

Reaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Teaching is an art. It can always be improved. By learning new teaching strategies, teachers can better meet the needs of all their students. Today we will consider a subject few people think about unless they happen to be the parents or grandparents of learning disabled children. Still, talking about today's subject can create a more comprehensive approach to discipling all people.

Teaching Session: Reaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Some statistics indicate that 10 percent of all children may experience some sort of learning disability. Others suggest that figure may be too low. Regardless of the percentages, we must assume that many of the children who attend our church have one or more learning disabilities. Further, learning disabilities are not confined to children. Many adults suffer from a variety of learning impairments. The larger the Sunday School, the more potential LD (learning disabled) students of all ages may be attending.

How shall we respond to LD students who attend our church? (Prepare a transparency with the following points and use it to guide the discussion)

1. We must acknowledge their presence and needs. If we are unprepared to teach children with learning disabilities, we fail to meet their needs, and they are left to fend for themselves. As a result, they are sometimes viewed as problem kids. To an untrained teacher, they may seem to be discipline problems. However, their behavior is not malicious; it is the result of their misperception of stimuli, directions, or situations.

Further, many LD students have learned to shut down in class. They cannot process information the way it is being taught and they have learned that it is safer to be silent-almost anonymous-in the classroom than to be involved. Such withdrawal from the learning process is a response to the anxiety these students feel.

Becoming sensitive to the way LD children process information usually corrects what seem to be behavior problems. Most of these students are intelligent and able to learn if taught with correct methods.

2. We must correctly define what learning disabilities are there. The most common ones we are likely to see in our Sunday School classes are dyslexia, ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), and ADH (Attention Deficit with Hyperactivity).

Learning disabilities are 24-hour-a-day concern to the students and their caregivers. LD children are neither lazy nor dumb. They may have high IQs. However, they learn in a different way and can be frustrated or demoralized by the treatment they receive from peers and adults.

3. We must receive some training in teaching techniques. In a moment, we will get a start in that direction. However, it is only a start. If you believe you have an LD student in your class, be willing to look further for resources that help you know how to reach that student. The public school may have special education teachers who can talk with you and suggest appropriate reading. Check for support groups for persons with dyslexia and ADD. They often provide free training.

As a starting point, it is important that we realize that:

1. Learning problems are not a problem of motivation. When the average Sunday School teacher encounters a child who does not respond like the other children, it is normal to want to encourage that child to "try harder," as though stronger motivation is the cure. For people with learning disabilities, that simply is not the case. In fact, they may be trying as hard as they can. Be careful not to intensify the student's frustration with statements such as "Try harder. The work is easy." "Pay attention and you'll understand." "Hurry up. You're getting behind." "Look at the paper harder and you will get it right."

Such statements belittle the person and fail to acknowledge the hard work the student is doing in trying to understand. As is true with all students, what teachers say to them can have a devastating impact on the self-esteem. LD students need to be encouraged and extended great patience in the teaching process.

2. Learning disabilities are processing problem. These students can learn; they simply learn in a different way. It takes them longer. For example, when a teacher asks a question. Most students immediately begin to process the answer. However, a LD student may first need to process the question before he or she can move on to the answer. The way their brains process slows down LD children. When most of the class is ready to blurt out the answer, the LD student may be still thinking about the question. Again, this does not mean the child is intellectually impaired or has a short attention span. Usually, LD children suffer from just the opposite. They are processing everything in their environment and need help to focus.
3. Students with learning disabilities need positive reinforcement. These people fear being thought of as stupid and are anxious about failing. Too often, they are the brunt of peer ridicule, leading them to develop false perceptions about themselves. Teachers can be a major influence in helping to mold a positive self-image in LD students by encouraging, praising good work, allowing time for LD students to respond, and not making an issue of failure.

The LD students who attend our Sunday School and live in our community are precious to God. We can reach them-and their families-with caring, sensitivity, and preparation to meet their special needs. We must commit ourselves to the idea that every person in our classroom should experience God's love and be disciplined at his or her level of ability.