
Transfer of Religious Values

Do Young People Accept Parental Standards?

By Roger L. Dudley and Margaret G. Dudley

Every thoughtful Christian parent, church leader, and educator realizes that the formation of a value system by a youth is, in the long run, of more importance than the transmission of mere information or the development of skills. While the latter are necessary, the former determines the ultimate results of education. Ellen White has counseled:

Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today.¹

A crucial question then is this: How likely are children to accept the religious values of their parents and authority figures and to build them into their own value systems? Social learning theory suggests that since parents possess the power of both modeling and reinforcement during the primary years of the child's socialization, youth are more likely to arrive at values that are at least somewhat similar to those of their parents. On the other hand, the process of emancipation that characterizes the passage from adolescence to adulthood might lead us to expect that the youth might reject parental and church

values as a means of securing a separate adult identity.

This concern is by no means a recent one. Wieting reminds us that:

A recurrent focus of social philosophy since Plato's *Republic* has been the threat to society posed by the possibility that the young might not adopt the essential wisdom

and values of that society. . . . a concern with generational issues is easy to understand. If a society is to continue its existence beyond one generation, the members must transmit what they consider to be necessary knowledge and values. The continuity of a social system by definition requires transmission between generations.²

Of course, a subject of this importance has received considerable

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Parents can significantly influence their children's values.

attention from social scientists. Researchers such as Acock and Bengtson³; Feather⁴; Payne, Summers, and Stewart⁵; Keeley⁶; Newcomb and Svehla⁷; and Wieting⁸ have generally found a value “generation gap” with adolescents being somewhat less traditional than their parents in the values that they hold.

On the other hand, studies to establish value similarities between parents and their children have had mixed results. A number of researchers⁹ found agreement between the generations on stated values, but the relationship has often been weak.

A Study of Adventist Families

To our knowledge, however, no study had been done comparing the stated values of Seventh-day Adventist youth with those of their parents. Such data are hard to come by, especially on a national basis. The purpose of this article is to report just such research, which we have been engaged in for more than a year.

Although the research involves adolescents and their parents, we believe it will be of vital interest to Adventist teachers as well. The church has recognized that in a

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complex society with many competing meaning systems the task of religious socialization cannot be accomplished by parents alone. The church has employed full-time professionals to aid the home in this mission. Therefore, facilitating the development of value systems by the youth must always be

seen as a joint effort of home, school, and church. While parents retain the primary responsibility, teachers must find ways to support and strengthen the home in the transmission of values.

Of particular interest to the present study is the work done by Hoge, et al.¹⁰ Four measures of religiosity were collected from 254 complete triads (father, mother, youth) drawn from Catholic, Southern Baptist, and United Methodist homes. As might be expected, the youth were generally less traditional than their parents. Relationships across generations were, for the most part, weak with only one of the religious measures—creedal assent—showing a consistent impact of family characteristics on transmission. Denomination proved to be a better predictor of adolescent standards than did parental values.

We decided to extend Hoge's investigation with two major changes. First, since the effect of denomination overpowered the parental effect, we saw the opportunity to select homes from just one denomination, Seventh-day Adventist, allowing concentration on the variable of interest: similarities to parents. Second, we constructed a more specific value measure. Indices such as the *Creedal Assent Index* are stated in such general terms that it is doubtful if sufficient variance could be obtained from the responses of adherents of conservative denominations to generate significant findings. We wished to include items about which Adventists might differ, depending on their position on a traditional to non-traditional continuum.

We hypothesized that adolescents as a group are less traditional than their parents in the values that they hold. On the other hand, young people still resemble their

parents to some extent—more traditional parents will tend to have more traditional children and less traditional parents, less traditional children—even though a gap remains between the generations. Further, we hypothesized that this relation holds true both for individual value items and a scale created from the items.

In spite of [the generation] gap, youth tend to resemble their parents in the religious values they affirm.

A five-choice questionnaire was constructed and labeled the Inter-generational Value Survey (IVS). It consisted of 22 value statements that impinge on the beliefs and behaviors of Seventh-day Adventists. The responses to the individual items were summed to form a Value Attitude Scale (VAS). The complete wording of the 22 items is shown in the box on page 25. In addition, information was collected about baptismal status, highest grade of education, years in Adventist schools, and sex of youth.

