The Double-Edged Sword: Unsuccessful versus Successful Religious Parenting and Transmission

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Abstract

Religious participation can have many positive effects on children and adolescents, including improved health, academic, and social capabilities. Therefore, many parents are concerned by the decrease in religiosity in American society today. In response to this common concern, this literature review discusses how various types of religious parenting can improve parent-child religious transmission while maintaining good parent-child relationships and promoting healthy child development. Much of the research on parenting styles suggests that religious parenting is most successful when using an authoritative style of parenting (high structure, high warmth, high autonomy) rather than an authoritarian style (high structure, low warmth, low autonomy). Applications of authoritative religious parenting and their effects are also discussed.

Keywords: religious parenting, religious parent-child transmission, religious child development, authoritative parenting, religion

The Double-Edged Sword

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Religious Parenting and Transmission

Religiosity and spirituality are key aspects of a person's identity. As children grow, they tend to develop their own religious and spiritual identities. According to Santrock et al. (2020), "adolescence and emerging adulthood can be especially important developmental periods in religious identity and behavior" (p. 375). As older children and adolescents develop cognitively and improve their ability to think abstractly, they are at a particularly sensitive time in their lives and, therefore, are increasingly moldable to their religious and spiritual environments. They begin to cultivate a greater awareness and ability to self-reflect, as well as an increased curiosity and motivation to wonder about the transcendent or divine meaning of life. In fact, research has shown that adolescents and emerging adults may be the most sensitive and responsive to spiritual and religious matters compared to any other age group (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Therefore, a child or adolescent's time spent building his or her religious and spiritual identity plays a critical role in establishing personal religious values and shaping behaviors. But what forces predominately influence the establishment of these values and the shaping of these behaviors?

Historically, psychologists have often assumed that peers contributed more towards a child's spiritual and religious development than parents; however, current research shows that parents share a greater—though different—role in their child's spiritual and religious development than what was once presumed (Walker et al., 2003). Depending on the style of parenting, parents may influence their child's religious or spiritual development in either positive or negative ways (Bartowski et al., 2019; Bornstein et al., 2017). While there is still limited research on the effects of parenting techniques on a child's religious or spiritual development, studies on parenting in general offer some intriguing insights to parenting within the religious sphere. Coupled with research focused on religious parenting, these studies provide valuable information as to which parenting styles improve transmission of religion from parent to child, as well as foster healthy religious and spiritual development in the home. Learning more about the effect of parenting styles on a child's religious and/or spiritual development may

help religious parents nurture their child's religiosity and spirituality in healthy, successful ways.

But what constitutes healthy religious and spiritual development in the home? And how can religious parents disseminate religious and spiritual values to their children while maintaining a respect for personal autonomy, as well as creating a warm, but structured, environment? This review will attempt to answer each of these questions, as well as set the stage for religious and spiritual child development. It will also describe the healthiest form of religious parenting, which can be defined as "socializing… children into… religious identities, practices, and beliefs" by way of attending religious events, adherence to religious rituals, and teaching religious values (Smith et al., 2020, p. 2). While some parents may feel it is their moral or parental responsibility to apply an authoritarian (high structure, low warmth, low autonomy) approach to religious parenting, studies show that an authoritative (high structure, high warmth, high autonomy) approach to religious parenting seems to be the healthiest and most successful style of religious parenting. This is because authoritative parenting allows for the foundational structure—as well as the freedom and space—that a child needs to successfully develop his or her own religious and/or spiritual identity; furthermore, it improves the chances that parents will successfully transmit their religion to their offspring.

Parent to Child Transmission: The Current Status of Religiosity

Parents from a variety of religions are worried about the increasingly substantial influences of religious pluralism, relativism, and secularism on their children (Bengtson et al., 2013). While historical documentation on generational differences within the 20th century showed greater religious continuity and consistency within families, religious continuity and consistency seem to be on the decline within the 21st century. Over the last fifty years, American society has adopted many new cultural and social changes. These changes have led both younger and older generations to feel a putative "gap" between themselves regarding religious ideals and practices (Bengtson et al., 2013). Consequently, many adults feel that today's youth are less religiously or

18

spiritually inclined, as well as less concerned with traditional, religious roles and moral values.

