Adventist Early Childhood Education

"Small children should be left as free as lambs, to run out of doors, to be free and happy, and should be allowed the most favorable opportunities to lay the foundation for sound constitutions" (White, 1948, 3T, p.137). For over a hundred years, this statement has been the authoritative counsel for Seventh-day Adventist parents and educators. Early childhood education and group care (ECEC) has not been part of the conventional Adventist paradigm. Many times, the question has been asked: "Are we working in opposition to Biblical and Spirit of Prophecy counsel when we promote the operation of ECEC programs?"

Dedicated as I am to my chosen field of expertise, I still acknowledge and assent to the traditional Adventist belief that young children, prior to entrance into formal schooling, should be in the home, taught and cared for by a loving and attentive mother and father. To quote developmental psychologist and home school advocate Raymond Moore (1982, p.2):

*Strong, research-based data suggests that whenever possible parents should be their children's only regular teachers or care givers until the youngsters are at least eight or ten years of age. Unnecessary out-of-home or other alternative care may endanger the child socially, emotionally, behaviorally and even academically. We assume that much research is still needed to confirm certain hypotheses against unnecessary early out-of-family care. Wherever possible this (policy) reform must be directed more toward preserving the integrity of the child's home life and less to institutionalizing children at ever earlier ages (emphasis in original).*

Empirical Backing for Adventist Traditions

As with other traditional Adventist teachings, empirical research consistently authenticates the efficacy of our heritage. Both past and current research find that children who stay at home between birth and eight years of age, cared for and taught by a loving and attentive mother and father, are more successful and balanced in all areas of life than those children who do not have the same growing-up environment (Lippman, 2005; Moore, 1986).

According to Dr. David Elkind (1997), author and professor of child development at Tufts University, "children who receive academic instruction too early - generally before age six or seven - are often put at risk; taught the wrong things at the wrong time, permanently damaging the child's belief in their abilities, reducing their "natural eagerness to learn", and blocking their "natural gifts and talents". In concurrence, Edward Zigler (1987), co-founder of Head Start and current Sterling Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University wrote: "There is a large body of evidence indicating that there is little if anything to be gained by exposing middleclass children to early education".
Finally, Dr. Rebecca Marcon (2002, p.21), a developmental psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of North Florida, has concluded from research that:

Children's long-term progress may be slowed by introducing formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status. Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grades and are required to think more independently and take on greater responsibility for their own learning process.

Recent research on the effects of the number of hours in group care demonstrates that smaller group settings are much more beneficial to the young child than larger, institutionalized care settings - regardless of the adult/child ratio. According to empirical research, home-based and faith-based centers do indeed provide more quality care and nurturance which in turn enhances social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Early Childhood Research Quarterly [ECRQ], 2004).

**Society vs. Family**

Unfortunately, for the vast majority of children, the ideal early home life scenario is not an optional reality. Over the past hundred years, the toll of society's 'success' has been felt due to war and prosperous peace, increased mobility of families, separation of core family units, women's liberation, excessive children's 'rights', men absent from family units, increasing numbers of women out of the home and in the workplace, social welfare, anti-traditional family legislation and taxation burdens, anti-social power pursuits, teen pregnancy, the ideology of promiscuity without responsibility, as well as an over-indulgence in pleasure-seeking behaviors.

All these elements have worked together to disintegrate the family. Although child advocates are calling for more institutionalized early education programs, Public Agenda (2000, p.3) found that "parents of young children believe that having a full-time parental presence at home is what's best for very young children and it is what most would prefer for their own family". Without question, the in-tact home where family can provide and protect the earliest years of the developing child remains the ideal educational environment.

**The Early Childhood/Universal Pre-kindergarten Frenzy**

In agreeing that a child's formative years are the responsibility of the parents and family, the reality of societal needs and trends of the twenty-first century has placed a heavy burden upon family oriented social structures. Politicians, corporations, teacher unions and professional organizations have propagated the results of three studies purporting the profound and long-term benefits of quality early childhood environments. However, the results of these studies have no relationship to the vast American population because the
demographics of the study groups were not representative of the larger population (Olsen, 1999).