From a list of Adventist churches in the United States with a membership of more than 500, 20 were randomly selected. The pastor of each was asked to serve as a liaison who would give a packet to 20 high-school-aged youth in his congregation. The packet contained three envelopes—each with a copy of the IVS clearly marked as *youth*, *mother*, or *father*. Each of these persons was to fill out his or her survey privately and seal it in the individual envelope. Then the three envelopes would be sealed in the larger packet and returned to the pastor, who would return them to the

researchers. Since the pastor would see only sealed envelopes and we did not know who the people were, confidentiality was guaranteed.

Some pastors did not follow through on their commitment, so four additional churches were selected. Others found it difficult to secure complete triads. Data collection was lengthy, lasting from June of 1983 until the end of January, 1984, with a series of follow-up letters and scores of long-distance phone calls. Eventually, surveys were received from a total of 252 families. Five sets were disqualified for various reasons. Usable surveys were obtained from 712 individuals in 247 families from 21 churches. Of these, 218 were complete triads, 26 were youth-mother dyads, and 3 were youth-father dyads.

Similar Yet Different

We found that Adventist youths, like those who have been studied in other denominations, do generally differ from their parents in the values they affirm. Youths and fathers have significantly different means on 12 of the 22 individual items (all but No. 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 15, 16, 18, and 19), as well

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as on the overall VAS. In every significant difference but one, the fathers are more traditional than the youths. The one exception is item 21, where the fathers are more likely to agree that a Christian might be justified in killing under some circumstances. Youths and mothers have significantly different means on 19 of the 22 individual items (all but No. 7, 18, and 21), as well as on the overall VAS. Here also, in every significant difference the mothers are more traditional than the youths.

But if youths differ from their parents in the religious values that they affirm, they also resemble them. Youths and fathers are significantly correlated on 15 of the 22 items (all but No. 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 15, and 20), as well as on the overall VAS. Youths and mothers are significantly correlated on 16 of the items (all but No. 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11), as well as on the VAS. For both sets of dyads all significant correlations are in the positive direction. While many of the correlations for individual items are not strong, the combined items in the VAS reveal quite powerful relationships between values of the youths and those of their parents.

A use of multiple regression analysis revealed that a combination of three of the variables formed a strong prediction equation of the scores of youths on the overall VAS. In order of importance, they were the VAS of the mother, the VAS of the father, and the status of the youth as to church membership. None of the other predictors was able to make a significant contribution in addition to those three. In the case of the third item selected, adolescents who had been baptized into church membership were more likely to be traditional than those who had not made that choice, even though

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WORDING OF ITEMS ON INTERGENERATIONAL VALUE SURVEY

1. The Bible is relevant to today's problems and I use its principles in making decisions.
2. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is God's true remnant church.
3. Ellen White was inspired by God and her writings are an authoritative guide for Christians today.
4. The church has an important place in my life.
5. I believe that God hears and answers my prayers.
6. A Christian should give tithe and offerings before spending any of his/her income on other things.
7. People of various races should worship together freely and with equality.
8. In choosing a life profession the most important factor is being of service to others.
9. Any position that a man holds should be open to a qualified woman.
10. There is no place for alcohol or tobacco in the full and happy life.
11. Recreational drugs such as marijuana should be legalized.
12. Vegetarianism is preferable as a life-style to meat-eating.
13. The Sabbath should be reserved for devotional and witnessing activities and not be made a day of general recreation.
14. It is all right to attend the movies if the pictures are carefully selected.
15. Homosexual behavior is a sin.
16. It is wrong to engage in premarital petting.
17. Premarital sexual intercourse is not wrong if two people really love each other.
18. Abortion is never an option for terminating a pregnancy.
19. Divorce is a valid option when marriage is unhappy.
20. A Christian should be willing to serve in the military as long as such service does not conflict with God's commands.
21. Under some circumstances a Christian could be justified in killing another person.
22. Christians should not wear decorative jewelry.

letting them know what activities the students from their district are involved in. When students return to their home churches and find that the pastor has shared with the members what each of them is doing on campus, this has given the young people a real boost. We have also asked pastors to sponsor *Insight* subscriptions for students from their districts who are attending the academy.

