

# A SNAPSHOT OF ADVENTIST PARENTS

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**A**s teachers do their daily work in the classroom—instilling information and noble traits of character—they recognize a fundamental truth about their students. The young people who enter their classrooms each day have been largely shaped by their homes. The family environment has affected their desire for knowledge, their learning styles, their commitment to religion, and their outlook on life. The school supplements, but rarely replaces, the influence of the home.

Accordingly, it would be helpful to teachers to know more about these parents, their attitudes, and behaviors. Even though each parent is unique, a recent study has made it possible to know something about contemporary Adventist parents in general.

During 1994-1995, the North American Division (NAD) coop-

*By a number of measures, the Adventist parents in the survey seem to be solidly religious.*

erated with Family Ministries of the General Conference Church Ministries Department in surveying a representative group of NAD Seventh-day Adventist families. Churches were selected in order to proportionately represent geographic area, congregational size, and ethnicity. Pastors were then invited to administer the questionnaire to those members present during a Sabbath personal ministries period.

The procedure produced usable questionnaires from 1,350 members in 29 widely distributed congregations. Of these churches, 20 were predominately Caucasian, 5 were black African-American, 3 were Hispanic/Latino, and 1 was of Asian origin. Of the respondents, 747 had no children and so were eliminated from this report. The information supplied by the remaining 603 parents comprises the basis for this article.

BY ROGER L. DUDLEY

#### **Personal Information**

Fifty-seven percent of

the respondents were female; 43 percent were male. Most had either one (32 percent) or two (35 percent) dependent children, but 20 percent reported three children, and 13 percent had four or more. Slightly over a fourth were 35 years of age or younger, a little more than half were between 36 and 50, and the remainder were 51 years and older. In comparing their financial condition with others in their communities, 26 percent felt they were better off than most, 61 percent claimed to be about the same as most, and 13 percent reported that they were worse off than most.

A large minority (44 percent) had been baptized Adventists for 20 years or more. Another 28 percent had been members between 11 and 20 years. Only 3 percent had been in the church for less than one year, with 12 percent between 1 and 5 years and the remaining 13 percent between 6 and 10 years. Approximately 44 percent of the sample grew up in a home with at least one Adventist parent; the remaining 56 percent came into the church either as teens or as adults.

The group was quite well-educated. Almost all (87 percent) had finished high school or academy, and 70 percent had attended college, where 40 percent earned a basic degree, and 10 percent went on to earn a graduate degree. While half of the group had never attended Adventist schools, the other half ranged from a year's attendance to having been enrolled for their entire school experience through graduate school. For example, 25 percent had received at least 8 years of Adventist education, 17 percent at least 12 years, and 7 percent at least 16 years.

### Religious Life

These Adventist parents were asked several questions about involvement in their local churches. For example, "If not prevented by unavoidable circumstances, how often do you attend church?" The great majority (84 per-

cent) said they attended at least once a week, with another 14 percent going two or three times a month. Not only that, but 62 percent said they held an office or other service position in their local congregations. Fewer were involved in outreach or witnessing activities: still, more than half participated on at least a monthly basis, and only 31 percent said they never engaged in share-your-faith activities. While 23 percent did not contribute a full 10 percent of their income to the church, a third said they gave 15 percent of their income or more, and 12 percent gave at least 20 percent of family income.

Religion, of course, involves more than just church-related behaviors. Respondents were asked how often they engaged in certain devotional practices. (See Figure 1.)

**Figure 1**  
**Frequency of Devotional Practices**

Practice	Daily	Seldom or Never
Pray privately	81 percent	2 percent
Study the Bible	40 percent	4 percent
Read religious literature	31 percent	5 percent
Family worship	34 percent	21 percent

In addition, 98 percent said that their religious faith was either extremely important or quite important to them.

Two further measures of religiosity were taken from the Christian Inter-

nalization Scale.<sup>1</sup> The identification subscale includes items thought to reflect internal control as related to religious belief and practice. The six items used in this study were:

- "I share my faith because God is important to me and I'd like others to know Him, too."
- "I pray because I find it satisfying."
- "I often experience the joy and peace which comes from knowing I am right with God."
- "I turn to God because I enjoy spending time with Him."
- "I attend church because by going I learn new things."
- "I turn to God because it is satisfying."

In previous research, Identification has been shown to correlate negatively with measures of anxiety and depres-

sion, and positively with measures of identity integration and self-actualization.

