The following article provides a description of Creation Kids Village (CKV), an outreach ministry of the Celebration Seventh-day Adventist Church to urban southwest Orlando, Florida. The description will focus on the program’s mission to reach urban families through wholistic lifestyle-based ministries. This article describes an innovative approach to early-childhood education that may be replicated in other urban areas, and seeks to stimulate readers to find creative ways of reaching urban children and families.

The Mission of Early-childhood Development

Scripture makes it clear that early-childhood development (birth to age 7) encompasses the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Luke's description of the early development of John and Jesus follow a similar pattern. Luke 2:40 says, "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" (NKJV). This developmental pattern is also clearly seen in the early childhood of Moses, Samuel, Josiah, and Joash and continues as God’s desire for every child today.

The biblical model for child development was important to the co-founder of the Adventist Church. Ellen White articulated this commitment: “The lessons learned, the habits formed, during the years of infancy and childhood, have more to do with the formation of the character and the direction of the life than have all the instructions and training of after years.”

From their first breath to their first day in formal schooling, children grow at a rate never again experienced in life as the brain, body, and spirit expand. In the first year, a child’s brain doubles in size; and by age 3, it reaches 75 percent of its adult volume. Fueling this
growth are the neurons, which pass the information being absorbed by the child along an information superhighway via neural connection pathways known as synapses, which are developed at an astounding 700 connections each second during the first five years. It is these connections that shape our capacity to sense, communicate, and engage the world by expressing our feelings and thoughts. As children’s minds expand, their bodies grow rapidly.

During these early years, spiritual development is critical. In “Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions,” George Barna illustrates the importance of spiritual growth in early childhood: “By the age of 13 your spiritual identity is largely set. The probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her Savior was 32 percent for those between the ages of 5 and 12; 4 percent for those in the 13- to 18-age range; and 6 percent for people 19 or older. In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.”

The Urban Challenge—The Changing Home

James Brooks, New York Times bestselling author, concluded in 2008 that by the age of 5, it is possible to predict with uncommon accuracy which children will complete high school and college. Brooks references Nobel Laureate David Heckman, who has done extensive research on the subject. Heckman identifies “the quality of parenting” as central to identifying young people likely to successfully complete high school and college.

Since the 1960s, the family unit in America has undergone remarkable changes as described in an excellent paper published by Harvard University entitled “The Spread of Single-Parent Families in the United States Since 1960.” For purposes of this article, we will focus on three significant factors in the changing family landscape that have increased the need for quality early-childhood education: the shift toward mothers as the main breadwinner; the urbanization of the United States; and the growth in media viewing by young children.

In the past 50 years, a dramatic shift in the primary source of income for American families has occurred. In 1960, 11 percent of mothers were the main wage earner. By 2011, this number had nearly quadrupled, to 40 percent. This shift also correlated to a decrease in time spent by mothers with their newborns. Recent statistics indicate that 75 percent of U.S. mothers work full-time in the first year of their child’s life. In the United States, maternity leave is typically six weeks or less, which results in a majority of infants entering a childcare setting before they reach 2 months of age.

While it may be necessary for parents to work in order to support their families, the impact on child development, attachment, and learning must be considered. The increased stress experienced to balance work, finances, and parenting responsibilities is further complicated when children are being raised by a single parent and/or in impoverished conditions.

The need for early-childhood care and education has risen considerably over the past 50 years. In 1965, 28 percent of American preschool-age children (3 to 5 years old) were enrolled in childcare. By 2011, that number had grown to 61 percent.

Urbanization, which is the process of increasing population growth in cities and suburbs and usually includes the increase of industrialization, is another major factor that strongly contributes to the need for quality early education. By 2008, 50 percent of the world’s population resided in urban areas, and the United Nations estimates that 4.9 billion people will live in urban areas by 2030. With the global migration into cities, the typical rural network of extended families living in close proximity no longer exists. The isolated family unit with minimal support from extended family has become the norm in urban environments. Research has found that the loss of the rural family support structure has significantly increased the demand for childcare by families in urban areas.

The third major factor differs from the others since it does not drive the need for quality early education; instead, it influences the need for early-childhood programs to implement quality curriculum and instructional approaches. The rise in young children’s media exposure is an area of concern for everyone, but especially teachers and parents. In 2013, a study by Common Sense Media found that 38 percent of children under 2 years old use a mobile device and spend twice as much time in front of a screen than having someone read to them. The University of Michigan reported that, on average, children ages 2 to 5 spend 32 hours a week in front of a TV. The amount of screen time logged by young children can have alarming health implications.

