

Effects of Religious Practice on Family Relationships

In general, religious participation appears to foster an authoritative, warm, active, and expressive style of parenting. Parents who attend religious services are more likely to enjoy a better relationship with their children¹⁾ and are more likely to be involved with their [children's education](#).²⁾

Moreover, the greater a child's religious involvement, the more likely both the child and parent will agree about the quality of their relationship,³⁾ the more similar their values will be, and the greater their emotional closeness will be.⁴⁾

1. Mother-Child Relations

Compared with mothers who did not consider religion important, those who deemed religion to be very important rated their relationship with their child significantly higher, according to a 1999 study. When mothers and their children share the same level of religious practice, they experience better relationships with one another. For instance, when 18- year-olds attended religious services with approximately the same frequency as their mothers, the mothers reported significantly better relationships with them, even many years later, indicating that the effects of similar religious practice endures. Moreover, mothers who became more religious throughout the first 18 years of their child's life reported a better relationship with that child, regardless of the level of their religious practice before the child was born. Mothers who attended religious services less often over time reported a lower-quality relationship with their adult child.⁵⁾

Grandmothers' religious practice illustrates an intergenerational influence. The more religious a mother's mother is, the more likely the mother has a good relationship with her own child.⁶⁾

2. Father-Child Relations

Greater religious practice of fathers is associated with better relationships with their children, higher expectations for good relationships in the future, a greater investment in their relationships with their children, a greater sense of obligation to stay in regular contact with their children, and a greater likelihood of supporting their children and grandchildren.⁷⁾

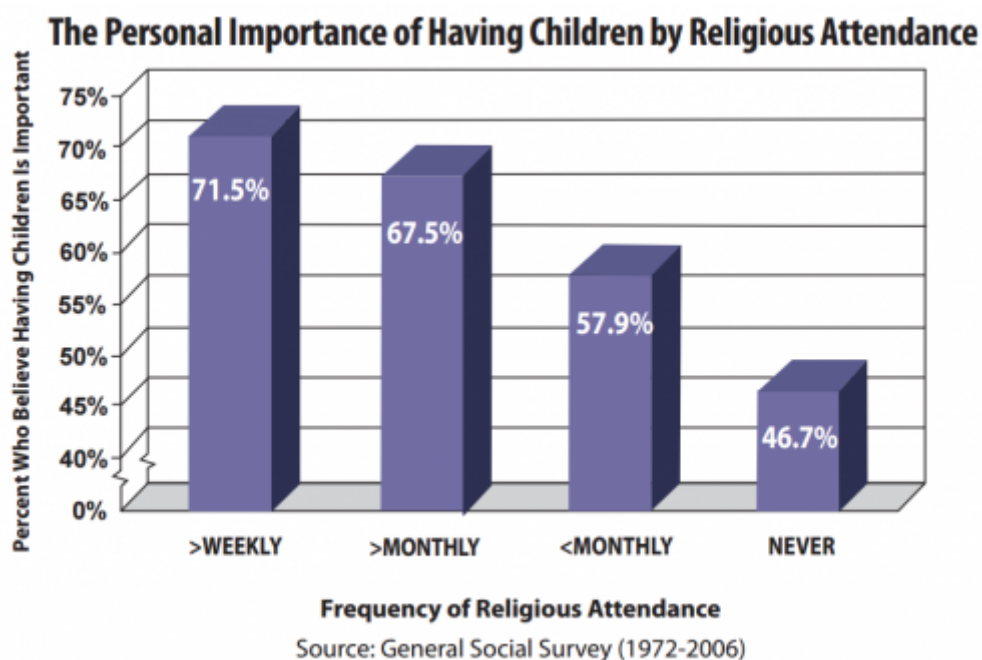
Brad Wilcox of the University of Virginia found that fathers' religious affiliations and religious attendance were positively associated with their involvement in activities with their children, such as one-on-one interaction, having dinner with their families, and volunteering for youth related activities. Compared with fathers who had no religious affiliation, those who attended religious services frequently were more likely to monitor their children, praise and hug their children, and spend time with their children. In fact, fathers' frequency of religious attendance was a stronger predictor of paternal involvement in one-on-one activities with children than were employment and income—the factors most frequently cited in the academic literature on fatherhood.⁸⁾

