember what year fall-out shelters became mandatory in schools. But we can remember that history teacher who told of sitting in the hallway during World War II after
the air raid buzzer sounded, shoulder-to-shoulder with classmates, all of them with their heads between their knees.

It’s not that the history teacher knew so many facts and figures. It’s that he cared about two things—the students in the class and the piece of history he was sharing.

Your most important job: Caring about your students.

If you can maintain your caring heart—to the students and the Bible stories—you will have a great foundation for being a memorable teacher.

What caring actually means
Caring about your students doesn’t necessarily mean having a constant gushy feeling about them. Caring means commitment. Being a Sunday school teacher is a little like being a spouse. Before you took those marriage vows, your pastor might have counseled you, “Feelings come and go. Love is a commitment.” And in all your newlywed glory, you may have thought he simply did not understand that the stars in your eyes meant your romantic feelings were a galaxy of their own, and love would conquer all. Then, the truth started to set in the twenty-ninth time your spouse left socks in the middle of the floor—or berated you for strewing socks when such things never mattered in your family.

It’s like that with a Sunday school class. Some kids are natural angels; some will make you want to crash nap after teaching. But feelings come and go. True love stays, in spite of annoyances. Love is a commitment you make to your kids. You commit to loving them, and the feelings follow in good time.

Ways to ‘feel’ your love
This isn’t to say it’s wise to come into class feeling that at any second your lip might curl and you’re fighting a snarl. Kids can read energy extremely well, and it’s important that they sense your comfort with them and how much you enjoy your time with them. Here are some ways to care and feel comfortable around your kids:

• Pray for your students. This is not only a spiritual benefit but a great exercise. “Someone you’ve prayed for becomes an extension of yourself, someone for whom empathy comes more easily,” one Sunday school teacher said. You’ll find that you’re able to put yourself in that child’s shoes if you pray in specifics.

• Take time to relax before class. While driving, while waiting for students to arrive, take all thoughts of how much information you have to impart and replace those thoughts with how glad you will be to see every face individually. Twenty years from now, your
students may not remember the items in your lesson plan, but they will remember the joy you felt in seeing them. They will project Christ as being the same way.

• Remember that the facts about Christianity are very important, however Sunday school teachers are generally not expected to be Biblical experts to younger children. No matter how good your knowledge base in all things Christian, you will still get hecklers, behavior problems, and ingratitude from some. You won’t win every argument or be able to answer every question. Students will, however, sense it if you really care about them, and the more they trust you, the more easily the information you provide become part of them.

That memorable history teacher mentioned in Secret #1 cared about his students—and about the World War II material he shared.

It’s okay to ask obvious questions, especially when it’s this important: How do we always care about stories that are so old that it’s downright inconceivable, and about people who did things so differently than we do?

It’s like caring about your students when sometimes they drive you batty. They are little and very different people than you are. If you pray for them, you personalize them and make them a part of you.

To care about Bible stories, it’s similar. You personalize the stories, finding the things about them that are relevant and important to you. The stories aren’t timeless because they’re in the Bible. They’re in the Bible because they’re timeless. They contain intrigue that applies no matter when or how you lived.

**Steps to personalizing your lesson**
What does your Bible lesson tell you about today? What about it interests you personally? Did Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt remind you of going off to college? Did it remind you of a trip you took when your parents were being like the Egyptians, not wanting to “let their daughter go”?

Bringing your own story into a Bible story will bring your passion into the Bible story. Your class might be nine-year-olds who haven’t a speck of a thought about going off to college—and maybe you don’t need to even mention your personal hook to that story. But the silent comparison will have infused you to feel its relevance, and then it’s easier to jump into your
student’s shoes. They might have had to stare down the bullies on the playground who remind everyone of Pharaoh. The more personal and relevant you can make the stories, the more vested your students will be in them.