Indeed, these fears seem to be validated. Compared to 2007, there have been decreases in the percentages of religious identification within the United States, including an 8% decrease in Protestantism and a 3% decrease in Catholicism. On the other hand, there has been a 3% increase in agnosticism, 2% increase in atheism, and a 5% increase in 'none-ness' (not having a particular belief) (Pew Research Center, 2019). Similar decreases have occurred for Jewish Americans but, interestingly, not Muslim Americans (Mohamed, 2018; Pew Research Center, 2018). As a whole, the United States has seen a 12% decrease in Christianity and a 9% increase in religious non-affiliation (Pew Research Center, 2019). Furthermore, births out of wedlock and cohabitation are increasing, while marriage rates are declining (Daugherty & Copen, 2016).

Many parents feel that a decline in religious continuity is caused by a lack of interest in spiritual matters, but this does not seem to be the case. A widespread survey conducted by Lipka and Gecewicz (2017) found that, while Americans may be decreasing in religious affiliation, the same cannot be said about spiritual identification. In fact, compared to 16% in 2012, approximately 27% of Americans currently consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious. Therefore, there is evidence that the majority (approximately 81%) of the American population considers themselves either religious, spiritual, or both. Compared to 84% in 2012, 81% is a slight change that could be but a small dip in an ever-shifting continuum—it is not the major decline that many presume it to be. In other words, while it is commonly assumed that spirituality is on the decline, the data shows otherwise; while religiosity does seem to be declining, people are just as spiritual, if not more spiritual, than they were before. Therefore, perhaps the younger generations are not lacking in spiritual interest as much as their parents may have imagined, but rather are not motivated to pursue organized religion.

Researchers are beginning to wonder what is causing this decrease in religiosity or, in other words, a lack of religious transmission between parent and child. Is this trend rooted in social change, faulty religious parenting, or both? While there is evidence that both social change and lack of successful religious transmission are partly to blame for the decline in religiosity, this review will focus primarily on the impact of parenting styles (authoritative and authoritarian) on the successful—or unsuccessful—transference of religion from parent to child. Understanding what makes a successful or unsuccessful transference of

religion from parent to child will help parents encourage the continuation of religious family values through their offspring in healthy and successful ways. Or, in the case of religious difference, parents can learn to better foster positive parent-child relationships and help their child develop his or her religious and spiritual identities in a healthy way, no matter their child's religious preferences.

Transmission of Religion from Parent to Child

While there is little research on religious parenting (parenting with the sole purpose of fostering religious development), there is a breadth of information on parenting styles in general which can be helpful in discerning good practices for parenting within the religious sphere. Given that religious values are comparable to other cultural or familial values, one can assume that such religious values can be transmitted from parent to child in a number of different ways. According to the widely respected Baumrind's (1971) "parenting paradigm," there are four styles of parenting, including (1) authoritarian parenting, (2) authoritative parenting, (3) neglectful parenting, and (4) indulgent parenting. Authoritative and authoritarian parenting will be the focus of this review since they are the most widely addressed in current academic research. Authoritarian parenting involves aggressive and forceful interactions between parent and child. It often includes fear mongering, weak parent-child communication, and excessive control. In other words, it is high in structure but low in warmth and autonomy. Authoritative parenting, on the other hand, encourages both structure and independence, often including healthy parental support, guidance, and cooperation. In simpler terms, it is high in structure, warmth, and autonomy.

Out of a desire or sense of moral obligation to pass their religion onto their children, parents may implement an authoritarian approach (high structure, low warmth, low autonomy) to religious parenting and teaching. In doing so, they may use excessive force to get their child or adolescent to participate in religious rituals and limit their religious autonomy. While there are differing opinions on whether authoritarian religious parenting is efficacious or not, there has been increasing evidence to suggest that an authoritative style (high structure, high warmth, and high autonomy) is better suited for successful religious transference between parent and child. Consequently, when parents apply an authoritative approach to parenting, the child is better able to harness the many benefits that come with religious and spiritual affiliation. Conversely, when parents apply an

20

authoritarian approach, they risk exploiting their child's autonomy, often leading to religious embitterment later on (Bornstein et al., 2017).

