USING TECHNOLOGY IN SUNDAY SCHOOL
Technology. On one hand you have the Sunday school teacher who’s been at it longer than I’ve been alive. This is the leader who’s there week after week—and he spends hours on prep time. Visuals collected over the years adorn the walls with the intention of reinforcing Bible concepts kids are learning. And flannelgraphs—they’re there, too.

Then there’s the Sunday school teacher who’s still in college. She loves working with preteens. She, too, prepares every week for Sunday mornings—she finds online videos and pictures she can show her kids on her smartphone with the intention of reinforcing the Bible concepts kids are learning. In this Sunday school, it wouldn’t be a surprise to see part of an episode from a popular preteen TV show used to illustrate a Bible point.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, you’ve probably formed opinions about these two leaders. You’ve speculated on which group of kids is engaged and which group is unruly. Maybe you think the first teacher I
mentioned is out of touch. He means well—but visuals taped to the wall and flannelgraphs? Those things simply don’t cut it for today’s wired generation—right? Then again, you might think the college student is distracting her kids with videos and TV shows; could those really have meaning? She means well, but playing with her cellphone isn’t the same as teaching the Bible.

But here’s the thing: I’ve observed both of these teachers in action, and both groups of kids were engrossed in conversations about God’s Word. Despite their widely different approaches, I can say—at least with these two teachers—that kids’ attention and imaginations were captured in ways that drew them closer to God.

Wait a minute! you might be thinking. Isn’t this supposed to be a chapter on using technology in Sunday school?

It is. So why begin by illustrating that successful and engaged small groups can happen with or without the use of the latest tech toys? Here’s why: Technology is a tool that has the capability to enhance the timeless truths of the gospel, but it isn’t a magic pill that miraculously turns a lack of preparation, passion, and connection into Sunday school success. It’s possible to be a top-notch Sunday school teacher without using modern technology tools such as smartphones, computers, and snazzy videos.

But if you’re not a fan of technology, don’t write it off just yet. Technology offers a new and fresh way to connect with the kids in your Sunday school. It can enhance Bible lessons in new and innovative ways. So before you decide whether technology is a godsend—or a distraction diluting the Bible—come with me as we explore ways to use technology in meaningful ways (and to its full capacity) in your Sunday school ministry. Everyone has different levels of comfort with technology and varying budgets, so we’ll look at opportunities technology can offer you and suggestions on scaling technology to your needs.

UNDERSTANDING THE “T” WORD

The children’s ministry world and the world at large have varying views on beneficial uses of technology. On any given week, you’re bound
to hear a study or expert talk about how technology such as social media, video games, television, or the Internet is eroding children's minds around the world. In the same week, and many times through the same media outlet, you’ll hear that technology is revolutionizing how we teach children and improving what children can learn and how they learn it.

There’s simply no consensus on the benefits or drawbacks to technology and its effects on children. But whether or not you have strong opinions on it, technology is a very real part of our lives. Unless you plan to set up a self-sustaining commune situated in an alternative reality where computers and electricity don’t exist, you’ll eventually have to come to terms with how technology fits into your Sunday school ministry.

You don’t have to become an expert, learn texting shorthand, or play the newest video games; there are people in your church who already know these things who’ll be willing to help you. What you do need to know, though, and what I hope to convey is that there are ways you can leverage technology when teaching kids about God’s Word. For some, this may not be new information. If that’s you, then reach out to your colleagues embarking on this journey into this new territory. And for those of you dipping your toes into the technological waters for the first time, view these next sections as your water wings.

BUILDING VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

One of the most immediate ways technology can be used in your Sunday school ministry is to enhance how you connect with kids and parents. And maybe you’re thinking that nothing can replace face-to-face connections. I wholeheartedly agree; but connecting virtually using tools such as texting, email, and social media can also extend your relationships beyond the weekends. Maybe you think virtual relationships aren’t real, but don’t forget that any form of communication that’s not in person is actually virtual—whether it’s phone calls, letters, cards, telegrams, or smoke signals. All of these virtual forms of communication can build real relationships between face-to-face moments of connection.

As of the writing of this chapter, there are three simple ways to leverage
modern technology to keep in touch with kids and parents in your Sunday school:

- email
- social media
- mobile technology

As with all types of communication with kids outside Sunday school, consult your church's children's ministry policy. Also, when communicating with kids outside of regular programming, it's wise to connect through kids' parents or guardians rather than with kids directly. For example, send emails to parents' email addresses rather than the kids' (if they have them); then parents can pass along the information.