In addition, the configuration of the studies were not representative of typical early childhood education environments as they included such intervention components as home visits, individualized education activities, and ratios of 1 teacher for 5 children. Sadly, these intervention study findings have been inappropriately generalized to the average preschool age child when, in reality, all three studies concentrated on severely disadvantaged, minority children, some at risk for retarded mental performance. Therefore, there is no evidence of universal replicability (Olsen, 1999).

For further information on these studies, please view their websites at: www.highscope.org/Research/perryProject/perrymain.htm, www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/, and www.waisman.wisc.edu/cls/Chicago.htm.

Many parents of young children now desire out-of-home care and early educational opportunities as a result of these over-publicized studies, the changing social structure of families, working parents, concerns for academic achievement, fear of academic deficiencies, language barriers, behavioral disturbances, test scores, and socialization skills (Mercury News Editorial, 2004).

**Benefits of Early Learning Environments**

Both public and private entities have responded by acknowledging the familial need for reliable, high-quality, safe and instructive care for their young children. The term *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP) has become a national cliche signifying the necessity to provide both aspects of early childhood education and care.

The concept of *developmental appropriateness* has two dimensions: age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Age appropriateness refers to the knowledge of child development that provides a framework from which teachers prepare the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences. This knowledge encompasses physical development, emotional development, social development, and cognitive development.

Education is *individually appropriate* when a teacher focuses a child's learning experiences to match their developing abilities while also challenging their interests, understanding and critical thinking skills. Factors to consider include the child's individual pattern and timing of growth, personality, learning style, coping skills, and family background.

Benefits of DAP have been verified repeatedly by developmental psychologists and educational researchers, many of which are enumerated by Marcon in her 2002 quasi-experimental follow-up study. The benefits of DAP are demonstrated through:

- The positive classroom climate which is conducive to children's healthy emotional development
- Less exhibited stress and higher levels of motivation to learn
- Facilitated creativity, increased verbal skills and receptive language skills, and higher levels of cognitive functioning
- Higher achievement scores throughout their primary grade years
- Smoother transitions from primary to later elementary grades with academic gains holding constant.

Within the DAP classroom, the teacher's role is critical in planning, observing, and guiding learning through direct instruction, environmental support, appropriate materials, and thoughtful questioning strategies. "Without a nurturing, playful, responsive environment, an academic focus may diminish children's engagement and motivation. But a 'child-centered' environment that lacks intellectual challenges also falls short of what curious young learners deserve" (Hyson, 2003). This is developmentally appropriate academics and the academic aptitude of young children is dependent upon the teacher's ability to focus the environment and activities so as to develop the child's skills in organization, coordination, cooperation, and independence.

**Adventist Early Childhood Education**

*How does all this information impact Adventist early childhood education?* To review the purpose of Adventist education might be of some assistance. Ellen White wrote that "the purpose of education is to qualify [children] for usefulness in this life and for the future life in the kingdom of God" (White, 1981, 2MR, p.218, p. 2). Elaborating on this, the North American Division (NAD) Office of Education published this philosophy statement in their Journey to Excellence document (2004, p. 4): Adventist education seeks to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator; to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others' thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual's potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.

Finally, per the Pacific Union Conference Education Code (2001, pp. 8 & 29): The primary aim of Seventh-day Adventist education is to provide opportunity for students to accept Christ as their Savior, to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives, and to fulfill the commission of preaching the gospel to all the world. Seventh-day Adventist education has a two-fold mission. The school's primary role is to educate and to spiritually strengthen Seventh-day Adventist youth. In addition, the school is to serve as a mission outreach to the community.

**Responsibility**

In order for us to meet the needs of society, Seventh-day Adventists have a responsibility to families, to help instruct and lead children of all ages. We have been counseled that "as soon as the child is capable of forming an idea and reasoning, his education should begin" (White, 1981, 7MR, p.6, p. 1). Long ago, the Adventist church organization
recognized the need to support families in training young children to become "useful, respected, and beloved members of society here, and give them a moral fitness for the society of the pure and holy hereafter" (White, 1980, AH, p.306, p. 5). Hence, Adventists instituted programs such as Sabbath School, church schools, Vacation Bible School, Adventurers, and Pathfinders.

