



# A Place for Organization

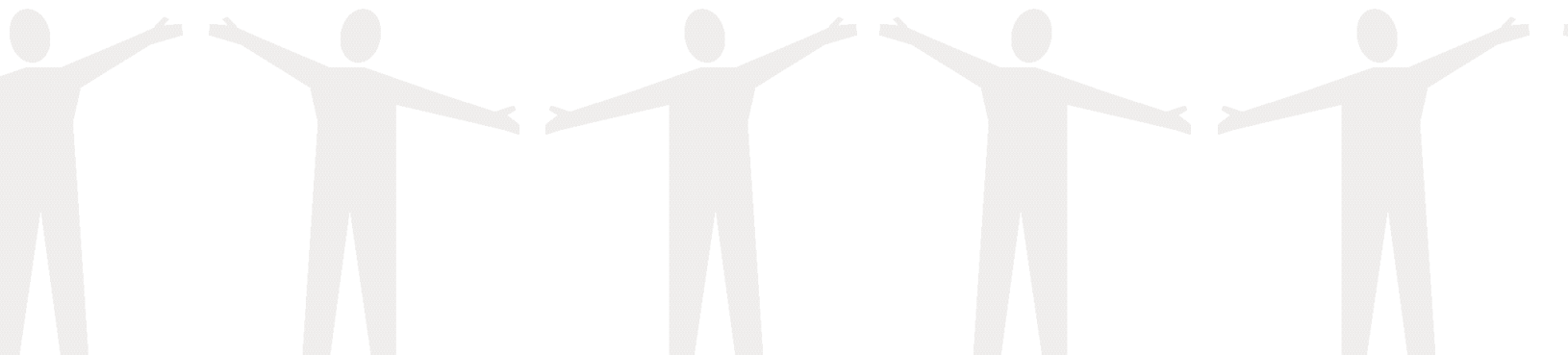
### A Place for organization:

- provides room and supplies.
- plans for teacher development.
- helps with behavior management.

Organizing your space, resources, and materials allows for maximum teaching efficiency in your special education department. Recording and keeping current information files about your learners is also important.

If you are a first-time leader in a special education department, starting the first-ever ministry for persons in your church who have mental disabilities, these answers should help you get a handle on the basic logistics.

You may have many years of experience as a teacher in a special education department with the



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best of resources, space, and a sufficient number of trained leaders. Look for new suggestions or insights. Realize many teachers in special education departments do not have your expertise or resources. This chapter may challenge you to search for a new teacher in your local area or state. Offer to share your knowledge, extra materials, and other resources. Help the new teacher solve problems she currently is facing in establishing her department.

Organization may not be an easy thing for you. Maybe the mere mention of the word makes you feel uncomfortable or even a bit intimidated. Do not be overwhelmed with the tasks of getting organized. The following ideas can help make your class learning environment inviting and safe.

***How big should our classroom be? How should we arrange our room? What suggestions are there for getting my room together?*** Persons who are disabled need to have provisions equal to any other group in the church. They are entitled to it. That means, first of all, that your department and class rooms should have adequate lighting and ventilation and heating and cooling systems. Walls should be smooth, and at least one large wall should be suitable for displays. As with all Sunday School rooms, it needs adequate storage areas such as cupboards, cabinets, and a coat closet. In addition, rooms for persons with mental disabilities should be at ground level with rest rooms nearby. Both the rooms and rest rooms should be wheelchair accessible.

Ideally, the room should provide 25 square feet per person at 80 percent of the enrollment. The minimum room size for your department should be 20 feet wide and 24 feet long to accommodate basic furniture needs. Add 10 square feet per person for anticipated wheelchair needs. It is most important that you have adequate space for all learners to sit and work comfortably. Avoid overcrowding for both learning and behavior reasons.

Provide sturdy folding chairs and provide enough tables to accommodate every four to six learners. Round tables work best, but these are not always available.

