

LAWNMOWERS AND CHILDREN

*As educators, we
have a momentous
responsibility as we
deal with small
minds, hearts, and
feelings.*

It seems to me that hardly anything is more complex than lawnmowers and children. Never has anything been harder to understand or to get to work. Never has there been anything more exasperating or trying to one's patience.

There was a time when I could repair almost anything on a car. I have turned brake drums, put in clutches, ground valves, and overhauled carburetors. That is, until the past few years, when car manufacturers started using fuel injection and computers. Now I have to take my car to the shop to be fixed.

But like an old Model-T, a lawnmower has a pretty simple engine. You just pull the rope and it starts. If it doesn't start, it has too much choke or not enough. If the choke is OK and it still doesn't start, then there's either no spark or no gas. It's all very uncomplicated. So why have I for hours, day after day, year after year, pulled both arms out of their sockets trying to start my lawnmower?

I have a teacher friend with a Ph.D. and a wife who works. They have no children. So in comparative terms, as Adventist workers they are rich. He bought a new lawnmower. It has an eight-horsepower engine and a seat so he can ride while he mows. It has lights so he can mow his lawn at night. It has a grass catcher so he does not have to rake the lawn. And it starts with a key!

He brought it home and filled it with gas. After mowing half the lawn, it quit. He checked the gas and

the spark, but it wouldn't run. He called the company. They asked if the blade and the lawnmower were in gear, if it was out of gas, and if the switch was off. He said, "I've tried all those things and it won't start."

They said, "But it's brand new."

He said, "I know. That's why I'm calling you."

They said, "We can't come and get it because we are working on other people's lawnmowers that won't start either."

He said, "I have a Ph.D., a wife who works, and no children, so I can afford to own a pickup truck. I'll bring it to you."

Three days later, he went back to the company. They showed him what they had found in the gas tank—fuel with some water, rust, and other impurities. He said, "But it is such a little bit."

They said, "You have such a small engine and gas tank that it doesn't take many impurities to ruin it."

This long story illustrates a short lesson: "A few impurities can ruin a small engine."

As Adventist teachers, we don't work with small engines. We don't hammer nails in boards or fix leaky pipes. We work with small, young minds, so we must be careful what we put in those minds. There is a saying about computer programming: "garbage in, garbage out." It doesn't take much garbage (im-

purities) to ruin a small mind. As educators, we have a momentous responsibility as we deal with small

BY DON L. WEATHERALL

Picture
Removed

minds, hearts, and feelings.

William Bennett, former U.S. Secretary of Education, once stated that the greatest concern about education today is our failure to teach our children and students moral values. He is right to be concerned. The moral training of students is an important responsibility of our educational system. It is more important than teacher certification, up-to-date technology, or high test results, though all of these are worthy concerns. But the most important questions we should ask ourselves are these: Are we telling our students that Jesus loves them? Are we a living example of that love? What we do has far more effect than what we say.

We teachers are overworked. We come to work tired. We become impatient and raise our voices. We sometimes allow the actions of one or two students to affect our whole teaching program.

We scold the class for the actions of one or two. This makes good students feel guilty, but rarely affects the problem child. In fact, such students often become callous; they got away with misbehaving and they will try it again and again.

We get so caught up in our little day-to-day concerns and activities that we forget the reason we are here and our ultimate goal. While concentrating on our schedule and our program, we forget children have problems that often seem overwhelming to them. We forget that they need love and approval. If ever there was a place for giving affirmation, it is in the Seventh-day Adventist classroom.

Cindy

A while back, I attended a curriculum committee at a certain academy. We were

discussing curriculum guides and textbooks when the principal stopped us to tell a story. Cindy,* one of his sophomore day students, had received a number of “Down Slips.” The girl had been a good student the year before but was not turning in her assignments. Her mind was not on school or work.

The principal called her into his office. As he talked to her, Cindy opened her heart. Her mother had walked out on the family during the summer, leaving behind a husband and three children—Cindy and two younger siblings in grade school. When she left, the mother told the girl, “I never want to see you again.”

