Religiosity and parenting: recent directions in process-oriented research

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Most faith traditions, in principle, promote family life and positive parent–child relationships. In recent years, research has moved beyond questions of whether religion supports positive parenting towards addressing more nuanced process-oriented questions, including how, why, and when religion is linked with adaptive or maladaptive parenting. Relations between religion and multiple specific parenting behaviors (e. g., involvement, warmth, authoritative parenting, communication) are identified, including contexts for when and why relations between religion and parenting are adaptive or maladaptive. A next step for research is the development and testing of theoretical models to more comprehensively account for process relations between religion and parenting.

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Most faith traditions, in principle, promote family life and positive parent–child relationships. Supporting these positive goals, many religions worldwide view parenting as imbued with the sacred, calling for parents to emulate the divine's love, mercy, patience, and forgiveness [1]. That is, most religions generally promote parenting, and similar positive goals are often endorsed. Thus, parents are typically encouraged by religious beliefs to foster in their children positive attributes, including prosocial identity and behavior, respect and obedience toward authority figures, self control, resistance to antisocial behavior, and emotional and spiritual connectedness to others and the divine.

However, the specific strategies used by parents, inspired by religious beliefs, to achieve these ends may vary in recommendation and consequent effectiveness [2,3••]. In recent years, research has moved beyond questions of whether religion supports positive parenting towards addressing more nuanced process-oriented questions, including how, why and when religion is linked with positive or maladaptive parenting. That is, as outlined in Figure 1, the aim now is to advance understanding of relations between religion and adaptive or maladaptive parenting practices, including the mechanisms accounting for or moderating those associations and their consequent impact on children. Specifically, six broad classes of parenting practices and their relation to religion can be identified as the focus of study in recent years, including involvement, warmth and emotional connectedness, parenting style and practice, communication and conflict, abuse, and responses to context of risk.

Involvement

Compared to non-religious parents, religious parents are more involved and invested with their children. For example, parents who more frequently attend religious services with their children spend more time with them outside of services [4]. Religious parents spend more time engaged in family leisure activities such as eating dinner or playing games together [5]. Mothers who consider their parenting role to be sacred reported greater investment in their relationship with their children. [6]. Similarly, fathers' use of positive religious coping which perceives God as loving and supportive and the sanctification of the parenting role predicted fathers' involvement, even after controlling for other determinants of parenting [7].

However, in some contexts religiosity can lead to less investment. Parents who rely on negative religious coping which represents a punishing or rejecting view of God, or who experience spiritual struggles are less invested and effective [6]. Unmarried religious fathers are less likely to live with their children [8]. Among urban, unmarried fathers, conservative Protestantism is associated with less parental engagement [9]. Since nonmarital sex and not marrying before the child's birth are typically deviations from the expectations of the conservative religious community, these factors may have contributed to men distancing themselves from their children and their parenting role.

Figure 1
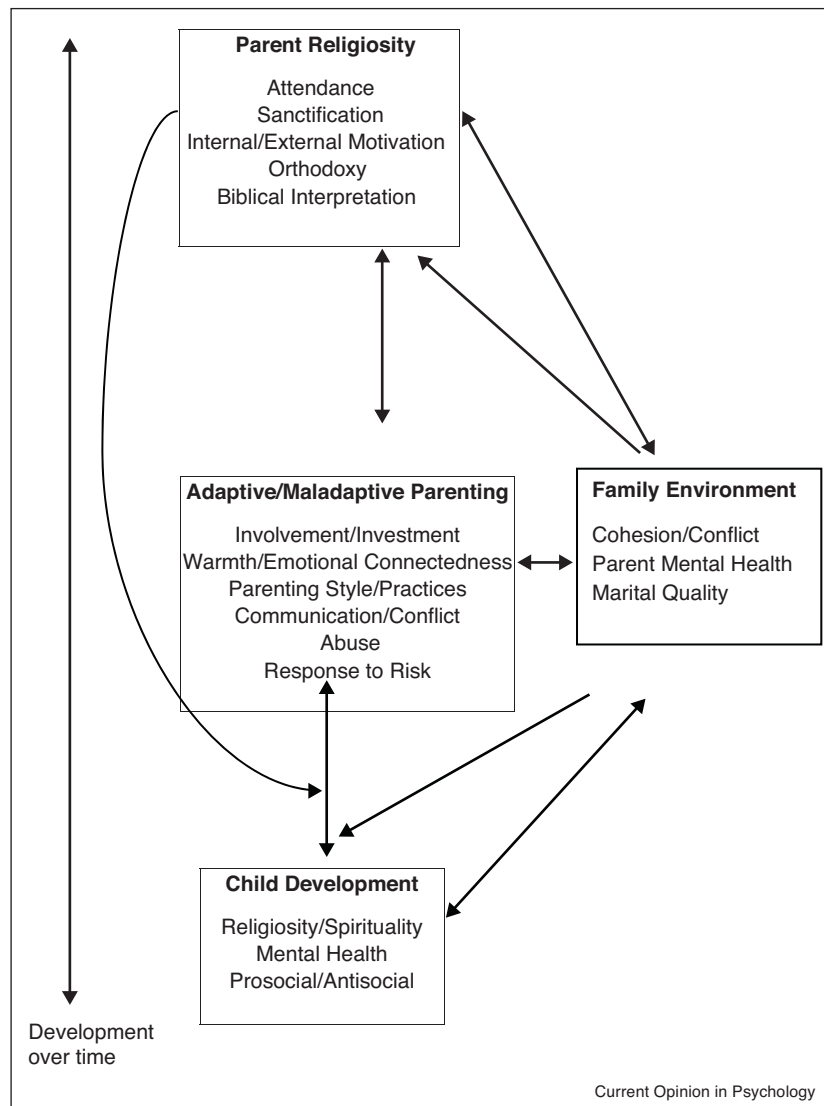
Systems framework for the role of religiosity in parenting.

Warmth and emotional connectedness

Religiosity is related to greater warmth in both Christian [10,11] and Muslim parents [12]. Conservative Protestant parents hug and praise children more than less religious parents [13]. Highly religious parents engage in more positive parenting interactions with adolescents [14]. In a pioneering study, Brody *et al*. [15] reported that parental religiosity in African American families promoted more cohesive family relationships, with less adjustment problems in adolescents.

However, as reflected in Figure 1, the family context may matter. In the absence of a secure attachment, parents' religiosity may be perceived by children as threatening or overbearing. In a recent study, parents' personal religiousness predicted greater internalizing symptoms in adolescents with insecure attachment relationships, but not in teens with secure attachments [16].

Parenting styles and practice

Parents' religiosity is often found to be related to positive parenting. Religious parents are more likely to engage in authoritative parenting practices, including induction, monitoring, consistent discipline, positive reinforcement, and warmth [17–19]. Positive parenting is linked with intrinsic religious motivation, strength of faith [19], and symbolic, rather than literal, interpretation of religion [20]. Parents' symbolic religious orientation is linked with the promotion of intrinsic (*e.g.*, community contribution, self-development) rather than extrinsic goals (*e.g.*, wealth,