

How Fathers' Religiosity Influences Early Childhood Behavior

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A number of studies indicate that fathers often become more engaged in religion after the birth of a child. Religious participation, in turn, seems to increase fathers' involvement in the lives of their children and strengthen parents' relationships. Yet little is known about how fathers' religious involvement affects the behavior of their young children.

This study uses data from a national, longitudinal study of fragile families to explore whether and how fathers' religiosity (i.e., practices and beliefs) influences their young children's behavior. Specifically, it examines whether fathers increase their religious involvement after the birth of a child and whether they maintain that involvement as the child grows older. It also looks at how fathers' religiosity affects their children in terms of positive and problem behaviors.

The results suggest that most fathers do increase their rate of religious participation after the birth of a child and that many fathers maintain a higher level of participation during the first five years of their children's lives. Men may turn to religion for support and guidance during the transition to fatherhood and remain involved as a way to pass on their religious traditions and beliefs to their children.

Although fathers become more involved in religion, the study found little evidence that their religiosity directly influences their children's behavior. Instead, fathers' religiosity appears to enhance the influence of other family characteristics on child behavior in a several ways. First, fathers' use of religious faith as a guide for how to treat their families seems to strengthen family relationships, improving the quality of the parents' relationship and reinforcing the mothers' religious values. By enhancing these relationships with the children's mothers, the fathers' religious beliefs appear to reduce the number of problem behaviors that young children display.

Second, being raised by a father who has some kind of religious affiliation, as opposed to none, seems to positively influence child behavior. Children display fewer delinquent behaviors when raised by a father who belongs to any religious denomination. Having a religious father may provide greater social control to children, resulting in fewer problem behaviors.

Finally, in those families where fathers are more involved in their children's activities, children raised by Evangelical Protestant fathers display more positive behaviors than children raised by other fathers. The warm, expressive style of fathering emphasized in many Evangelical Protestant denominations may encourage fathers not only to be more involved in their children's lives but to provide greater support and affection to their children while doing so. The findings from this study are important because they show that religion can encourage fathers to become involved in their children's lives from an early age and perhaps remain engaged as their children grow older. Fathers' religiosity benefits young children by strengthening the quality of the relationship between the children's parents, reinforcing the mothers' religious values, and enhancing fathers' interactions with their children. Overall, the study suggests that religious communities may provide important support for fragile families, helping to strengthen family relationships and improve the well-being of young children.