The father left each morning at 6:00 for work some distance away. Cindy got the two younger children up, fed them, sent them off to school, and went to school herself. She worked three to four hours each day after school. She then went home, cleaned the house, washed and ironed clothes, and made supper for the family.

Cindy was a full-time student, employee, mother, and housekeeper. On top of everything else, an “understanding aunt” had come and complained about the food the children were eating and criticized the way Cindy dressed, telling her that she should wear a dress rather than slacks to school.

While in the principal’s office, Cindy broke down and cried. She didn’t want to be a mother and a housekeeper. She wanted to be a teenager and a student.

This had been going on for months, but not a teacher knew what Cindy was going through. Yes, they knew the mother had left (wasn’t it awful), but that was last summer and this is October, so everyone had forgotten.

We brag about being a caring church. The epitome of a caring church is the caring church school teacher, yet not one knew or had taken time to find out how desperate was Cindy’s situation.

Jim

Every teacher knew Jim. He was smart but lazy. He cut up and bothered the other students. Though he never studied, he was always able to pass. He rarely showed up for work. When he did show up, he didn’t work and usually caused those he “worked” with not to work either. He had been fired from sev-

eral campus jobs.

The first two years he got by, but his junior year was different. His orneriness turned to meanness. He committed several serious offenses, and at the end of the year, his reapplication was denied. The week before school started, he and his parents begged for him to be allowed to return. He was allowed in on strict probation.

The attitude of the staff was, "He is no good, and will never be of any value to himself, his parents, the school, church, or God. If we could just get rid of him, the school would be better off. The other students would line up because they would see we meant business. In fact, the students don't respect us because we let him back in."

Jim hadn't changed. He was just smarter and more careful. Everyone was sure he was doing something bad and if we could just catch him, the problem would be solved.

Then one night it happened. We had him. He had slipped out of the dorm at night with non-SDA girls, gone to town in their car, talked the girls into letting him drive back to school, and then turned the car over and wrecked it. He was in trouble with the police, the girls' parents, and his parents—and we were home free. We needed only to call the meeting that evening and make it official.

During the afternoon, I called Jim in and we talked. I went through the long list of things he had done over the years. I told him about the scheduled staff meeting and the probable outcome. As we talked, I suddenly realized that Jim wasn't the same. He had changed; he had grown up. The more I listened, the more I realized that we had something to work with now, and it would be a mistake to let him go. But I was the only one who knew.

I went to the meeting and said I needed to explain something. A faculty member spoke up, "Fine, but first things first. I move that we expel Jim and call his parents to get him off campus tonight." The motion was followed by a chorus of seconds. With that, the faculty celebrated. It was the Day of Jubilation, the Year of Jubilee.

Then I told them about my talk with Jim that afternoon. The discussion went

The most important questions we should ask ourselves are these: Are we telling our students that Jesus loves them? Are we a living example of that love?

on for hours. I talked; they disagreed. The decision hung on whether I had written a letter the previous summer detailing his probationary status. If I had, he was out. If I had not, then he could stay, but I was in trouble. I told them I would look for the letter and follow through on the action the following day.

I went to my office and got the letter. It was very clear; he was on strict probation—if he did anything more, he was out. I went home and prayed, then tossed and turned all night.

I called a faculty meeting for the next night. At the meeting, I read the letter and explained that they had every right to take the action they had, but as a principal I was overriding it.

It is the principal's role to tell his or her staff where to draw the line, what to teach in what order, and when they are on or off duty. The principal has almost complete control of their life and being. But there is one thing that a principal does not control on an academy campus. The faculty decides what students will be accepted and expelled. I had just overridden that prerogative. I dismissed the meeting before they realized what had happened. I went to my office, called the conference president, and told him what I had done.