**A word about all the ‘words’**

Often, lessons are presented to Sunday school teachers today with “teacher words” drawn out clearly, so you don’t have to do all of this thinking if such doesn’t come easily to you. Such might make you think there is no room for individuality in presenting a Sunday school lesson. The authors of any of these texts would be the firsts to admit: *The point of providing words is to help those with lack of training and/or confidence. It is not to thwart individuality and the artistic instincts of a teacher.*

If your Sunday school utilizes one of these programs, think of your youth pastor answering the question: “Which do you want: Teachers to stick to the text utterly, and at the expense of their artistic input?” Very few leaders would answer that question “yes.” A horrified “no!” might be expected.

Use what tools you need, but infuse those lessons with your own gifts and experiences to show students you care.

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**Secret #3**

**BAD BEHAVIOR IS NOT ABOUT YOU. SO DON’T TAKE IT PERSONALLY.**

(Take disruptive behavior with a grain of salt.)

So, you are excited to see your students and you’re excited to apply the lessons directly to their lives. Now, to deal with the gritty stuff.

So, you get a child who raises the question for the edification and enjoyment of his classmates: “If God can do anything, can He create a rock so big that He Himself cannot lift it?” Or you get a student with ADHD who can’t stay in his chair. Or you get the unwilling participant, thrust on you by an insistent mom or dad, and he only wants to sit by the door and pout.

This is part of Sunday school, but it doesn’t need to become part of your self esteem as a teacher. We’ll talk about how to prevent kids from acting up, but first let’s look at why kids act up. Generally, kids misbehave for reasons that have nothing to do with you. Accept that truth.

It’s always our tendency to put ourselves at the center of the universe and announce to ourselves, “I must not be a very good teacher or so-and-so would not get my goat once a month.” As you get to know these students and watch them interact with their parents, you will begin to see otherwise.
Sometimes children act up when they are stressed. Maybe one parent forces Sunday school and another is lethargic or even downright antagonizing, creating confusion that’s brought from home. Other children have behavior challenges that have them in special classes in school. You don’t have that luxury. You have only your little bit of training and your good gut instincts to guide you, which doesn’t always mean children will be angels. The most important thing is not to heap doubt and guilt onto yourself.

The more you learn about keeping order, preventing disruptions, and the more you understand about the children you teach, the more your confidence will grow. So let’s look at some of the most important means of keeping order.

The saying is true: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Here are some ways to keep a class on track and thereby prevent disruptive behavior.

Preparing with rules
First, keep a list of rules in plain sight. Nearly every successful Sunday school classroom has some version of these rules:

1. Raise your hand and wait your turn; do not interrupt a teacher.
2. Listen and wait your turn; do not interrupt another student.
3. Leave the belongings of others alone; do not touch what belongs to another student without asking permission.
4. Ask permission before leaving the room; a teacher who says you can’t leave has good reason to say that;
5. Keep cell phones and electronic gadgets in jacket pockets turned off; no electronics allowed in class time.

An important fact about rules and boundaries: They are actually comforting to children. Some Sunday school teachers feel that they will be “downers” or will put a dark cloud over their class if they introduce rules. But specialists note that children are happiest when they understand the expectations upon them and when those expectations are realistic.

Preparing with your Lesson Plans

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Second, prepare your lessons understanding what children are capable of according to their ages. Different levels of understanding require different approaches with teaching. Getting to know the world from the eyes of children of different ages is vital.

Here is some information about children’s attention spans as well as how many adults should be among them to create good ratios for learning:

**Ages 2 – 3**
**Average attention span:** 2-4 minutes  
**Needed teacher/attendee ratio:** 1 teacher per 3-5 children

**Ages 4 – 5**
**Average attention span:** 5-10 minutes  
**Needed teacher/attendee ratio:** 1 teacher per 5-6 children

**Ages 6 – 8**
**Average attention span:** 10 - 15 minutes  
**Needed teacher/attendee ratio:** 1 teacher per 7-8 children

**Ages 9 – 12**
**Average attention span:** 20 minutes  
**Needed teacher/attendee ratio:** 1 teacher per 8-10 children

As shown, attention spans broaden as the years increase, and the need for extra help diminishes. Try to keep the student-teacher ratio manageable and think in terms of attention spans while planning lessons.

