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Five Ways Parents Can Support Religious Teens

by Megan Gale



A plethora of coming-of-age stories in the media highlight the significance of the teen years in an individual's search to find

themselves. During this period of self-discovery, teens search for identity, belonging, and life's meaning. For many, teens turn either away or towards their religious upbringing as they embark on this important search.

Gen Z teens are twice as likely to consider themselves atheist as compared to older generations.¹ While this statistic may seem alarming, more than half of teens still consider themselves to be religious. Brigham Young University researchers, Dr. David Dollahite and Dr. Loren Marks synthesized findings in 2019 from several recent studies using a diverse national sample to share findings about teens' religious development. They stated: "Adolescents' spirituality and religiosity can be articulated and engaged, stifled and thwarted, or misdirected. This is an age period of intense ideological hunger, a striving for meaning and purpose, and desire for relationships and connectedness."²

Despite what teens may hear from peers about restrictive rules and wasted weekends, religion has been found to provide unique benefits to teens. Religious teens tend to experience higher self-esteem, have more positive attitudes about life, and report being happier compared to their non-religious peers.³ They volunteer in their communities more and experience a higher sense of mission and purpose in life. They also tend to experience other benefits such as lower levels of sexual activity, less depressive symptoms, and less drug and alcohol use and abuse.⁴ Many religious beliefs and expectations emphasize positive character qualities and virtues that

teens can develop, such as altruism, kindness, and forgiveness.

In their 2019 article, Dollahite and Marks share five pillars of positive religious development for teens that can help parents and other adults support and foster teen religiosity.

Conversations

Conversations about religious topics are most impactful and helpful for teens when the teen leads the discussion. Sometimes when discussing religious topics, teens may feel like they are being lectured or preached to, which may not be helpful and, in fact, is sometimes counterproductive. Teens feel like they are better understood and tend to experience more positive feelings toward their faith when they share their ideas and feel comfortable in bringing up topics in their religious conversations with adults. To encourage these positive exchanges, parents and leaders may try to listen more and talk less when discussing topics of faith.

Sacrifices

Religious communities commonly ask adherents to make sacrifices of time, money, and even personal preferences. Religious teens often make both public and private sacrifices as they honor religious holy days (e.g., the Sabbath) or use their time to engage in personal prayer or scripture study. In fact, when they make sacrifices, they tend to have greater understanding and show increased devotion to their religion. Witnessing teens making sacrifices for their religion should be encouraging to adults and a sign that these teens are taking their spiritual and religious identities seriously. Parents and leaders should help teens identify religious sacrifices they can make and share their appreciation for the reason they are making them. "Adults who can

help teens to both reflect upon and strengthen their religious commitments may be better at supporting teens as they live their faith."²

Anchors

Teens often make commitments to stay anchored to their religion. One Muslim teen from the Dollahite and Marks' study explained: "Religion is not just something that you are doing at certain times of the week ... it's real, like you do it all day ... it's part of what you do. Part of the way you eat, and the way you treat other people."² In those practical ways that this teen noted, religious anchors can help teens live their religion on a daily basis. Many teens who are connected to these anchors of commitment describe their faith as being a part of them through their thoughts, words, and behaviors. These anchors of commitment may include religious traditions, rituals, or laws; faith tradition or denomination; or God. Parents and leaders can help teens build on and strengthen their anchoring commitments as they help them find steady and meaningful anchors.

Exploration

Teens actively explore what they believe and compare it to who they are and who they are becoming. Teens' religious exploration usually does not occur in one single event but happens as a process over time as they explore various aspects of their religious beliefs or identity. As part of their exploration process, teens typically express questions and experience doubts. They may seek out deep conversations with those whom they trust—while also learning firsthand from their own experiences as they live or do not live according to their faith. Religious adults should understand that exploration is a normal part of teens understanding their religion.

Providing space for teens to explore can be helpful in supporting teens as they develop stronger and more positive religiosity. Parents and leaders should remain stable supports to allow open and caring conversations at any point, and be especially wise in their counsel and willing to listen when teens have questions or doubts.

Support

Most parents, youth religious pastors, and mentoring adults genuinely want what is best for teens. These religious adults may help strengthen and support teens by being a consistent

example, providing love and support, and teaching values and religious tradition. Within the home, religious parents must navigate being religiously firm and yet flexible with their teens.

“Parents who desire the religious development of their adolescent children to be positive and optimal would seek to engage with their teens in ways that respect their agency, their interests, their changing circumstances, and their daily schedules,”² report Dollahite and Marks. Other influential religious adults may be supportive and bring other resources and insights to their interactions with teens, adding to the level of support teens feel from

adult religious role models.

Religion may be one of the most helpful and impactful influences for teens as they navigate their personal journey of self-discovery. As the Dollahite and Marks’ work shows, parents, leaders, and other trusted religious adults can play a significant role in teens’ process of discovering and strengthening their religious beliefs and identity.

***Megan Gale** recently graduated from BYU’s School of Family Life and will be pursuing a master’s degree in Marriage, Family, and Human Development this Fall.*

Endnotes

¹ Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z. (n.d.). *Barna Group*. <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/?ga=2.157162555.1216452430.1584026106-828349794.1584026105>

² Dollahite, D., & Marks, L. (2019). Positive teens religious and spiritual development: What we have learned from religious families. *Religions*, 10, 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100548>

³ University of Notre Dame. Sociologists find that religious teens are more positive about life. *National Study of Youth & Religion*. <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/related-resources/preliminary-research-findings/sociologists-find-that-religious-teens-are-more-positive-about-life/>

⁴ VanderWeele, T. (2018). Religious upbringing and adolescence. *Institute for Family Studies*. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/religious-upbringing-and-adolescence>