Benefits of Religiosity and Spirituality

Before elaborating upon the elements of a successful or unsuccessful religious transference between parent and child, it is important to recognize why religiosity is largely beneficial for a child's development. While some blame organized religion for creating "intolerance, hatred, and violence… [as well as] repress[ing] freedom of thought, and…fill[ing] people with guilt and anxiety" (Ward, 2008, p. 413), there is a multitude of evidence suggesting that participation within organized religion offers more benefits than harm (Aldwin et al., 2014; Koenig, 2015; Santrock et al., 2020). And though researchers recognize that negative religious coping mechanisms can lead to different forms of psychopathy, including paranoid ideation, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsiveness (McConnell et al., 2006), there is a greater amount of scientific evidence that supports the physical, emotional, mental, and social benefits of religiosity and spirituality when implemented in a healthy way (Aldwin et al., 2014; Koenig, 2015; Santrock et al., 2020).

In a review on the correlation between health, religion, and spirituality, Koenig (2015) synthesized evidence from more than 3,000 different studies. After analyzing these studies, Koenig discovered three essential benefits that were positively correlated with religiosity and spirituality: (1) increased mental wellness, including decreased depression, suicide, and substance abuse, (2) less risky behaviors, including less risky sexual behaviors, healthier diets, and increased physical activity, and (3) increased physical health, including fewer chronic illnesses and lower mortality rates. Aldwin et al. (2014) reached similar conclusions: They found that religiosity was linked to improved health habits while spirituality was linked to improved biomarkers including healthier blood pressure levels and increased immunity. Lastly, religiosity was also found to increase self-esteem, improve interpersonal relationships, and enhance prosocial behaviors (Santrock et al., 2020). Altogether, when incorporated in a healthy way, religion can be a great influence on a child's overall mental, physical, social, and emotional

health. For this reason, it is recommended that parents encourage religiosity and spirituality in the home.

When it Goes Wrong

Given the benefits of religiosity and spirituality, parents often feel discouraged if their aims to persuade their children to adopt religious values and traditions are either unfruitful or frustrating. It is understandable that parents who are highly invested in their child's religious and spiritual development and affiliation may struggle applying a parenting style that supports spiritual and religious autonomy. For this reason, parents may attempt to use authoritarian parenting to instill religious sentiments upon their children, especially since authoritarian parenting tends to enforce good behavior, emphasize safety, and incorporate clear, precise rules (Perry, 2019). Nevertheless,   parents should keep in mind that an authoritarian approach to religious parenting can end up being more harmful than successful. Authoritarian parenting tends to evoke fear more than respect, resulting in weak parent-child communications and interactions. It also tends to limit the child's freedom, undermining the need for children to explore and establish their own religious identities (Baumrind, 1971; Santrock et al., 2020). Furthermore, authoritarian parents frequently use fear mongering and excessive control to manage their children's behaviors, often resulting in bitterness or lack of autonomy and self-sufficiency on the part of the child.

Additionally, when authoritarian parents are religious conservatists, they are more likely to endorse the use of corporal punishment, such as spanking and other types of physical discipline, in an effort to increase their control (Mahoney et al., 2001). Corporal punishment is especially common when the parents take a more fundamentalist, rather than liberal, approach to interpreting the Bible or other books of scripture (Bottoms et al., 2008). In other words, those who strictly conform to the exact letter of sacred texts are more likely to practice corporal punishment within the home. Studies have shown that corporal punishment can lead to "increased aggression, antisocial behavior, physical injury and mental health problems for children" (Smith, 2012, p. 60). The negative effects of corporal punishment can force children to accept their parents' religion out of fear rather than faith, potentially leading to both religious and familial bitterness in adolescence or adulthood. In other words, the use of

22

corporal punishment can undermine a parent's ability to influence their child's religious and spiritual development for good.

