

What if *You* Were Preston's Teacher?

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His Sunday school teacher just might have driven him to crime.

When seven-year-old Preston Scarbrough woke up early one Sunday morning in July 2009, he just didn't want to go to church. He slipped out of the house while his family slept, got in the car and went for a drive that ended in a police chase reaching speeds of 40 miles an hour. Preston ran through a stop sign and barely missed hitting other cars in his effort to avoid capture. The police pursued Preston back to his home, where he jumped out of the car, ran into the house and down to the basement to hide.¹



I don't know what your first thought was, but when I heard this story, my heart went out to his Sunday school teacher. Can you imagine how she must have felt? There was one of her students on the national news, fleeing police, all in an effort to avoid this Sunday's Primary class. It would cause even the most seasoned and gifted teacher to reevaluate her approach.

Let's imagine that Preston was one of our students—yours or mine. Besides the fact that all little boys have active sin natures, what else might cause him to go to such lengths just to ditch church?

Does he know what to expect? Every class needs some sort of structure or schedule. Children feel secure in knowing what to expect from week to week. This is not to say you can never vary your routine, but establish some sort of continuity. It might be as simple as keeping the same order for prayer time, song time, memory verse time, story time and snack time each week.

Does he dread the chaos? Children don't look forward to attending a class that's out of control. When the teacher has to spend most of class correcting or cajoling the children to behave, no one learns much of anything and timid children feel insecure and frightened. Decide now that you *are* going to have a disciplined classroom, and do what it takes to make it one. Give the children clear direction. They should know not to speak without raising their hand during story time, for example, and that all the legs of the chair need to be on the floor all the time. You'll think of other rules. Enforce them consistently.

Having a disciplined classroom may also mean taking a firmer stance toward misbehaving children. Try giving them specific consequences for poor behavior—and if the behavior continues, don't be afraid to talk with parents after class (although usually, just reminding a child that you are willing to do this is enough!). You may want to assign seating or rearrange your classroom to keep troublemakers apart. But don't forget to reward good behavior, too, by calling attention to it and praising it.

Even using the best methods, you might need help to get your classroom under consistent control, especially if you have a large group. If so, ask the superintendent or leader responsible to have someone sit in on your class specifically to deal with children who misbehave. It's a little humbling for us as teachers to ask for help, but do it for the sake of your students.

Is he bored? Some children may be bored in class no matter how engaging the teacher is, but if *most* of your kids have glazed eyes and no response to the lesson *most* of the time, *you* might be the problem. Are you excited about what you are teaching? Your enthusiasm will be contagious. Are you teaching at the children's level? Aiming too low *or* too high will cause the children to lose interest. Did you spend enough time in the Bible, preparing your lesson? Even if you've taught Noah's ark every year for the last 20, take a fresh look at it and ask for God's help each time you teach it. He may show you something you never saw before, something He has specifically planned for you to teach your kids.

Does he know you love him? The well-known hymn writer Frances Ridley Havergal taught a children's Sunday school class for many years. Miss Havergal kept a register with all her students' names, addresses and attendance records. She knew each pupil, what their family was like and what their prayer requests were. She prayed for each child every day and took an interest in everything the children were doing. She visited them when they were sick and took every opportunity to talk to them about their soul. Her students loved her dearly because she loved *them* so much.

Even without using the latest high-tech methods or pandering with entertainment-based presentations, you can make your Sunday school class one of the high points in a child's week rather than something to avoid at any cost.

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¹ Reported in USA Today. <http://blogs.usatoday.com/ondeadline/2009/07/utah-boy-7-drives-off-to-avoid-going-to-church.html>