A carpeted or non-skid floor is best. Never have throw rugs. Make certain all cracks in the linoleum or vinyl floors are repaired. Adults with mental disabilities often have visual and coordination problems. They stumble easily on poor walking surfaces.

It is best if you have areas for small-group activities, a large-group semicircle facing the display wall, and a quiet inviting corner or separate small room for a timeout center or for the individual who needs to be alone.

***Our department rooms are far from ideal. There aren't even rest rooms nearby. What can we do?*** I have endured all types of far-from-ideal classrooms for my special education groups. Our first class for adults with mental handicaps met in the overflow room where the church stored choir risers and the wedding ceremony paraphernalia. I determined the class would not meet in that room any longer than necessary. My strategy was based on education—informing the church staff about the needs of my learners. Those were the days before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and communitywide building accessibility codes, both of which are advantageous tools for your current purposes.

Our area of the room had enough space for two long tables with chairs. At least the floor was



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carpeted nicely, and the walls were cleaned and smooth. I made certain our class area had sturdy tables and chairs. One of our deacon friends made a fantastic bulletin board for the focal wall. I could ignore the other things for a while. I concentrated on building the size of the group through personal visitation, by having well-prepared lessons, and by praying a lot. It didn't take long for the staff to notice how God was blessing us with visitors and new members. After we had the staff's attention, I talked with them about how we needed additional space and how choir risers and wedding gear were in the way. I talked about safety and liability issues involving persons with disabilities. It backfired! They moved our department to a basement classroom. We had plenty of space and storage all to ourselves, but the steps! And the rest rooms were even further away. But we continued to grow in numbers. The staff and the building committee sincerely wanted to bless the ministry with their support and did all they could to arrange good accommodations for us.

Talk with your church staff and Sunday School director about the type of space you need. They are interested in helping you. By all means talk about the rest room accommodations. Bladder control and other health-related problems are important issues for your learners.

Until a more ideal space is available, make the most of what you have. You can make certain the walls are clean and painted in a light, neutral shade. If the floors are in poor condition, be creative about ways you get them fixed. Here are some ideas:

- Ask two or three adult classes to raise the funds for new flooring in your room.
- Talk to a local carpet and flooring dealer. You might be surprised at the generous donations one will make for a class like yours.
- Talk with the Church Council about plans to fix and improve the area. Be certain to stress the risks involved with poor floor surfaces.

Request good light fixtures and lighting. Ask for storage areas. Arrange your room so you can have small groups and a large-group area. If you do not have a window in your room, ask an artist to paint an outdoor scene on a wall or display different posters for each season of the year. It does not take much money to make the room attractive and inviting.

Keep an inventory in your room of basic supplies. If possible, try to maintain an inventory of optional supplies.

### **Basic**

- poster board
- white paper
- large sheets of paper in various colors
- construction paper
- felt-tip markers in various colors
- CD player
- pens and pencils
- scissors
- tape and glue sticks
- an audiocassette tape recorder
- a department set of low-vocabulary Bibles

### **Optional**

- tempera paints
- colored chalk
- modeling clay
- paper towels
- dowel sticks
- rhythm instruments

***We share a room with two other groups. We get it during Sunday School. The other groups use it on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. We are not allowed to put pictures on the walls, so there go our permanent displays. Each group has different furniture needs, and there is no storage area. What can we do to get the best use of our space?*** Be convinced that, for Sunday School at least, the space in that room is for your learners to use. Arrange tables and chairs for your time in the room. Three tables positioned near three corners can be small-group areas, and a semicircle near the center of the room can be the large-group area. If all your learners meet as one large group, arrange tables in a *U* formation. Place the chairs so all learners can see the focal wall.

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Ask the building committee for a minimum of two combination chalk/bulletin boards to be placed on separate walls. That alone can make the room multipurpose. Or suggest that cork message bars (low-cost items available at office-supply stores) be positioned on every wall. They are easy to mount and have dozens of uses for displaying posters, pictures, charts—whatever you need to put on a wall. Display only what you need for that lesson and take it down at the end of the session.