**A little about how children think**
Other important issues also apply, including facts such as preschoolers not understanding symbolism. A favorite Sunday school story concerns the four-year-old who sang with the group, “Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam.” Halfway through the lesson, the child started crying and said, “But I don’t want to be a toaster!”

Preschoolers have great imaginations and understand the love of Jesus, but not of Him being the “bread of life.” Elementary school children love putting on dramas and have not had enough school yet to be tired of memorization. They love to learn bible verses.

Starting around age nine, children can understand symbolism. They also can understand terminology such as B.C. and A.D. and can work with maps.
In preparing your lesson, any knowledge you can acquire about children’s age groups and what they can and can’t do will be helpful to you. You won’t find minds wandering and bodies fidgeting either because you’re speaking over their heads or treating a 10-year-old like a six-year-old.

Even with the best preparation and the best laid plans, a class can “have its moments.” One minute, all will be coloring and happy. A minute later, they’re running, yelling over each other, talking too loudly, or laughing at inappropriate behavior of an instigator.

Let’s look first at the causes of disruptions that are easier to solve. Let’s say it’s the lesson plan that caused the problem. Here are some lesson-plan pitfalls and how to work against them.

**Secret #5**
**LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES (Great lesson plans take talent, and talent is learned)**

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**Lesson-plan pitfalls that can be avoided**

Sometimes those dreaded lulls in the action can cause challenges. Perhaps a lesson was shorter than you predicted—you thought it would take fifteen minutes and it only took seven. Such things happen all the time—less and less as a teacher grows more seasoned, but it is considered normal. Nonetheless, eight minutes is a long time for children to sit quietly at the end of class.

Projects that continue past the length of children’s abilities to pay attention will cause those with short attention spans to act up. Let’s say you predicted your project would take fifteen minutes, and it did, but you didn’t consider Alicia, whose attention span is for some reason much shorter than the other children. She gets distracted and then as the great capacity to distract other students.

Finally, certain projects take some children seven minutes to finish and others fifteen minutes, just because some are more dextrous. Certain projects are worthy of attention, but not disruption.

**Some solutions to the pitfalls**

In any of these cases, think of something children can do next if they finish early. One teacher always says, “If you finish early, you have to start cleaning up.” That will give some the inspiration to stick with a project.
A secondary short project for those with less attention span works well. Some teachers keep a box full of “early finishers” games and worksheets in a closet, and consequently they’re always prepared to keep minds busy.

Kids tend to spiral into not-so-good behavior when they’re unclear what they’re supposed to be doing. Hence, it pays to keep their minds rolling forward.

**Preserving the value of free time**

However, no matter how well you plan, sometimes you end up with free time, so let’s look at how free time can serve and how to keep it under control.

For children of schooling age, state rules associated with free time clearly:

- No running games
- Sit and talk
- Play a game that requires sitting down

For younger children, free time is almost necessary. However, they’re more likely than older children to use the time well. Preschool children have not yet formed collective thinking behaviors. Hence, their troubles tend to run in twos: Two children won’t share, Child A won’t do things the way Child B wants. As pre-school attention span runs about five minutes, you would drive yourself crazy having 12 five-minute activities. Free time before and after the lesson and activities will not be disruptive.

For both groups, practice good transition policies between activities. A transition policy involves announcing that kids will soon end one activity and move to the next. Older groups will understand, “You have three minutes to…” Younger children word well with, “Let’s finish up now because we’re going to…”

You will find that the balance between free time and structured time and the ability to predict the time of assignments comes more easily the more often you do it. In the meantime, remember what a famous millionaire once said, “Failure is part of success.” If a class spirals, don’t ride yourself. Sometimes it is a student and not you—and we’ll look at that next.
Even the best laid plans run amuck. Most often it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with a particular child or children who can easily raise the energy level in the room for whatever reason.

This is when you do well to think like a child and respond like an adult. Being able to put yourself in children’s shoes is being *child-like*. Everyone needs to empathize with the children in their classes and understand that disruptions are part of the normalcy. While empathizing you need to respond like a leader.

