

# CHAPTER 2

# SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT REACHES EVERY CHILD

SUNDAY SCHOOL THAT WORKS!

by Jennifer Hooks

**A** teacher struggles to hold kids' interest as she talks through the Bible lesson.

*Kids have more fun teasing and distracting each other than doing the lesson activities.*

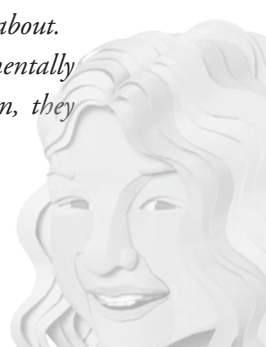
*Boredom stamps kids' faces. They're not connected to the lesson or the teacher; they're tired of sitting as if they're back in school.*

*One disruptive child becomes two. Two becomes three. Soon a small mob of children rules the class.*

*Different kids show up each week. There's no sense of community or bonding between kids.*

*Each week is like starting over. The lessons find no traction and kids never recall what they learned the previous week—much less what the series is about.*

*Teachers prepare, preread the lesson, gather supplies, and get mentally ready for a successful session each week. But at the end of each lesson, they*



*quietly wonder whether any of their efforts made a difference because kids don't seem to be "getting" it.*

Do these situations sound familiar? Like classroom management or discipline problems? Maybe parent problems; after all, if parents would do more discipline and faith training at home, Sunday school wouldn't be such a struggle each week, right? Maybe the right people aren't in place leading kids. Or maybe it's a curriculum issue.

Here's the bottom line. At their core, these symptoms of disengagement go far deeper than merely discipline or curriculum issues.

Your ultimate goal in Sunday school is to help children grow in their relationship with Jesus. You and your team no doubt work hard every week to ensure you're moving toward this goal and toward fulfilling your specific ministry mission. Sunday school is a giant opportunity to genuinely make a difference in kids' lives. But without an effective learning philosophy in place, you'll get mixed results at best for all your efforts.

For learning to be effective, we know it needs to be R.E.A.L.: Relational, Experiential, Applicable, and Learner-based. In ministries around the globe, R.E.A.L. learning has transformed how children and adults learn and develop their faith. Let's take a closer look at R.E.A.L. learning, why it works, and how you can adopt it in *your* Sunday school ministry.

## WHY R.E.A.L.?

Over the past 30 years, R.E.A.L. learning, an educational philosophy developed by Thom and Joani Schultz, founders of Group Publishing and authors of *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible*, has become widely accepted as one of the best, most effective ways to reach all kids. The premise of R.E.A.L. learning is simply this: When kids adopt an active role in the learning process, rather than passively listening to someone talk about what he or she knows, the meaning of what they're learning takes hold.

The four components of R.E.A.L.—Relational, Experiential, Applicable, and Learner-based—make learning exciting, personally interesting, and memorable.



## R IS FOR RELATIONAL

We can never underestimate the power of relationships when it comes to kids' learning. Reconsider the situations mentioned at the start of this chapter where kids are bored, disengaged, and disconnected. What difference might a relational experience make in these situations?

Relationships unlock kids' understanding of faith by opening their hearts and minds to deeper discoveries and common experiences with their peers and leaders in a safe environment. Having built-in time for meaningful relationship-builders woven throughout every experience and encouraging kids to get to know their peers and teachers is essential for faith formation.

An intentional focus on relationship-building can be difficult for people who prefer an environment that feels more controlled and quiet, where the teacher leads and the kids listen. But to transform kids' lives, we must be willing to do less of the talking and allow time for kids to talk. Here are ways you can intentionally build a relational focus into your ministry.

**Make discussion a given.** Routinely have kids form pairs or trios to answer questions, share their thoughts, and build friendships while they process their discoveries together. Ask kids for their thoughts, questions, and ideas. You may find that once discussion becomes a norm, teachers do less talking than the kids.

**Encourage relational growth.** It's important for you to have strong relationships with children, and it's also important to foster an environment where kids' relationships easily form and grow. How can kids learn to love and value one another if we don't give them relationship-building opportunities? What better way for kids to unpack what they're learning than through conversation with a peer who just had the same experience? No matter which curriculum you use, intentionally work in time for friendships to form.

