

FOOTSTEPS

HOW PARENTS INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

Call them late adolescents, college students, emerging adults, twenty-somethings, or what have you. The values and behaviors of young people, and the factors that influence them, provide endless fascination for parents, educators, marketers, clergy, the church, and society in general. As a result, there is a significant body of literature focused on the relationship between family interaction and adolescent beliefs related to sexual attitudes and behavior, substance use and abuse, consumer activity, academics, and media use, including music, video games, and communication technology. However, this literature focuses almost entirely on negative adolescent behavior, ignores spirituality and religion altogether, and fails to integrate family interaction, communication, and spirituality into a coherent whole.

Parental interaction and communication may be the single most important influence on positive adolescent behavior in general and on attitudes about religion in particular, according to some past research. Unfortunately, most parents have little insight into the way their communication and parenting styles affect these relationships. Therefore, two of my students (now alumni) and I designed a study to examine: the effect of perceived parental communication quality, the frequency of communication about

spiritual issues with parents, and the effect of various parenting styles on attitudes toward religion.

A LITTLE BACKGROUND

Communication in the family

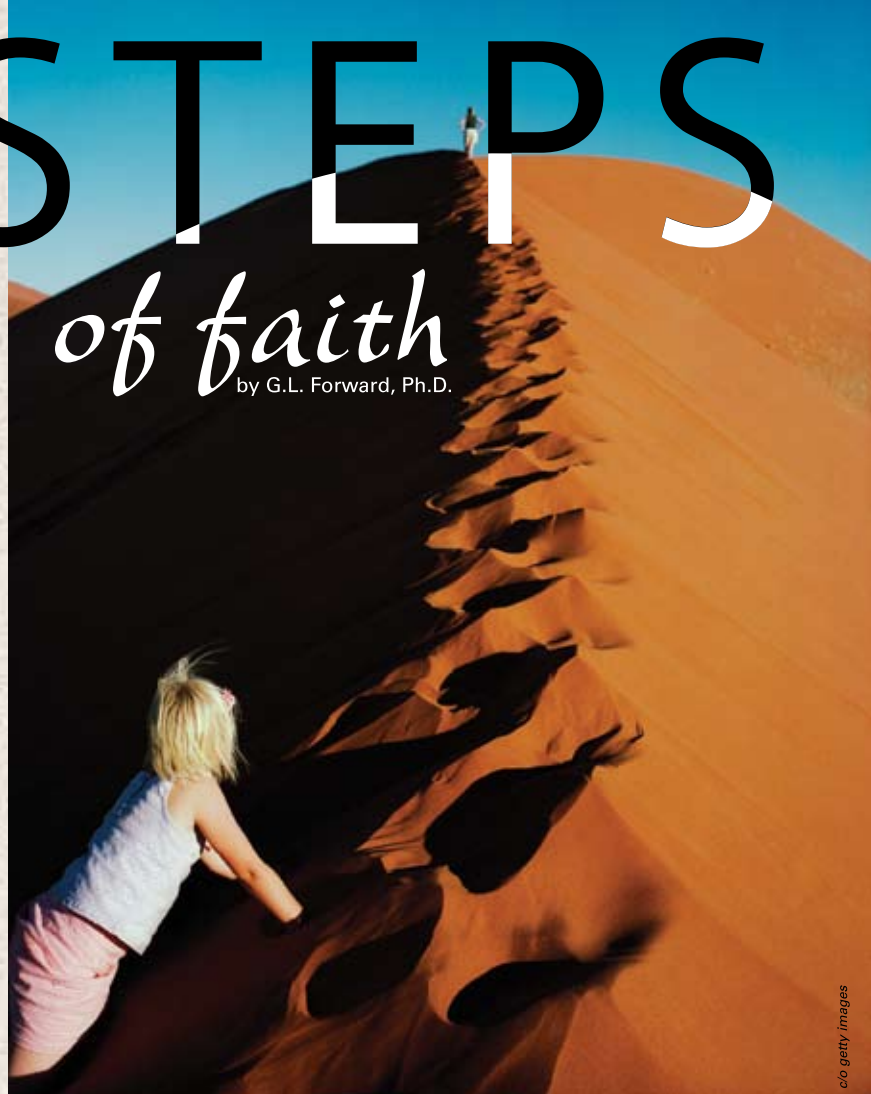
Communication is the fundamental building block of the family unit. It alters and shapes relationships and interactions. Increasingly, researchers have identified "family rules" that send clear messages to children about acceptable forms of communication, ranging from "children don't talk back to their parents" to "tell the truth at all times" to "do not discuss politics and religion with strangers." These messages are so strong and deeply embedded in the texture of family interaction that they have been shown to influence personal identity, behavior, and attitudes more effectively than outside factors such as mass media advertising.

