

The Natural Learning Cycle

You Can Teach Them All

Melissa bounces into Sunday school already in mid-sentence and barely stops *talking* during the whole class hour. Sometimes your brain has trouble keeping up. It seems like anything you say triggers a story she is eager to share.

Jason is the first one to shoot up his hand to volunteer to read aloud. He writes on the lines and looks at you when you speak. He has a bundle of *questions* and expects you to answer them. It's no surprise that he makes straight As at school.

Heather has a permanent case of the *wiggles*. She thumps her toes or twirls her hair because she knows she's supposed to sit still, but it's really hard for her. She rubs her back against the chair to get rid of the itch. You might find her hanging half upside down as she tries to do what you ask but really wants to get moving.

Steven gets bored easily. You learned that a long time ago. If class is too much the same from week to week, his *brain spins off* into another dimension, and his body soon follows. The next minute all the boys in the class are more interested in what Steven is doing than what you're saying.

Do Melissa, Jason, Heather, and Steven sound like any kids you know? Perhaps you're already wondering what to do with Ben, who always has a better idea no matter what the activity, or Cady, who is fine with squares but insists that she can't cut circles.

Students come in all varieties. Your goal for all of them is the same—to know Jesus better so they can follow Him with their lives. So what happens in your class really does matter. You're not just passing time or keeping kids out of trouble. You're teaching something that matters for God's kingdom.

Good teaching begins with understanding *how learning happens*. When students know that a lesson will affirm their individual ways of learning, they enthusiastically participate in the whole lesson. New Life lessons take you step-by-step through the *Natural Learning Cycle* that honors every student—whether children or teens. By the end of the cycle, you'll see the change in your students.

Step 1: What's Happenin'?

Goal: Capture their attention. Focus their interest.

Key Question: Why do I need to know this stuff?

The teacher's role changes in each step of the Natural Learning Cycle. In *Step 1*, the teacher is a friend, someone who makes sure everyone is sharing and everyone is beginning to think about why he or she needs this lesson. The teacher *motivates* students to talk, experience, and share.



Talk? Did you say we can talk? That's all Melissa needs and she's off and running. She has no trouble recounting what her week was like. Melissa is a lightning rod that draws the class together and sparks everyone's interest. Others follow her lead and soon they're all sharing.

Remember, the key question is, "Why do I need to know this stuff?" Students will be looking for connections to their own lives. You can help them find these connections with variety that will keep even Steven on his toes.

- ✓ Play a team game.
- ✓ Roleplay a situation and discuss afterward.
- ✓ Interview each other.
- ✓ Talk about events that happened since your last class.

Every week is different. While the method changes, the goal is the same—capture attention and focus students' interest on the lesson.

Did you know that most of us prefer to teach the way that we ourselves like to learn? What if most of your students don't learn best that way? As you get to know the students in your class, you'll see their learning styles and be able to adapt your teaching to reach all of them. Resist the temptation to get in a groove and teach only one way.

Modalities
"Hey—kill the educationalese!"

"Modalities" are the senses we use in learning—seeing, hearing, and moving. Most of us—including children—have a favorite sense to use in learning. Some learn by listening and talking. Some learn by moving. Others learn by seeing words and pictures. Because not everyone learns best the same way, use a variety of teaching methods at each step in the lesson.

Step 2: Just the Facts

Goal: Learn the facts.

Key Question: What do I need to know from the Bible?

"How dead is she?" Jason wants to know. The Bible story is about Jairus's sick daughter, who died before Jesus got to his house. But Jesus told the mourners that the girl was sleeping, not dead. "Well, was she dead or not?" Jason demands.

You began as a motivator to get students engaged. In *Step 2*, the teacher is an *information manager*. You want to make sure students know what the Bible says.

During the second step of the Natural Learning Cycle, the Sunday school space often looks like a classroom with students checking their Bibles and writing what they discover. The Jasons in your class will lead the whole group in finding out what God has to say in His Word. By the end of this step, everyone will have the facts of the story.



Making sure students know what the Bible says doesn't mean you talk and they listen. A variety of teaching methods appeal to several senses. Students might:

- ✓ Listen to a Bible story
- ✓ Retell the story with felt pieces, puppets, or chenille wire figures.
- ✓ Act out the story.
- ✓ Study verses in pairs to come up with things the teacher didn't say.

In the second step, the teacher sometimes will share what the students need to know, and sometimes teach students how to study for themselves, at their own age

Yes, Jason is smart.

School was invented for kids like Jason. he reads, he writes, he answers questions - all the things we ask students to do in a traditional classroom. About 30 percent of students are like Jason. What about the other 70 percent? They have fairly equally divided preferences across the other three steps in the Natural Learning Cycle - they're smart in ways other than school smart.

level. If you're teaching the story of Abram's journey from Ur, you might take students on a journey around the church building, stopping at various points for the next part of the story. If you're teaching about Elijah hiding in the cave, you might drape a blanket over a table or chairs to make a cave, then take everyone in the cave for the story.