A study in Pediatrics noted, “just 9 minutes of viewing a fast-paced television cartoon had immediate negative effects on 4-year-olds’ executive function.” Further, over the past three decades, childhood obesity rates have tripled in the United States. Today, one out of six U.S. children is obese, and one out of three children is overweight or obese with media time serving as a major factor. In a longitudinal study that evaluated a group of children at age 3 and then again at age 4-and-a-half, researchers found that just by being awake in the room with the TV on, more than two hours a day, served as a leading risk factor for obesity in children. Whether under direct parental supervision and care or in an early-childhood center, the impact of increased media exposure on children must receive intentional focus. Early-childhood educators must model and provide guidance for the intentional and appropriate use of technology and interactive media through both the
curriculum and effective instructional approaches, so that media use supports learning and development and does not replace developmentally appropriate practices.22

The Power of Early Education

Despite all that is known about the importance of early intentional and purposeful care and education, many children do not receive the preparation needed to ensure the best possible start to a life full of learning, growth, and balance. Childcare centers increasingly have become part of many youngsters’ most formative years, and have had to address the mental and physical health issues brought on by disconnected family dynamics, increased urbanization, and the impact of the technological age. In 2008, Nobel Laureate James Heckman presented compelling research that supports the importance of a wholistic approach to quality early-childhood education.23 He firmly believes in the ability of early education to provide many families with the vital partnership necessary to return quality parenting to the home. Heckman asserts, “Programs that target the early years seem to have the greatest promise. Programs with home visits affect the lives of the parents and create a permanent change in the home environment that supports the child after center-based interventions end. Programs that build character and motivation that do not focus exclusively on cognition appear to be the most effective.”24 These character-based early-education programs have a remarkable economic impact. “For every dollar invested in high quality early childhood education produces a 7-10% per annum return in better education, health, social and economic outcomes.”25 Three further significant studies support the impact of early education on forever changing children’s lives within an urban setting. To view these studies, visit http://www.creationdevelopment.org.26

Creation Kids Village

In the early 1990s, the Disney Development Company (DDC) set out to transform Walt Disney’s vision for EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) into a reality. The goal was to create a town in southeast Orlando, Florida, built on five cornerstones: health, education, community, place, and technology. World-renowned architects took Disney’s vision and designed Celebration as a new and exciting place to live, work, and play.27

With health serving as a cornerstone, Disney solicited bids from around the world for partners to build a world-class hospital. Florida Hospital, part of Adventist Health Systems, proposed to create a city based on healthy lifestyles embraced by Adventists. To inform and fulfill this purpose, the team developed the CREATION Health acronym based on the eight letters in the word and drawn from principles of health established at creation—Choice, Rest, Environment, Activity, Trust, Interpersonal Skills, Outlook, Nutrition.28 This acronym also embraces the components of the historic Adventist philosophy. CREATION Health is an Adventist lifestyle that has been researched, tested, and proved to create healthy habits that will lead to a healthy future.29 Many Americans have reached a level of awareness of the need for health improvement that had given rise to a demand for health-focused early-childhood education.

After evaluating other potential hospital partners, DDC selected Florida Hospital. A vibrant Adventist hospital must be led by skilled Adventist professionals who work and live in the community. This need focused the efforts of both Florida Hospital and the Florida Conference to planting and growing a Seventh-day Adventist church in Celebration. The decision was made to organize the church ministry around CREATION Health. This enabled the church and hospital to share one vision and communicate it with one voice.

The vision for CREATION Health included the Creation Kids Village (CKV), giving it a unique platform for ministry. Orlando is the most visited destination in the United States, with more than 57 million visitors from around the world in 2012.30 Celebration is located in the Orlando Metro area and is the 26th largest city in the United States.31 The Celebration community was designed to provide housing for both Disney management and hourly employees. Accordingly, the 4,060 housing units are split almost evenly between single-family homes and condos/apartments. Thus, while the median income in Celebration is nearly double that of the state of Florida, the reality is a mixed-income community with large discrepancies in income, much like a large metropolitan area.32

In this upper-middle-class Caucasian neighborhood, residents have higher levels of education, pay higher rent, and earn higher per-capita income than people in surrounding areas.33 The town exists within the larger community, which has high levels of poverty, homelessness, and lower faith commitments.34

Faced with great needs and few resources, the Celebration Adventist church congregation prayed for God’s leading and conducted several needs-based studies of both the hospital and the community. They concluded that God was calling them to meet the need for wholistic, quality education and childcare in Celebration.