Also request at least three wall-mounted cabinets with locks. Probably the other two groups would appreciate their own storage cabinet as much as you would. The fronts of cabinets are handy for displays. Be careful about using sticky putty and tape.

Alternative solutions for churches with low budgets include the following possibilities:

- Stand a large three-sided display board on a table. You can buy one at most office and art-supply stores. Or you can easily make your own with cardboard, self-adhesive plastic, and vinyl tape.
- Display pictures on the back of a shelf unit, a piano, on window glass.
- Use a portable room divider/bulletin board.
- Construct a low-cost, four-sided unit. Cover one side with cork board, the other side with dry-erase material, the ends with peg board.
- Store writing and art supplies in a large fishing tackle box.
- Buy your own two-drawer filing cabinet for the room. Keep supplies locked in it when not in use. Cover the filing cabinet and use it as a table top.
- If no storage is available at the church, store supplies in a heavy cardboard box, a poultry box, or plastic crate. Carry your supplies and materials to and from the room each week.

***What do you mean by large-group time and small-group time? How do I group members?*** Adults with mental disabilities generally learn best when given individual attention. Therefore, grouping learners in small groups for at least part of the teaching time enhances their learning experience. Learners who are very low-functioning or have severe disabilities usually learn best in a one-on-one teaching setting. These learners typically do not read and may be nonverbal. Four to six learners who are higher functioning and have some reading skills can be grouped together. Learners who are somewhere in between—who may recognize letters or a few words—can be grouped in twos or threes. Remember, a leader needs to work with each group of learners.

Two approaches to “small-group time” and “large-group time” are fairly typical. Either approach to grouping works. Choose the one that best fits your learners’ needs.

1. Invite all learners to gather together at the beginning of the session for fellowship, prayer requests, singing, previewing/reviewing the unit, and creating interest in the session. This would be “large-group time.” Then dismiss to “small-group time” to study the Bible story, review the story, learn a Bible verse, apply the lesson truths, and wrap up the session.
2. As each learner arrives, direct him to a small-group activity area to create interest in the session. When small-group activities are finished, invite everyone to the large-group area to sing, pray, preview/review the unit/study and review the Bible story, and learn a Bible verse. Dismiss everyone back to their small groups to apply the lesson truths and wrap up the session.

***Where do I find workers?*** Look for potential workers in every adult age group from college to senior adults. A simple questionnaire often helps you pinpoint the people in your church who are interested in working with your learners.

- Don’t neglect to invite the new church member to visit your class. Many teachers currently working in special education departments were introduced to the ministry within a few weeks of joining the church.
- Workers who help with one of the department’s social events or special education VBS often feel impressed to teach in the Sunday School department because of the learners’ winsome openness and friendliness.
- Teachers who have “retired” after many years with the same age group are usually not satisfied

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sitting in a Sunday School class. They get excited about the opportunity to use their skills in creative ways with your learners.

- A parent of a mentally disabled person can be a potential worker in your department. However, most of the time, the parent needs the support and nurturing of her own peer group, and she needs time away from her child. It is best if the parent/worker is a mature Christian with a good support group, works in the department after the child moves away from home or is deceased, and is not asked to work with his or her child.

Pray about the names of potential workers. Ask God for His leadership. Talk to other church leaders about how potential leaders have previously exhibited dependability and commitment to their responsibilities. Do not consider someone who is emotionally unstable or who has a reputation for not following through on his or her commitment. Then contact each person you feel strongly impressed to approach.

1. Tell her why you feel she would make a good teacher in your department.
2. Ask her to visit your department for one session or to let you show and explain teaching materials and learners' magazines.
3. Ask her to pray about the matter. Agree on a date when you will contact her again about her decision.
4. Never pressure a potential teacher into accepting the position.

