

The Influence of Family Religiosity During Adolescence on Risky Behaviors in Young Adulthood

Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., Sr. Research Scientist
NORC

Additional authors: Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D. and Kathleen Sidorowicz, Child Trends

Recent research has found that nearly half of the adolescents in America feel that religion is an important part of their daily lives. Other research shows that participation in risky behaviors such as drinking, using drugs, and having unsafe sex peak in young adulthood between the ages of 18 and 25. Yet few studies have investigated the potential beneficial effects of family religiosity during adolescence on youth's well-being as they grow into young adulthood.

This study examines factors in adolescence that predict risky behaviors in young adulthood, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 Cohort. Researchers used the sample of 4,834 adolescents who were 12–14 in 1997 because these cohorts received detailed questions on family religious activities and family processes.

Earlier work by the researchers on religiosity and young adult mental development suggested that parents' religious beliefs and attendance in early adolescent has an indirect impact on risky behaviors in young adulthood via mediating factors, such as family religious attendance in adolescence and young adult religious beliefs and attendance. These mediators, in turn, were directly associated with beneficial effects on risky behaviors such as illegal drug use, heavy smoking, binge drinking, unsafe sexual behavior, and delinquency in young adulthood.

The results of the study show that parent religious beliefs and attendance seldom directly influenced young adult risky behaviors. But they were important in the development of young adult religious beliefs and behaviors. These beliefs and behaviors both seemed to protect against risky behaviors. Young adults with strong religious beliefs were less likely to engage in unsafe sex, use illegal substances, or binge drink. Similarly, those who attended church regularly tended not to binge drink, use illegal substances, or smoke heavily. In addition, individuals who consistently attended religious services with their family in adolescence were less likely to binge drink or engage in delinquent behaviors as a young adult.

The researchers also conducted cross-group analyses to determine whether the relationships among family religiosity, young adult religiosity, and young adult risky behavior described above also exist for subgroups based on poverty, race/ethnicity, and gender. The results showed some differences in terms of which religiosity dimensions were important for specific behaviors. But in general, religious beliefs and religious attendance both functioned as protective factors of young adult risky behaviors across the subgroups.

The findings from this study demonstrate the beneficial consequences of religious belief and attendance on the risky behaviors of young adults. Paired with previous work showing the beneficial effects of religiosity on young adult mental health, this work suggests that religiosity may have lasting benefits for future marital and family relationships.