

Child Study Teams

BY WILLIAM H. GREEN

Have you ever wished for some advice to help with vexing discipline problems? How should you handle a child who routinely lies? Swears? Or fights? What if you suspect that a child needs counseling or is being abused at home? What if you think a child is mentally or emotionally handicapped? If a child is doing poorly academically, should he or she be promoted at the end of the year? Who should be involved in such decisions? The Child Study Team (CST) offers one solution to these kinds of problems.

Gathering together to solve persistent management problems is a common process in U.S. public education, especially since the passage in 1975 of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act.¹ However, Adventist schools have not generally used CSTs. While the approach has been known by a number of names, such as individualized education plan team, or committee (IEPT, IEPC, etc.), this article will use the term "Child Study Team" to designate a multidisciplinary group of professionals who cooperate to solve persistent classroom management problems in schools.

Who would serve on such a team? In public schools the team consists of an administrator (principal, vice-principal, etc.), a regular education teacher, a special-education teacher, and other specialists as needed. These specialists may include a nurse, psychologist, speech or hearing therapist, social worker, or other professional, depending upon the problem. Smaller schools can adapt the concept to their slimmer resources. In addition, in most cases parents are also a part of many team meetings. In fact, in special-education decisions, parents must consent to any assessment or placement of their children.

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Goals and Purposes of Child Study Teams

The Child Study Team meets regularly and keeps careful records of all its decisions. The team seeks to prevent and solve academic, social, or personal behavioral problems that hinder children's healthy growth. This is one reason why a multidisciplinary group is required. Teachers rarely have the background to solve complex student problems. Having a variety of alternatives makes it more likely that a

satisfactory solution will be found. Complex problems often require sophisticated answers, which are more likely to be forthcoming from a multidisciplinary group of professionals.

Solve Problems

The first purpose of Child Study Teams is to solve problems—academic, social, and personal. The STP problem-solving method works well. First, the present situation (S) needs to be described objectively and factually. This includes a description of the child's present functioning in the classroom and any assessment that has previously been done. Next, a target (T) or acceptable level of functioning needs to be described, in terms of academic, social, or personal behavior, or a combination of the three. Then the team needs to formulate a plan (P) to close the gap between the present situation (S) and the target (T). The plan may be simple or complex, depending upon the nature of the problem.

Staff Development

A well-functioning team also contributes to staff development. Each team member brings a certain perspective from his or her training and stands to learn much from others. Teachers are often isolated from others in their profession² and rarely get to interact with professionals from other fields.

Teacher Empowerment

Teacher empowerment is an important goal of staff development. Knowing that others will listen to a teacher's concerns is often empowering. A significant number of teachers, both in Adventist and other schools, feel lonely³ and isolated. Many suffer from symptoms of burnout.⁴ By listening to teachers and helping them solve problems, child study teams can help prevent burnout.

Good PR

Child Study Teams also help create positive public relations. Parents often are an integral part of study team deliberations. Parents feel reassured to know that a number of people are concerned about and willing to help their child. They thus feel that they are not alone in the difficult role of raising healthy children. While keeping information confidential, the team needs to be honest and supportive of parents—while at the same time, solving the problem.

Child Study Teams in an Adventist Setting

Up to now, the concept of Child Study Teams has been discussed primarily as it applies to the public school system. But will the same idea work in Adventist schools? Let me make some suggestions based on 10 years' experience in administering a successful weekly Child Study Team in public education.

Our CST met for a full day each week. Since Adventist schools are smaller, their Child Study Team would not need to meet as often. A meeting once or twice a month for two to four hours would generally suffice. The time of day for the meeting could vary, but afternoon usually works best. If the school is small, perhaps a volunteer could substitute for the teacher for an hour or two while the Child Study Team meets.

What about the auxiliary personnel

needed for the team? How could Adventist schools, particularly small ones, provide for this? Here are some suggestions:

Often there are Adventist medical personnel nearby who are supportive. There may also be Adventist social workers, psychologists, or special-education professionals who would volunteer their time.

In addition, in the U.S., if a child needs assessment, according to P.L. 94-142, the public school system is obligated to provide this service. Some may feel this is inappropriate. However, one must consider that this service benefits the individual child rather than the institution. In addition, Ellen G. White counsels as follows regarding the receiving of gifts from governmental entities: "The Lord would move upon worldly men, even idolaters, to give of their abundance. . . . What they would give we should be privileged to receive."⁵

In the Adventist school system, others could play a crucial role in the CST. Both the school and the pastor could benefit if pastors were regular members of the team. Administrators from the conference offices should also be members. Associate superintendents and superintendents of education could offer administrative leadership. Union education offices could provide training so that the teams can function effectively. Other conference administrative officers should include membership on Child Study Teams on their itinerary. Their expertise would benefit the school, and they would gain an understanding of the problems faced by teachers that they probably could not get in any other way.

An Adventist Child Study Team ought to have at least four to five members. The regular classroom teacher, the local pastor, a medical professional, and someone from the conference should make up the team. If psychologists or other professionals are available they should, of course, be included. Even very small one- to three-room schools could, with local conference and union assistance, organize CSTs.

Privacy Issues

Because the Child Study Team is multidisciplinary and some of our churches and

schools are small, careful planning is needed to ensure ethical and legal requirements regarding confidentiality. This issue of confidentiality of CST deliberation and records is, of course, a litigious one. A procedures manual could be prepared by the North American Division Office of Education or local conference education departments. The document needs to deal with procedural matters and the privacy and confidentiality of records and CST deliberations. Parents, for example, need to sign permission forms if information is to be shared with anyone outside the team or between agencies. Systematic procedures must be followed to obtain and maintain records. All information shared with the team is confidential, just as are medical records.

Conclusion

The Child Study Team concept offers great benefit in the Adventist school setting for teachers, parents, and students.✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. P.L. 94-142, called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was signed into U.S. law in 1975. The law stipulates that each state and locality must have a plan to ensure the following:
 - a. Child identification
 - b. Full service, at no cost to parents
 - c. Due process
 - d. Parent/guardian consultation
 - e. Education in the least-restrictive environment (LRE)
 - f. A written, individualized education plan (IEP) for each identified child
 - g. Nondiscriminatory evaluation in regard to language, culture, or handicap
 - h. Confidentiality of all proceedings and records
 - i. Staff development for school personnel.Detailed federal rules and regulations govern the implementation of each of these major provisions. These regulations are still being clarified by federal officials and by court decisions.
2. Paul S. Brantley and Shirley A. Freed, "Do Adventist Teachers Feel Valued? Research on Faculty in SDA Colleges and Universities," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 52:4 (April-May 1990), p. 9; D. C. Lortie, *School Teacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1975.
3. Samuel Gaikwad and Paul Brantley, "Teacher Isolation: Loneliness in the Classroom," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 54:4 (April-May 1992), p. 14; Brantley and Freed; Lortie.
4. Paul Brantley, "Curriculum and Instruction in Adventist Schools: A Profile of Teacher Concern," Final Report of the Profile '89 Survey, Berrien Springs, Michigan (May 1990).
5. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1944), p. 197.