**Email** The easiest way to communicate with kids and families is through email. Most everyone has an email address. Even people who don't own a computer often have an email account they access through public computers such as those at the library. If you don't have an email address, it's easy to get one for free through these popular services: Google (gmail.com), Yahoo (yahoo.com), or Outlook (outlook.com).

Emailing is simple and quick, and there are many reasons to email your kids and their families. Here are some ideas:

- Send simple notes of encouragement to kids or kids' parents.
- Send parents brief summaries of what you cover in Sunday school from week to week.
- Use word processing programs such as Microsoft Word or Pages for Mac to create short newsletters or cards and send those as an email.
- Use an online service or website to create email newsletters, invitations, electronic cards, and more to email to families.

**Drawback** Email can sometimes become an ineffective way to communicate with families because so many organizations—churches, schools, sports teams, and clubs—use it to communicate. Many times your emails get lumped in and trashed alongside the deluge of junk email families.
receive. Two important keys to remember are to craft your emails effectively by using clear, different subject lines with each email and to keep your message short and to the point rather than a rambling, chatty message with little “meat.”

**Social Media** Another effective method of communicating with families between weekends is through social media sites. Social media is a means for people to interact with each other online through virtual communities and networks. As of the writing of this chapter, Facebook (facebook.com) is the most popular social media website worldwide. You can easily set up a ministry account on Facebook and connect with the Facebook accounts of parents who have kids in your Sunday school ministry. (Check with your leader to ensure you set up the account in a way that best represents your ministry and/or church.) From this account you can send notes, pictures, and invitations.

There are other social media sites and networks you can use to communicate with families, such as Twitter or Vine. But to reach the largest number of families, find out which social media websites and networks your families already use and connect with them there.

**Drawback** Of all the ways to connect with families, social media is currently the most effective, but discretion is key. Most of what’s posted on social media websites and networks can be viewed by anyone connected to that network or website, so ensure that as you create an account you’re conscious of privacy settings.

**Mobile Technology** One other way to use technology to connect with families in your Sunday school ministry is through mobile technology such as texting to send brief notes and information. This is a quick way to connect with families, and you can be more certain they’ll get the information in a timely manner. Because of its implicitly personal nature, only use texting as a means of communication after you’ve received explicit permission from families you’re texting.

**Drawback** Intentionally use texting more often as a form of child-specific communication than a way to disseminate general ministry

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**POSTING: A RULE OF THUMB**

Only post items that are okay for the general public to see or read. This does NOT include photos of the kids in your ministry unless you have signed photo release forms from parents allowing you to post specific children’s images. And if you do have permission, don’t “tag” photos with kids’ names.
TELLING A NEW OLD STORY

In addition to enhancing real relationships, you can leverage technology to help your kids experience the Bible in new ways. Sure, technology can’t turn you into a master storyteller or engaging teacher, but it can offer innovative options to present and encounter timeless truths in timely ways.

Here are a couple of points to consider:

• Large-screen televisions or projectors can showcase computer-generated media in a big and exciting way. (But they can cost a lot.)
• Laptops, tablets, and smartphones can showcase computer-generated media in smaller group settings. (And they’re more cost-efficient.)

You can easily locate material created for Sunday school settings that’s meant to be shown on computers, tablets, or smartphones from most Christian education publishers. Many Sunday school curriculum publishers offer media you can use to supplement a lesson. You can also find material online. Here are sites I recommend: YouTube (youtube.com), GodTube (godtube.com), and WorshipHouseKids (worshiphousekids.com).

Not only can you present creative media in your Sunday school using technology, but you can also find applications and programs to help kids learn and experience lessons in new ways. All it takes is a little bit of time searching on the Internet. Here are options you’ll likely find when searching:

• Online games that cover Bible passages.
• Customizable game-show style games you can convert into Bible-learning tools.
• Applications and programs for creating movies or virtual puppet shows.

Many of these resources are inexpensive and easy to use—for kids and adults. Another great way to learn more about technological resources
for educational purposes is to call your local school district and talk with someone in charge of integrating technology into the schools in your area.

TAMING THE TECHNOLOGY TITAN

Don’t let technology intimidate you. You don’t have to be a technology guru to use it. Be willing to tap the shoulder of a tech-savvy member of your congregation to help you get started. You can even have kids lend you a technological hand. And you likely already have what you need: a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. If you don’t have any of those, someone in your church may have something you can use for your Sunday school ministry.

Today, technology is available that can help us make the Bible come alive like never before for kids who’d rather be glued to the latest video game or TV show. Rather than shying away from it, let’s follow Paul’s example in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23: “I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings.”

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