Leaders don’t get impatient easily, they don’t let the disruption win, and they don’t berate one child in front of the whole class, no matter how tempting it is to do so.

**Behavior signals are great tools**
First, rely on a “behavior signal” to restore order. It can be telling all children to put their hands in the air and then one finger to their lips. It can be clapping or flickering the lights.

Set the signal up with the class in advance, and they’ll know to quiet down when they see or hear it. Using behavior signals is another way of helping kids know what’s expected of them.

**Reprimanding is okay at times**
Sometimes a leader finds it’s time for a reprimand. Here’s are a few tips:

- Keep your voice confident and your words “directive.” Director means you shouldn’t say, “Would you like to sit down now?” Say, “Now you need to sit at the table.”

- Stoop down when addressing the child and then look into his eyes. Some say your energy becomes “compressed” and more powerful when you stoop, and you’re more likely to get the reaction you’re after.

- Praise positive actions. Some children would rather have stones thrown at them than be ignored. Once they realize their best chance is by getting praise, they’ll go for the good behavior.

- Don’t be afraid to ask parents for advice about their child. Generally, if a child is doing something disruptive in your class he’s done it in others, and the parents are well versed. Obviously, you don’t want to offend, but parents may have already solved a challenge at home—or may want to if they know what’s going on.
Sandwiching remarks helps parents understand
Talking to parents can feel tricky. You want to let parents know you’re in their camp and you’re not judging them, and the best leaders practice one good approach. They practice the old business management behavior called “sandwiching,” meaning you sandwich negative comments between two positive ones. Here an example of how to state the sandwiched negative:

“Allie has a lot of artistic talent. I always love to see what she paints next. She also acts angry sometimes. Is there any light you can shed to help me out? We really want her to have a good time.”

Notice there’s no use of the word “but” in the statement, as in “but she also acts angry…” The “but” word or other transitional negatives like “however” and “nonetheless” tend to erase your positive statement. It takes some work, but try to avoid the “but” words when sandwiching compliments, either to parents or the students themselves.

Be childlike in your ability to empathize and be a leader in your ability to address challenges. The group should never suffer due to one person’s disruptions.

Part of being a Sunday school teacher is getting a heckler. We’ve all had them. Let’s get back to the student who comes equipped with bedeviling questions such as, “If God is all-powerful, can he create a rock so heavy that he himself can’t lift it?”

Sunday school teachers do themselves enormous favors not to think of it as their job to quickly answer difficult questions—those meant to heckle such as the above, or even those asked with sincerity. Certain questions you may be well versed in, while others may stump you completely. If you have an answer to a difficult question, give it readily. If not, don’t worry about it.

It is perfectly all right to say “I don’t know.” You can follow the statement up with, “Let me look that up for you this week, and I’ll get back to you.” If the question is worthy enough and grade level appropriate, you can ask if the class would like to investigate it together.
Some of the best teachers out there are really just the best facilitators. They don’t lecture much and they don’t have all the answers. But they admire their students natural curiosity and are willing to learn along with them. Some would say they are enthusiastic students themselves.

**Guilt is unnecessary with “I don’t know”**

The most important thing is to not feel guilty about not knowing. Kids will read your guilty energy in a heartbeat, and there is no reason to feel guilty. Your students need to understand that it’s perfectly all right to not know everything about God. They need to accept their own questions and occasional doubts as normal and not something to be ashamed of. One of the best ways to bring that acceptance is to let them see your comfortable application of faith while having questions or even doubts.

“I don’t know,” provides a great opportunity to share that no one knows everything, and we don’t wait to proceed with our faith until all our questions are answered. One teacher recently said, “There are plenty of things I don’t know. But I know enough to feel very confident that Jesus is real.”

Sincerity is even more key to easing children’s minds than Biblical acumen. That’s because at some point, any teacher’s knowledge will fall short. Humility is more key than the pride of “knowing,” as humility brings us closer to God, and God is the one with the answers.