Authoritarian religious parenting has also been linked to lower academic achievement. The negative effects of authoritarian religious parenting can be especially pervasive within a child's academic success if the child identifies as being less religious while the parents identify as being highly religious (McKune & Hoffman, 2009). Additionally, in a study on the correlations between religion and educational success, Bartkowski et al. (2008) found that certain types of negative, religious parenting can lead to decreases in standardized test scores, more specifically in math, reading, and science. While it isn't clear why children with authoritarian, religious parents tend to have lower standardized test scores, it can be hypothesized that—by nature of authoritarian parenting techniques— their frequent use of rage, comparisons, and intolerance to failure may apply excessive pressure on children to meet high expectations, potentially leading them to self-handicap themselves by decreasing academic effort in order to cope (Santrock et al., 2020). Fortunately, these negative influences may be mitigated through frequent, open parent-child religious discussions, which open conversations mark the technique of authoritative, rather than authoritarian, parenting.

Additionally, research has demonstrated a link between authoritarian religious parenting and increased tension within child-parent relationships. First, authoritarian, religious parenting is linked to increased conflict between the parent and child, as well as unnecessary tension between families and church authority. Furthermore, increased religious conflict and tension have been found to be positively correlated with decreased self-control and increased emotional issues in children (Bartowski et al., 2008). This is especially the case in mixed-faith households. Additionally, unnecessary religious conflict within the family may lead older children to parallelize religious incompatibility with familial relationships, resulting in feelings of rejection (Bornstein et al., 2017). Bornstein et al. also found that familial, religious conflict may decrease children's self-esteem, increase their risk for depression, and minimize parental religious authority in the home.

But conflict isn't the only way that authoritarian, religious parenting can increase tension between parent and child. When parents attempt to transfer religious beliefs to their child using an authoritarian style, they are more likely to disrespect or disregard their child's religious agency. Furthermore, when adults

prioritize obedience over religious tolerance, their religious goals can be seen by adolescents as more restrictive than motivating (Bornstein et al., 2017). It is important to note that obedience and structure within the home are important elements of a healthy household; nevertheless, when parents undermine their child's religious autonomy via complete lack of religious agency, children are more likely to develop problematic internalizing (harmful behaviors directed towards oneself) and externalizing behaviors (harmful behaviors directed towards others), as well as increased stress and anxiety (Bornstein et al., 2017). Lastly, authoritarian, religious parenting runs the risk of crossing the threshold into abusive or manipulative behaviors, stagnating a child's ability to develop a healthy relationship with God (Bottoms et al., 2008; Kvarfordt, 2010). And while this evidence shines light on problematic religious parenting, it does not imply that parents should neglect setting religious standards or priorities in the home; rather, excessive force and control can negatively impact a child's religious experience and development.

When it Goes Right

If authoritarian parenting is not the best way to transmit religious values to children and encourage healthy religious and spiritual development, what is? Bornstein et al. (2017) discovered that religious parenting involving "communication, closeness, warmth, support, and monitoring" is key, along with less authoritarian parenting (p. 88). In other words, parents should develop an authoritative style (high structure, high warmth, high autonomy) of religious parenting. Additionally, Bornstein et al. encourage parents to practice what religious psychologists sometimes call sanctification, or the application of religious teachings that are embedded in everyday life. Sanctification is a critical aspect of religious authoritative parenting that prioritizes mutual respect, constructive discipline, and diminished conflict. In addition to sanctification, when authoritative parenting includes frequent attendance of religious services, families are more likely to experience a healthy religious transference between parent and child, as well as other benefits for the child: positive socialization, higher levels of parent-child cooperation, prosocial behaviors, increased social

24

capital, and greater psychological adjustment (Bartkowsi et al., 2019; Bartkowki et al., 2008; Ebstyne King & Furrow, 2004).