Avoid the trap of thinking there is only one kind of smart. Jason is smart with academic information. Melissa is smart with people skills and makes everyone feel welcome. Heather is body smart; she knows how to use her body to learn and process new ideas. Steven is creative

smart, full of ideas waiting to be channeled so that everyone in the class can learn.

Step 3: Practice Makes Perfect

Goal: Practice how students can use what they learned during the week.

Key Questions: How does it work? How might I practice what I found in the Bible today?

"Do you think Jesus is angry at me because I prayed that the sermon would end?" Heather whispers to her teacher.

"My bones were tired of sitting."

Heather needs to be moving!

Some teachers stop after Step 2.

They assume that if students know what the Bible teaches, they will obey it.

Sometimes yes, but more often, children don't know how to make the jump from knowing facts to using those facts. Teens and adults may be able to see how to use what God's Word teaches, but often,

Tactile/Kinesthetic—
More Educationalese!

Tactile students are good at things like catching a ball or molding clay or drawing—things they do with their hands. Kinesthetic students learn by moving their whole bodies. Often if a lesson does not include enough kinesthetic activities, these students will create their own movement—restlessly moving in chairs, shaking a foot, or wandering around the room. They are not trying to be disruptive. They just need to move in order to learn.

unless someone challenges them to think about it and holds them accountable, they simply become Bible-facts smart. And facts alone do not make growing Christians.

In *Step 3* of the Natural Learning Cycle, the teacher *coaches* the students to practice, practice, practice. In this important lesson step, students test how valuable the Bible study is to them personally. Heather gets to be physically active, to try things out for herself. Focused activity has children moving, interacting, and learning.

Students who learn best in this part of the Natural Learning Cycle would explain it this way: "I get to move. My mind works best when my body is moving. But I don't want to just jump around. I want to move while I'm really learning. I don't want to just learn facts, either. That's makes no sense to me. I want everything I learn in Sunday school to be useful during the week."

Once again, a variety of teaching methods is key to engaging all the students. Every week is different.

- ✓ Turn the classroom into a practice laboratory.
- ✓ Do an art project that reminds students of how to use what they've learned.
- ✓ Build a model of the Bible story.
- ✓ Take a self-evaluation quiz.

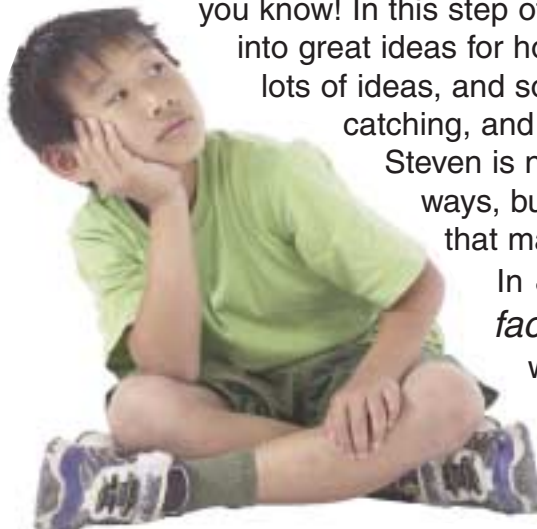


Step 4: Leave with a Plan

Goal: Students creatively add their own personalities, gifts, and talents to the lesson and determine to do something for Jesus this week.

Key Questions: What can this become? What, with Jesus' help, can I really do for Him with what I learned in class?

Steven can think of more things to do with his friends than anyone else you know! In this step of the lesson, he gets to put that creative energy into great ideas for how he and his friends can live for Jesus. He has lots of ideas, and some of them are pretty amazing. His enthusiasm is catching, and other students come up with their own ideas. Now Steven is not getting attention by being naughty in creative ways, but by encouraging the whole class to do something that makes a difference.



In *Step 4* of the Natural Learning Cycle, the teacher *facilitates* what students will do for Jesus during the week. The teacher might evaluate their ideas, redirecting and encouraging students in their decisions to live for Jesus.

Students like Steven thrive in *Step 4* and often become class leaders. They get so excited about one of their great ideas that their enthusiasm rubs off. Everyone

else gets excited too. A wise teacher affirms the good ideas and helps the class adjust those that might not be quite on target. Students like Steven like to see their ideas in action.

- ✓ Brainstorm possible ideas.
- ✓ Make a reminder to display at home.
- ✓ Pray specifically for what students decide to do.
- ✓ Set up accountability partners to complete projects.

Every week is different. Every week encourages growth.

Kingdom Investment

Melissa, Jason, Heather, and Steven each come at the lesson from their own perspectives. Their strengths at different points of the Natural Learning Cycle make it easy for other students to get involved in those steps, too.



You may not know how much God uses a lesson until your students return the next week and tell you about what they did for Jesus. Or you might not know for years and years.

After 15 years, a young woman tracked down a former Sunday school teacher and sent a letter. The letter arrived on a day when the teacher was dead tired and wishing Sunday were a lot longer than six days away. "I thought you'd like to know," the former student wrote. "I've stayed with Jesus all these years. I'm a pastor's wife, and what's more important, I'm a Sunday school

teacher."

The letter was a bouquet from God to that teacher. What you're doing *does* make a difference!