



Part 1 of 2—

# 21 Ways to Shape the 21st Century

by Sharon Ellard

In the first century Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples and “teach them to obey everything I have told you” (Matthew 28:20). At the beginning of the 21st century, we continue to obey Jesus’ commission on Sunday School. Here are 21 thoughts for using Sunday School to shape the 21st century.

**1 Help your students view Sunday School as a worldwide movement to disciple people of all ages,** teaching them to love, trust, and obey God every day. Look for ways to introduce students to the language, foods, and customs of Christians all over the world.

**2 Recognize that many religions and worldviews will compete for the hearts and lives of our children in the 21st century.** Christian children will need help to hold firmly to the absolute truth of God. We can begin to help children love people of other religions while also believing steadfastly in one God. A good way to accomplish this is to encourage children to pray over pictures of children throughout the world, thanking God for the ones who know Jesus and earnestly praying that every child will have a chance to love Jesus.

**3 Emphasize what is important.** To emphasize the Bible, place visuals and other teaching helps in its pages and take them out as you teach. To emphasize the importance of children, let class members watch you ministering to them and their friends. They will learn how to treat one another in biblical ways. Emphasize that the purpose of Bible facts is to help us trust the Bible. In Psalm 78, God commands adults to tell children the stories of God’s mighty deeds. Why? “So [children] would all trust God. They would not forget what God has done. Instead, they would obey his commands” (verse 7).

**4 Carry a vision for the lifelong impact of early Bible learning.** In the 21st century, the emphasis on early childhood ministries will expand dramatically because new technology has allowed us to understand the lifelong impact of the first 6 years of life. The relationships and experiences of early childhood affect our intelligence by as much as 30 percent, influence our relationships by as much as 50 percent, and shape the spiritual basics of love, trust, and obedience.

**5 Understand God’s design for early childhood.** It is by God’s design that early childhood relationships and experiences affect lifelong attitudes and choices. He is raising up people to influence their world. He has lifelong plans for the little ones you teach. Dedicated early childhood teachers invest themselves in the prayer and study needed to understand and follow God’s plan for early discipleship.

**6 Learn to teach the way young children learn.** Young children are global learners who learn more when they are on the go using all their senses. At first, the on-the-go learning style of young children may unsettle those of us who were told to sit still and listen at church. Fortunately, there are many resources to help us match our Bible-teaching styles with children’s learning styles.

**7 Present the Bible as the Book of the future as well as the past.** Children need help to understand that God knows spaceships as well as camels. Your teaching style can help. Choose a Bible translation that uses the language children hear every day. Learn what interests the children you teach. Plan

ways to incorporate their interests into modern parables that illustrate spiritual truths.



**8 Get to know Millennial kids.** Tailor Bible lessons for the generation born after 1980. They like to work in teams. Begin to teach with at least one other person so children will see how a team can work at church. They like to work with adults. Participate with them. They want to change their world. So begin to add age-appropriate ministry projects to your Bible lessons. Even 3-year-olds can help collect money on World Hunger Day.



**9 Share personal stories of spiritual growth.** Millennial kids identify with grown-ups.

You can identify with them by telling events that shaped your faith. When did God answer your first prayer? What childhood choices shaped your life? What would you change? What would you repeat? Of course, your stories will be tailored to fit the understanding of young children. As children learn about your childhood experiences, they will begin to understand that what they do as children can continue to help them love God as adults.



**10 Support Gen X parents.**

These young parents need help to understand the eternal significance of Sunday School lessons. Generally speaking, today's young parents desire relationships that will help them successfully manage the challenges of everyday living. The more you can share Bible-related resources, ideas, and wholesome family events with them, the more they will catch the vision for your ministry to their little ones.

*(Points 11 through 21 can be found in Part 2.)*

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### Questions For Further Study—

1. What different religions are represented in your community? What can you and your children do to reach the people of those religions?
2. List four things you can do to emphasize the importance of the Bible.
3. List four things you can do to emphasize the importance of children.
4. How can you help children understand that the Bible is the book of the future?



Part 2 of 2—

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(Continued from Part 1.)

**11** **Look for weekday strategies to build relationships.** Young children (and their parents) will enjoy a card, a phone call, or a visit with homemade cookies. When it is possible, sending e-mail is fast, free, and fun. If possible, try to include a photo, graphic, or website address that parents and children can use during the week to learn more about living for Jesus.

**12** **Search for Internet help.** If you do not own a computer, check at your local library. Many libraries provide free access to the Internet, and their staff will help you learn how to use it too. The Internet can be a source of free or affordable recipes, games, pictures, sound, and more.

**13** **Have some fun during every lesson.** Fun has more spiritual potential than we realize. Children will come again when they have fun. They make friends more easily with fun. A fun part of a Bible lesson may be repeated with friends during the week. What's fun for young children? Think of what children choose to do every day. Eat snacks, play games, sing songs, and use stickers are some examples. Watch for ways to con-

nect these kinds of fun activities to Bible learning in your classroom.

**14** **Learn how to include children with special needs.** Children with mental and physical challenges need to know Jesus. Jesus was moved with compassion for the blind, deaf, and lame. You can help even young children know how to befriend those with special needs.

**15** **Ask God to help your class become a refuge for hurting children.** Here's what one man remembers about Sunday School: "When I was a child, school tore me apart 5 days a week, but each week at church my Sunday School teacher put me back together." That boy grew up to become a spiritual adviser to a president of our country.

**16** **Teach children God loves them.** Sunday School teachers can demonstrate God's love for children. They can look happy to see the children at God's house. They can show mercy and grace to young children. They can plan Bible lessons children will love. They can tell young children that God loves them. All of these efforts combine with the work of the Holy Spirit in each child's life

to nurture faith in God's love.

**17** **Teach children to love God.** Teachers can help children express their love of God through words, through worship, through service, through obedience, and through relationships.

**18** **Teach children to love one another.** Young children are egocentric. They see the world from only one point of view—their own. Sunday School teachers can help children learn to love others as well as they love themselves. Enjoyable rituals and projects that focus on being kind, taking turns, working together, and sharing, help children enjoy loving others.

**19** **Pray for your students.** Get to know them well enough to pray for them specifically. Keep a prayer journal that records your prayers and God's answers. Remember to thank God for the answers.

**20** **Follow your Leader.** Jesus is in charge of building His church. He empowers His followers for effective ministry. He draws people into the church. As you faithfully offer yourself for ministry, you become a partner with Him.

**21** **Commit yourself to ministry.** At the end of the 20th century too

many early childhood teachers viewed themselves as baby-sitters rather than ministers. As a result, too many church nurseries and early childhood Sunday Schools and classes were led by rotating staffs—people who helped once a month. That can

change in the 21st century. As nursery teachers and early childhood ministers, we can see ourselves as God sees us. We can understand that as we minister to little children, Jesus considers it ministry to Him.  
Children of the 21st century

can grow like Jesus did in the first century: “Jesus continued to **learn** more and more and to **grow physically**. **People liked him** and he **pleased God**” (Luke 2:52, International Children’s Bible).

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### Questions For Further Study—

1. List four things you can do during the week to build relationships with children and their families.
  - 1)
  - 2)
  - 3)
  - 4)
2. What are some “fun” things that children in your church do during the week? How can you incorporate these activities into church time?
3. Brainstorm with your children’s ministry workers to discover several activities you can use to help children learn to love one another.