

NO ONE'S LAZY IN LAZYTOWN

What can we learn about reaching and teaching kids from NickJr's hardest-working show?

By Aaron Reynolds

If you haven't seen Lazytown, then your first exercise is clear. Program the VCR, set the TiVo, or get the kids off to school, pour yourself a cup of joe, and tune in real-time to NickJr's powerhouse to the lineup. Imported from Iceland, Lazytown has raised the bar on making "healthy living" exciting to kids. Taking on topics like "playing outside versus video games", "getting enough sleep", "not eating junk food", and geared toward the late pre-school crowd, this Scandinavian success has got kids of all ages tracking along.

So, what can a new show about health teach us in Children's Ministry?

Sit up and take notice.

Energize me!

One viewing of Lazytown will reveal it: this is an incredibly energetic show. For a warm-up, the main character, Sportacus, doesn't just walk, he flips, flies, tears and tumbles everywhere he goes. *Great, you say, I already have to tap-dance to keep my kids attention during the Bible lesson. Now I have to stand on my head?*

Not unless you want to. Because there's more to this high-energy excitement than first meets the eye. In addition to the va-va-voom of the vibrant characters, you'll also note that energizing music and sound effects continually drive the pacing of the show forward.

That's powerful learning. If Lazytown's soundtrack can juice up a snore-bore topic like health, imagine the goose your teaching might get from a little mood music when the topic is something exciting like the Bible. Next time you have an exciting Bible story, set some stirring music under the scene. Heighten the mood of a more serious story with a little dramatic underscoring. You'll be amazed by the power it can bring to your storytelling.

Where am I getting all this music, you ask? Instrumental movie soundtracks make great choices. To get you off and running, check out the soundtracks to Batman, Henry V, and Prince of Egypt. They are custom-designed for the purpose, and as long as you're playing it off the original CD and not charging admission (you're not, are you?), then there's no copyright worries.

The Right Who

One time watching and you'll see something else about Lazytown: these are some cool characters. Check out the girl with the crazy pink hair. And Sportacus' outfit? I wouldn't mind taking my morning jog dressed in those digs. This cool collection of characters draws even older kids to Lazytown. While my three-year-old is now fervent about her daily teeth-brushing so she can "be like Sportacus", my eight-year-old is equally enamored by these high-flying characters. No doubt about it. Lazytown's cast is cool.

Here's the learning, while it may make you sweat to hear it: the "who" counts. Having the right person up front goes a long way to getting buy-in from your kids. And while a grandmotherly figure may be ideal for your kindergarten room, when it comes to 2nd through 5th grade, cool counts. These kids hear their teachers and their moms weigh in all week, so putting someone from a different demographic in front of them on Sunday really makes a difference.

Be intentional about recruiting the right person for the job, knowing how kids respond. Seek out some teenagers, especially guys (a couple piercings or tattoos never hurt either), to teach your 5th graders, and watch what happens. Yes, these teenagers will need to be developed and kept accountable, but who doesn't?

My greatest teaching volunteer was a kid named Dugan. When Dugan stepped up to teach, there was a whole new energy in the room. I mean, I'm not exactly geriatric, but his youth brought a credibility to the lesson that was much different from me. There was power in the room when this 16-year-old with the earrings and the spiked hair talked

about forgiveness. No doubt about it, this guy was cool. And the kids wanted to hear what he had to say in a way that I had to work for.

Say it, don't spray it

Often in Children's Ministry, we live by the "more is more" principle. We want the kids to know so much about God, so we spray them with information, like a sprinkler gone haywire, thinking that if we just say it all then they'll get it. But the truth is, the more we pack into a single lesson, the less they walk out with.

Lazytown is masterful at "less is more" thinking. Over the course of their season they cover a wide scope of topics, but each story-driven episode focuses on a single clear learning. In one show, the whole point is that Sportacus goes to sleep at exactly 8:08 every night. In another, Stephanie, Sportacus' pink-haired compatriot discovers a memorable formula for brushing her teeth: 20 times up, 20 times down, 20 times left, 20 times right. And while I saw these episodes weeks ago, I remember them like they were yesterday. And so do my kids. That's the power of "less for more" teaching.

Not only is Lazytown teaching less concepts for more retention, but they package the concept into a memorable hook. Hooks like going to bed at 8:08, or the "20 times" rule of teeth-brushing are not only fun, but unforgettable.

We can apply this learning to Children's Ministry. For example, don't feel the need to tell kids everything the Bible has to say about lying in a single lesson, instead give them one verse, and teach them to recognize the reason they are lying, the WHY behind the LIE, so they can stop it before it happens. A single hook that leads to application.

So resist the urge to spray the kids in your ministry with a shower of truth. You'll find that a clear focused concept, taught with a memorable hook, will hit home with the impact of a fire-hose.

Lazytown is doing a great job teaching kids about health. I know they've got my kids eating carrot-sticks right out of their hands. But the learnings of Lazytown's good-living gurus have great application for us in Children's Ministry as well. They can help us continue to make the Bible energizing and exhilarating for kids. Work out these lessons in your ministry, and before you know it, you'll be reaching kids for God and teaching them about the Bible in even more powerful and pumped-up ways, without working up such a sweat.

Aaron Reynolds is the author of The Fabulous Reinvention of Sunday School, and is eagerly sought-after worldwide as a speaker, workshop presenter, and consultant in Children's Ministry. To talk to Aaron about ways he can help envision, train, and equip your ministry team, reach Aaron at www.creativekidsministry.com.