

Does religion make kids less generous?

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Credit: Robert Kraft/public domain

Religious parents are more likely to describe their children as empathetic and concerned about justice than are non-religious parents. But, new evidence reported in the Cell Press journal *Current Biology* on November 5 suggests that the opposite is in fact true.

In the study, children growing up in households that weren't religious

were significantly more likely to share than were children growing up in religious homes. The findings support the notion that the secularization of moral discourse may serve to increase rather than decrease human kindness, the researchers say.

"Some past research had demonstrated that religious people aren't more likely to do good than their nonreligious counterparts," said Jean Decety of the University of Chicago. "Our study goes beyond that by showing that [religious people](#) are less generous, and not only adults but children too."

To examine the influence of religion on the expression of altruism, Decety and his colleagues asked more than 1,100 children between the ages of five and twelve from the US, Canada, Jordan, Turkey, South Africa, and China to play a game in which they were asked to make decisions about how many stickers to share with an anonymous person from the same school and a similar ethnic group. Most of the children came from households that identified as Christian, Muslim, or not religious. The study also included smaller numbers of children from Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and agnostic homes.

The children became more generous with age, consistent with earlier studies. But their religious rearing environment also fundamentally shaped their altruistic tendencies, with more-religious children showing less generosity. Importantly, the researchers report, children who were the most altruistic came from atheist or non-religious families.

The data also show that religious children judged interpersonal harm as being meaner and deserving of harsher punishment than did children from non-religious households. Those findings are consistent with past research in adults showing that religiousness is directly related to increased intolerance for and punitive attitudes toward interpersonal offenses, including the probability of supporting harsh penalties.

The results might be explained in part by "moral licensing," a phenomenon in which doing something "good"—in this case practicing a religion—can leave people less concerned about the consequences of immoral behavior, the researchers say. They also come as a timely reminder that religion and morality are not one and the same.

"A common-sense notion is that religiosity has a positive association with self-control and moral behaviors," Decety said. "This view is unfortunately so deeply embedded that individuals who are not religious can be considered morally suspect. In the United States, for instance, non-religious individuals have little chance to be elected to a high political office, and those who identify as agnostic and atheist are considered to be less trustworthy and more likely to be amoral or even immoral. Thus, it is generally admitted that religion shapes people's moral judgments and prosocial behavior, but the relation between religiosity and morality is actually a contentious one, and not always positive."

Decety says he is now in the process of expanding the work to include [children](#) of ages four to eight in 14 countries—Canada, China, Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Turkey, Jordan, Taiwan, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Norway, and Mexico.

More information: *Current Biology*, Decety et al.: "The Negative Association between Religiousness and Children's Altruism across the World" [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.09.056](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.09.056)

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