Wilcox also traced the "pathways" through which religion affects fathers' relationships with their children and concluded that religious affiliation and especially religious attendance have unique

effects that are independent of conventional habits of civic engagement. The emphasis that religion typically places on family life, along with churches' family-focused social networks of support and psychological support of fatherhood, helps to explain why religiously active fathers are more involved in youth-related activities.⁹⁾

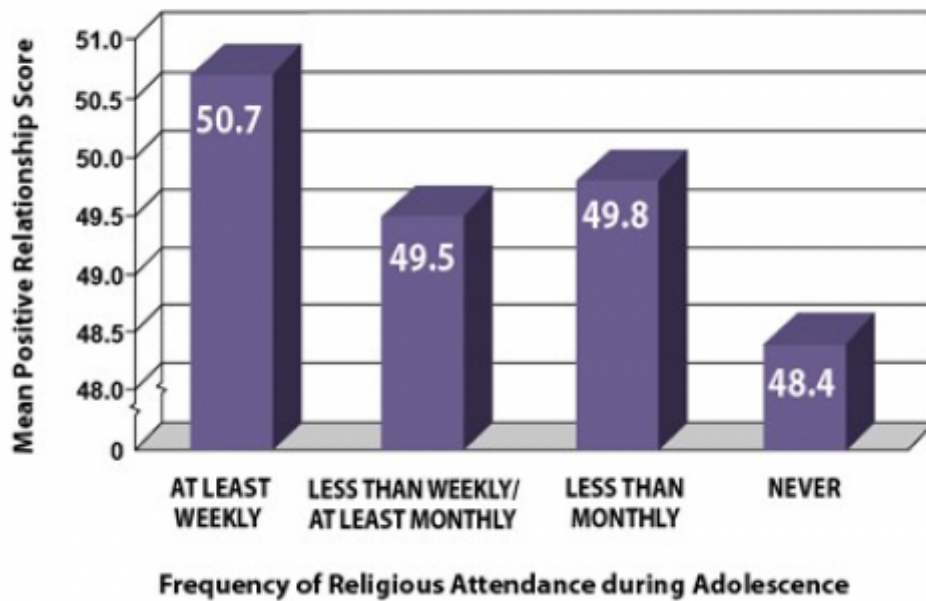
3. Related American Demographics

According to the General Social Survey (1972-2006), adults who attend religious services at least weekly are more likely to believe in the importance of having their own children than those who worship less frequently.¹⁰⁾ (See [Chart](#))



The National Survey of Children's Health shows that children who attend worship at least weekly have a higher-quality relationship with their parents than those who worship less frequently.¹¹⁾ (See [Chart Below](#))

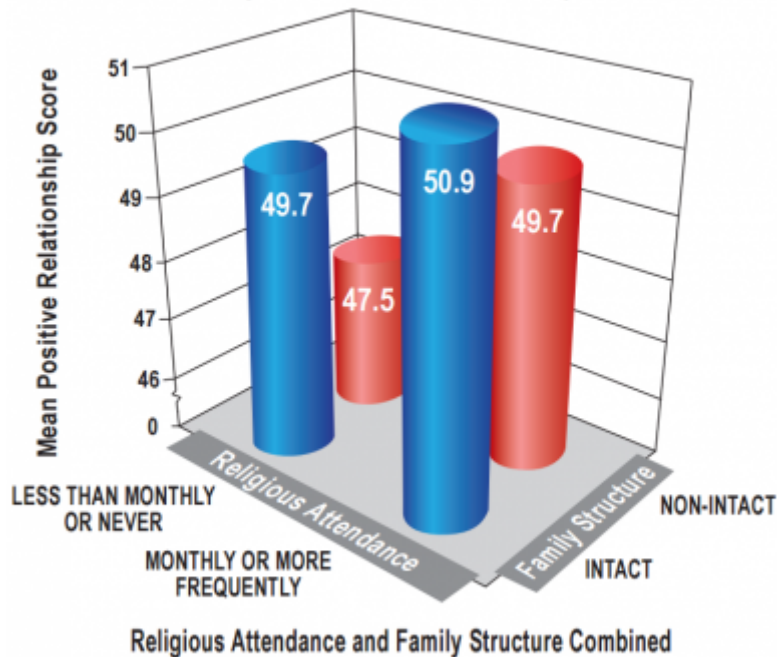
Quality of Parent-Child Relationship by Religious Attendance