**Make it routine.** In each lesson, include a friendship-building experience or game to open, multiple opportunities to discuss what they're learning throughout the lesson, and an opportunity to pray together to close.

**Embrace the noise.** Reality is, the group that fully grasps the relational aspect of R.E.A.L. will be the one people can hear out in the hallways.

When kids are talking, giggling, chattering, and engaging, they're relating to one another and it's often noisy. They're forming bonds, expressing themselves, and connecting with their peers. As adults, we tend to believe that good teaching is equivalent to keeping control and having a quiet room. The truth is, when we're able to act as guides rather than police officers and let go and trust God to be present in every conversation, kids will find natural, authentic connections with one another. And they'll care and become more invested.

## E IS FOR EXPERIENTIAL

There's a Chinese proverb that says "Tell me, and I'll forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I'll understand." Likewise, research shows that we remember much more of what we *experience* than what we hear, see, or even read. In fact, we remember 10 percent of what we hear but a whopping 90 percent of what we experience.

Experiences are a powerful aspect of R.E.A.L. learning that unlocks kids' faith. When kids experience a lesson, they're more motivated, interested, and better able to remember what they've discovered. That's in part because they're actively involved in what they're learning—and also because the experience evokes an emotional reaction within them. Here are ways you can make your Sunday school ministry experiential.

**Get everyone involved.** It's common to think you've got an experiential mind-set when you provide an engaging demonstration with one child. But experiences need everyone to be involved. I remember one perfect example when a teacher had one child sit in front of the group holding a cup on his head. As the child listed things in his life that stressed him, the teacher would pour water into the cup, until it was overflowing, dribbling water onto the child's head. All the kids got a great demonstration about what happens when we're stressed. But how much more profound would this experience be if kids formed pairs, did the activity, and then switched roles, so they all had first-hand knowledge about what it's like? Now *that's* powerful. (For a genuine R.E.A.L. experience, see the "Overflow Experience" box near the end of this chapter.)



# 4 ACTS OF LOVE THAT WILL CHANGE YOUR MINISTRY

by Thom and Joani Schultz

You can go the extra mile to ensure the R in R.E.A.L. transforms your Sunday school ministry by incorporating the 4 Acts of Love from *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible* by Thom and Joani Schultz.

The 4 Acts of Love are, in essence and in practice, how to grow faith as a relationship. Here's how they relate to the most common reasons people avoid church, and what their impact can be on the kids in your Sunday school.

## Radical Hospitality

- We show radical hospitality when we authentically welcome others.
- We are caringly curious by showing genuine interest.
- We accept someone no matter what their gender, age, looks, dress, or economic status.

## Fearless Conversation

- Seeking to understand how another person views the world.
- Taking the time to listen before we speak.
- Tackling touchy subjects that people don't want to talk about.

## Genuine Humility

- We can demonstrate acceptance, love, understanding, curiosity, respect, and genuine humility to people who are different than what we can understand. Even if "different" falls into the sin category.

- When we admit our limitations and weaknesses to others it shows genuine humility to others.
- When we are open to learning from others with different beliefs it shows genuine humility to others.

## Divine Anticipation

- When we realize God is actively involved we show divine anticipation.
- When we accept there are things we just can't explain we show divine anticipation.
- When we are focused on God and not the "show" or the program we show divine anticipation.

These 4 Acts of Love—radical hospitality, fearless conversation, genuine humility, and divine anticipation—will make your Sunday school irresistible because *Jesus* is irresistible. They really work, and we can honestly say we've witnessed this countless times, week after week, for the last few years. When the four cries (why nobody wants to go to church anymore) meet these four Jesus-centered values, God's Spirit can't help but gush forth in miraculous ways.

