

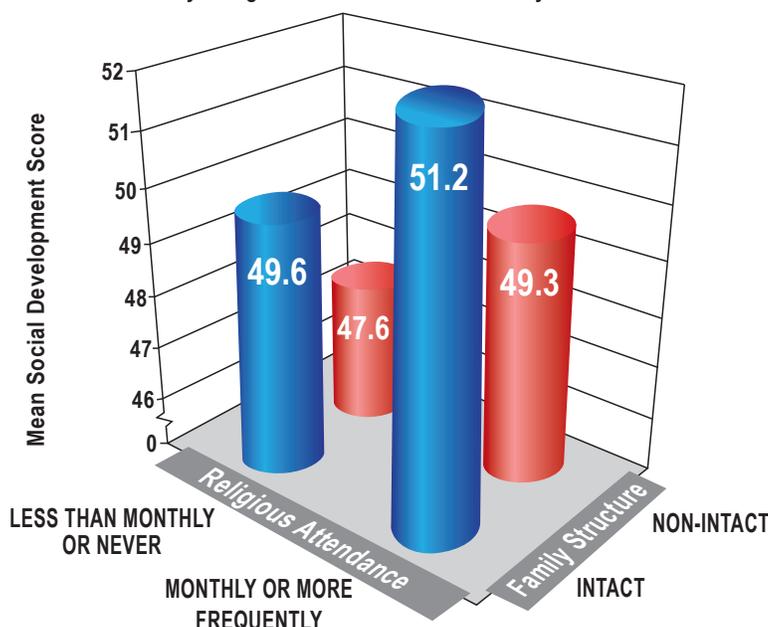


Mapping America™

Marriage, Religion, and the Common Good – Number 60

Children’s Positive Social Development, Religious Attendance, and Family Structure

Children’s Positive Social Development by Religious Attendance and Family Structure



Religious Attendance and Family Structure Combined

Source: National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH, 2003)

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 frequently vs. less than monthly or never) and family structure (intact vs. non-intact).

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

Nicholas Zill, Ph.D.¹ provided the data for this chart.²

Children from intact families who frequently attend worship are more socially developed than those living in non-intact families who attend worship infrequently.

This chart depicts the mean social development score of children aged 6 to 17, correlated with religious attendance and family structure. Children who worship frequently and live with both biological parents or with two adoptive parents have a higher score (51.2) than those who worship less than monthly and live in single-parent or reconstituted families (47.6). In between are those who live in intact families and worship less than monthly (49.6) and those who live in non-intact families who worship at least monthly (49.3). The data are taken from the National Survey of Children’s Health.

Positive social development is shown by behaviors such as getting along with other children, showing respect for teachers and neighbors, trying to understand other people’s feelings, and trying to resolve conflicts between people.

Other Studies

Several other studies corroborate the direction of these findings. Jerry Trusty of Texas A&M University and Richard Watts of Baylor University reported that high school seniors who frequently participated in religious activities were more likely to have involved parents and less likely to exhibit delinquent behavior.³

John Bartkowski of Mississippi State University and colleagues also found that both parents' frequent worship corresponded to several positive outcomes in their children, including greater social skills, greater interpersonal skills at school, protection "against internalizing problem behaviors," protection against loneliness/sadness, and protection from overactive and impulsive behaviors in the home.⁴

As the evidence shows, children who live with both parents in a religiously active family are more likely to develop positive social behavior.

Nicholas Zill, Ph.D.
Research Psychologist
Former Vice President of Westat
Founding President of Child Trends

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- 1 Nicholas Zill is a research psychologist and consultant. Until his recent retirement, he was a vice president of Westat Inc. He was the founder of Child Trends and its executive director for 13 years.
 - 2 This chart draws on data collected by the National Center for Health Statistics in the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) in 2003. The data sample consisted of parents of 102,353 children and teens in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. 68,996 of these children and teens were between six and 17 years old, the age group that was the focus of the study. The survey sample in this age range represented a population of nearly 49 million young people nationwide.
 - 3 Jerry Trusty and Richard E. Watts, "Relationship of High School Seniors' Religious Perceptions and Behavior to Educational, Career, and Leisure Variables," *Counseling and Values*, vol. 44 (1999): 30-40.
 - 4 John P. Bartkowski, et al., "Religion and Child Development: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study," *Social Science Research*, vol. 37 (2008): 18-36.



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