

Pathways of Religious Influence on Family Relationships from One Generation to the Next
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This three-generation study explores how the religiosity of parents in one generation may affect the religiosity of second-generation children when they reach emerging adulthood, as well as their competence in romantic relationships and in parenting their own children.

The study uses data from about 500 participants in the Family Transitions Project, a 20-year longitudinal study of youth from Iowa. Over the course of the project, parents and children reported independently about their own religiosity. Researchers observed participants interacting with each other in order to evaluate the quality of interactions between parents and children and between romantic partners. Collecting data from several sources over time reduces the chance for memory bias in reporting past behaviors and for biases due to reliance on a single source of data.

The current study identified two pathways by which parents' religiosity seems to benefit the children over time. First, when parents are religious during children's adolescence—attending church often and emphasizing the importance of religious belief and being a religious person—their children are more likely to be religious in adolescence. Children who are religious in adolescence, in turn, tend to be religious when they reach emerging adulthood and to have better relationships with their romantic partner or spouse, as well as their own children.

Second, parents who are religious tend to use better parenting practices, showing greater warmth and support for their adolescent children and less hostility and anger. Children who experience such parenting in adolescence are more likely to parent their own children in the same way and to have better interactions with their romantic partner or spouse. This second pathway is independent from the first. Regardless of how they were parented in adolescence, children who are religious in adolescence have better family relationships in adulthood.

The results of this study indicate that the religiosity of one generation may enhance the religiosity and family relationships of second-generation children when they reach emerging adulthood. The influence of parents' religiosity is indirect, however, following pathways through better parenting and the children's own religiosity in adolescence. These findings suggest that religiosity may be an important resource for many families in terms of promoting more-positive family dynamics that lead to better development over the life course.