

# The Benefits and Best Practices of Religious Parenting

Surveying the growing body of social science research helps bring greater clarity to the complex, and largely beneficial, interactions between religion and family life. The research also suggests evidence-based best practices for effectively integrating faith and family life, including religious-spiritual authenticity, nurturing parent-child relationships, balancing religious firmness and flexibility, and encouraging youth to have spiritual experiences, sacrifice meaningfully, and pray earnestly – all while parents preach a bit less and listen a bit more.

Decades of research support the proposition that healthy, faith-based practices in the home are strongly associated with pro-social outcomes for children, youth, couples, and families – especially among [racial](#) minority families, [immigrant families](#), and [religious minority families](#). It is important to understand the benefits of religion in the home and to consider research-based best practices when it comes to faith and parenting.

When a study was released several years ago claiming to find that religious families, and specifically children, were “less kind and more punitive than those from non-religious households,” it made headlines precisely because it seemed to contradict years of study and common wisdom. It turns out, however, that the [researchers read the data wrong](#) and, earlier this year, the paper was formally [retracted](#) by the journal *Current Biology*.

In reality, plenty of social science continues to support positive correlations between religious practice in the home

and pro-social behaviors. A rarely achieved gold standard of social science research is the multi-generational, longitudinal study in which the same parents and children both offer reports across several years. One such study by [Sarah Spillman and colleagues](#) found that religious involvement predicted positive marital and parenting interactions for both generations examined. What has been under-studied, however, is *why* faith and families are such a robust combination. What is the magic at work here? We think we now have something of an answer.

## The Reasons for Religious Benefits

Over the past two decades, our [American Families of Faith project](#) has studied the reasons why religious involvement has positive potential for strengthening family relationships. We've identified specific behavioral patterns in faith-based marital and family relationships that help cultivate healthy interactions. In our research, we give voice to those who have spoken with us. Therefore, all of the articles we link to in the rest of this essay contain direct quotes from parents and youth of faith that illustrate our findings.

Meaningful religious traditions, for example, not only provide a sense of connection around the holidays, but families also report meaningful daily and weekly rituals. These include weekly [Shabbat](#) practices for [Jewish families](#), weekly [Family Home Evening](#) for [Latter-day Saint families](#), daily prayer (Salat) for [Muslim families](#), family Bible reading for [Evangelical Christian families](#), and regular forgiveness and confession for [Catholic and Orthodox Christian families](#). Each of these practices yield myriad reported benefits. Religious involvement is especially helpful in supporting and strengthening minority families such as [African American Christians](#) and [Asian American Christians](#).

Many may wonder whether shared secular practices within

families might create the same results. As David Zahl observes in his book [Seculosity](#), people may not be attending religious services as frequently, but contemporary “replacement religion” is in abundant supply. Zahl notes that many now divert energy once dedicated to religious devotion to more secular pursuits such as TV shows, sports, shopping, fitness, technology, politics, and other passions. We are not aware, however, of research that links any of these with the same expansive range or depth of benefits to marriage and family documented in connection with religious devotion.

Admittedly, religion does not always result in a positive outcome in family life. Along with other [scholars](#), we have found that although religious involvement is largely positive, the nexus of faith and family life contains [dualities](#) that allow religion, when misapplied, to cause potential harms to occur to individuals, [marriage and family relationships](#), and to societies.

## Best Practices for Religious Parents

To avoid a toxic approach to faith and to more fully appreciate the benefits of religion, parents and couples should understand research-based best practices regarding religion and family life. According to [an AEI survey](#), about 30 percent of young adults who were raised in religious homes are now religiously unaffiliated, while only about 11 percent of older Americans raised religiously are now unaffiliated. Although the AEI report mentions that “Americans raised in homes with more robust religious experiences are less likely to disaffiliate from religion entirely” (only about 7 percent), it is important to mention that of those who become disaffiliated from their childhood faith, about 70 percent said they stopped identifying with that faith when they were 17 years old or younger.

A [2016 Pew Research Report](#) found that of those who report being religiously unaffiliated (aka, religious “Nones”), 78 percent report that they were raised in a religious family. About half of these say they are no longer religious because they lack belief – and many mentioned “science” as the reason they no longer believe. A striking irony is that social science has repeatedly and conclusively demonstrated that religious belief and involvement is, in most cases, quite beneficial for [personal mental and physical health](#) and for [marriage and family relationships](#).

The religious potential for either harm or help suggests the need to consider better ways in which religious parents, particularly highly religious parents, can share their faith with their children in a healthy and beneficial manner. Drawing on our findings from dozens of published social science [studies](#), we mention eight key social science ideas or best practices regarding [religious parenting](#):

## **Cultivate Religious-Spiritual Authenticity**

Both the youth and the parents we have interviewed have emphasized how important it is for parents to be an upright example of what they claim to believe. Many of the religious parents we interviewed believed it was important to be [authentic](#) with their children about their weaknesses and failings, as opposed to trying to seem better than they really are. Walk an authentic walk.

## **Nurture the Parent–Child Relationship**

While many parents might feel that engaging in religious activities such as prayer, reading sacred texts, and attending religious services are paramount practices, [our research](#) (and others’) has repeatedly indicated that the quality of the parent–child relationship is even more important. Worship with

warmth and love.

## **Balance Firmness and Flexibility**

We have found it is vital for parents to [balance religious firmness with religious flexibility](#) in their parenting. Parents who learn to avoid unhealthy religious rigidity in their relationship with their children are more likely to maintain more positive relationships with them and their children. Avoid rigidity through balance.

## **Balance Desire for Religious Continuity with Children's Agency**

The parents and children we interviewed described relational processes that supported both parents' desires to [pass their faith to their children while honoring their children's agency](#). Healthy practices included teaching principles and values, providing expectations of religious participation and responsibility, not forcing faith, allowing exploration and mistakes, and showing respect for children's views. Honor both family legacy and children's choices.

## **Help Youth Make Meaningful Sacrifices**

[We found](#) that many religious youth take their spiritual and religious identities seriously enough to make significant, religiously inspired sacrifices for others. Giving and serving matter.

## **Encourage Spiritual Exploration in Youth**

[Our findings](#) confirm the importance of helping youth explore their own faith and others' faiths. Parents can expect and should support an active process of religious and spiritual exploration among their children. Parents who understand that it is normal and healthy for such exploration to occur are more likely to provide youth the space they need and want,

while being there as a stable, supporting, and faithful resource for them. Encourage deep seeking.

## **Make Prayer in Families Meaningful**

Our [research](#) has shown that an important intersection of religion and family occurs with regular family prayer, a practice that reportedly influences family relationships in various ways, including: family prayer as a time of family togetherness and interaction, as a space for social support, and as a means for intergenerational transmission of moral and spiritual values. [Further](#), for the families we interviewed, family prayer involved issues and concerns of individuals and the family, helped reduce relational tensions, and provided feelings of connectedness, unity, and bonding. Family prayer unifies.

## **Listen More, Preach Less**

Parents and youth told us that [the way parents approach parent-youth conversations about religion and spirituality matters](#). Youth and parents reported that it was a more satisfying and successful religious and relational experience when the conversations were more youth-centered than parent-centered. Listen more, preach less.

Based on our in-depth interviews with almost five hundred American adults and youth from [many religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds](#), we found that personal decisions regarding God, religion, and faith have profound relational consequences for individuals and for their loved ones. These consequences often greatly enhance couples and families. Informed by the best practices from social science and the best of religious belief, parents can raise their children with the benefits of a meaningful faith, as part of a nurturing community, in a manner that honors children's humanity, their growing autonomy, and their spiritual choices.

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