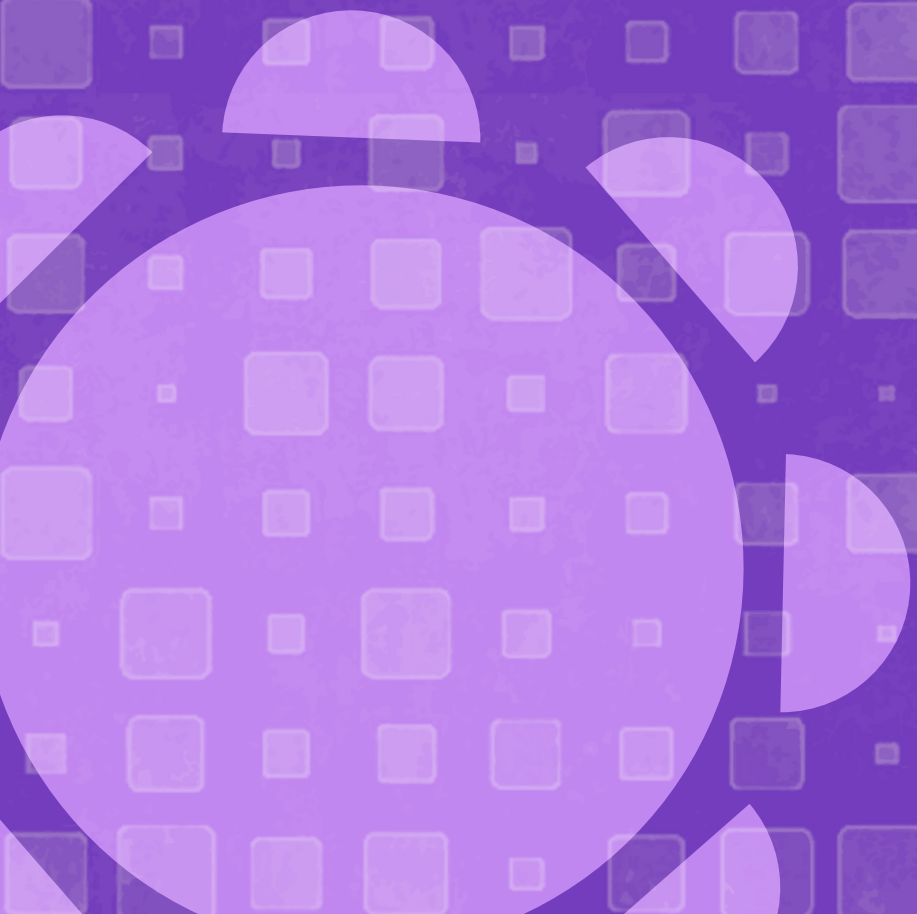


# OVERCOMING SPACE ISSUES



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**L**et's face it—we all have space issues. Whether we have too little space, too much space, or we just don't know what to do with our space, how we handle our “space issues” can be pretty critical to our ministries. Over the years, I've found there's a process to creating a great, workable space for the children and volunteers in our church to thrive in. It's a process I follow on a cyclical basis, and there are many different aspects I consider. And I know it's all worth my time and focus—and it will be worth yours, too.

## EVALUATE YOUR SPACE

You can't overcome space issues without evaluating the space you live and work in. An evaluation calls unknown concerns to mind, tells you what you have to work with, and gives you an idea of where you'd like to go with the space.

I start by listing my ministry values. For example, you may want your environment to be safe, fun, age-appropriate, child-centered, parent-friendly,

and interactive. Once I've made a list of values, I look into whether our rooms are currently highlighting those values. I determine this by honestly evaluating each space. I ask at least one key volunteer and one brand-new parent to conduct assessments, encouraging them to walk through the meeting rooms and hallways on a typical Sunday morning. A checklist in hand with all our values listed prompts them to know what they're looking for. I also invite them to mention examples of what they see. In addition to the list of values on the checklist, I like to ask questions such as:

- Are children learning?
- Are teachers engaged with children?
- Are parents trusting?

Following the assessment, I take the volunteer and parent out for lunch

to discuss their findings. Then I make a plan to determine the next steps for highlighting our values and creating more effective room spaces.

### TIPS FOR LESS-THAN-IDEAL SPACES

If your current room space isn't the shiny, beautiful, expansive space you dream of, consider these tips for making it a whole lot better.

**Add rugs or carpet squares.** Find a colorful patterned rug to place over an old floor. It'll bring instant color and warmth to the space.