The next step was to form a planning team, Developing Adventist Excellence (DAE), to create a mission, vision, and strategy. Its early-education center would become the first phase in the development of an Adventist Health Education Campus. DAE determined that wholistic health-focused childcare would provide a wonderful opportunity to partner with families in raising healthy children.
Creation Kids Village officially opened August 1, 2013. As of May 2015, it is at capacity serving more than 160 families with a quality, affordable program. The cost of tuition is on average 15 percent below the typical cost for the area. The center has kept the fees low because of its commitment to create a model of superior and affordable Christian childcare. Further, the 20 percent of participating families who are financially disadvantaged are enabled to enroll their children in the center because of its lower tuition, state-provided programs such as Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK), and the scholarships provided.

The Mission

Creation Kids Village is founded on the mission to grow children in mind, body, and spirit for Christ so they can ultimately live life “abundantly” (John 10:10). This biblical vision of whole-child development forms the foundation of the Adventist philosophy of education: “True education means more than the perusal of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole person, and with the whole period of existence possible to human beings. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”

Creation Kids Village is patterned after the Head Start early childhood model, which seeks “to bring about a greater degree of social competence in children of low-income families. Social competence means the child’s everyday effectiveness in dealing with both the present environment and later responsibilities in school and in life.” Head Start strives to meet not only the educational needs of children, but also their social, emotional, nutritional, and environmental needs. Yet, there is no religious component to Head Start. Creation Kids Village provides the bonus of a Seventh-day Adventist wholistic worldview. Not only are educational and care services provided, but
also on-site counseling and psychological services, pediatric services, parenting support classes, services for children with disabilities, as well as extra-curricular activities such as karate and gymnastics.

CREATION Health serves as the framework for Creation Kids Village. Its principles form the basis for the programming for young children, their families, and the community. Philosophically, CREATION Health also connects the childcare center to the local Adventist church and Florida Hospital Celebration Health. Examples of the ways the center actualizes the CREATION Health principles in the lives of the children are provided below. More information can be found on the Website (http://www.creationkidsvillage.com).

• **Choice:** This early-education program engages children in age-appropriate character-based learning through an emerging project approach. They learn to make healthy choices about study, play, rest, and food.

• **Rest:** Time for resting the body and the mind is built into the schedule. Teachers emphasize this principle in a variety of ways. Through example, children establish their own pace according to their needs, learning to slow down and take time to make the best choices. The children are guided to self-monitor in order to manage their emotions and better enjoy their day. CKV provides a place of rest from screen time, which relieves the children’s brains of the effects of constant agitation from TV and mobile-device interaction.

• **Environment:** CKV’s learning areas are designed to maximize natural light. Its active learning centers incorporate emerging curriculum and project-based learning. Center designers created an 11,000-square-foot garden playscape to inspire children to explore, learn, and play outdoors. Central to the playscape are two “outdoor classrooms”: a butterfly habitat and an organic edible garden. The butterfly habitat is home to a variety of native wildlife, which connect children to the cycles of life and the wonder, beauty, and science of God’s creation. The organic vegetable garden, based on the Back to Eden gardening method developed by Paul Gautschi, allows the children to seed, transplant, grow, harvest, prepare, and eat organic fruits and vegetables. The remainder of the playscape features natural elements (tropical beach, gazebo, forest hill slide, treehouse, music, and art garden) that foster a world of adventure and imagination.

• **Activity:** The center focuses on the physical health and well-being of the children to ensure that they grow up safe and strong. Motor skills development, coordination, mobility, and exercise all help ensure that they acquire a solid physical-health foundation. The children engage in nearly two hours of outdoor play every day, which helps them grow in a multitude of ways: mind, body, and spirit. The program also integrates several creative-movement workshops focused on getting children active through music, movement, imagination, and discovery. CKV also offers enrichment activities focusing on dramatic play and musical expression. By promoting physical activity, the program also supports the Rest and Nutrition principles by preparing the body and mind for both.