What types of qualifications and characteristics are you to look for in special education workers?

Special education workers:

- love God.
- are active, growing Christians.
- are enthusiastic and lifelong learners.
- live moral lifestyles.
- are church members and loyal to the church.
- display a call from God to teach persons who are mentally disabled.
- have a love for persons who have mental retardation; enjoy being around them.
- are able to cope physically and emotionally with the demands of teaching.
- understand the development and learning characteristics of persons with mental disabilities.
- are responsive to the many forms of communication used by learners.
- are willing to visit.
- are willing to plan.
- are committed to studying, preparing, and using the resources in effective teaching.
- are cooperative.
- are fun-loving.
- are confident, but accepting of personal limitations.
- are creative, flexible, friendly, patient, kind, and understanding.
- enable learners to do for themselves.
- are firm, but gentle.
- have concern for families and caregivers.

**What draws workers to the special education department?** Many reasons draw workers to the special education department.

**Bite-size pieces.**—Potential workers are more likely to accept a specific responsibility—a job that seems doable for a set amount of time, within a certain time frame, rather than a list of duties that appear burdensome and overwhelming.

**Wording in your request.**—“Would you be willing to lead a small-group activity each Sunday morning from 9:30 to 10:00?” is less threatening than, “We need a teacher for 25 adults during Sunday School.”

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**Bible study.**—Potential workers often agree to serve when they see the quality and focus of the Bible study materials. New teachers are impressed that we teach the Bible to adults with mental handicaps at their level of understanding. New teachers are often surprised at the spiritual depth in each lesson.

**A clear sense of purpose.**—Many teachers testify, “Somehow I knew God wanted me to serve in the special education department.”

**Love for learners.**—Potential workers often discover they enjoy being with persons with mental disabilities and truly want God’s best for them.

**Where can teachers get training? Why are training sessions important?** Workers need to understand persons with mental disabilities and how to work with them. Training allows teachers to learn more about persons with mental disabilities. Training allows teachers to discover teaching strengths as well as ideas on how to increase effective teaching.

Training opportunities are offered through the local Baptist association and state Baptist convention offices. Summer conferences on special education are sponsored by LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention at Glorieta, a LifeWay Conference Center, and at Ridgecrest, a LifeWay Conference Center. No matter how long you have taught or how new you are to the ministry, all teachers benefit from the insights and ideas of another person who works in this ministry. Each teacher should take part in training as often as possible.

**How necessary are planning meetings?** Planning is essential. A weekly planning meeting is best, but if that is not possible for your teachers, try meeting once a month or once a quarter. According to experienced special education department workers, planning:

- improves communication among workers, provides for coordination, and links Special Education Sunday School to the work of the church.
- instills confidence.
- affords you plenty of time to gather resources, photocopy handouts, and preenlist learners who will help during the session.
- enables you to hear other people’s ideas on what the Bible passage means and on how to conduct the teaching session.
- stops you from using the same teaching method week after week.
- prevents duplication.
- ensures at least one teacher is in the room before the first learner arrives.
- guarantees that you set up the room and prepare activity areas before the session.
- keeps your session time focused on Bible truths.
- enables learners to make choices among planned activities.
- keeps ministry, outreach, and evangelism as top priorities.
- reveals training needs and opportunities.

The following five basic topics should be covered in a weekly leadership meeting. This meeting consists of a general period, which is a brief informational and motivational gathering of all Bible study group leaders under the direction of the leader administering the Bible study ministry, and a department/class leadership meeting. The latter, which is the primary focus of the weekly meeting, has two segments that contribute to the achievement of the purpose of the Bible study ministry.

**Focus on Mission.**—This portion of the meeting relates the work of the Bible teaching ministry to the mission and the ministry of the church. Information is shared concerning the church’s ministry. Leaders are made aware of churchwide emphases, needs, and concerns, and how Bible study groups can support them.

