

Parental influence in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude in Christian adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The role of a parent in the life of an adolescent is indispensable, for the functioning and physical and psychological well-being. Adolescence is a phase of drastic changes in various dimensions such as physical growth and development, psychological maturity, educational advancements and marks the transition into adulthood. Spiritual development is of utmost importance in this phase and is necessary for their psychological well-being in the future. Like in other dimensions, spirituality and religion are also enforced and inculcated in children by their parents. This study explores the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of 300 Christian adolescents (between ages 13-16) and their perceived parental influence and support. This was assessed through a self-constructed questionnaire. The data was analysed by comparing the mean scores of the group and also using Mann Whitney U test to compare the scores between boys and girls. The findings reveal that the adolescents attribute their spiritual development, church and faith related activities to their parents and upbringing, thus reinforcing the value of positive parenting in the dimension of religion and spirituality.

Keywords: *Adolescence, Spirituality, Parenting*

Adolescence is a major stage in the life span development of a human being and the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. This stage is marked by drastic changes in all dimensions of development, such as growth spurt and attainment of sexual maturation, cognitive development and identity formation (Santrock, 2006). They have received a large degree of attention from researchers with respect to their physical, psychological, and social development but not sufficiently with respect to their spiritual growth (Smith, 2005). Spirituality plays a major role in the character formation of adolescents and can eventually influence their life outcomes (Benson et al., 2003; Smith, 2005). As adolescents are exposed to influences that will either be beneficial or detrimental to their personal development, they need a worldview that will provide the beliefs, principles, and values that will guide their decisions and form their characters (Barna, 2001).

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Received: August 28, 2019; Revision Received: December 10, 2019; Accepted: December 25, 2019

Parental Influence and Positive Outcomes

According to Tripp (2001), the life span stage adolescence is filled with conflicts and struggles, and these will produce “wonderful parental opportunities” which can shape and influence the spiritual lives of their children. A study by The State of Our Nation’s Youth 2005-2006, report that majority, about 46% of adolescents wished for more time spent together as a family which implies the degree of influence that parents have. To support this above statement, study conducted by Barna (1999), found that seventy eight percent of teenagers acknowledge that their parents have a lot of influence on the way they think and act and thus they strive to have a close connection with family and friends on a daily basis (Barna, 2001). Smith (2005), suggests that the family being united, having parents as religious role models and consistently involved in a child’s daily life and religious activities have a positive impact on spiritual development, church attendance and faith. Adding to this, Parker and Gaier (1980) report that parents' level of religious participation accounted for more than 60% of the variance in the religious beliefs and practices of their high school-aged children. Family is an institution that provides the environment where parents and children can love each other and help each other grow spiritually, mentally, and physically through healthy interactions and can thus develop faith maturity, denominational loyalty, and moral reasoning (Dudley & Gillespie, 1992; Speicher, 1992). Ramírez-Johnson and Hernández (2003) in their study among Adventists Youth found a relationship between high faith maturity and family unity among youth. They also state that positive affective relationships between a child and her or his parents, as well as parental understanding and support, have been found to promote the development of adolescent moral reasoning.

Studies indicate that, mothers were especially influential and strong religious transmission effects were more apparent among children. A study conducted by Varon and Riley (1999) reports that adolescents whose mothers attended religious services at least once a week displayed better health problem- solving skills, more support from their friends, and higher overall satisfaction with their lives, even after controlling for race, gender, income, and family structure. This in turn positively impacts the mother-child relationship and also faith formation in the child (Pearce & Axinn, 1998). A comparable longitudinal study by Litchfield and Thomas (1997) showed that children enjoying emotionally supportive relationships with their mother were more likely to increase in private religiosity over time, and that this mother-child connection predicted the child's public religious practices almost as much as family religious practice itself.

Negative Outcomes

While a positive home environment is evidenced to have a positive effect for faith and spirituality, a negative home environment can have a negative effect on the children of all age. Smith (2005), states that divorce typically reduces religious involvement of parents and teens. Similarly, teenagers who live in intact families are most likely to be more religious than teenagers who do not live in intact families. Smith also declares that "Higher levels of teen religiosity are positively associated with growing up in married Parent households; teens whose parents are not married tend to be personally less religious themselves". In this respect, Dudley (2000) also found that more than 87% of youth who remained in the church had biological parents who were married and still together, whereas 66% of youth who drop out of church did not. Webb and Whitmer (2003) found that adults refuse to take up the belief taught in the family due to the emotional and physical abuse from the parents. Researchers (Bierman, 2005, Bottoms, Nielsen, Murray, and Filipas 2003) found that adolescents those who have experienced maltreatment from mothers and abuse from fathers had a negative effect on religiosity or decreases in religiosity with several experiences. Bierman, (2005) in

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his study found that maltreatment from mothers had negative impact on adolescent's religiosity. Similarly abuse committed by fathers was related to decreases in religiosity, and the image of God as father may lead victims of abusive fathers to distance themselves from religion. Emotional and physical abuse is related to the loss or rejection of belief systems taught in the family (Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, 1998 Webb and Whitmer 2003)

Theories on Adolescents Spirituality

Religious development in children and adolescents is a research area of increasing interest to developmental psychologists, theorists of religious development, religious educators, and designers of religious education curricula, especially in Christian settings Spilka, Hook & Gorsuch appropriately pointed out that more research work have to be conduct to differentiate the factors that are influencing the adolescent's religious growth (1985).