Subjects responded to each item with a four-point scale ranging from "not at all like me" (1) to "very much

like me" (4). The scores on each item were totaled, yielding a scale with a possible range of 6 to 24. Only 1 percent scored at 12 or below, 16 percent were moderate with scores between 13 and 18, 83 percent were at 19 or above, and a third received a full 24 points (they said that all six items were "very much like me").

In contrast, the second subscale, labeled Introjection, describes an orientation in which beliefs and practices are maintained through guilt or esteem-related anxiety. The four items used here were as follows:

- "I attend church because others would disapprove if I didn't."
- "I attend church because one is supposed to go."
- "I pray because God will disapprove if I don't."
- "I share my faith because I want other Christians to approve of me."

Ryan et al. report positive correlations between Introjection and anxiety and depression measures and negative correlations with self-esteem, identity integrations, and self-actualization.<sup>2</sup>

With a possible range of 4 to 16, 77 percent scored at 8 or below, 15 percent ranged between 9 and 11, and only 8 percent received scores of 12 or above. Nearly 38 percent received the minimum score of 4 (they held that all of the items were "not at all like me"). Apparently, these Adventist parents tended to be high on Identification and low on Introjection. That is, they were religiously motivated by attitudes conducive to mental health.

Several items were included that measure orthodoxy of views about inspiration. To the statement, "It is very important for true Christians to believe that the Bible is the infallible word of God," 91 percent said "it is very much like me" and another 7 percent declared that "it is somewhat like me." In responding to "I am sure the Bible contains no errors or contradictions," 67 percent chose "it is very much like me" and 18 percent "it is somewhat like me." Finally, 69 percent strongly agreed and 17 percent somewhat agreed with the statement: "Ellen White was inspired by God and

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her writings are an authoritative guide for Adventists today." Only 4 percent disagreed. By a number of measure, these Adventist parents seems to be solidly religious.

### **Parenting Styles**

Twenty items from the Child-Rearing Practices Report<sup>3</sup> were included to assess various parenting styles. These were grouped into six scales: Encouraging Independence, Exercising Strong Control, Using Rational Guidance and Reasoning, Punishing in Non-physical Ways, Expressing Affection to Children, and Conflict. Scores on these scales, as with Religious Orientation, were divided into low, moderate, and high. In the list below, the percentage that fell into each classification is given, along with two sample items for each.

*Encourage independence in children.* "I respect my child(ren)'s opinions and encourage them to express them." "I let my children make decisions for themselves."

- 1 percent low
- 13 percent moderate
- 86 percent high

*Exercise strong parental control.* "I do not allow my child(ren) to get angry with me." "I have strict, well-established rules for my child(ren)."

- 35 percent low
- 44 percent moderate
- 21 percent high

*Use methods of rational guidance and reasoning:* "I talk it over and reason with my child(ren) when they misbehave." "I make sure that my child(ren) know that I appreciate them when they try or succeed."

- 1 percent low
- 16 percent moderate
- 83 percent high

*Punish in non-physical ways:* "I punish my child(ren) by putting them off somewhere by themselves." "I punish my child(ren) by taking away a privilege."

- 17 percent low
- 53 percent moderate
- 30 percent high

*Express affection to children.* "I express affection by hugging, kissing, and holding my child(ren)." "My child(ren) and I have warm, intimate times together."

- 2 percent low
- 8 percent moderate
- 90 percent high

*Anger and conflict between parent and child.* "I often feel angry with my child(ren)." "There is a good deal of conflict between my child(ren) and me."

- 40 percent low
- 43 percent moderate
- 17 percent high

These Adventists tend to use sound parenting practices, especially in the areas of Independence, Rational Guidance, and Expressing Affection. A fifth may be over-controlling, and a sixth are too high on anger and conflict. But in general, they have learned effective parenting behaviors.

**Life-style Attitudes**

Children often reflect their parents' attitudes about acceptable social behavior, so the survey asked parents to what extent they agree with certain statements about life-style, particularly in the area of human sexuality. The percentages given in Figure 2 indicate those who agreed either strongly or somewhat with the positions described.

This does not mean that everyone else *disagreed* with each of these items. The percentages of those who are "uncertain" ranged from 5 percent on whether adultery is always wrong to 38 percent on the need to review the Adventist Church's present position on divorce. Less than a third *disagreed* with the latter item. In general, the parents were quite conservative. This shows up in the substantial majorities that rejected premarital sex, adultery, abortion, and homosexuality.