In addition, Elder Litchfield has edited a Bible teacher's letter, circulated in the Southern Union Conference, entitled SUBTEX (Southern Union Bible Teachers' Exchange), which has encouraged the sharing of ideas for Bible teaching in the classroom and outreach activities on academy campuses.

Each morning, in worship, students are given an opportunity to write a personal letter to a friend on campus and have it read before the student body. Several letters a day are shared, which often deal with student outreach activities that have overlapped into friendships here on campus.

The results of an active outreach program are sometimes difficult to ascertain. However, I believe that students on our campus are committed to an outreach program and would be disappointed if it were not continued. They expect Wednesday night to be a special time in which there are no inter-murals; the gymnasium is open for general recreation, but the emphasis is that Wednesday night is for students to share, witness, and give of themselves.

Participants in the outreach program have a real feeling of accomplishment and are quick to share their enthusiasm. One of the senior boys who visited the local public elementary school as a part of the Teach-a-Kid program came back after Valentine's Day with a huge

card signed by all of the youngsters in the classroom where he worked. When we shared the card in chapel, students expressed many positive feelings about the program.

A recent letter from the Gordon County Department of Family and Children's Service sums up our outreach program: "We know that they [the GCA students] have freely given of their time and their energy and enthusiasm to help others when they could have been doing something for themselves. This generosity and love for their fellowman assures us that today's youth are not the self-indulgent, self-centered 'me generation' we read about." □

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they had at least one Adventist parent.¹¹

How shall we interpret these findings? First, let us recognize that as teenagers attempt to "cut the apron strings" they have a tendency to put some distance between their values and those of their parents. A definite generation gap concerning values exists, with adolescents as a group being less traditional in the religious values they hold than are their parents. As a group, mothers are the most traditional, with fathers falling between youths and mothers.

In spite of this gap, youths tend to resemble their parents in the religious values they affirm. While the youths lean toward the nontraditional end of the scale, they tend to correlate with their parents on the traditional to nontraditional continuum. That is, more traditional parents tend to have offspring who are more traditional than their peers, although the youths are less traditional than

their parents. Thus, it is encouraging to discover that parental values do make a difference—indeed a most important one—even if parents may often find reason to doubt this during the struggles of the separation process.

Suggestions for Parents and Teachers

While this study establishes a definite relationship between the values held by youths and those of their parents, it does not investigate how this parental influence might be maximized. However, Hoge, et al¹² found that transmission was strongest in families where the parents had definite religious beliefs, agreed on them, and carried out conscious religious socialization in the home. Transmission was also strongest in families where parent-child overall disagreements were small.

Other researchers agree. From the literature we have surveyed—some of which we have included at the end of this article—we might summarize the factors that are most conducive to the transmission of parental values:

1. Parents themselves have strong religious values.
2. Parents agree with each other on the content of those values.
3. Parents live in harmony with their stated values.
4. Parents get along well with each other. They do not often argue and fight, but live in an atmosphere of marital harmony.
5. Parents operate a democratic family government, allowing input from the children and being willing to explain the reasons for necessary rules.
6. Parents are warm and loving toward their children and accepting of them.
7. Parents mingle firm control with high support. Discipline is love-oriented.

8. Parents and children get along well together, rarely arguing and fighting.

9. Parents actively teach their religious principles to their children.

These conclusions are certainly in harmony with the findings of this study. Furthermore, they are of importance to teachers for at least two reasons. First, teachers have the opportunity to help parents learn the attitudes and behaviors that will maximize the transmission of religious values. The process of Christian education

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cannot begin and end with children if it is to accomplish its mission. It must also include parents.

Secondly, Christian educators also have the privilege of applying these principles in their task of encouraging the development of values. Translated into the classroom setting and employed in cooperation with the Christian home, there is a high possibility that the new generation will come to cherish those religious beliefs that have given such great meaning to their parents' and teachers' lives. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1952), p. 225.

² Stephen G. Wieting, "An Examination of Intergenerational Patterns of Religious Belief and Practice," *Sociological Analysis* 36:137 (1975).

