

## Responding to Their Needs

by Kurt Goble

### Consider This . . .

The medical office manager puts down her coffee cup and looks at the next line in the day's appointment book: 1:30—John Q. Patient, physical exam. Within a minute she has pulled John's file and inserted in the folder a medical questionnaire, physical exam chart, and a blood work order. When the doctor sees the file, he will know exactly what to do, what to ask, and what to look for. The office manager lays the file in a stack on the counter where she can access it quickly when John arrives.

John shows up at 1:31. This morning he woke up with a sore throat. He is running a high fever and has a strange rash on his stomach. His neck is stiff and his ears are ringing. John is not up to a physical exam, but he wants to keep the appointment. What was supposed to be a routine physical exam should now become a "sick visit."

John steps up to the reception desk and says, "I have an appointment for a checkup, but I woke up this morning feeling awful and I just want the doctor to take a look at . . ."

The receptionist interrupts, "Take this medical questionnaire and fill it out for me, Honey. I'll call you up when the doctor is ready to do your physical."

"But I don't want a physical."

"Who *does*?" she quips. "Just bring the form back to me when you are finished."

After he has finished filling out the form, John's name is called and he enters the exam room. The nurse is surprised to see that John has a temperature of 102.7°. "Aren't you here for a physical?" she asks.

"Well, I was but . . ."

"Okay. Take off your clothes and put on this gown. The doctor will be with you shortly."

The doctor arrives 20 minutes later. John is relieved to finally see him. John begins, "I've got a problem. See, my appointment was originally for a physical, but when I woke up this morning I felt horrible. The physical isn't that important to me right now, Doc. I just want you to see this rash and look at my ears. Something's wrong with me."

"Mmm, hmm," the doctor replies. "I'll tell you what we're going to do, Mr. Patient. I'm going to go ahead and give you a physical. Then you are going to go down to the lab and get your blood work done. I think you need to let me decide what's important right now. See, *I'm* the doctor."

“But I don’t *want* a physical. I don’t *want* blood work. I’m sick and I need your help,” John pleads.

“Look, Mr. Patient. Your name is in our appointment book. And next to your name it says ‘exam.’ My assistant pulled your chart and filled it with the proper paperwork for an exam. I showed up today prepared to give you an exam. If you aren’t going to cooperate, then I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Mr. Patient’s reasons for coming in didn’t fall in line with the doctor’s, so he is given an ultimatum: fall in line or leave. Mr. Patient goes home and finds a new doctor.

### **And Then . . .**

Two days later a Sunday school teacher stands in her classroom finishing her preparations. An intricate craft will consume most of the hour today. The children will weave small baskets. As the children work, the teacher will tell them the story about Moses’ mother hiding him in a basket. Then the class will learn a Bible memory verse and the children will practice memorizing the books of the New Testament. It’s a good plan. The teacher knows her reasons for being there.

A second-grade boy named Jordan stands in the doorway, wondering why the table is covered with reeds. He moves to the table and joins other children. The craft begins and as the children work, their teacher tells the story. It’s a story of a loving mother who would save her child at great risk. The story reminds Jordan of the fact that his mother left. She left yesterday and she said she wouldn’t be back. Jordan stops working on his craft. He doesn’t need a craft and a story any more than Mr. Patient needed a checkup. Jordan has endured weeks of arguments, heartache, and misery. Jordan needs to connect with caring people in a safe place. Jordan decides to find a friend. He whispers to the boy next to him, “How did you get your basket to look like that?”

Now Jordan has become a problem. Talking during the story. Not doing his craft. This doesn’t jive with the teacher’s agenda. She’s there to deliver a well-planned lesson, and Jordan is interfering. We call this disruptive behavior. The teacher puts an end to it. Her reasons for being there don’t line up with Jordan’s. He is given ultimatums. Jordan decides to stay at home with his dad next Sunday instead of going to Sunday school.

These two scenarios both illustrate a lack of responsiveness to a real need. And while the first is silly and ridiculous, the second is subtle and far more likely to occur.

### **Why Real Responsiveness Counts**

It is crucial that we are responsive in the right way for a number of reasons. First, responsiveness shows kids that you care. Children bond with people, not plans. A plan is impersonal. You are not. If we get too wrapped up in jumping through the hoops of our lesson plan, we miss the point of our being there. We come because we want to love kids into a relationship with their Savior. Have you ever had a friend who constantly talked

about his own life and never inquired about yours? Eventually you come to believe that this person isn't very interested in you. When we don't take the time to listen to our students and find out about their lives, their issues, and their concerns, we send the message that we just aren't interested in them.