When they say...	Imagine Jesus saying...	The church practices...
"I feel judged."	"You're welcome just as you are."	<b>RADICAL HOSPITALITY</b>
"I don't want to be lectured. You don't care what I think."	"Your thoughts are welcome, your doubts are welcome."	<b>FEARLESS CONVERSATION</b>
"Church people are a bunch of hypocrites."	"We're all in this together."	<b>GENUINE HUMILITY</b>
"Your God is irrelevant to my life."	"God is here, ready to connect with you in a fresh way."	<b>DIVINE ANTICIPATION</b>

Filter all the experiences in your lessons to ensure that everyone gets involved. This will be powerful and memorable.

**Evoke authentic emotions.** Research has proven that the emotional climate of a classroom or any other learning environment actually affects brain chemistry—and that affects what children learn. According to Sue Geiman in “Emotions: The Cement of Learning” in *Children’s Ministry Magazine*, “We’re just beginning to understand how what we see, feel, smell, touch, and taste is transported through the millions of neuron networks in our brain and then translated into millions of interconnected memories that travel down multiple different paths into long-term storage vaults. One thing is clear—there’s one force that’s more powerful than any other when it comes to moving information into and out of long-term memory storage: emotions.”

Use experiences that evoke emotion and use multiple senses. If you’re teaching kids about the pressure Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane, use an experience that could emulate that experience or those emotions. For example, have children try to thread a needle in a limited amount of time. They’ll feel stress, pressure—even fear. Then help them see how Jesus felt the same way with what he faced.

Experiential learning is most effective when the experience has a parallel correlation to what kids are learning in the Bible passage or lesson. Kids will remember the experience because of the emotions it evokes, and they’ll be better able to understand the content of the lesson.

**Debrief experiences.** The debriefing process is essential following *each* experience. Don’t skip the debrief, because it’s crucial to helping kids make connections between what they’ve experienced and what they’re learning. Consider Jesus’ teaching pattern: The Master Teacher always followed his experiences with great open-ended questions (questions that must be answered with more than yes or no). Put as much effort into creating open-ended, thought-provoking questions as you do the experience itself.

Follow this three-step process to develop great discussion questions following an experience.

- 1. Reflection:** Ask a reflective question that helps kids talk about what they just experienced, such as “What was that experience like for you?”

- 2. Relevance:** Ask questions that help kids relate the experience back to their life and the issues they deal with, such as “How was that experience like something you’re facing right now?”
- 3. Application:** Finally, ask questions that get kids thinking about how they can apply what they’ve learned to their lives. “How can you apply that to your life this week?”

By asking a few simple questions, you’ll allow kids to make discoveries that’ll help their faith grow.

**Let go.** When you incorporate experiences into kids’ learning, it’s important to understand that you won’t always know what’ll happen, how kids will react, and what discussion will result. Will kids have drenched hair when it’s over? Will some make profound discoveries about why they think they don’t have time for God? Will emotions escalate? Letting go and letting the experience and kids’ reactions to it take over will lead to more authentic, memorable learning.

## A IS FOR APPLICABLE

Applying what kids are learning to daily life is another component of helping kids unlock their faith. Pumping kids’ brains full of facts and data won’t lead to life change. Leading kids into a deeper relationship with Jesus happens through transformation, not information. In order to teach kids things that matter to them today, we have to help them find the connections to everyday life. One way to keep this front of mind is to imagine that all your kids are silently asking, “So what?” Here are ways to make learning applicable to kids’ lives.

**Keep asking, “So what?”** Jesus was kind to the woman at the well and told her of his living water. He wants us to be kind to people who are different from us and to share his good news. *So what? What does that mean to me?* A child may struggle to be kind to someone at school or home. Or a child may want to tell a friend about Jesus but not know how.

### ESSENTIALS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

For experiences to have the most impact, they must have these four essentials.

- Experiential learning is an adventure.
- Experiential learning involves everyone.
- Experiential learning evokes emotion.
- Experiential learning is focused through debriefing.



## LIFE APPLICATION WHEEL



With every lesson, every experience, every activity, keep this question in mind—and explore it with kids. A great technique is to literally ask kids following a lesson or experience, “So what does this mean for you?” Process this question together with kids, and you’ll train them to think critically about why what they’re learning matters.