³ Alan C. Acock and Vern L. Bengtson, "On the Relative Influence of Mothers and Fathers: A Covariance Analysis of Political and Religious Socialization," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 40:519-530 (1978); _____, "Socialization and Attribution Processes: Actual Versus Perceived Similarity Among Parents and Youth,"

Journal of Marriage and the Family 42:501-515 (1980).

⁴ Norman T. Feather, "Generation and Family Effects in Value Socialization," *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1980), pp. 247-294.

⁵ Sam Payne, David A. Summers, and Thomas R. Stewart, "Value Differences Across Three Generations," *Sociometry* 36:20-30 (1973).

⁶ Benjamin J. Keeley, "Generations in Tension: Intergenerational Differences and Continuities in Religion and Religion-related Behavior," *Review of Religious Research* 17:221-231 (1976).

⁷ Theodore Newcomb and George Svehla, "Intra-family Relationships in Attitude," *Sociometry* 1:180-205 (1937).

⁸ Wieting, pp. 137-149.

⁹ Vern L. Bengtson, "Generation and Family Effects in Value Socialization," *American Sociological Review* 40:358-371 (1975); Martin A. Johnson, "Family Life and Religious Commitment," *Review of Religious Research* 14:144-150 (1973); William C. McCready, "Faith of Our Fathers: A Study of the Process of Religious Socialization," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1972; Hart M. Nelsen, "Gender Differences in the Effects of Parental Discord on Preadolescent Religiousness," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20:351-360 (1981); Darwin L. Thomas, Viktor Gecas, Andrew Weigert, and Elizabeth Rooney, *Family Socialization and the Adolescent* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1974); Lillian E. Troll, Bernice L. Neugarten, and Ruth J. Kraines, "Similarities in Values and Other Personality Characteristics in College Students and Their Parents," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 15:323-336 (1969); Andrew J. Weigert and Darwin L. Thomas, "Socialization and Religiosity: A Cross-National Analysis of Catholic Adolescents," *Sociometry* 33:305-326 (1970).

¹⁰ Dean R. Hoge, Gregory H. Petrillo, and Ella I. Smith, "Transmission of Religious and Social Values From Parents to Teenage Children," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 44:569-580 (1982).

¹¹ Those readers interested in the technical details of the study will find complete statistical methodology, including tables in Margaret G. Dudley, "A Study of the Transmission of Religious Values From Parents to Adolescents." Unpublished manuscript, 1984, Heritage Room, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

¹² Hoge, et al.

Teacher Reaction

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lines take pot shots in such a manner at them.

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• *The author responds: "Hiding"? No — I merely thought that to name myself and my location would be unfair to the nearest academy, though I have observed several. "Removed from the front lines"? Hardly — I taught at the academy level, as did my spouse, for more than a decade.*

I am still profoundly convinced that, though some activities do provide "fond memories" and foster a caring teacher-student relationship, to have fun and games interrupt family and study time three and four times every week is unfair to both faculty and students. The sarcastic tone of

one respondent only underlines my fear that our students are not being taught to respect academic pursuits.

Enjoys Computer Column

I recently completed several classes in computer science. I wish I knew more. There are so many ways that computers can be used today and in the future. As a teacher, I feel that they can become a most valuable tool to increase and enhance instruction.

When I recently reread the entire 1984-1985 volume of the JOURNAL I saved the articles in "Computing With Class" for future reference. The suggestions and advice could help many teachers and schools to make wiser choices in the area of computers. I think that the points are well made, and I hope that the author will continue to write informative materials in this area.

Keith Ellsworth
Sylacauga, Alabama

New Insights

I just finished reading "Financing Church Colleges" (December, 1984-January, 1985, issue). I discovered some new insights into the financial making of a college!

This is a creative scholarly thesis, and the points are well taken. I liked in particular the proposal to re-educate donors to focus more on faculty enrichment programs rather than buildings. Of course, it would not hurt if they did the one without leaving the other undone!

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Did I Do All I Could?

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Calling for Decisions

Teachers and others who work with youth can call for decisions in two ways—on an individual (one-on-one) basis or in a group situation. The first technique has the advantage of avoiding peer influence that often causes young people to ignore their true feelings.