

# Religion and child development: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Although interest in religion among young people has increased markedly, research examining the impact of religion on child development has been sorely lacking. This study is the first of its kind to use nationally representative data to explore the influence of religion on several different dimensions of psychological development and social adjustment in early childhood. Data from the Spring 2000 wave of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) are analyzed to explore how child development is shaped by individual parents' religiosity, the religious homogamy of couples, and the family's religious environment. Significant religious effects are observed across a range of child development domains and are manifested for both parents' ratings and teachers' ratings of youngsters. Parental, couple, and familial religion are linked with youngsters' pro-social behavior. However, religion can undermine child development when it is a source of conflict among families. The investigation concludes with a specification of implications and directions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Is parental religiosity a blessing or a bane for young children? Does religion facilitate or undermine the psychological development and social adjustment of youngsters? While no scholarship has offered a direct answer to such questions, countervailing evidence surfaces from related bodies of literature. To date, a great deal of research has surfaced concerning religious variations in parental values, child-rearing practices, paternal involvement, and parental attachment (e.g., Alwin, 1986; Bartkowski, 1995; Bartkowski and Ellison, 1995; Bartkowski and Wilcox, 2000; Bartkowski and Xu, 2000; Dollahite, 1998, 2003; Ellison et al., 1996a,b; Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a,b; King, 2003; Mahoney et al., 2003; Pearce and Axin, 1998; Wilcox, 1998, 2002; see

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Ellison, 1996; Bartkowski et al., 2000 for reviews). On the positive side of the ledger, religion has been shown to enhance the parent–child bond for both mothers (Pearce and Axin, 1998) and fathers (Bartkowski and Xu, 2000; King, 2003; Wilcox, 2002, 2004). Moreover, scholarship on religion and youth has demonstrated that faith is generally important to American teens, and that religion reduces adolescents' involvement in risk activities while fostering pro-social behaviors (e.g., Miller et al., 1997; Pearce et al., 2003; Smith, 2003a,b,c; Smith and Denton, 2005; Smith et al., 2002; Smith and Faris, 2002a,b; Smith et al., 2003; Smith and Kim, 2003; see Regnerus et al., 2003). Thus, religion would seem to function as a positive influence in the lives of youth.

At the same time, observers have expressed concern at the disciplinary tactics used in some religious families, most notably, conservative Protestants households (see Bartkowski, 1995; Ellison, 1996 for reviews). Conservative Protestants have been shown to punish their children physically much more frequently than other parents, demonstrate higher levels of attitudinal support for the use of a “good, hard spanking” as a legitimate means of discipline, and tend to value obedience rather than autonomy in youngsters (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a,b; Ellison et al., 1996a,b; Gershoff et al., 1999; Grasmick et al., 1991). Subsequent research has revealed, rather paradoxically, that more spanking in conservative Protestant homes is coupled with less yelling, more positive emotion work (i.e., hugging and praising of children), and higher levels of paternal involvement (Bartkowski and Xu, 2000; Bartkowski and Wilcox, 2000; Wilcox, 1998, 2002, 2004). Nevertheless, given the sizable literature that links spanking to negative developmental outcomes for children (Straus, 1994), concerns have been raised about the developmental deficits that conservative Protestant youngsters would seem to face during childhood and adolescence as a result of the ostensibly strict discipline to which they are subject early in life (see Bartkowski, 1995 for review). Published empirical evidence on the effects of conservative Protestant child discipline, however, is lacking.

This conflicting evidence notwithstanding, religion and spirituality appear to be an important part of many children's lives and are vital to family relationships. People's images of God are formed early in the life course (e.g., Richert and Barrett, 2005; Tirri et al., 2005; Nucci and Turiel, 1993; see Boyatzis, 2003) and relationships to parents are particularly influential in shaping youngsters' spiritual formation (e.g., Hertel and Donahue, 1995; Ratcliff, 1992; see Mahoney et al., 2003). In various ways, then, religion seems to “sanctify” family relationships (Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2001, 2003; see also Marks, 2004; Pargament and Mahoney, 2005). Through such dictums as “train up a child in the way he or she should go,” religious norms encourage parents to invest a great deal of quantity and quality time in their children (Bartkowski, 2001; Bartkowski and Wilcox, 2000; Bartkowski and Xu, 2000; Mahoney et al., 2003; Pearce and Axin, 1998; Wilcox, 2004). Furthermore, religious communities provide a meaning system (or “nomos”) that imbues family relationships with spiritual, enduring significance which commonly includes divine accountability for the discharge of parental obligations (Mahoney et al., 2003; Wilcox, 1998, 2002, 2004). And, finally, social networks in religious congregations (e.g., parents' Sunday school classes and scripture study groups) provide sanctions, both positive and negative, designed to encourage parents to attend to their obligations as caregivers (Bartkowski, 2001; Wilcox, 2004; see Bartkowski and Xu, 2007). Thus, the norms, nomos, and networks found in religious communities combine to create a distinctive context for familial relationships and functioning.

This constellation of factors is well articulated in the work of Mahoney and colleagues (2003, p. 221), who argue: “Religion is distinctive because it incorporates peoples' perceptions of the ‘sacred’ into the search for significant goals and values... The sacred refers to the holy, those things that are ‘set apart’ from the ordinary and deserve veneration and respect... Indeed, part of the power of religion lies in its ability to infuse spiritual character and significance into a broad range of worldly concerns,” including those in the domestic arena. In this sense, religious involvement can be understood as a cultural resource that a family can use to enhance cohesion among its members, resolve conflicts that may arise, and identify and pursue collectively desired goals (Marks, 2004; Mahoney, 2005). Mahoney and colleagues contend that religious people “view family relationships as sacred... Judeo-Christian religions portray the burdens and pleasures of parenting as opportunities to model and deepen one's understanding of God's love, patience, and commitment, and frame the parental role as a sacred calling that requires personal sacrifices” (Mahoney et al., 2003, pp. 222–223). Thus, religious parenting can take on a covenantal character, and caregivers can draw on the developmental resources that faith communities provide when confronting the challenges that parenting presents (Wagener et al., 2003). And yet, Mahoney et al. (2003) recognize that religious sanctification may not always be positive.

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