

Early Spirituality and Religious Participation Linked to Later Adolescent Well-Being

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A new Search Institute analysis finds that young people in middle school who describe spirituality as important, and who participate in religious community, are better off on a variety of risk and thriving indicators several years later in high school. Earlier studies with the institute's large 2003 aggregate sample of nearly 150,000 6th-12th graders had shown that spirituality and religiosity were connected to current well-being, but we could not infer cause and effect because, even though that sample was large, we did not follow these young people over time.

However, we did follow 370 students in St. Louis Park, Minn., for three years, from 1998 when they were in middle school to 2001 when they were in high school. We looked separately at young people who said being spiritual was important or very important to them, versus young people who did not, and at young people who participated at least one hour a week, on average, in a religious community, versus young people who did not. We compared these groups of young people on 10 risk-behavior patterns and seven indicators of thriving. We used several different statistical methods to examine the data, and each method yielded some common but also some unique results.

- A smaller percentage of young people who were religiously active in middle school engaged in these 5 risk behaviors three years later when they were in high school: Alcohol abuse, driving and alcohol, tobacco, illicit drugs, and sexual intercourse. For example, **only 13% of youth who were religiously active in middle school had alcohol abuse problems in high school, versus 23% of inactive youth.** Religiously active youth did not have lower average scores on those risk behaviors, but did have lower average scores on school problems in high school. A higher percentage of religiously active youth in middle school also had these 4 thriving indicators in high school: Resisting danger, informal helping of others, leadership, and overcoming adversity. For example, 29% of religiously active youth in middle school were able to resist danger in high school, but only 17% of inactive youth did. In addition to having higher average scores on those thriving indicators, **religiously active youth had higher average scores in high school on resisting danger, leadership, overcoming adversity, and valuing of diversity.**
- The importance placed in middle school on being spiritual or religious had a similar relationship to outcomes three years later. A smaller percentage of youth who were spiritual in middle school engaged in these risk behaviors three years later in high school: Sexual intercourse, violence, gambling, and anti-social behavior. For example, **only 14% of spiritual youth in middle school had had sexual intercourse three or more times by high school, but 28% of non-spiritual youth had.** Spiritual youth also had lower average scores on those risk behaviors, and as for religiously active youth, spiritual youth also had lower

average school problems scores in high school. A higher percentage of youth who were spiritual in middle school also experienced these 4 thriving indicators in high school: Resisting danger, leadership, overcoming adversity, and getting mostly A's in school. For example, **34% of spiritual youth in middle school got mostly A's in high school, versus just 22% of non-spiritual youth who did that well in high school.** Spiritual youth also had higher average scores on these thriving indicators.

It appears then, that both formal participation in a religious community, and a high importance placed on being spiritual, may have important causal relationships with helping young people delay sexual intercourse, prevent school problems, and promote their resistance to getting into dangerous situations, their leadership, and their ability to overcome adversity. Religious involvement in middle school, more so than being spiritual, may have an effect on later alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use, and on informal helping of others and valuing diversity. And being spiritual in middle school may have more of an impact than religious community on later anti-social behavior, gambling, and engagement in violence, as well as on doing well in school.

We should not overstate the possible influence of religiosity and spirituality. Regression analyses we conducted on these data show that when considered alone, apart from any other influences in a young person's world, religious community and spirituality each explain only about 5% of the variation in indexes of risk and thriving created by summing up the individual scores to the various risk patterns and thriving indicators. In contrast, when we have allowed the entire range of Developmental Assets to predict risk and thriving, we can explain about 57% of the variation in the risk index, and 47%-54% of the thriving index, across six different racial/ethnic groups of young people. Many other studies have also supported this common-sense conclusion, that single factors alone do not usually explain much of young people's well-being, but that it takes multiple influences operating in multiple parts of young people's worlds, and over multiple points in time, to promote positive youth development.

But even so qualified, religiosity and spirituality clearly contribute an important role to current and future adolescent well-being. Unfortunately, the same longitudinal data also show that young people get less and less religiously active and spiritual from middle school to high school. For example, **75% of 7th graders are religiously active, but only 60% of the same youth are still participating an hour a week or more three years later when they are in the 10th grade** (an even bigger drop is seen as 8th graders grow into 11th graders). Similarly, 54% of those 7th graders say being spiritual is very important to them, but only 45% attach that importance to being spiritual three years later when they are in the 10th grade.

These trend data show that the level of importance placed on being spiritual is less at every grade level, and in each year, than the level of religious activity reported. However, the decline in considering spirituality to be important is also less than the decline seen in religious participation. For example, **71% of 8th graders were religiously active in 1998, but only 53% of those same youth were, by 11th grade.** But 56% of 8th graders in 1998 considered being

spiritual to be important, a percentage that dropped, but only to 49%, by the time they were in 11th grade.

Percentage Active in Religious Community, Middle School to High School, St. Louis Park Longitudinal Data

	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	
1998 Cohort Grade Level	75	71	61	
2001 Cohort Grade Level		60	53	51
		Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12

Percentage Saying Being Spiritual Is Very Important, Middle School to High School, St. Louis Park Longitudinal Data

	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	
1998 Cohort Grade Level	54	56	42	
2001 Cohort Grade Level		45	49	40
		Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12