

Lesson #13: Think outside of the boxed curriculum box.

Curriculum (almost) always needs customizing. It is but a set of tools, sitting in a toolbox, ready to be picked and worked with. Curriculum is a starting point, not a final product! It needs to be molded to fit your children, your teaching style and your teaching situation. The curriculum that you just purchased or downloaded needs a carpenter to really become useful... and that carpenter is YOU! It takes time, knowledge of your situation, and a bit of trial and error to make something that works well. Treat curriculum with the limitations it has and you will be on your way to building something beautiful with it. If you are looking for the perfect straight-out-of-the-box resource for your church, I doubt you will find it. I created the Praise Factory family of curriculums for use at our church, CHBC, and they STILL have to make changes and customize even more to fit our children, teachers, classrooms and parents!

Here are some steps that can help you customize a curriculum to best fit your ministry setting:

Step #1: Know Yourself (Your Church, Your Teachers, Your Families, etc.)

Think about your teachers' experience and teaching styles. Make sure you know the church leaders' vision for what they want the children to learn. Think about how much teaching time the teachers have each week; the pros and cons of their teaching environment; and, what teaching formats and activities best lend themselves to these parameters. Develop a good understanding of the families/children your are serving: their needs and abilities. How can you best support them, given what you know of them?

You may want to use the "Children's Ministry Questionnaire," found in Section 2 of this book. It has been created to help you get a good picture of your ministry setting and the families you are wanting to support. Discuss your answers as a group with your church leaders/children's ministry team. Ask God to give you a clear picture of where your church is and what He wants you to teach the children. The more you can understand about who you are wanting to teach, the better you will be able to customize the curriculum to reach that goal.

Step #2: Know the Curriculum

Read through a sample of the curriculum and any introductory materials a few times. Talk to someone who has used it already or observe it being taught. Get a good sense of what resources the curriculum includes and how they are used.

Step #3: Choose Your Resources

Now comes the "tools in the toolbox" part of your work. Review your answers to the questionnaire. Think about how to shape the curriculum resources to best fit your situation and your children. Is your session shorter than the time allotted in the lesson plan? Then take a highlighter and cut out elements. It is longer than the time allotted in the lesson plan? Think of what kind of resources you might be able to add to the curriculum to extend it. Are you using it for a VBS or another ministry setting different from the one it was originally intended for? Then you may need to re-group the resources into a rotation of activities. etc.

Step #4: Prepare Your First Session

Choose a sample session of the curriculum and prepare any Bible study, visuals, crafts, games or other resources you would need to teach your typical class. Notice how much time it takes to prepare these things. Are the instructions easy to follow? Are the resources required reasonable in price? Is the prep a do-able amount for your teachers? Do the activities seem to be a good fit for your teachers and kids? Do the activities seem like fluff or do they help reinforce the key teaching points?

Step #5: Make a Maiden Voyage

Try out your customized version of the curriculum on the kids. Our favorite way to try out a new curriculum is with a pair of very experienced teachers and a smaller group of children, when there is an opportunity to do so. This gives the curriculum its best test-run. Ideally, you want to give any curriculum a few sessions trial period. New curriculum is new curriculum. Teachers will be getting used to it as will the kids. The lesson plans for all three of the Praise Factory curriculum follow the same order, session after session. As this routine kicks in, it provides a structure helpful to teachers and children. But of course, it takes a number of sessions for the routine to become routine.

Step #6: Evaluate and Make Adjustments

As you test-run the curriculum, you will probably want to evaluate and make changes. Perhaps some activities typically take longer than anticipated. Perhaps your children would do better by switching the order suggested in the lesson plan.

Step #7: Train Others

Once you feel that you have adjusted the curriculum to a good fit for teacher and children, begin to teach others how to teach it, too. Ideally, this starts as a mentoring experience, with the teachers who have been teaching during the trial period lead the children and the new teachers observe. Gradually, you can hand over teaching to the new teachers, with you observing/aiding them. Do your volunteers a huge favor and always be looking for new help. Even the most eager teacher who gets no break will burn out. Many hands make light work...and work that keeps on working!

See Section 3: Eleven Steps for Making a Curriculum Custom Fit for even more information on this topic.

Lesson #13: Questions for You in Your Ministry Setting:

1. What are key factors about your teachers, parents, children, ministry setting and facilities that will affect what curriculum you use and how you use it?
2. Given what you have learned about your families and ministry setting, what characteristics are top priority for choosing and shaping a curriculum to best fit?
3. What kind of preparation work do you think your teachers should be expected to do? How much time do you think they will most likely commit/need to commit to prepare well for their class time?
4. Is there any of the preparation that can be done by someone on the children's ministry team (or other volunteer) besides teachers that would help make the teachers' load easier?
5. What are the greatest difficulties and greatest advantages to the curriculum you are trying out? Are any of them because the curriculum is new to teachers and children? How could you "fix" any of the persistent problems?
6. What would be the best way to introduce and train new teachers to use the new curriculum?