**Focus on Relationships.**—During this time, relationships are discussed, individual needs

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assessed, and plans made to involve members in responding to needs. Approaches are determined for being involved with learners beyond the session. Specific plans are made for following up on ministry needs of members and prospects. Plans are made for fellowship activities and various assimilation actions to involve learners in loving and caring relationships. In an evangelistic Bible study group, visitation assignments and reports can be shared.

***How can I plan if there is only one worker in the special education department?*** You are not alone. Other teachers in your church are planning a Sunday School session each week. Attend the weekly leadership meeting; plan with other teachers using the same curriculum series. Or plan with a teacher from another church. Or meet with members of your social committee to pray and plan fellowships. Plan for a time each week when you prepare your teaching room and pray for your members.

It is important for each teacher to have a personal daily worship time. The most effective leaders are ones who spend time alone with God each day. Concentrate your study on the Bible passage for the week. Also, use a devotional guide to help you study God's Word.

***Are member information sheets really necessary?*** Member information sheets are necessary. A sample of an information sheet is given in the Appendix. We encourage you to complete one for each member in your class or department. Consider printing the form on cardstock. Each 8 1/2 X 11 inch sheet should hold two forms. Separate the forms to make durable information cards suitable for filing. If your church develops a Person/Family-Centered Plan, the member information card should be included in the plan.

You will use this information in many ways as you learn to know and respond to each member individually. It helps to know about each member, especially if there is a medical emergency. In cases where neither of the parents nor a responsible family member attends the church, special education workers do well to have both an information sheet and a medical emergency form. A sample of the medical emergency form is given in the Appendix. Be certain the form includes information about the hospital preference, primary care physician, and where parents or caregivers can be reached while the member is in your care. Ask for important medical history of each member. Explain the information will be kept confidential and will be used only in an emergency.

***Is a medical emergency plan needed?*** Because of the types of physical impairments and medical conditions associated with mental retardation, a wise teacher will have a written medical emergency plan in place. Post the plan in a highly visible area with information files close by.

Keep these considerations in mind when you develop a medical emergency plan for your circumstances.

- Every leader should be prepared to handle a medical emergency. Know first-aid and have CPR training. These classes are available through the American Red Cross, public school community-education classes, and local hospitals.
- Many of your learners have a history of seizures, at times with respiratory arrest. Not all seizures come on in the same way. Find out what to look for and expect should a member go into a seizure.
- Keep a first-aid kit in the room. Restock it regularly.
- Decide which workers will handle first-aid, who will go for any needed help, who will call for an ambulance or professional medical services if necessary.
- If you teach alone, make plans with the teacher in an adjacent classroom to assist you in an emergency. If you do not have another teacher close by, ask for a telephone extension to your room or explain you will need another worker in the room with you.
- Teach learners how to use the phone or go for help in an emergency. Post emergency phone

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numbers near the telephone or show members where they should go for help.

- In cases where you know that a learner has a fragile health history, make certain a responsible worker is in the room at all times. Develop a clear communication system for seeking help in these cases.

Perhaps a trained medical professional goes to your church. Know where he or she is located during Sunday School. Inform the professional about the medical condition and get permission to notify him or her in case of an emergency.

***We have one child in our church who has mental handicaps. Why can't we put him with the special education adults during Sunday School?*** Would you want your child to attend Sunday School with a group of adults?

The interests and activities of adults with mental disabilities are the same as those of their age-group peers. The interests and activities of a child with mental disabilities are the same as those of his age-group peers.

This discussion was handled with greater detail in the chapter on mainstreaming. We mention it again because this question or discussion is raised frequently.

It is not wise or best to place a child who is mentally handicapped in the same Sunday School department with mentally handicapped adults. Children should be taught with curriculum designed for the development and interests of children.

