

So you're thinking of teaching Scripture



Hi I'm Sally Smith, SRE consultant with Baptist Churches NSW.

There are over 10,000 volunteer scripture teachers in NSW and it's a privileged position. Before you teach Scripture I'd like to talk with you about the responsibilities involved.

In NSW law, Special Religious Education or SRE is defined as 'education in the beliefs and practices of an approved religious persuasion by authorised representatives of that persuasion.'

Every SRE teacher must be authorised. Each denomination has its own requirements but to be authorised by the Baptist Union you need to complete the SRE Teachers Engagement Form, signing to say that you meet specific government requirements to be allowed to work with children. You also need to be endorsed by your minister who signs your form agreeing to support you and encourage your church to pray for you.

So you can see that agreeing to teach SRE is not something you do as an individual. SRE teachers teach on behalf of their minister, their church and their denomination. Those who teach in a joint program with children from different denominations together in the one group, also represent all the other local ministers and churches, in fact the wider Christian faith. And of course SRE teachers also represent God. It's an awesome privilege.

Because you're representing others, those others determine what you teach. The curriculum we recommend is GodSpace, which we believe gives you the most help as a teacher and is most relevant for children in public schools but there are others. **Local ministers decide on the curriculum and it's important to stick to what's chosen.** Anything else you teach, and any visitors you may wish to take to school and involve in your lessons need to be approved by all the clergy.

It's not just your minister and the other churches you need to keep in mind. **Children who are in your class are only there because their parents allow them to be.** Not all parents are believers, but most are happy for their children to hear Bible stories and learn about mainstream Christian faith so they can decide for themselves if they want to live by faith, or not. It's important not to speak against any child's parents or their beliefs. How to do that with integrity is part of the training SRE teachers are required to do.

The principal is ultimately responsible for the children in his school, including in SRE time. The principal and staff want the best for the children, just as you do, so do your best to work *with* them. Jesus said that he came 'not to be served, but to serve', and Christian SRE teachers come with the same servant attitude.

I find a good way to make sure you represent the appropriate people well and respect the role of the parents and principal is to imagine them in the classroom with you as you teach. It shouldn't change what you say, but it just might change the way you say it.

There are some essential dos and don'ts that every scripture teacher needs to abide by.

NEVER focus on violence. Many Bible stories are very violent. The Easter account certainly is, and since we're working in a school context where violence is actively discouraged, we're careful how we approach such stories. Your curriculum will deal with it appropriately so again, stick to the curriculum and **ALWAYS focus on the positive.**

NEVER allow discussion of the devil, evil spirits and hell to continue in a lesson. Kids will bring up these things because they know you're interested in spiritual things, but it's a DANGER ZONE for SRE. There have been many cases of classroom discussions resulting in kids' nightmares, followed by complaints by parents, and children being withdrawn from SRE. Yes, it's part of the Christian faith, but it's a part that we avoid in SRE because of the trouble it causes and because we want to protect the opportunity we have in schools. When the topic is raised, make a brief statement about God's power over evil, focus on the positive, move on quickly and stick to the curriculum.

NEVER put down other faiths. If you're asked, make 'I believe...' statements so the focus is always on Christian faith.

RESPECT and never speak against the teachings or values of the children's families. It's not the SRE teacher's role to tell kids that Santa or the Easter bunny is a myth. **Always respect the children's opinions even if they are opposite to what the Bible says.**

ALWAYS imagine the parents and the school principal in the room with you when you're teaching. It will help you phrase things in a way that respects others' beliefs and opinions.

In order to be authorised to teach SRE regularly, you'll need to commit to doing some training in child protection and classroom practice. This covers practical and useful material, which is valuable even for those who are trained in education and theology.

SRE is likely to be the only regular time in the life of most children in your class that they explore their spiritual questions with a person who has a living faith in Jesus Christ. We work for the good of the kids, as the principal and staff do, as the parents do. And we also pray that the children will grow socially, mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually into the people God created them to be.

I hope to see you at training very soon so we can unpack some of these things further and share practical ways of accomplishing them.

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