

**S**mall children should be left as free as lambs, to run out of doors, to be free and happy, and should be allowed the most favorable opportunities to lay the foundation for sound constitutions.<sup>1</sup> For more than 100 years, this statement has been the authoritative counsel for Seventh-day Adventist parents and educators. Early childhood education and group care (ECEC) have not been part of the conventional Adventist paradigm. Many times, the question has been asked: “Are we working in opposition to biblical and Spirit of Prophecy counsel when we promote the operation of ECEC programs?”

Although I am an early childhood educator and coordinator for the early childhood education and care division of a union conference, I still concur with the traditional Adventist belief that young children, prior to entrance into formal schooling, should be in the home, taught and cared for by loving parents.

#### **Empirical Backing for Adventist Traditions**

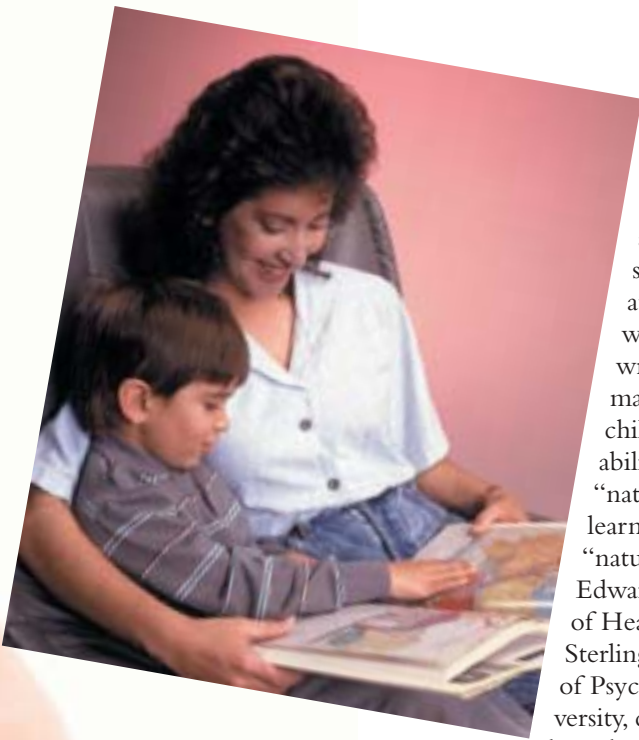
As with other traditional Adventist teachings, empirical research consistently authenticates the wisdom of our heritage. Both past and current research reveal that children who stay at home between birth and 8 years of age, cared for and taught by a loving and attentive mother *and* father, are more successful and balanced in all areas of life than those children who do not have the same early environment.<sup>2</sup>

According to David Elkind, professor of child development at Tufts University, “children who receive academic instruction too early—gener-



# ADVENTIST EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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ally before age six or seven—are often put at risk. . . taught the wrong things at the wrong time. . . ,” permanently damaging children’s belief in their abilities, reducing their “natural eagerness to learn,” and blocking their “natural gifts and talents.”<sup>3</sup> Edward Zigler, co-founder of Head Start and current Sterling Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University, concurs: “There is a

large body of evidence indicating that there is little if anything to be gained by exposing middle-class children to early education.”<sup>4</sup>

Rebecca Marcon, a developmental psychologist and a professor of psychology at the University of North Florida, has concluded from research that “[c]hildren’s . . . long-term progress may be slowed by . . . [introducing] formalized learning experiences too early for most children’s developmental status. Pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grades and are required to think more independently and take on greater responsibility for their own learning process.”<sup>5</sup>

Recent research on the effects of time spent in childcare demonstrates that smaller care settings are much more beneficial for the young child than larger, institutionalized settings—regardless of the adult/child ratio. According to empirical research, home-based and faith-based centers do indeed provide higher-quality care and nurture, which in turn enhances children’s social, emotional, and academic success.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, no research supports the assumption that enrolling middle-class and upper-class children in preschool will increase their academic, emotional, and social skills. In

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fact, it may produce negative outcomes.

### **Society Versus Family**

Unfortunately, for the vast majority of children, the ideal scenario of care by one or both parents in the home is not a reality. Over the past century, diverse sociological and political factors have had a huge impact on families and child-raising. These include increased mobility and immigration, nuclear families, high divorce rates, teenage pregnancy and single parenthood, societal disdain for “women’s work,” better-educated mothers with demanding careers, anti-family legislation and taxation, wars and natural disasters, the high cost of living, the change from an industrial to a service economy, promiscuity, the increasing gap between rich and poor, and over-indulgence in pleasure-seeking behaviors.