Authoritative styles of communication also impact the success of religious transference and development. If parents want to positively influence their child's religiosity, they must prioritize two-way, respectful, religious conversations with their children. Bartkowski et al. (2008) found that when parents frequently participate in religious discussions with their children, their children tend to develop greater self-control and enjoy positive social interactions, improved cognitive processes, and enhanced learning capabilities. Good religious communication can also improve the bond between mother and child. Moreover, Bornstein et al. (2017) found that warm parent-child interactions (religiously centered or not) can lead to increased prosocial competence and academic performance, as well as fewer negative, externalizing behaviors by age 10. This is especially the case when both parent and child consider themselves to be highly religious or spiritual (McKune & Hoffmann, 2009). In other words, healthy religious interactions between parents and their children can augment a parent's influence over his or her child and motivate prosocial behaviors and intellectual development.

Additionally, authoritative religious parenting, coupled with frequent church attendance, is associated with greater overall health, including psychological health (Chiswick & Mirtcheva, 2013). Both Chiswick & Mirtcheva (2013) and Shaver et al. (2020) discovered this association to be greatest when the child is between ages 12-15 and when the mother is educated and supported by co-religious adults. Furrow et al. (2010) reached similar conclusions, finding that authoritative, religious parenting that instills positive, religious sentiments helps children develop a greater psychological wellness and increases their sense of meaning and purpose. A greater sense of personal meaning and identity, coupled with positive ties to their religious community, boost children's willingness to care for others, stay out of trouble, commit to the common good, participate within the community, and behave in a more altruistic manner. Furthermore, when religious parenting is done right, children are more motivated to participate in religious activities along with their parents and practice other prosocial, positive behaviors.

But what does authoritative, religious parenting look like? According to Barrow et al. (2020) and Owen (1984), parents can balance their desire for religious continuity and their child's religious agency in a number of ways. First, parents should teach principles more than they should attempt to enforce religious practices. If a child does not want to pray or attend church, parents should patiently explain

the principles behind prayer and worship. Forcing a child to participate without explanation often leads to rebellion, bitterness, or blind obedience rather than true faith and understanding. Second, parents should clearly communicate household expectations and standards for religious practice in the home; nevertheless, these expectations or rules should still allow for some personal exploration. For example, a household rule may enforce family church attendance, but children should also be allowed to visit other religious congregations if desired. Parents should respect their child's views and be willing to listen to and support their religious beliefs. Additionally, parents should create an atmosphere of acceptance where children can learn from their mistakes rather than feel shame by using their child's failures as teaching experiences and not being overly critical when disciplining. Lastly, authoritative parents should set an example by modeling the behaviors they want to see in their children. Doing so will decrease religious hypocrisy and conflict in the home, as well as encourage a spirit of religious harmony between parent and child.

Conclusion

While many parents may believe that an authoritarian style (high structure, low warmth, low autonomy) of religious parenting is the best way to transmit one's religion to their child, research has indicated that an authoritative approach (high structure, high warmth, high autonomy) to religious parenting is more successful (Bornstein et al., 2017). Authoritative parenting applies a perfect mixture of restrictive and non-restrictive parenting techniques, allowing children the needed structure and space to develop their own religious identities. Rather than apply excessive force, it is recommended that parents set boundaries and religious expectations in their home, as well as encourage children to participate in religious rituals and activities. After all, healthy religious and spiritual practices can offer a multiplicity of benefits including increased mental, physical, social, and emotional health, as well as greater social capital, sense of meaning, and academic achievement (Aldwin et al., 2014; Bartkowski et al., 2008, Bornstein et al, 2017; Chiswick & Mirtcheva, 2013; Ebstyne King, & Furrow, 2004; Furrow et al., 2010; Koenig, 2015; McKune & Hoffmann, 2009; Santrock et al., 2020).

Further research is needed to better understand what makes a successful or unsuccessful religious transference between parent and child. Moreover, additional research is required to better comprehend the effects of religion on child

26

The Double-Edged Sword

development. Since much of the existing research is based on parenting in general rather than religious parenting, there must be more research directed specifically to parenting within the religious sphere, in addition to research on parent-child religious transmission. This research will help families understand how they can foster healthy, religious development in the home. As a result, families and individuals—as well as entire societies—will be strengthened. Only then will the psychology of religion and spirituality be "no longer… overlooked as an important developmental context" and facet of human understanding (Ebstyne King & Furrow, 2004, p. 46).

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The Double-Edged Sword

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