**Declutter and clean.** Biannually clean the rooms by donating old toys, throwing away broken supplies, and deep cleaning each space. A clean, clutter-free room makes a space shine.

**Hang fabric.** To cover unsightly walls, add fabric. A pattern that brings energy will improve a room significantly. Hang it on a curtain rod in front of the less-than-desirable wall.

**Create virtual rooms.** If your space is small, make it feel bigger by designating areas for each age group. Use colored masking or duct tape to create patterns on the floor representing each age. For example, have second graders sit in a red star and third graders in a blue moon. Also, hang fabric shapes in matching patterns (red stars, blue moons, and so on) over each age group's area.

### CREATE FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When a new parent visits a Sunday school room, that parent typically makes judgments based on first impressions. Even if your ministry is deep and rich and filled with great teachers and curriculum, that might not be apparent through a first impression. You want parents to know what your ministry is all about and to have a good impression from the beginning—so start by highlighting your ministry values

through your ministry space. Here are examples of aspects you can look at as you highlight your ministry values in this way.

**Cleanliness** Safety is a key value in ministry. Cleanliness conveys not only that things are sterile so parents don't have to worry about their kids' health in Sunday school, but also that leaders take care of things and children will be safe in the environment.

For example, in the nursery you need a strict cleaning routine, posted in view. I like the nursery to sparkle and shine and smell clean at all times. You can even place a sign near the entrance that mentions how often the room is cleaned and by whom—it's extra assurance to parents that their little ones are safe in that respect.

Nursery cleanliness is often in the details, so move that random unused diaper on the counter into a cabinet, pick up the tiny wrapper lying in the hallway, and use opaque storage bins with lids. When a parent can see trash on the floor or an untidy space, he or she might wonder what else isn't taken care of in the nursery.

**Organization** Everyone is short on storage space, right? It can be difficult to neatly store the massive amount of supplies needed for Sunday mornings. But during a parent's first visit, you definitely don't want to highlight your storage issue. Work to put away extra chairs, tables, bins, curriculum boxes, paper, and toys before children arrive. Hide supplies in bins, and place them under covered tables. Put away as much as possible in closed cabinets. Ask the facility manager or assistants to help you take away extra chairs, tables, and maintenance equipment.

**Check-In** This is likely the place where parents first see your meeting area. Set up the check-in area—no matter how elaborate or simple it is—so parents' eyes are directed to what you want them to see. If you have a creative Bible art wall, put the check-in line directly across from the art wall. If you offer an amazing small-group time, have parents drop off their kids to their small groups; you'll highlight your values of community and intentional relationships by giving parents a glimpse of the small-group time their children experience each week.

## DESIGN WITH FLEXIBILITY

Sunday school rooms often need to be designed with a great deal of flexibility in mind. If your ministry is in a multipurpose room or you have to set up and tear down every week, you've got an extra-special need for flexibility on your hands. Whether your space is permanent or temporary, you want the space to encompass your ministry values. At times, it can seem difficult to accomplish this. A few simple ingredients might be all you need.

**Color** If your space doesn't allow for permanent decor or for colorful signs, consider purchasing brightly colored magnets to hang along metal door frames. Placing the magnets along the sides and top of the door-frames provides a bright, cheerful, and engaging welcome for kids. And magnets can be changed for seasons or lesson themes.

**Creative Signs** Proper signage can be a challenge in portable spaces. You want signs to be helpful, easily storable, and flexible. For example, if you need signs that direct parents to their children's rooms, laminate colorful paper and write room changes on them with dry-erase markers—that way you can easily make changes. Easels can hold signs for easy set-up and take-down. If you use portable dry-erase boards or chalkboards, you might even place a few dry-erase markers or a small box of chalk near the easel, encouraging children to write their prayers and praise on the bottom part of the board.

**Information for Volunteers** Rather than relaying information on a piece of paper, communicate by adding a removable dry-erase sticker on a wall inside each room. The stickers come in a variety of colors and designs and add a great pop of color while drawing volunteers' eyes to important information, such as the Bible passage or verse for the day, the volunteer schedule, or encouraging words to your volunteers.

**Simple, Eye-Appealing Storage** Clever storage is key for a portable space. But clever and eye-appealing storage is even better. Stackable bins, perfect for neatly storing diaper bags or room supplies, can be stored inside each other during the week, and they're inexpensive—so as your ministry grows, you can add more bins. Purchase bins that are all the same color. This makes for a cleaner, tidier look. Simply add a bright table cover that matches your ministry's branding, and stack the bins underneath.