• **Trust in God:** At CKV, children enjoy a safe, nurturing home away from harm.
from home where they can express themselves and appreciate their own unique identities. They gain comfort and confidence through trusting relationships based on the staff’s belief and image of each child as a unique and intelligent individual, strong and beautiful, with dreams, desires, and ambitions. Love, the foundation for healthy children and the building blocks upon which the CKV program stands, empowers children to know God, how He formed them, and why He wants them to live life to the full! Instilling God’s love for each child is the core for the center’s daily routines, lessons, and all other activities.

- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Children communicate with others verbally and nonverbally to engage and create an understanding of the world around them. The children at the center make new friends and gain the confidence, self-esteem, and negotiating skills necessary for a lifetime of healthy relationships. One of the keys to a healthy social life is finding fulfillment through helping others. In a “give me” world, CKV seeks to create giving hearts. Teaching children to move together toward a resolution versus moving back in alienation is the focus. The teachers identify daily learning opportunities where children can work through and understand their actions, consequences, and methods for managing emotions within a relationship. This helps them to develop relationships with boundaries based on love.

- **Outlook:** The children are taught to intentionally seek to meet the needs of others, which not only reduces selfishness and loneliness, but also adds meaning, significance, and purpose to their lives. The center emphasizes Conscious Discipline, which integrates social-emotional learning, discipline, and self-regulation. Through these important life skills, the teachers help children learn how to manage lifelong stress with grace and to find solutions that transform everyday problems into life lessons. By establishing a culture of com-

Left: Learning areas are designed to maximize natural light. Above: Creation Kids Village students build interpersonal relationships and develop physical health and wellbeing as they play together. Right: The gazebo is another central feature of the 11,000-square-foot playscape.
passion, the employees build positive connections that positively affect family relationships and the community.

- **Nutrition:** Creation Kids Village seeks to promote healthy eating habits while demonstrating how to enjoy good foods. CKV serves a vegetarian menu focused on organic foods. The meals are prepared daily by a chef and enjoyed family-style in the classroom, which enhances relationships and builds social skills. The children help plant, grow, and then harvest the fruit and vegetables from the center’s organic garden. This edible schoolyard provides a great environment where children can learn where food comes from, and what best fuels their body and mind.

### Meeting a Need

CKV serves families on both ends of the socio-economic spectrum in the urban Orlando area. The diversity of its clientele encourages the staff to stretch their abilities to meet the needs of children and families from all walks of life. Some of the center’s practices that have made a significant difference include the following:

- **A Mutually Embraced Philosophy Throughout the Program Culture:** Because CREATION Health permeates every aspect of this program, this allows leaders to focus on those things that unite them. Additionally, it enables the center to connect its program to the homes of clients. As the principles of CREATION Health are modeled and taught, the staff hear from parents how they are implementing some of the principles at home. Local families within the community say that they treasure health, values, and comprehensive services as the main factors in deciding where to place their children. The majority of the families whose children are enrolled in CKV are non-Adventists yet strongly favor the center’s instilling the CREATION Health principles in their children. Most of the families are non-vegetarian, but they want the best for their children and thus favor the center’s emphasis on a natural, organic, plant-based diet.
• **One-Stop Shop:** The leadership of CKV recognizes that while the center plays an important part in the lives of children and families, it is only one of many communities in which children and families interact. Recognizing the frenetic pace of the lives of most of the families, the center has subsumed many of the services that families would typically use under one roof. Thus, the CKV has developed relationships with CREATION Health Kids, Tupperware, DoTerra Essential Oils, Celebration Fitness Centre, X-Factor Gymnastics, Les Mills, Creative Workshops, a pediatric physician, and a family and developmental psychologist, several of which are located at Creation Kids Village so they can provide immediate services to the families while concurrently expanding the CKV’s revenue sources. Thus far, the staff members of CKV report that local families are increasingly seeking quality care and development for their children that is provided by a childcare center. Because the parents have little quality time to spend with their children, they are pleased to have a wide array of services provided in one location, which increases the time they can spend with their children.

• **Community Outreach:** The personnel at CKV regard the center as an integral contributor to the local community in which they reside and serve. They are intricately involved in local activities, such as marching in the Fourth of July parade, and work closely with the Celebration church community. For example, in order to better reach the community, the church transitioned its children’s Sabbath school programs into the CKV facility. These are advertised locally and at the center as a Saturday morning story hour. This has resulted in an increase of quality programming and resources, and greater participation by both church families and community members. In addition, a rising number of CKV families attend the Sabbath Story Hour, finding it convenient to spend Sabbath morning in a familiar location with familiar teachers so their children can learn more about the Bible.