***What curriculum needs to be used for adults who have mentally retardation?*** Sunday School curriculum should be designed for the unique needs, interests, and abilities of adults who have mental handicaps. Such a design excludes children's materials and simplified versions of youth or adult materials.

The best curriculum is one which is designed to teach the Bible to adults with mental handicaps so they can apply biblical truths to their lives. This type of curriculum assumes adults with mental retardation can learn biblical truths and that these adults deserve the respect of being taught, rather than entertained, in Sunday School. Appropriate Sunday School curriculum for adults with mental disabilities:

- has the Bible as its textbook and makes it the center of everything taught in Sunday School.
- focuses on teaching for spiritual transformation so that learners acknowledge authority, search the truth, discover the truth, personalize the truth, struggle with the truth, believe the Truth, and obey the truth.
- contains activities, songs, and teaching procedures that are developed to help learners realize one central biblical truth each session.
- encourages men and women with mental disabilities to know and love God, and at their level of understanding, to acknowledge Jesus Christ is the Savior.
- impacts and changes the lives of adults with mental disabilities for God's glory.

***What is an appropriate Bible translation for adults with mental disabilities?*** This decision needs to be made based on the level of the persons in your class or group. These translations read on the 4th to 7th grade levels: *Good News Bible*, *The Bible in Today's English Version*; *Contemporary English Version*; *New Century Version*; *New Living Translation*; and *New International Version*. This Bible reads on a 3rd grade level and is said to be the lowest level full-translation version currently available: *New International Reader's Version*.

***What are some suggestions for handling behavior problems?*** Most behavior problems are caused because your learners are confused or have too much stimuli bombarding them at once.

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Many potentially negative behaviors are avoided by well-prepared leaders who have consistent teaching plans and teaching schedules.

**Arrive before the first learner.**—Have an interesting activity ready, even if it is a structured social time. Begin each session with an activity that captivates learners' interests and makes them wonder *What's next?*

**Plan to teach individuals with activities adapted to the specific needs of your learners.**—Use visual aids, make eye contact, ask questions and give time for learners to answer, and involve learners in activities. Encourage learners to respond to one another in appropriate ways. Stick with a regular schedule each week. When you do need to make changes, explain these to learners in advance.

**Know how to pace the session for your learners.**—Do not stay on one activity too long. Build in opportunities for learners to move around and to talk purposefully. Short segments are a must for short attention spans.

**Before you begin, have plans for how you are going to end the session.**—Teach with an application and a closure in mind. Keep a smooth flow from one activity to another. Close with an activity that ties the session together.

The first thing to do in behavior management is to let learners know the appropriate behaviors you expect from them. Display a chart of basic behavior expectations and review them on a regular basis. Make them general.

- Be respectful of others.
- Use materials appropriately.
- Work quietly.
- Remain in your assigned seat or area.
- Follow the directions of your teacher.

Give learners concrete examples: "I talk to other learners with a kind voice. I hold the Bible carefully without tearing the pages. I use the markers when I write in my learner's book. I stay in my chair or at the table until my teacher gives me permission to move. I listen to the teacher and do what she says."

Learners lack self-control for a number of reasons. If you know that a learner's behavior problem results from medication or a diagnosed syndrome, ask her caregivers and work trainers how they deal with the behavior. Be as consistent as possible with their way of handling the problem.

With other self-control issues, you can help learners reduce the numbers of impulsive behaviors with firm and consistent expectations and clearly expressed consequences. In addition to the well-structured learning environment, be certain you give adequate supervision and plenty of praises for appropriate behaviors. "We are ready to hear a Bible story. Carl, I like the way you hold your Bible. Thank you, Annette, for helping Paula find the Scripture. William, you show us how to sit quietly and listen." A reminder is sometimes necessary when behavior appears to be heading for trouble. Learners need to know there are specific consequence for each inappropriate behavior.