Secondly, being responsive to needs shifts our priority in the right direction. It places the people above the plan. When our radar is on, we understand that each and every child has come to us from a different place and with a different story, ideas, and needs. We become empowered to treat children as individuals, each made by God with a unique and wonderful personality. The lesson plan becomes nothing more than a means of serving our Lord by serving His children.

Finally, real responsiveness is following the example of Jesus Christ. His entire ministry unfolds in the Gospels as Jesus responds to the situations, needs, conversations, and questions of people. John 3:16 gives Jesus' response to Nicodemus' question about being born again. In Matthew 9, Jesus has compassion on the crowds because they are harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus' next move is to empower the Twelve to heal and drive out evil spirits, sending them out to the masses. In Mark 7, Jesus responds to a Pharisee's question about hand washing by speaking about what makes a person spiritually clean. Miracle after miracle, parable after parable, lesson after lesson, Jesus is constantly responding to what is happening in the hearts of people and the world around Him.

### **So How Can I Be More Responsive?**

*Plan for responsiveness.* Shift your planning to include responding to students' struggles and concerns. Imagine yourself teaching the lesson in the context of a one-on-one conversation with a specific student. As you prepare the lesson, ask yourself, "What does this passage or story say to that child?"

*Be ready to engage.* Have your materials ready so that you are not still making final preparations as students enter. As children arrive, you have a unique opportunity to connect with them in smaller numbers. Use this time to ask about their week, school, and sports activities.

*Define success differently.* Too often we define success as getting through all the activities in our lesson plan without major disruption or incident. This definition values the plan over the people. Define success in things such as building relationships, capitalizing on teachable moments, and connecting God's Word to the real-life situations your students face.

*Allow room for relationships.* Imagine that a friend wants to structure every moment of your interaction with crafts, Bible studies, and activities. These things are great, but they are not where relationships happen. Relationships happen when people hang out. Make your first or last 10 minutes "hang time." If the entirety of your relationship with students happens within a structured context, there is little or no room for being personal.

*Pray.* Take the time to pray with your students. Have weeks where *you* pray for all the requests instead of having the kids do it. It is a powerful thing to hear another person praying for you. Write down children's prayer requests and follow up the next week.

*Get over yourself.* You know *your* reasons for being there, so take the time to think beyond that. Ask your students lots of questions about themselves. Find out what *their* reasons are for being at Sunday school. Find out what they need from you. Use an anonymous question box to allow students to write down their questions each week. Often kids will ask things anonymously that they would never share in a discussion. Pray that God will help you to see *His* reasons for having you with this group of children too. Understand that you are being used for something that goes far beyond yourself. Seek God's guidance constantly as you plan your time.

### **And Then . . . [Take Two]**

A second-grade boy named Jordan wanders into his Sunday school classroom. His teacher instantly notices that he has stopped in the doorway. Her lesson plan and materials are ready to go, so she pulls Jordan aside and asks if he is OK. He looks up at her with tears in his eyes and simply says, "No."

"We'll talk," the teacher says, recognizing that the room is beginning to fill up with kids. She gets them busy making little baskets and puts her assistant in charge. The teacher pulls Jordan aside. They talk. They pray. She tries to be strong for Jordan, but she can't help but cry a little herself.

By the time Jordan and his teacher return from the hallway, the kids are done with their craft. She has to rush the story a bit, making unplanned adjustments to be sensitive to Jordan's feelings. A student who finished his craft early was asked to make an extra basket; the basket is given to Jordan. Jordan has made a new friend. The books of the New Testament will have to wait until next week. There isn't time to practice them, but there is time to connect with each other over a snack. As the children laugh and jabber, Jordan is caught up in fleeting moments where he completely forgets about his problems at home.

As prayer requests are shared, Jordan's teacher tells the other students that Jordan is going through some tough stuff. The teacher isn't going to share the details, but Jordan needs prayer. Other requests are shared for a sick uncle and a broken finger. One of Jordan's classmates is still sad about a dog that died three years ago, so she shares, knowing her teacher will pray for her.

The hour ends and Jordan is already looking forward to next week. The teacher looks down at her lesson plan. Not everything went according to the plan, but God's purposes for her being there today are clear.