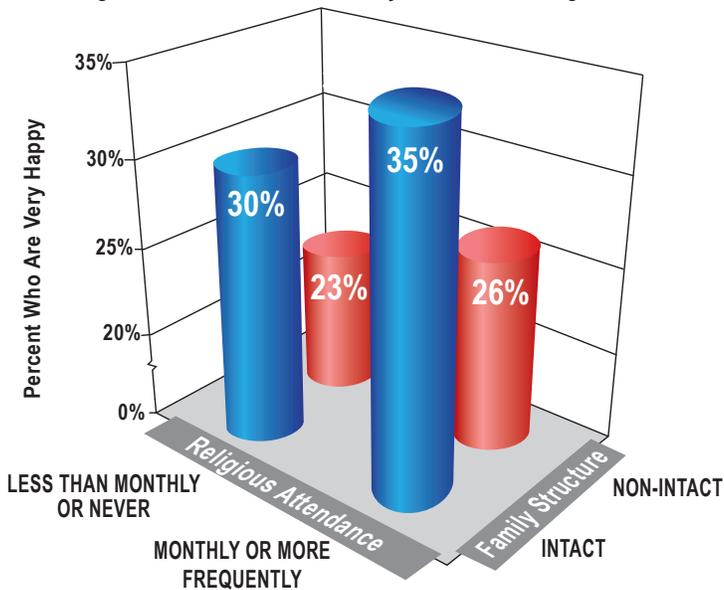




Marriage, Religion, and the Common Good – Number 51

## Intergenerational Links to Happiness: Religious Attendance and Family Structure

Percent Who Are Very Happy by Frequency of Their Religious Attendance and Family Structure during Adolescence



During Adolescence: Religious Attendance and Family Structure Combined

Source: General Social Survey (GSS)

*This chart groups the data in four categories, with two different configurations for each of two major indicators, frequency of religious attendance (monthly or more/less than monthly) and family structure (intact/non-intact).*

*The intact category consists of families with both biological parents, married or unmarried, raising their children. The non-intact category is composed of families without both biological parents, including married stepfamilies, cohabiting stepfamilies, divorced single-parent families, and always single-parent families.*

*The resultant four categories are 1) intact family with monthly or more religious attendance; 2) intact family with less than monthly religious attendance; 3) non-intact family with monthly or more religious attendance; and 4) non-intact family with less than monthly religious attendance.*

*This chart is taken from a study conducted by Visiting Fellow Althea Nagai for Family Research Council.*

Adults who frequently attended religious services as adolescents and grew up living with both biological parents are most likely to be very happy.

According to the General Social Survey (GSS), 35 percent of adults who attended religious services at least monthly and lived in an intact family through adolescence considered themselves very happy, compared to 23 percent of adults who attended religious services less than monthly and lived in a non-intact family as adolescents. In between were those who had attended religious services at least monthly but lived in a non-intact family (26 percent) and those who lived in an intact family but attended religious services less than monthly (30 percent).<sup>1</sup>

The combination of frequent religious attendance during adolescence and an intact family background clearly increases the likelihood of being very happy in adulthood. The data indicate, however, that family structure may have a more pronounced effect than religious attendance.

## Other Studies

Very few studies have examined contemporaneous effects of both religious attendance and family structure on happiness, let alone intergenerational effects, but these studies generally support the direction of these findings. Arthur Brooks of Syracuse University reported that while “practicing a religion makes people very happy, on average,” married people are “nearly twice as likely as singles” to report being very happy.<sup>2</sup>

In a study of Caribbean adolescents, Robert Blum of the University of Minnesota and colleagues found that adolescents who report having religious beliefs and connectedness with their parents are less likely to experience rage.<sup>3</sup>

Though the evidence demonstrates that an intact family may have a greater influence than religiosity on the likelihood of being very happy, the combination of frequent religious attendance and an intact family yields the highest proportion of very happy people, as adolescents and adults.

Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D. & Althea Nagai, Ph.D.

*Dr. Fagan is senior fellow and director of the Center for Family and Religion at Family Research Council.*

*Dr. Nagai is a visiting fellow at Family Research Council.*

---

1 This chart draws on data collected by the General Social Survey, 1972-2006. From 1972 to 1993, the sample size averaged 1,500 each year. No GSS was conducted in 1979, 1981, or 1992. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted only in even-numbered years and uses two samples per GSS that total approximately 3,000. In 2006, a third sample was added for a total sample size of 4,510.

2 Arthur Brooks, *Gross National Happiness* (New York: Basic Books, 2008): 28, 30, 217, 227.

3 Robert Blum, et al., “Adolescent Health in the Caribbean: Risk and Protective Factors,” *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 93 (2003): 456-460.



FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL  
801 G STREET NW  
WASHINGTON DC 20001  
800-225-4008  
WWW.FRC.ORG

Mapping America  
Editor: Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D.  
Managing Editor: Michael Leaser

Please feel free to make additional copies of this resource. We only ask that you comply with standard norms of attribution to the Family Research Council and to Mapping America.

---

WWW.MAPPINGAMERICAPROJECT.ORG