### Vertical Toys for Visual Appeal

Often the toys purchased for a portable church are small and easily collapsible for simple storage. But an overabundance of small toys can lead to an unfriendly first impression for a child. Add a few tall, age-appropriate toys to each room that grab kids' attention, such as a Playskool basketball hoop. Choose toys that are bright, unique in their purpose (for instance, a toy that most kids don't already have at home), and encourage interaction. A few vertical toys will catch kids' eyes and encourage them to run in and have fun.

### SPICE UP YOUR SUPPLY ROOM

Your supply room doesn't have to be ugly or boring. A little color, a bit of organization, and a whole lot of fun—and in no time you'll have a spiced-up supply room. Set aside an afternoon to declutter, and invite a few volunteers to pitch in with the sprucing. You'll be glad you did. Add these elements to your clean supply room.

**Table and Seating** Increase the functionality of your supply room by adding a table in the center. Volunteers can use this space to organize weekly supplies, or staff can use it as a fun alternative for weekly meetings. Add comfy, colorful chairs for extra pizzazz.

**Framed Photos** The supply room is a place where everyone spends at least a little time—so make it a place where your team is reminded of the

### LEAVE AN EMPTY SPACE

It can be difficult to know just how to design a room for older children. The rooms might feature designs that appear too young or too old or too boring. Consider involving older children in designing their own space. Sometimes the best learning spaces for kids are created by kids.

In her book *Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship* (Baker Books), Ivy Beckwith describes an experience in which her older elementary kids weren't connecting with the message. One day, she looked around the room, realizing the children had no physical ownership of the room. She'd always been the one to set up the chairs and arrange the supplies. That Sunday, Ivy left the room empty—the chairs stacked in a corner and the supplies unorganized.

When the children arrived, they wondered if Sunday school was canceled for the day. Ivy told the kids they'd work together to set up the room. She let them decide how to set up the chairs and supplies. The children wanted to know what they'd be learning and what activities they'd be doing so they could make an informed decision. Then they worked as a team to imagine, problem solve, and create the perfect room for that day. Once the room was complete, the children actively engaged in the activities and message in their perfect space.

This Sunday, leave an empty space. In the emptiness ask that God might fill the room with his Spirit so that the children will experience him anew.

greater purpose of their ministry. Add framed photos of volunteers or photos of families who've been impacted by your ministry. Focal points such as this can serve to inspire your team and remind them of your greater mission as they gather and prepare supplies.

**New Supply Bins** Consider investing in a few cheap and cheerful bins that look great all lined up next to each other. Buy the same size, color, and shape bins to create a fresh and organized look. And, for a textured look, use cleaned out old soup cans as storage containers for pencils and pens. Place the soup cans between the storage bins to create an interesting pattern.

**Cozy Rug** Supply rooms aren't exactly known for their coziness, especially if they're in a dark, dingy basement. Choose a brightly colored patterned rug so it highlights all those colorful supplies. By adding a super-soft, large rug to the room, you'll make the room more comfortable for volunteers who spend time organizing supplies.

**Music** Consider adding an option for your team to listen to their favorite tunes while they work. Even a simple docking station allows volunteers to plug in their own MP3 players. Or you could create a special supply room playlist with songs that are high energy and fun.

**Warning:** If you keep spicing up your supply room like this, it's bound to become the greatest place on earth!

## BONUS! CREATE A VOLUNTEER BREAK ROOM

A break room is a great place where your team can relax, prop up their feet, eat a doughnut (or two), and quiet their hearts before or after their serving experience. This doesn't have to be luxurious; it can be a small room, the back of the kitchen, even a hallway. As long as it communicates thoughtfulness and gratitude and gives volunteers a place to hang their coats, say a prayer, and feel encouraged, it's perfect.

Here are ideas for redecorating or creating your break room:

- Add a chalkboard, or use chalkboard paint to create a writable wall. Sketch caricatures of volunteers to highlight who's serving when, or draw a music chart to highlight a song kids will be singing.
- Hang an inspirational quote on the wall to remind volunteers of their purpose. My favorite is "Make today ridiculously amazing."
- Include a special basket of toys just for volunteers. They'll relax, have fun, and get into a childlike mind-set as they prepare to serve.
- Snacks are a must. Include delicious and nutritious snacks that energize and fuel your team.
- Place each volunteer's supplies on a brightly colored supply cart in their room. They'll feel organized, prepared, and energized by the bright color.



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