In 1904, though, Mrs. White showed a distinct concern for young children who were not being soberly disciplined and trained within their home environments. Her concern centered on the verity that such children were not afforded the proper foundation necessary for their future education (White, 1958, 3SM, p.215, p. 1).

On January 14 of that year, Mrs. White met with the Sanitarium church school board at Elmshaven, St. Helena, California. Her quoted statements acknowledged that "children surrounded by these unfortunate conditions are indeed to be pitied. If not afforded an opportunity for proper training outside the home, they are debarred from many privileges that, by right, every child should enjoy. God desires us to deal with these problems sensibly" (White, 1958, 3SM, p.215, pp. 1, 2). "[H]ere is a work that must be done for the families. They will learn in school that which they frequently do not learn out of school, except by association" (White, 1958, 3SM, p.216, p. 2).

When attending board members questioned her previous statement about the need for children to be as 'free as lambs', she answered: "God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things" (White, 1958, 3SM, p.217, p. 2).

In 1904, Mrs. White was referring to the care and educational needs of children between the ages of seven-ten years. However, the philosophy set forth here by Mrs. White is that the church is to be ever vigilant in the upbringing and training of their youngest members. In the twenty-first century, life-style choices and ever increasing economic demands have placed families in peril. Using Biblical principles, mature members are to provide guidance and counsel for the less mature as they "hand one another along" (Coles, 2000). In addition, the church is to meet the needs of its young families who are struggling to provide the type of home environment most suitable for the indoctrination of values and principles.

This does not mean that every Seventh-day Adventist church and/or school should actively participate in the operation of some form of child care program. However, it does mean that congregations should have sympathy for their struggling members, being willing to teach and care for them, seeking to serve them (DePree, 1987).

Mrs. White encouraged the church to "carry a burden for the lambs of the flock. Let the children be educated and trained to do service for God, for they are the Lord's heritage." (White, 1948, 6T, p.203, p. 1). "...[C]hildren who have been rightly educated, will in their simplicity... do a work in the proclamation of the truth which the older workers cannot do..." (White, 1948, 6T, p.202, p. 2).
Call to Action

Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16 (King James Version) both record Jesus saying "suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not". In saying this Christ instructs that every child deserves to learn about Him. Thus, He has placed a longing desire upon the hearts of certain individuals (myself included), to pick up the seemingly impossible task of caring for and guiding young children to Himself.

"Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people . . . . He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me,'" (White, 1905, MH, p.143). This is where the desire for Christ-centered early childhood education and care begins. To lovingly care for another's child provides opportunities to build strong bonds of trust and confidence between teacher and parent. It is through this medium that the gospel of Jesus Christ is taught and lived in the hope that the children's parents will hear the call of Christ. Through the faithful work of Adventist teachers and administrators with impressionable children, the gospel of Jesus Christ is being taught and lived in an effort to "train up [the children] in the way [they] should go" (Proverbs 6:22).

This is the mission of Adventist early childhood education and care centers.

Church Administration Responds

For many years, decades even, ECEC professionals within the Seventh-day Adventist church organization have faithfully looked after the 'little lambs of the flock' and anyone else willing to entrust their children to our care and training. Recently, church administrators have also demonstrated their willingness to be more involved, more active in assuming responsibility for the young.

In June of 2005, Seventh-day Adventist North American Division union presidents and division officers addressed the question for determining what NAD entity should be responsible for early childhood education. The vote was to ask the NAD Office of Education to take responsibility for the development and supervision of all early childhood education and care programs (G. Koalski, personal communication, June 2, 2005). For those of us within the ECEC field, this is the commencement of a very exciting time in Adventist history! The Lord is working to preserve the family unit and we have the privilege of being His instruments through our ECEC centers.

We have a lot of organizational work ahead of us, but what a blessing it is to participate in the great commission of Matthew 28:19, 20:

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."
References


