

How Sunday school and elementary school are different (and the same)

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I worked in Christian education for just a couple of years before I had a child of my own. It was remarkable to me how different my work began to look once I was a parent and could better understand the *needs and perspective* of parents and families within my congregation.

But it wasn't until my son was old enough to attend school that I started to understand the *behavior* of parents and families, especially in relationship to the "formal" education that we offered as a church.

I spent many Sunday mornings wishing that families would consider the classes we provided at church to have the same importance as the classes at school their child attended Monday through Friday, while at the same time wishing that they would acknowledge and value the differences between the two institutions.

There is quite a bit that Sunday school (or any formal educational opportunity children are offered at church) and elementary school have in common. Obviously, for those who have chosen to send their children to a religious elementary school affiliated with their church, the connections abound. But there are also some ways that they are different—important ways. Here are five.

**1. Volunteering.** It didn't take me long as a parent to realize that the very best way to find out what was happening in my son's school was to volunteer to help in his class and on field trips.

While the volunteer jobs that I was given mostly involved photocopying and crowd control, in the church we are reliant upon a whole army of volunteers not just to do the grunt work of running an education program but also to teach the classes, develop programs, and use their professional and God-given gifts to add depth and creativity to our children's ministry.

In my congregation there was an assumption that each parent (each family) would take their turn as volunteers in the classroom. In many ways I really liked that

idea—that each family was willing to invest their time in their child’s religious education.

However, a difference, in my experience, between school volunteering and church volunteering is that while the only risk in diving in head first and submersing oneself in school volunteering is being elected to the PTA, when parents *overcommit* to volunteering on behalf of their children at church they can end up missing out on everything else that church is supposed to be for them as adults.

It is all too easy to lose one’s church identity in volunteering with Sunday school and children’s ministries, but when we do we sacrifice our own faith development as adult Christians. Some Sundays it is okay (and important) to head for the adult education classes or to stay in worship for the whole service. Church is a community made up of more than parents, and we carry the responsibility of volunteering and caring for these children together—which leads me to my next point.

**2. Community:** Each elementary school develops its own community and its own culture, but, outside of teachers and staff, it is pretty reliably a single-generation community. We are all parents raising children in this specific moment in their lives. We are all watching our children take the same tests, win or lose in the same sports, and succeed or fail in the same activities.

In my experience, the multigenerational community available to parents in a congregation is a much-needed corrective to that tunnel vision. At my son’s schools it was clear that we were almost all wrapped up in the bubble of the now—a little foggy on what might lie ahead and certainly lacking a certain perspective of experience that might help to burst that sometimes self-absorbed state.

Time after time it has been the input from older and more experienced parents *at church*, who knew my child (and who, by the way, were also volunteering in his classroom), that has helped me think through and better understand the larger journey that I am on as a parent.

**3. Staff:** I think that teachers, pastors, and Christian educators all hold in common the strange relationship that we have with parents. On the one hand we can be seen as authority figures who hold some sway over a child’s future and well-being. But at the same time there is also a sense that the teacher, or the educator, or the pastor, “works for” the family. In both venues parents are often so bold as to point out the ways that their child is not thriving under our charge, or the mistakes that

we have made, or the disappointments we have caused. On the flip side, in both venues we can also be the recipients of much love and gratitude from our students and their parents.

Here is the difference that I came to value in my role as a pastor and staff person working with children in Sunday school: the long view of a child's development.

I taught children in class whom I had held in my arms days after they were born; I was privileged to stand with others on their wedding day. I was able to watch children grow into and out of phases of development, alongside their parents.

If I had been required every eight weeks to document my impressions of each child in my congregation, there would have been quite a few who would not have come out very favorably. Fortunately, I had the gift of knowing them, teaching them, and watching them outside of the classroom for more than just nine months—often for years. It was long enough for me to become confident (and to assure their parents) that despite their behavior or their aptitude in a particular class they were growing into adults that I would actually enjoy spending time with.

**4. Attendance:** Yes, we take attendance in Sunday school, but I have no idea why. It is rare that a decision is made about a child or a family based on attendance patterns. Opportunities are not withheld. Grades (because there are none) are not affected. You are graduated from one grade to the next regardless of how many times you appeared the previous year.

There is something good about a system like that. It exhibits to children and families a sort of grace that the rest of the world doesn't show very often. It is a gift that our arms are always open and that there is always room for another.

But this is one of the ways I wish Sunday school parents came with more of an elementary school mindset. If we all agree to the premise that underlies our elementary school attendance policies—that children can only be learning in the classroom if they are actually in the classroom—then why don't we as parents take Sunday school attendance more seriously?

Just like in a regular school, lessons are written and taught to build on each other week after week. Just like in a regular school, time spent in class together helps children to build relationships with each other and, as they get older, to actually learn from each other.

Church/worship attendance is a sticky subject with a lot of people, especially as cultural expectations about a family's time and weekends change. But, regardless of any newer trends in family schedules, there is a long-standing pattern of families who never seem to understand that for their children to benefit from the curriculum, staff, volunteers and community that go into Sunday school classes, they need to be an active and regular part of that community and those classes.

**5. Homework:** I would in no way argue for the inclusion of homework into elementary Sunday school curriculum.

But just as with attendance, the same educational concept that dictates the use of homework for regular school applies to the lessons of faith which should be reinforced and developed at home. Repetition of stories, engaged conversations with parents, the memorization of prayers and scripture, and the daily habits of prayer all done at home (not in the classroom) are honestly what is going to have the most effective impact on a child's faith development.

During my last few years in my congregation we realized more and more that we needed to spend just as much time developing resources for parents to use with their children at home as we did for the classroom. While we never called it homework, we certainly tried to help everyone in the family understand the benefits of working on these things at home together.

I would have children in my Sunday school classes who always knew the answer, who could pull Bible stories from thin air, who could easily lead the class in a closing prayer. I loved having these children in my class. When people would compliment me on their achievements, I always tried to place the credit where it was due—with their parents, who I knew were reading and praying (essentially their church homework) at home.

As we all approach the ever earlier arrival of back-to-school season, let us be mindful of the gifts of grace that we can find in our Sunday school classrooms and the simple ways that our children can get the most out of their religious education.

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