Parenting Styles

Studies attempt to capture the general patterns, organization, and climate of family communication that have been linked to children's social development and behavioral patterns. The combination of two underlying dimensions – warmth/responsiveness and control – results in three distinct categories of parenting, identified as "permissive," "authoritarian," and "authoritative."

of faith

by G.L. Forward, Ph.D.



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Permissive parents provide moderate to high levels of nurturing but exercise little parental control. These parents place few demands on their children and are often inconsistent disciplinarians. Their children tend to be friendly, sociable youngsters, but in comparison with others their age, they tend to display inappropriate behaviors in ordinary social situations.

On the other hand, authoritarian parents have high standards for their children and demand unquestioning obedience from them. These parents coerce and manipulate their children to conform to their social and personal views and values. Authoritarian parents who succeed in enforcing

their demands through coercive discipline tend to raise depressed children with subsequently poor social skills.

The last style of parenting is labeled authoritative. This style of parenting exhibits high levels of parental responsiveness with equally high expectations placed on the child. These parents exert firm control when necessary but do not hem the child in with excessive restrictions. Authoritative parents use reason, as well as parental authority, to achieve their objectives. Research shows that children raised by authoritative parents exhibit higher degrees of interpersonal competence and greater psychosocial maturity and are better able to balance personal and societal needs and responsibilities.

communication quality parental spirituality adolescent identification frequency

Spirituality and Religion

Most people, including adolescents, report that spirituality and religion are important to them. According to research, 95 percent of U.S. youth profess a belief in God, 75 percent say they try to follow the precepts of their religion, more than half have participated in a church-related youth group, and 42 percent claim to pray regularly. Late adolescence (including the college years), in particular, is characterized by striving for purpose, seeking direction, and exploring identity, which are all often related to questions of spirituality and religion. Research suggests that parents who are supportive of their children's spiritual and religious activities and have a stable home environment are more likely to pass along their spiritual attitudes and practices to their children.

WHAT WE FOUND

Our research explored the relationship between family communication, parenting style, and late adolescent (also sometimes called emerging adult) spirituality. We gave a four-page survey to 119 college students, 39 males and 80 females, attending one of four church-related universities in Southern California. The average age was 20, and 82 percent of the participants were Caucasian. In addition, a majority of the sample was affiliated with a nondenominational church,

with Nazarene and Baptist the next most often represented denominations. Several significant implications emerged from our research.

(1). First, parents matter.

If religion and spirituality are important to you as a parent, they are more likely to be important to your children. We tend to talk about the things we care about and have meaningful conversations about the things that are important to us. Our research shows strong, positive correlations between communication quality, frequency, parental spirituality, and adolescent identification with spirituality. Although no one can predict another person's behavior, if your children see the importance of religion and spirituality reflected in your attitudes, communication, and behavior, they are more likely to embrace spirituality for themselves. This was by far the most powerful predictor of student spirituality.

(2). **Second, dads matter.** There is a growing body of research highlighting the significance of a father's role in the family. Our project found that the quality of communication with fathers and fathers' authoritative (not authoritarian) parenting style contribute to adolescent spirituality. Children respond well when dad is actively involved in the family, contributes direction and priorities, and explains decisions. However, at the same time, fathers must communicate acceptance of their children for who they are and permit freedom in nonessential areas, as well.

(3). Third, communicating is most important.

Parents sometimes obsess about their behaviors and choices relative to parenting.

However, our research shows that frequent, open, and honest communication about spirituality matters more than any parenting style when it comes to imparting spiritual beliefs and values to children. Our family relationships are more resilient than we sometimes think, and warm, open communication with our children can go a long way.

(4). **Fourth, parenting style may make a difference.** The foregoing does not imply that parenting style does not matter at all. We now know the importance of communication quality between parents and children regarding the transmission of spiritual values. However, our research also shows that communication quality is rated highest in families in which both parents exhibit an authoritative style. This style is very responsive to the child, respectful of the child's rights, and uses reason to persuade while also communicating high expectations.

CONCLUSION

Research indicates that parents' involvement in the religious practices of their children has a major influence on late adolescent spirituality. Late adolescents who perceive their parents to be spiritual and sense the importance of spiritual issues while growing up tend to adopt parental attitudes about spirituality as their own. ⊕

Adapted from Baumbach, K., Forward, G.L., and Hart, D. (2006). Communication and parental influence on late adolescent spirituality. The Journal of Communication and Religion, 29(2), 394-420. G.L. Forward, Ph.D., is a professor of organizational communication at Point Loma Nazarene University. Katy Baumbach (03) and David Hart (03) are both management and organizational communication alumni of PLNU.