• **Partnerships:** The staff of the CKV center believe that working collaboratively will enable them to accomplish much. Thus, administrators work closely with Florida Hospital and the Celebration Adventist church. In a broader collaboration, the center is partnering with the North American Division (NAD) to launch the CREATION Kids Early Childhood Curriculum and spread the message of CREATION Health to many of the approximately 200 NAD church-based childcare programs in the U.S. and Canada, as well as thousands of faith-based programs around the world. CKV has been chosen to serve as the demonstration and training site, modeling the most effective and developmentally appropriate practices in early-childhood education as well as the most successful approaches to integrating the principles of CREATION Health within an early-childhood program.

**Challenges**

While there have been numerous successes, program development has not been without its challenges, a significant one of which is recruitment and retention of quality teachers. CKV’s commitment to excellence begins with the hiring of caring, nurturing, and...
competent staff. It is able to do so by providing competitive wages, benefits, and professional development, as well as opportunities for growth. Minimum qualifications for lead teachers in early-childhood education typically include a minimum of 90 hours in child development; however, in addition to the minimum, the center seeks candidates with experience and training in the preferred methodologies in addition to those who are interested in advancing their education. The majority of CKV teachers have an associate’s degree; lead teachers hold bachelor’s degrees.

One of the greatest challenges, however, has been funding. Opening such a center with the Celebration Adventist church’s limited financial capacity, in a city with extremely expensive land and building costs, seemed like an overwhelming challenge. After exploring alternatives, it was decided to form the Creation Development Foundation (CDF), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that could raise the money to finance the project and obtain the credit to obtain a loan.

CDF’s organizational structure is patterned after other types of Adventist philanthropy. In partnership with the conference, hospital, and local church, CDF raised the necessary funds to build Phase 1 of CREATION Health Education Campus, the 20,000-square-foot Zwart Learning Center that is home to Creation Kids Village. Through philanthropy, the project has raised $2 million since 2010 from Adventists and non-Adventists because the donors believe in the vision. A growing portion of the funds raised is now channeled into scholarships for disadvantaged families.

**Conclusion**

Against the backdrop of the urban setting and challenges of modern parenting, we believe that the model at Creation Kids Village can serve as a platform to prepare and invigorate families to experience the fullness of life in Christ. The Creation Kids Village is currently collecting assessment data by surveying its key stakeholders, early-childhood assessment measures, and holding ongoing meetings with parents and staff to solicit their thoughts and opinions. More specifically, the leadership is attempting to determine the lifestyle impact on children and their families due to increased outdoor activity, strong interaction with the natural environment, establishing a relationship with God, and a natural vegetarian diet. As the program grows, this data will enable the center to improve its services to both children and their families.

It is our hope that the Creation Kids Village model will serve as a catalyst for Adventist churches around the world, and inspire our educators to consider the potential of reaching cities worldwide through providing quality education, care, support, and ministry to young children and their families.

*This article has been peer reviewed.*

**The authors wish to express appreciation to Davenia J. Lea, Ph.D., of the North American Division Office of Education for her contributions to this article.**
Des Cummings Jr., Ph.D., is Executive Vice President at Florida Hospital, one of America’s largest hospitals. He earned his doctoral degree in Leadership and Management with emphasis in Statistical Forecasting from Andrews University. He holds a Master of Divinity degree and is an ordained minister of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The author and co-author of three books and numerous articles, Dr. Cummings speaks to national and international conferences on the future of health care, specializing in strategies for whole person care, healthy communities, and the hospital of the future. He co-authored CREATION Health Discovery and writes from Celebration, Florida.

Derek Cummings, M.B.A., currently serves as President and Chairman of Creation Development Foundation, a non-profit education organization in Florida which also serves as a grant partner for Creation Kids Village. Mr. Cummings graduated from Columbia Union College (now Washington Adventist University) with a B.A. in History/Pre-Law. After college, he worked for two years in Shanghai, China, as a teacher, then returned to the U.S.A., where he joined a technology start-up while obtaining an M.B.A. and worked for 12 years in the field of technology managing business units, designing communications solutions, and creating new businesses. He writes from Celebration, Florida.

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
5. Ibid.
6. George Barna, Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2003), p. 34.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
29. Ibid.