Check out the “Life Application Wheel” sidebar. This is a great tool you can use to help kids apply God’s Word to all areas of their lives. Each piece of the pie is labeled with a different area of a child’s life: classroom, home, church, friends, playground, sports, and other. When you’re preparing a lesson, think how a child could apply the lesson to each area of his or her life. You may not have an application for each area, but that’s okay.

**Focus on transformation.** The Bible isn’t a textbook to be memorized and then quickly forgotten. Its words are to be imprinted upon our hearts as they become part of who we are. Our role is to equip kids to know when and how to apply the power of God’s Word to their lives. With thoughtful guidance, we can help kids discover how to apply the discoveries they make to what’s happening at home, with friends, and at school. It’s up to us to help them practice making the connections between what they’re learning and what they’re living.

**Make it concrete.** One of the most important aspects of making learning applicable is to help kids see—and commit to—ways they can use or apply what they’ve learned. Maybe it’s thinking more about something, responding to God about something, or actually doing something. Remember, if you struggle to come up with a real-world application for what you’re teaching, kids will, too. By training kids to continually look for ways to put their learning into action, you’ll equip them to own their faith and deepen their understanding.



# L IS FOR LEARNER-BASED

The final aspect of R.E.A.L. is that it must be learner-based. We have a natural tendency to teach in ways we like to learn. If you like to learn by listening to others speak, it's likely you'll adopt lecture as your go-to teaching style. If you learn best through art or music, you may lean in those ways for your primary teaching techniques. Any single teaching style will likely work well for a handful of kids, but the other kids would learn more effectively using a different style of teaching, according to Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. (For more on this educational theory, see

**OVERFLOW EXPERIENCE**

Check out this R.E.A.L. learning experience for older kids to discover how you can craft impactful learning experiences for the children you minister to each week.

**LEARNER-BASED**

Form pairs. Give one partner in each pair a large cup of water and the other partner a small cup.

**RELATIONAL**

Say: **If you have the small cup, sit in a chair and hold the cup over your head...like this.** (demonstrate) **Tell your partner all the things that are in your life right now that you have to do. What's filling your cup? Partners with the cups of water, every time your partner tells you something, you'll pour some water into their cup. You can pour as much as you think that thing your partner just mentioned merits. Go!**

**EXPERIENTIAL**

Call time when it seems appropriate (no more than a minute or so).

Read aloud Ephesians 5:15-16: **"So be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days."**

**APPLICABLE**

Have partners discuss these questions.

- How did you feel during this experience?
- How is what happened to the small cup like or unlike what happens to our lives?
- What can you do this week to live as wise people?

Invite children to tell the entire group what they talked about.

“Chapter 14: Sunday School for the 21st Century.”) Stretch yourself as a teacher to incorporate the different ways children learn so your teaching is age-appropriate. Use these pointers.

**Offer choices.** One of the real hallmarks of a learner-based environment is the ability for kids to make choices based on their preferences. Learning centers or stations, activity alternatives, and different storytelling options all give kids the option to learn in different ways. Giving kids choices means you’ll see more engaged and motivated learners.

**Adapt.** If the lesson only touches on a couple of learning styles or multiple intelligences, adapt it and incorporate more ways for kids to learn. Add in openings and closings that vary and allow kids to choose. Add options to draw or write about what kids experience, or help kids move their bodies with an active game. Your kids will be more motivated and therefore more prepared to grow in their faith if you make your lessons learner-based.

We all have important goals for our Sunday school ministries. When you undergird all your other efforts with the solid, effective teaching philosophy of R.E.A.L. learning, you’ll help ensure everyone’s success and deeper faith growth.



**JENNIFER HOOKS** is the managing editor for children’s ministry resources at Group, including *Children’s Ministry Magazine*, books, and other resources. She writes largely on children’s issues and has contributed to numerous books, resources, workshops, and media products aimed at growing kids’ faith. She’s a children’s ministry volunteer at her church in Colorado. Jennifer earned her M.A. in early childhood education with a focus on youth at risk from the College of Santa Fe.