At first Gary did well in our department, but one Sunday he wandered toward the door while we were in large group. He said he felt sick and needed to go home. So we took him. That happened for several weeks in a row. Then one of our leaders, a supervisor at the work center, explained Gary had a history of that type of behavior at work. He liked to go home in the afternoons to watch his favorite TV shows. He tried to control the situation by saying he was going to vomit. If Gary left work early when he didn't have symptoms of being ill, he was put on down-time the next day without pay.

His house manager and I discussed the situation and agreed to follow the strategy used at home and work. When Gary arrived on Sunday, I explained what I knew about his behavior history and that no one was available to take him home during Sunday School that day. If he started to act fidgety, we would ask a teacher to take him for a walk and then come back to the room. If he complained of being sick that day, we would ask him to stay home the next week. Whether he came or not would be his decision. I asked Gary to repeat what I had said to be certain he understood.

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I announced to the entire department that the next week we would have our monthly birthday celebration. I knew Gary really enjoyed those celebrations. Gary did well until just before time for the Bible story. Then he started to get out of his chair. The teacher touched him on the shoulder and asked him to go for a walk. He was quiet for just a few minutes when he came back. He complained of being sick. I reminded him of our earlier conversation and repeated that he would be making a decision about next week. He persisted, but we didn't take him home early.

I scheduled a meeting with Gary and his house manager that afternoon and explained what happened. The house manager agreed Gary had made the decision to stay home the next Sunday. When Gary started to get on the van the next week, the house manager and our van driver reminded him of his decision the week before. Gary was angry and frustrated! But the consequence was great enough to motivate a change of behavior.

Give the member opportunity to express his anger or frustration before he loses control. One way to do this is to role play situations that create problems.

Why was there a conflict between Marla and Donna? It began 20 years before. Both high-functioning women wanted to be in charge at work, at home, at church. It was a classic case of power struggle. The women had so many arguments in Sunday School we began to do a series of role plays. Whenever Marla and Donna had a squabble, we would ask members to do an impromptu drama about ways to settle it. We asked both women to take part in many of these. One hitch. They reversed roles; each played the other. I would like to say the women are good friends today. They aren't. But by learning to see the situation from each other's perspective, they have learned to control their conflicts.

Each individual needs plenty of loving acceptance.

Virgie loved coffee. She asked for it frequently: "Coffee-coffee-coffee." She asked for it as soon as she walked in the door each Sunday and several times throughout the morning. We began by giving her a red card and showing her a green card. We explained: "You keep the red card. We will trade a green card for the red when it is time for coffee. If you ask before we give you the green card, you will have to wait longer to get the coffee. After a few trials and errors, Virgie learned to wait for the green card and her coffee. We started out with three cups of coffee each session. With the card system, we were able to control the time span between cups until she only had one cup at the close of each session. Virgie learned not to ask for coffee all the time.

You want to help learners discover how to control specific behaviors. List those changes as goals. Work on one goal at a time. Plan strategies to help members accomplish those goals. Do not reinforce negative behavior by giving it too much attention. Before choosing a plan of action toward a negative behavior, honestly ask yourself if it is something you can ignore. Often praising and giving positive attention for appropriate behaviors are the best ways you can help learners learn to avoid negative behaviors.

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## Q&A

Evaluate your current classroom.

- How can we make the most of the space we have?
- What are some practical ways we can increase storage and display areas?
- This is what we need to do about

walls \_\_\_\_\_

floors \_\_\_\_\_

lighting \_\_\_\_\_

How do you currently group department members? What changes do you need to make?

Write one thing you read about:

finding workers for your department \_\_\_\_\_

training teachers \_\_\_\_\_

planning meetings \_\_\_\_\_

Look at the sample Member Information Sheet. How would you adapt it for your department?

Develop a medical emergency plan for your current circumstances. List the steps:

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluate your current Sunday School curriculum. Is it appropriate for your learners' ages and skills abilities? Why?

List ways to avoid or manage behavior problems in your department or class.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_