

Creating Space for Kids with Special Needs

I. Each child is created with a purpose.

1. Each purpose weaves together God's kingdom.
2. See the child before you see the disability.
 - Ex.) The child is not a "dyslexic kid". They are a "child with dyslexia."

II. Common Learning Disabilities

1. ADHD/ADD
 - *(Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) While technically classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder rather than a specific learning disability (SLD), ADHD significantly impacts learning by affecting the brain's executive functions.*
 - Key Challenges: Sustaining attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation.
 - How it manifests: Difficulty following multi-step instructions, losing track of assignments, or struggling to sit still during quiet tasks.
 - ADHD vs. ADD: "ADD" is an older term now categorized under ADHD as the Inattentive Presentation, where hyperactivity isn't the primary symptom.
2. Dyslexia
 - *Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability that specifically affects phonological processing, which is defined as the ability to identify and manipulate the sounds in speech.*
 - Key Challenges: Accurate and fluent word recognition, spelling, and decoding.
 - How it manifests: Reading at a slower pace than peers, reversing letters or words (though this is a common myth—it's more about the sound-letter connection), and difficulty summarizing a story after reading it.
 - Dyslexia is not a reflection of intelligence; it is a structural difference in how the brain processes language.
3. Auditory Processing Disorder
 - *APD is not a hearing loss issue; it is a "listening" disability. The ear hears the sound just fine, but the brain has trouble interpreting and making sense of that sound.*
 - Key Challenges: Distinguishing between similar sounds (e.g., "seventy" vs. "seventeen") and filtering out background noise.
 - How it manifests: A student may seem like they aren't paying attention or may be easily overwhelmed by noisy environments like cafeterias or busy classrooms.
 - Visual aids and written instructions are game-changers for those with APD.
4. Non-verbal learning disabilities (NLD)
 - *NVLD is often misunderstood because it is the opposite of many other learning disabilities. People with NVLD usually have excellent verbal skills but struggle with "non-verbal" cues.*
 - Key Challenges: Spatial awareness, motor skills, and interpreting social cues (body language, tone of voice, sarcasm).
 - How it manifests: Difficulty understanding "the big picture" or abstract concepts, physical clumsiness, and trouble making transitions between activities.
 - Strengths: Often includes a high vocabulary, strong memory for rote facts, and advanced early reading skills.

III. Disabilities and Behavior

☆ Learning disabilities often manifest as behavioral challenges.

These behavior challenges can include, but are not limited to:

1. Refusal to attend class

2. Emotional outbursts
3. Internalized distress, such as anxiety, depression, or feelings of worthlessness
4. Trouble interpreting social clues
5. Inattention/inability to focus

IV. Adjusting the Environment

☆ Often times, adjusting the environment can be a major help for children with learning disabilities.

Ways you can shift the environment based on what is affecting the child:

1. Sensory awareness
2. Offering visual support
3. Creating safe zones

Sensory Triggers & Mediations

Triggers

- Loud music
- Crowded hallways
- Flickering lights
- Unexpected hugs
- Scratchy clothes
- Messy crafts
- Sitting still for too long

Mediations

- Noise-dampening headphones
- Bring the child to the back of the room, a lower volume area
- 5-minute warning
- Cover flickering lights
- Create a rug space for the child
- Fidget kits
- Stretch breaks

But sometimes, simple mediations aren't enough, and children can get overwhelmed.

What do we do then?

- Transition to a safe space.
- Use a “calm down kit”, containing a timer, a weighted blanket or a comforting toy, and a visual breathing guide.
- Do not ask the child “Why are you doing this?” They cannot process language in that moment.

V. Teaching Strategies

1. Multisensory storytelling
2. Positive reinforcement

Multisensory Storytelling

1. Visual: Continue using props and videos
2. Auditory: Keep instructions short and clear
3. Kinesthetic: Incorporate movement that they can interact with

Positive Reinforcement

- Catch them doing good and use specific praise rather than just “good job” comments.
- For example, “I really liked how you colored that giraffe with blue and green! He’s quite colorful and joyful now.”

VI. Work with parents

- Handle difficult moments with grace.
- Seek to build trust with their families!

CONFIDENTIALITY IS KEY!

- Remember that a child's diagnosis is *private* and should only be discussed with necessary leadership.

Works Cited

- Alanazi, Ali A. "Understanding Auditory Processing Disorder: A Narrative Review." *Saudi Journal of Medicine & Medical Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2023, pp. 275-82. NCBI, https://doi.org/10.4103/sjmms.sjmms_218_23.
- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. 5th ed., American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.
- Hayes, Anne M., et al. *Learning Disabilities Screening and Evaluation Guide for Low- and Middle-Income Countries*. RTI Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.3768/rtipress.2018.op.0052.1804>.
- Majak, Joanna, et al. "Auditory Processing Disorders in Children – Diagnosis and Management." *Polski Przegląd Otorynolaryngologiczny*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2023, pp. 9-19. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0053.7127>.
- Marciano, Laura, et al. "The Developing Brain in the Digital Era: A Scoping Review of Structural and Functional Correlates of Screen Time in Adolescence." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.671817>.
- Miller, Brett, et al. "Learning Disabilities Research Studies: Findings from NICHD-funded Projects." *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2014, pp. 225-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2014.927251>.
- StatPearls. "Learning Disorder." *NCBI Bookshelf*, StatPearls Publishing, Jan. 2025, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK554371/>.

6 Sensory Stations for Your Children's Ministry Classroom

Let's face it, sometimes kids just can't connect with our "regularly scheduled program" in children's ministry. They need a little extra love, support, attention, and engagement.