These trends have led to the disintegration of the traditional family structure and made it more difficult for people to care for their children at home. Although childcare advocates see these trends as creating a demand for universal early childhood education, Public Agenda found that “parents of young children believe that having a full-time parental presence at home is what’s best for very young children and it is what most

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would prefer for their own family.”<sup>7</sup> Without question, the intact home where family members can provide love, training, and protection during the earliest years remains the ideal educational environment.

### **The Early Childhood Education Frenzy**

Although a child’s formative years are the responsibility of the parents and extended family, the reality of societal trends has placed a heavy burden upon schools and social structures. Politicians, corporations, teacher unions, and professional organizations have seized upon the results of three studies purporting to show profound and long-term benefits from quality early childhood education. However, the results of these studies cannot be generalized to all American families, as the demographics of the participants were not representative of the larger population.<sup>8</sup>

## ***In order to help meet the needs of society, Seventh-day Adventists have a responsibility to offer appropriate instruction and to lead children to Christ.***

In addition, the environments were not representative, as they included home visits, individualized education activities, and teacher/child ratios of 1:5. All three studies concentrated on severely disadvantaged minority children, some at risk for retarded mental performance. Furthermore, the studies have not been replicated with a broader cross-section

of young children.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these over-publicized studies, the changing social structure of families, working parents, parental concern about their children’s perceived academic deficiencies, language barriers, behavioral disturbances, test scores, and socialization skills, “experts” have convinced many parents that they need to enroll their young children in out-of-home care for early educational opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

### **Benefits of Early Learning Environments**

Both public and private entities have responded by recommending reliable, high-quality, safe, and instructive care for young children. The term “developmentally appropriate practice” (DAP) has become a cliché signifying the necessity to provide both education *and* care.

A developmentally appropriate preschool environment can provide





long-term benefits if the program is not overly academic. Developmental appropriateness has two dimensions: age and individualization. Experts in child development have produced a framework that teachers can use to shape the learning environment and plan appropriate experiences. These programs seek to promote physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development that is appropriate for the age of the child.

Individual appropriateness focuses on enhancing children's abilities while also challenging their interests, understanding, and critical-thinking skills. Factors to be considered include the child's individual pattern and timing of growth, personality, learning style, coping skills, and family background.

The benefits of DAP have been verified repeatedly by developmental psychologists and educational researchers. Many of these were enumerated by Marcon in her 2002 quasi-experimental follow-up study:<sup>11</sup>

- A positive classroom climate that is conducive to children's healthy emotional development;
- Lower levels of exhibited stress and greater motivation to learn;
- Increased comprehension and verbal skills, greater creativity, and higher levels of cognitive functioning;
- Higher achievement scores throughout their primary grade years; and
- Smoother transitions from primary to later elementary grades with academic gains holding constant.

The preschool teacher's role is critical—he or she must plan, observe, and guide learning through direct instruction, environmental support, appropriate materials, and thoughtful questioning strategies. “Without a nurturing, playful, responsive environment, an academic focus may diminish children's engagement and motivation. But a ‘child-centered’ environment that lacks intellectual challenges also falls short of what curious young learners deserve.”<sup>12</sup> Young children's academic aptitude can be significantly shaped if

the teacher focuses and individualizes the environment and activities in the areas of organization, coordination, cooperation, and independence.

### **Adventist Early Childhood Education**

How do the studies cited above relate to Adventist preschools? It will be helpful to review the goals of Adventist education at this point. Ellen White wrote that “the purpose of education is to qualify [children] for usefulness in this life and for the future life in the kingdom of God.”<sup>13</sup> Elaborating on this, the North American Division (NAD) Office of Edu-

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cation published this philosophy statement in their Journey to Excellence document:

“Adventist education seeks to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator; to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others' thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual's potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.”<sup>14</sup>

The Pacific Union Conference Education Code provides more detail: “The primary aim of Seventh-day Adventist education is to provide opportunity for students to accept Christ as their Savior, to allow the Holy Spirit to transform their lives, and to fulfill the commission of preaching the gospel to all the world. Seventh-day Adventist education has a two-fold mission. The school's primary role is to educate and to spiritually strengthen Seventh-day Adventist youth. In addition, the school is to serve as a mission outreach to the community.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Responsibility**