However, there are those “chosen few” who will bring up a question for the purpose of stump ing a teacher.

**Back to basics: It’s not about you**

First, understand that a child looking to create confusion is no reflection on you. It has little or nothing to do with you. Often children like this have been taunted at home by caustic doubters who are older and keener in wit than they are. Agitators in Sunday school are frequently under stress, and the questions they raise are a reflection of that stress—not of you and your biblical knowledge base.

These children will take “I don’t know” as a triumph. It’s best in this case to ignore any gloating and merely continue on. It’s a time when “turn the other cheek” comes seriously into play. In a class with the maturity level to contain an agitator, the other children will read his energy and see him as such. Your inability to answer will not bother them, but any guilt or nervousness over the situation will.
The most important Christian message we try to impart on our Sunday school students is that the love of Christ is free, it’s unconditional, and it’s available no matter what a person has done. Christ is willing to meet students wherever they are—in the darkest corners of doubt and stressful circumstances—and that love does not change.

However, we forget to apply the same to ourselves. When it comes time to be a teacher, we fall into traps. We feel inadequate. We are afraid we won’t love these kids enough. We’re thinking of what mediocre (or horrible) students we were, and thus we think we’ll make horrible teachers. We think of how little time we have and how much of a time commitment this job will take.

Many falsehoods need to be yanked out of those concerns:

**All fall short**
First: We’re *all* inadequate. It’s not just you. It’s your pastor, your spouse, your kids, your teachers, your doctors. “All fall short of the glory of God,” Paul says in the Book of Romans.

One woman ran all her concerns past her mother when she was asked to be a Sunday school teacher. She got to the part about being a terrible student, hence a potentially worse teacher, and her mother interrupted.

“You’re being a little presumptuous, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?” the daughter asked impatiently. “I’m stating everything that’s *wrong* with me!”

“To think you’re so much worse than the rest of us, that makes you rather important, doesn’t it? You’re not *that* important, Sarah.”

**The myth of poor teachers**
Second: When we say we’d make poor teachers, we often don’t understand what a teacher is.

We think of teachers as people who stand in front of a class and say this or that, and the students walk away enlightened. However, studies reveal that how students learn has very little to do with people standing in front of them and listing off important facts. Children learn with their senses. They learn by touching, by handling, by figuring things out for themselves. They learn because they want to.

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The best teachers are facilitators. They learn as they go. They let their own natural curiosity match their students—and of course, Bible study and the wisdom of years has imparted a bit of wisdom upon them. This combination of humility and wisdom makes them good teachers, whereas some very poor teachers have all the information yet little understanding of how easy it is to impart.

Finally, we misunderstand the goals of a church when we think we can’t teach. A church is not supposed to be like a school. Or if it is somewhat like a school, it is still a lot more like home. Church is supposed to be a family. Mothers of five worry sometimes about how to teach their children family values, ethics and morality. But their concerns do not keep them from moving forward and simply doing the best they can. If we look at the kids we teach as part of our family, we have a better chance of being good Sunday school leaders than if we think of it in terms of desks and chairs and lesson plans and oh so much to-do.

This is why it’s important to think of your Sunday school classes as places where teachers and students feel like a family. It should be a relaxing place where everyone can have their say, express their desires, and make mistakes.

If you feel you have “a lot to prove” to a lot of people, it’s pretty hard to think of those little people as your friends.

A youth minister’s job is not one of filling little heads with as many Biblical truths as possible in the short time we have with them. We hope that children go away far better educated than when they came to Sunday school. However, our biggest concern is spiritual growth, a process that involves the entire child, not just his intellect. Spiritual grown involves the heart, soul, and mind.

Hence, a teacher’s understanding and ability to flex with situations is more important than her getting the lesson out to the students without flex-requiring interruptions.

Keep your eyes on the big picture, even when you’re deep in the details. Think of the children in your class, and think of them thirty years from now. When they look back on Sunday school, they will remember your kindness, your leadership, your empathy. They’ll have come to believe that Jesus is a little like that.