This list also contains some positive advice for our schools. As noted above, 70 percent agreed that our churches and church schools should provide sex education for our young people, 15 percent were uncertain, and only 15 percent disagreed.

**Abuse**

In recent years, the news media have devoted considerable attention to the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of children. Various people have speculated about how the incidence of such behavior in Christian (and specifically Adventist) settings might compare with that in the larger society. Respondents were asked: "To what extent are the following things problems in your local congregation?"

Obviously, Adventist congregations are not problem-free. Nearly half have had at least some problems with sexual abuse, more than half with physical abuse, and nearly three-fourths with emotional or verbal abuse. This should not be interpreted to mean that most Adventist families have these problems. There may be only one or a few cases in a congregation. Nevertheless, the church needs to address these concerns, and the

educational system may be able to make especially helpful contributions in these areas.

Had these parents ever been personally abused physically to the point of suffering scars, black and blue marks, welts, bleeding, or broken bones? Three-fourths said "never," but the rest reported such incidents, with 16 percent saying it had happened more than once and 6 percent claiming more than 10 times.

In addition, 14 percent said they had been sexually abused by an adult—8 percent by a family member, 2 percent by a church member, and 8 percent by some other person. All this suggests the urgency for a comprehensive and thoroughly Christian sex education program in all our churches and schools.

**Problems Can Be Opportunities**

Given this report, how can the

**Figure 2**  
**Percent Who Agreed Strongly or Somewhat With Statements**

Abortion is never an option for Christians.	48 percent
Abortion is wrong except for rape and incest, or to save the mother's life.	65 percent
Celibate homosexuals may be accepted into the church.	56 percent
Premarital sex is not wrong if there is real love.	8 percent
The Adventist position on divorce needs revision.	33 percent
Family planning through birth control should be encouraged.	69 percent
Sex in marriage should celebrate love and spiritual intimacy.	91 percent
Homosexual relationships may not be wrong in a lifetime commitment.	3 percent
Church/church school should provide sex education for youth.	70 percent
Remarriage after divorce is OK only for adultery or spouse's death.	52 percent
It is wrong for a married person to have sex with anyone but a spouse.	78 percent

**Figure 3**  
**Perceptions of Abuse in Local Congregation**

	None	Some	Big Problem
Physical abuse	45 percent	37 percent	18 percent
Emotional/verbal abuse	26 percent	50 percent	24 percent
Sexual abuse or incest	55 percent	25 percent	20 percent

church and the school work together most effectively? What opportunities do these problems offer?

The parents were asked what services they would like their local church to provide. To the list of services, they could respond: "absolutely essential," "very important," "somewhat important," or "not important." In Figure 4, the percentages represent the combined responses of those who chose either "absolutely essential" or "very important."

Adventist schools could incorporate some of these areas into the curriculum. They might also consider offering parent education in areas in which they possess competence. Then, because school administrators and teachers are also members of local congregations, such personnel could use their spiritual gifts to help congregations offer service aimed at

strengthening family life. As the ValneGenesis study has amply demonstrated, it is the *combined* effect of home, church, and school that produces the greatest and most-lasting results in faith development and religious commitment.<sup>4,5</sup>

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#### REFERENCES

1. R. M. Ryan, S. Rigby, and K. King, "Two Types of Religious Internalization and Their Relations to Religious Orientations and Mental Health," *Journal of Social Psychology and Personality* 65 (1993), pp. 586-596.
2. Ibid.
3. Sandra McNally, Nancy Eisenberg, and Jerry D. Harris, "Consistency and Change in Maternal Child-Rearing Practices and Values: A Longitudinal Study," *Child Development* 62:1 (February 1991), pp. 190-198.
4. See Roger L. Dudley with V. Bailey Gillespie, *ValueGenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992).

*Two-thirds of all congregations serving people with some problems with self-harm, more than half with physical abuse, and nearly three-quarters with emotional or mental illness.*



**Figure 4**  
**Services Desired From Local Church**

Premarital counseling or education	90 percent
Marriage strengthening programs	91 percent
Parent education	91 percent
Sex education	71 percent
Singles ministry	80 percent
Communication skills seminar	80 percent
Divorce recovery programs	80 percent
Family conflict management seminar	86 percent
Grief recovery programs	84 percent
Addiction recovery support groups	78 percent
Referral list of Christian family counselors	82 percent
Family counseling center	78 percent
Guidance in moral decision-making with Bible principles	88 percent