In order to help meet the needs of society and to fulfill the gospel commission, Seventh-day Adventists have a responsibility to offer appropriate instruction and to lead children to Christ. We have been counseled that “as soon as the child is capable of forming an idea and reasoning, his education should begin.”<sup>16</sup> Long ago, the Adventist Church recognized the need to support families in training young children to become “useful, respected, and beloved members of society here, and give them a moral fitness for the society of the pure and holy hereafter.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, Adventists

instituted programs such as Sabbath school, church schools, Vacation Bible School, Adventurers, and Pathfinders.

In 1904, Mrs. White expressed deep concern for young children who were not being properly disciplined and trained within their home environments. Such children, she believed, were not provided with the proper foundation for the future.<sup>18</sup>

On January 14 of that year, Mrs. White met with the church school board at Elmshaven, Sanitarium, California. She acknowledged that “children surrounded by these unfortunate conditions are indeed to be pitied. If not afforded an opportunity for proper training outside the home, they are debarred from many privileges that, by right, every child should enjoy. . . God desires us to deal with these problems sensibly.”<sup>19</sup> “[H]ere is a work that must be done for the families. . . They will learn in school that which they frequently do not learn out of school, except by association.”<sup>20</sup>

When board members questioned her previous statement about the need for children to be as “free as



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lambs,” she answered: “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things.”<sup>21</sup>

In these comments, Mrs. White was referring to the care and educational needs of children between the ages of 7 and 10 years. However, the *philosophy* applies to younger children as well: The church must be ever vigilant to assist in the upbringing and training of its youngest members. In the 21st century, lifestyle choices and ever-increasing economic demands have placed families in peril. Using biblical principles, mature members must provide guidance and counsel for the less mature as they “hand one another along.”<sup>22</sup> In addition, the church needs to help its young families who are struggling to provide the type of home environment most suitable for the indoctrination of biblical values and principles.

This does not mean that every

Seventh-day Adventist church and/or school should operate a childcare program. However, it does mean that congregations should assist their struggling members, being willing to teach and care for them, and seeking to serve them.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. White encouraged the church to “carry a burden for the lambs of the flock. Let the children be educated and trained to do service for God, for they are the Lord’s heritage.”<sup>24</sup> “[C]hildren who have been rightly educated. . . will in their simplicity. . . do a work in the proclama-

tion of the truth which the older workers cannot do.”<sup>25</sup>

#### **A Call to Action**

Matthew 19:14 and Luke 18:16 (KJV) both record Jesus saying “suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not.” This implies that *every* child deserves to learn about Him. Thus, He placed a longing within the hearts of certain individuals (myself included) to pick up the seemingly impossible task of caring for and guiding young children to Himself.

“Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people . . . He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’”<sup>26</sup> This is where Christ-centered early childhood education and care must begin. To lovingly care for another person’s child provides a sacred opportunity to build strong bonds of trust and confidence between teacher and parent. Through this medium, the gospel of Jesus Christ is taught and lived in the hope that the children’s parents will heed the call of Christ. Through the faithful work of Adventist teachers and administrators with impressionable children, the gospel of Jesus Christ is being taught and lived in an effort to “train up [the children] in the way [they] should go” (Proverbs 6:22).

This is the mission of Adventist early childhood education and care centers.

### Church Administration Responds

For many years, ECEC professionals within the Seventh-day Adventist Church have faithfully looked after the “little lambs of the flock”—and those of anyone else willing to entrust their children to our care and training. Recently, church administrators have also demonstrated a more active interest in assuming responsibility for training the young.

In June 2005, the North American Division (NAD) union presidents and division officers voted to ask the NAD Office of Education to take responsibility for the development and supervision of all early childhood education and care programs.<sup>27</sup>

For those of us within the ECEC field, this is the beginning of an exciting time in Adventist history! The Lord is working to preserve the family unit, and we have the privilege of being His instruments through our ECEC centers. We hope to both share with and learn from what other church organizations have done in this area.

We have a lot of organizational

work ahead of us, but what a blessing it is to participate in the great commission of Matthew 28:19, 20: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (KJV). ✍



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