Prepare yourself, your helpers, and your classroom for those moments with intentional and Jesus-centered sensory stations. Have them handy during holiday services, or make them permanent parts of your kids' ministry environment.



These ideas (adapted from Group's Simply Loved® curriculum) also make great opening options for kids as they enter a children's ministry space. They set the tone with hands-on fun, friendship building, and the good news about Jesus!

What to do:

- Print out instruction cards (below) on card stock.
- Place the indicated supplies (along with the instruction card) in a plastic bin.
- Then, when a child needs extra support, have a classroom helper engage with the child in a quiet corner while "the show goes on" for others.

Why sensory stations save the day:

- All stations can be done quietly with one or more children.
- You'll find ideas for elementary kids and some special stuff for preschoolers, too.
- You just need the sensory bin and one helper to support the child and share the Bible Point.
- These stations can be done *during* the lesson when a child is having trouble listening. Or you can offer them as overtime options *after* the lesson.



ELEMENTARY STATION: PLATE SKETCH

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **We can trust God.**

"You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me" (John 20:29).

You'll need:

- crayons
- paper plates

What kids will do:

- Hold a paper plate on your head.
- Then try to draw a picture of something on the plate.
- When you're finished drawing, take a look!
- Does the picture look like you thought it would?

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Ask: Tell about a time you couldn't see well.

Say: Like you couldn't see what you were drawing, sometimes we can't see what's going to happen next in our lives. The unknown can make us feel uneasy and nervous. It helps to remember that God is faithful even when things aren't clear. God is with us, and ➔ **we can trust God.**



PRESCHOOL STATION: PONY BEAD PRAISE

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **Jesus deserves our praise.**

"Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever" (Revelation 5:13).

You'll need:

- chenille wires
- pony beads

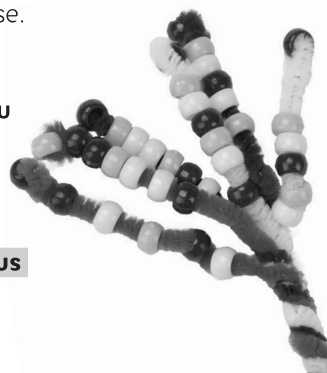
What kids will do:

- Make a musical instrument!
- Fold three chenille wires in half.
- Twist the bent sections together to make a small handle.
- Place pony beads on the end of each wire.
- Tuck the end of each wire inside the final bead to secure.
- Jiggle the shaker to make a joyful noise.

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Ask: What's a musical instrument you play or someone you know plays?

Say: Jesus loves us so much! Hooray, Jesus! Let's show him our praise with our musical instruments. ➔ **Jesus deserves our praise!**



ELEMENTARY STATION: WIRE CHAIN

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **Jesus is our friend forever.**

"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"
(Matthew 28:20).

You'll need:

- chenille wires
- child-safe scissors

What kids will do:

- Cut chenille wires into thirds.
- Twist chenille wires to make a colorful chain of links.

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Say: It seems like this chain could go on forever.

Ask: Tell about a time you felt like something would last forever.

Say: Things in this world are temporary, but
➔ **Jesus is our friend forever.**



ELEMENTARY STATION: FOAM FORMATIONS

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **God gives us joy.**

"Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us...we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory" (Romans 5:1-2).

You'll need:

- foam shapes
- flat surface

What kids will do:

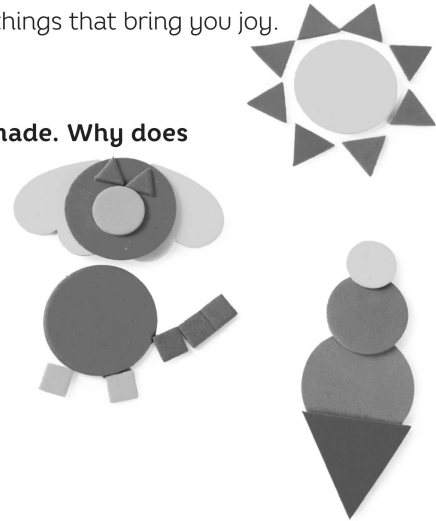
- Use foam shapes to form things that bring you joy.

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Ask: Tell about what you made. Why does that thing bring you joy?

Say: It's such a gift when things in this world bring us joy. Those things remind us of Jesus and the joy that's in our hearts to stay when we believe and trust in him.

➔ **God gives us joy!**



PRESCHOOL STATION: CLOTHESPIN CLIPS

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **Jesus is our friend forever.**

"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"
(Matthew 28:20).

You'll need:

- clothespins
- construction paper
- washable markers

What kids will do:

- Listen to the grown-up helper call out a number.
- Then clip that many clothespins to a piece of construction paper, a washable marker, or your clothes!
- Repeat with new numbers.

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Ask: When have you stayed close to someone?

Say: Like clothespins clip to papers, markers, or our clothes, our friend Jesus will always stick with us. That's because ➔ **Jesus is our friend forever.**



PRESCHOOL STATION: PAINTER'S TAPE SHAPES

BIBLE POINT: ➔ **Jesus brings us joy.**

"So they worshiped him and then returned to Jerusalem filled with great joy" (Luke 24:52).

You'll need:

- pompoms
- painter's tape

What kids will do:

- Use painter's tape to make shapes on the ground or plastic bin.
- Then fill the tape shapes with pompoms to make a colorful design.

BIBLE CONNECTION:

Say: The pompoms fill the shapes with fun colors. When Jesus came back to life, Jesus' friends were filled with joy! ➔ **Jesus brings all of us joy** because he's alive!

Ask: What fills your heart with happiness and joy?