The outcome was unbelievable. We had the best second se-

mester of my 17 years of teaching. Jim came to my office a few days later and asked if we could have a student week of prayer. I didn't want to discourage him, but neither did I want him telling faculty and students how to live their lives after the way he had lived his. I wanted him to have the lowest profile of anyone on the campus! But I suggested that he plan something, give me the details, and then we would see—thinking that would be the end of it. Two days later, he was back. He brought lists of speakers that he had lined up, their topics, song leaders, special music, prayer band leaders—everything was planned from Sunday morning through Sabbath church.

We had the best week of prayer I ever attended. Jim started prayer bands in the dormitories. He convinced students to turn out in droves for Sabbath afternoon activities. Single-handedly, he turned that campus around for good. We finished the school year on a tremendous high.

At graduation, he stood before me. Both of us had tears in our eyes. His classmates gave him a standing ovation. He picked me up and squeezed me tight.

I saw him a year later at La Sierra University. He told about his dormitory prayer band and showed me a paper he was printing about student outreach programs at the college. He was a happy

C L A Y
ANONYMOUS

I took a pat of potters clay
And carefully fashioned it one day.
And with my fingers running still
It bent and yielded to my will.

I came again when days were passed.
That bit of clay was hard at last.
The form I gave it, still it bore
And I could change it never more.

I took a piece of living clay
And gently formed it day by day
And molded with my power and art
A young child's soft and yielding heart.

I came again when years were gone.
It was a man I looked upon,
Who still that early impress bore
And I could change it never more.

Picture
Removed

Christian. Years later, I saw him at an alumni weekend. A successful businessman with a family, he was a faithful member of his local church.

I know that many teachers who read this will question my overruling the staff. I admit that such a thing should rarely be done. The only time I did it, it turned out to be successful. After school let out, several staff members told me that while they hadn't approved at the time, the end had more than justified the action.

By the way, I never told Jim that the faculty voted for him to leave. I did tell him that he deserved to go, but that I had convinced the staff that he had changed and deserved another chance, and that I depended on him to not let me down.

Karen

I was asked to make some presentations at a teachers' convention outside my territory. After the first meeting, one of the teachers asked if I remembered her. Her face was familiar, but I couldn't

*We get so caught up
in our little day-to-
day concerns and
activities that we
forget the reason we
are here and our
ultimate goal.*

place her name. When she told me, I immediately remembered that she had been a senior during my first year of principalship. (If only I could forget that first year!)

At graduation, I had asked each student to stand before the audience as I shared some facts about them, such as

offices they had held and their personal attributes. Karen suddenly asked if I remembered what I had said about her at her graduation. This was 18 years earlier, and since I had followed this practice for 10 years, you can imagine the turmoil my mind was going through.

Before I could speak, Karen reminded me that I had said she had the prettiest smile on campus, which she always wore and shared with everyone she met. She told me she remembered what I had said each morning as she drove to her school. Before she got out of the car, she always prayed she would wear her smile all day and that her students would never see her without it.

I have thought about Karen many times since . . . how one little statement so many years ago has affected her life every day since and the hundreds of lives she has touched as a result. I have thought with chagrin of times when I was insensitive to a student, when I put students down, when I turned them off to what I was teaching, off to my influence as a friend and counselor, off to the church. Some of those times haunt me. I have searched out former students and tried to make amends.

As Seventh-day Adventist teachers, we have a tremendous responsibility. The words we use, the tone of voice, and the indirect teaching that takes place have far more implications than the subject matter we dispense. As Seventh-day Adventist teachers, we don't drive lawnmowers for a living. We don't hammer nails or fix leaking pipes. We deal with minds: young untainted, unpolluted minds that are open to the love that Jesus has for them as illustrated by our dealings with them. Some may be callous to our efforts. However, the great majority will respond to Christ's love when demonstrated in the life of a dedicated, caring teacher. ☺

* Names have been changed to protect the students' privacy.

Dr. Don L. Weatherall is Assistant Director for Secondary Education for the North American Division of SDA Office of Education, and writes from Lilburn, Georgia. This article is based on a devotional that he gave at a Carolina Conference teachers' convention in August 1994.