Source: National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

Both family structure and religious attendance effect the quality of parent-child relationships. The National Survey of Children's Health showed that children from intact families who frequently attended worship were most likely to have a high-quality relationship with their parents. ¹²⁾ (See [Chart Below](#))

Quality of Parent-Child Relationship by Children's Religious Attendance and Family Structure



Source: National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH)

4. Domestic Violence

Couples who share the same religious commitment are less likely to commit [acts of domestic violence](#).¹³⁾ Men who attend religious services at least weekly are less than half as likely to commit an act of violence against their partners as their peers who attend once yearly or less.¹⁴⁾ Regular attendance at religious services has a strong and statistically significant inverse association with the incidence of domestic abuse.¹⁵⁾ Mothers who attended religious services less often over time reported a lower quality relationship with their adult child.¹⁶⁾ Compared to those who consider themselves “very religious,” those who are “not at all religious” are far more likely to bear a [child out of wedlock](#) (among whites, three times as likely; among Hispanics, 2.5 times as likely; and among blacks, twice as likely).¹⁷⁾

¹⁾ , ⁵⁾ , ⁶⁾ Lisa D. Pearce and William G. Axinn, “The Impact of Family Religious Life on the Quality of Mother-Child Relations,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 6 (December 1998): 810-828.

²⁾ , ⁹⁾ W. Bradford Wilcox, “Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, no. 3 (August 2002): 780-792.

³⁾ William S. Aquilino, “Two Views of One Relationship: Comparing Parents’ and Young Adult Children’s Reports of the Quality of Intergenerational Relations,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61, no. 4 (November 1999): 858-870.

⁴⁾ Lisa D. Pearce and Dana L. Haynie, “Intergenerational Religious Dynamics and Adolescent Delinquency,” *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (June 2004): 1553-1572.

⁷⁾ Valerie King, “The Influence of Religion on Fathers’ Relationships with Their Children,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65, no. 2 (May 2003): 382-395.

⁸⁾ W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 112-118.

¹⁰⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Survey, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510. Patrick F. Fagan and Althea Nagai, “The Personal Importance of Having Children by Religious Attendance,” Mapping America Project. Available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09K51.pdf>

¹¹⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) in 2003. The data sample consisted of parents of 102,353 children and teens in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. 68,996 of these children and teens were between six and 17 years old, the age group that was the focus of the study. The survey sample in this age range represented a population of nearly 49 million young people nationwide. Nicholas Zill, “Quality of Parent-Child Relationship and Religious Attendance,” Mapping America Project. Available at <http://marri.us/get.cfm?i=MA09B04>

¹²⁾ This chart draws on data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH) in 2003. The data sample consisted of parents of 102,353 children and teens in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. 68,996 of these children and teens were between six and 17 years old, the age group that was the focus of the study. The survey sample in this age range represented a population of nearly 49 million young people nationwide. Nicholas Zill, “Quality of Parent-Child Relationship, Religious Attendance, and Family Structure,” Mapping America Project. Available at <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09D42.pdf>

¹³⁾ , ¹⁴⁾ Christopher G. Ellison, John P. Bartkowski, and Kristin L. Anderson, “Are There Religious Variations in Domestic Violence?” *Journal of Family Issues* 20, no. 1 (January 1999): 87-113.

¹⁵⁾ Christopher G. Ellison and Kristin L. Anderson, “Religious Involvement and Domestic Violence

Among U.S. Couples," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 2 (June 2001): 269-286.

¹⁶⁾ Lisa D. Pearce and William G. Axinn, "The Impact of Family Religious Life on the Quality of Mother-Child Relations," *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 6 (December 1998): 810-828.

¹⁷⁾ Allan F. Abrahamse, *Beyond Stereotypes: Who Becomes a Single Teenage Mother?* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1988), 37-50.

This entry draws heavily from [95 Social Science Reasons for Religious Worship and Practice](#) and [Why Religion Matters Even More: The Impact of Religious Practice on Social Stability](#).

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