

Disability Ministry in the Classroom

Teaching the Gospel is important for all students. When it comes to teaching students who have intellectual and developmental disabilities, learning a few key points can make all the difference.

1. Supporting Sensory Needs Supports Students

There are two types of sensory needs: Sensory Avoiding and Sensory Seeking.

- **Sensory Avoiding**

Many students are more sensitive to the things in their environment, such as sights, sounds, textures, tastes, and smells. When sensory stimuli become too intense, it can lead to sensory overload. Sensory overload feels TERRIBLE. It can cause students to act out, run away, or shut down.

Help students by reducing the sensory stimuli in your classroom. You can turn down lights, avoid fragrances, and decrease volume. You can also offer noise-canceling head phones and a quiet area for a student to take a break from the environment.

- **Sensory Seeking**

All of us have times when we seek out more sensory input, like when we turn up the volume or chew gum. Some students need a LOT of sensory input. Sensory seekers may rock, vocalize, fidget, or stim. Stimming is self-stimulating behavior that looks like repetitive actions or movement, such as hand flapping, jumping, and many more. Stimming is harmless. It meets an important need for many students, so we should respect and support it.

Help students by teaching others that stimming is OK. Have a space, such as a breakroom, or an area in the classroom, where a student can move, and offer fidgets or other sensory resources to those who need them.

2. Setting Expectations Gets Students Ready to Learn

Students can feel less anxious when they know what to expect.

- **Create a Routine**

Creating a predictable routine and communicating it clearly can reduce challenging behavior. Using a visual schedule can help.

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Setting Expectations Continued

- **Prepare for Transitions (Switching Activities)**

Switching from one activity to the next can be tough for everyone sometimes. For many students who have developmental disabilities, it can be even harder than you can imagine. So, preparing them for the switch is a great way to avoid challenging behavior in the classroom. These techniques can help.

Use a visual schedule to point to what activity you are doing now, then point to the next activity and announce that the switch will be coming soon.

Use a First/Then Board or Ring to show students what activity you are doing now and then what activity you will do next.

Set a visual timer for a few minutes. Then announce the timer is set and that once it goes off, it will be time to go to the next activity. Put the timer somewhere where the students can see it.

- **Visual Boundaries**

Place visual boundaries, such as carpet circles, chairs, or something else that shows where students should go when it's time for the next activity.

3. Setting Expectations Gets Students Ready to Learn

The Gospel is for everyone! Learn a few tips on how to make it accessible for all learners.

- **Interactive Teaching Helps Students Learn**

Incorporate multiple senses into the lesson. For example, you can show a Bible video, then add in hands-on learning. You could invite kids to retell the story through felt characters, acting it out, drawing it, or many other ways. Hands-on learning works well for Bible verse memorization too. Try the Bible Verse Jump, or have kids write the verse in shaving cream or whipped cream. Be creative and remember that engaging the senses increases learning for many students.

4. Manage Redirection with Compassionate, Calm Redirection

If a student is struggling, remember - "It's not that they are giving YOU a hard time. It's that THEY are having a hard time." So be compassionate and try positive behavior support.

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Managing Redirection Continued

- **Look for Compromise**

Behavior is communication. So, if you see a student acting out, stop and ask yourself, what need is the student trying to meet. For example, in our video, our student did not want to stop rolling her slime fidget, even though it was circle time. Her teacher understood that rolling the slime was meeting her need to cope with the changes in the classroom, and that was important. So, our teacher offered a compromise - bring your slime to circle time and roll it on a lap desk. This allowed the student to continue getting her needs met and gave our teacher a chance to engage her in the lesson. Win. Win.

- **Stay Calm**

If a student is struggling, stay calm, use a warm tone of voice, and open body language. Often people will mirror the emotions of those around them. Which is why it's so important to lead with calm.

- **Use Discernment about How Much Redirection to Use**

Understand that sometimes meeting classroom expectations might feel really hard for a student. So, use your best judgment about when a behavior really needs to be redirected and when it is better to lead with grace and flexibility.

- **Offer Controlled Choices**

If a student's behavior needs redirection, you can try to offer two preferred activities for the student to do instead. For example, you could say, "Would you like to jump on the trampoline or play a puzzle. Then respect their choice. This can be even more effective when visuals are used to show the choices.

- **Incorporate a Preferred Interest**

If you want to shift a student's attention away from a challenging behavior, try offering them time with a preferred interest, like reading a story about dinosaurs or playing with train stickers.

- **Have Sensory Items**

Sometimes giving students a sensory item, such as a fidget or stuffed animal filled with beans, can help meet their needs and help them feel better.

Church is for everyone. Thank you for what you do!

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Resources

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A Note

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