

Youth groups, classes may be key in maintaining faith as kids age

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Parents are an undeniably influential force in their children's lives. But a new study from the University of Georgia suggests that when it comes to religion, an engaged congregation may also be a deciding factor of

whether youth stay involved in their religious practice as they age.

The study found that the way parents live and the conversations they have with their children have the largest impact on whether their kids continue in their faith as they age.

But things like youth groups, Sunday school and attending weekly services make a big difference in youths' feelings of belonging within their religious community, according to the research. As a result of that, they may be more likely to stay in their faith as they grow.

About three out of 10 Americans currently identify as non-religious, according to the Pew Research Center. And that number is expected to rise.

For parents who are invested in religious tradition and religious community leaders, that may be concerning.

"It used to be just a truism that people stop attending religious services in college and then they came back when they had kids," said Bill Stanford, lead author of the study and a doctoral graduate of UGA's College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "But more recent studies have pointed out people aren't coming back after they have kids. The million-dollar question is why."

1 in 6 kids from religious families say they never discuss religion with parents

The researchers analyzed responses from more than 1,700 youth and their caregivers interviewed over several years as part of the National Study of Youth and Religion. The dataset provides a big picture view of young people's relationship with religion and spirituality and includes

individuals from a variety of faiths, such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, among others.

More than three out of four of the parents in the study said their faith was either a very or extremely important guide in their daily decisions. And more than half said they went to at least weekly [religious services](#).

But more than one in six of the kids surveyed said they never discussed religion with their parents. Less than half of the youth reported having conversations about religion with their caregivers on a weekly basis.

"It's not something that we commonly talk about, in terms of educating parents on how to help facilitate religiosity and spirituality with their kids," said Ted Futris, co-author of the study and a professor of human development and family science. "It's often seen as something personal.

"What Bill's work is showing is that building spirituality in youth is a community process. It's both parents and the faith-based community working together to help foster that religiosity and spirituality among our young people."

Only 2 out of 5 youth attend youth group

Although more than 60% of adults said youth ministry was a priority in their faith communities, only two out of five children said they participated in a youth-oriented group.

Almost 30% of youth reported never taking religious education courses, and half said they'd never undergone a rite of initiation into the [religious community](#), such as a baptism or confirmation.

"The role of parents is incredibly powerful in shaping future religiosity in children, but engagement matters," said Stanford, who is now an

associate priest at St. Thomas Anglican Church in Athens, Georgia. "Nonfamilial adult mentorship relationships are extremely important. Integrating youth into the community and connecting them with religious education and the rites of passage—the congregation has an important role to play in helping pass down religious tradition."

Youth groups, religious education courses lead to more religiosity in young people

Young people in religious organizations that emphasize youth group and religious education and expect kids to regularly attend worship services are more likely to report high levels of personal [religious practice](#), such as fasting and independent study of religious texts.

The study also explored differences between religious denominations. The researchers found some traditions put more of an emphasis on integrating youth into their communities than others.

"What you're doing as parents is you're creating a framework through which to view the world," Stanford said. "And religion's part of that for a lot of people. Religion becomes part of the scaffolding for how you view the world."

"I would say part of purposefully engaging [youth](#) is thinking through, how are we as a congregation coming alongside [parents](#) and providing a lens through which the world makes sense? How are we being purposeful about talking through what we believe, why we believe it, how we see it acting in the world?"

The findings are published in the journal *Applied Developmental Science*.

More information: William D. Stanford et al, Parental and contextual

influences on religious transmission in adolescence, *Applied Developmental Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/10888691.2023.2223999](https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2023.2223999)

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