GUIDE

Where color-coded VBS shirts fail, and the backup cue that fixes it

About 1 in 12 men have color vision deficiency, so some crew colors look the same to your volunteers. Here is how to add a cue that does not depend on color.

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Giving every crew its own shirt color is one of the most common ways to organize a VBS week. It works well right up to the moment the person doing the looking cannot tell two of those colors apart. That happens more often than most planning committees expect, and the fix is cheap if you build it into the design before the order goes in.

Who cannot tell your crew colors apart?

More of your volunteers than you might guess. The National Eye Institute says that "about 1 in 12 men have color vision deficiency," and that men have a much higher risk than women. On average, a volunteer team with a dozen men on it includes about one man who sees some of your crew colors differently from everyone else. He might be the dad at the check-in table, the recreation leader sending crews back inside, or the person matching kids to parents at pickup.

The same inherited condition shows up in the boys in your crews. A first grader told to "follow the green shirts" may be following red ones.

Which crew color pairs cause the most trouble?

Red and green cause the most trouble. The NEI describes the most common type of color vision deficiency as one that "makes it hard to tell the difference between red and green." Its milder forms shift the colors rather than erase them: deuteranomaly makes certain shades of

green look more red, and protanomaly makes certain shades of red look more green and less bright. A red crew and a green crew, a common pairing for a farm or garden theme, can read as two versions of the same muddy color.

No palette is safe for everyone on hue alone. The NEI lists a less common type, tritanomaly, that makes it hard to tell blue from green and yellow from red.

A second failure has nothing to do with eyesight. The more crews you have, the closer the colors get. VBS T-Shirts has printed one design on as many as ten shirt colors for a single church, and at that count some pairs, like navy and royal blue or kelly green and lime, are hard for anyone to separate across a dim gym or a sunny field.

What does a backup cue look like on a shirt?

Web designers already have a rule for this problem. The W3C accessibility guidelines (WCAG 2.1, success criterion 1.4.1) say color should not be "the only visual means of conveying information." The rule was written for websites, and it applies just as well to a hallway full of eight-year-olds. Keep the colors, and give each crew a second cue that survives without them:

- **A large crew name or number on the back.** Crews walk in lines, so the back of the shirt is what a leader sees most. "Crew 4" in big letters reads the same to every set of eyes.
- **A picture for each crew, taken from the theme.** A jungle VBS can have a lion crew and a parrot crew. Pre-readers in the youngest crews can match a picture when they cannot yet read a word.
- **The same label everywhere else.** Put the crew name or picture on rosters, room signs, name tags and crew flags, so the label carries the system and color only speeds it up.
- **A printed word on staff shirts.** If kids are told to find an adult in a certain color, print STAFF or LEADER in large letters on the back so a colorblind child can still find one.

Every VBS T-Shirts design can be changed, with any text added and any element swapped, so a crew name, number or picture on the back is a request a designer handles on the proof.

How do you test a crew color plan before ordering?

Run a grayscale test. On an iPhone, open Settings, then Accessibility, then Display & Text Size, then Color Filters, and turn on Grayscale. Look at your shirt color swatches or the design proof. Any two crews that turn into the same shade of gray are being told apart by hue alone, and

those are the pairs most likely to fail. Swap one for a color that is clearly lighter or darker, or make sure the back print does the work.

Then ask a person. At volunteer training, ask whether anyone has trouble with certain colors and have them look at the swatches. Many people with color vision deficiency know exactly which pairs give them trouble, and five minutes of their input can save a week of confused crews.

Should you drop color coding altogether?

No. For most of your volunteers and kids, color is still the fastest way to spot a crew from across a room, which is why so many churches use it. The failure is relying on color alone. A shirt plan that pairs color with a printed name, number or picture works for every volunteer at the door, including the one who sees red and green as the same.

To build crew names or pictures into your design, request a custom design and list your crew colors and labels, or read how to combine shirt colors in one order. You can also call 888-980-4827, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm Pacific.

VBS T-Shirts 888-980-4827 vbstshirts.com

VBS T-Shirts designs custom Vacation Bible School shirts for every VBS theme, plus leader and volunteer shirts.