According to Kirkpatrick (1997), children whose attachment relationships with parents are secure are likely to adopt the religious beliefs of their parents, while those whose attachment relationships are insecure are likely to be less influenced by parents. Hence Kirkpatrick suggest that an individual's relationship with God can be considered as an attachment relationship and is based directly on the quality of parent- child attachment

Elkind (1964; 1970), following the cognitive development stages of Piaget, proposed three stages of religious development in childhood and adolescence ie preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. The first two stages children began to use signs and symbols to represent objects in their real life and the understanding about religion and religious belief is based on observable behavior, rather than on thoughts, feeling, and motivations. But in the third stage, with the advent of formal operational thought, there is reflection, and exploration of religious beliefs, values and practices developing a private and personal experience of communion with God.

Flower's theory of faith development includes several stages influenced by Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg in which the final stage ie synthetic conventional faith emerges in early adolescence and signifies the beginning of the ability to use abstract ideas and concepts to understand the world around them (1991). The individual's "faith" becomes susceptible to the shaping influence of societal norms and accepted groups or structures (Einstein, 1978). The adolescent also develop interpersonal multi-perspective cognitions and begin to desire a personal relationship with God in which they feel loved in a deep and comprehensive way (Fowler & Dell, 2005).

Oser (1991) defines religious judgment as " . . .reasoning that relates reality as experienced to something beyond reality and that serves to provide meaning and direction beyond learned content". In adolescence, judgment is promoted by personal experiences and observations of people prospering or suffering unjustly, and of prayers not answered. In the face of increasing recognition of injustice and human suffering, this is also a stage of increased questioning of the existence of God and increasing atheism among adolescents following which individuals who maintain religious faith may turn again to God as the ultimate creator who is the source of freedom and life, and whose existence makes life meaningful.

Relevance of the Study

Parents play a very important role in the life of every Child's life. And the same role has the influence of shaping many aspects of one's life. Understanding the importance of parental

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role in an adolescent life will be an eye opener for the parents. It would be also fruitful to explore parental influence in relation with adolescent's spirituality to make both the groups emotionally aware and stable individual. Thus by knowing the parental influence more care and interventions can be developed to support these groups. This particular study focusses on Christian adolescents in a village called vettikal, which is in Ernakulam, Kerala. The specialty of this place is that there are several Christian Churches and groups that promote Christianity. This study will help in precise form to understand the influence of Christian Parents in shaping spiritual nature of adolescents of this locality.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological aspects discussed in the present chapter are aim of the study, objective, hypothesis, operational definitions, sample, tools, and procedure of data collection and statistical analyses of the data.

Aim

The aim of the study was to understand the parental influence in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude in adolescents

Hypotheses

1. Parents play a major role in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude in adolescents.
2. There is significant difference between adolescent boys and adolescent girls in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude due to parental influence.

Operational definitions

Adolescent is the period in development between the onset of puberty and adulthood. It usually begins between 11 and 13 years of age with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and spans the teenage years, terminating at 18 to 20 years of age with the completion of the development of the adult form. This is the time when they try to form identity and set certain religious belief. Formations of spirituality develop in adolescence.

Spirituality is a term that is difficult to define and describe. It can be understood as the practice of devotions to enter into a personal communion with God. Spirituality derives from the Hebrew word "ruah" which means breath or spirit and from the Latin word spiritus which means breathe of life (Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988). Spirituality also comes from the French word spiritualité and from the Latin adjective spiritualis which in the Middle Ages meant pertaining to monasticism (Stuckrad, 2006, vol. 4).

Sample and Sampling procedure

The sample size consists of 300 students, with mean age of 13 to 16 years, residing in Ernakulum. Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling are the sampling method used in this study. Convenient sampling was used to identify adolescents from nearby school without disturbing their academic performance. The Christian adolescents were chosen and separated for the study after a brief introduction to the whole class. The researcher made sure that feelings of adolescents from other religious community are not hurt by this study

Table1: Breakup of the sample

DIMENSION	CATEGORY	PARTICIPANTS	
		Males	Females
Age	14	38	46
	15	63	70
	16	31	52
Education	9 th standard	40	67
	10 th standard	73	81
	11 th standard	19	20
Domicile	Urban	--	--
	Semi- Urban	94	131
	Rural	38	37
Denomination	Jacobite	55	66
	Orthodox	30	42
	Marthomite	21	26
	Pentacostal	15	21
	Catholic	11	13

Tools

Socio demographic details

It is a personal data sheet prepared by the researcher to obtain details for the basic screening of the samples. The information includes name, age, gender, education, religion, caste and other details of the participant.

Structured interview schedule

The questionnaire for the study was constructed by the Researcher himself. The questionnaire consists of 20 questions which helps adolescents to think about their parents influence in spiritual life. The areas that have been covered in the questionnaire are parent’s encouragement in church activities, prayer life, involvement in charity and the effort taken in clearing the doubts that they may have in the area of spirituality, thereby reassuring their faith. The questions were constructed based on the literature review and the objectives of the study. A preliminary investigation with the questionnaire was conducted on a small sample of 10 adolescents to validate the questionnaire and their feedback was taken for reformulation of the questions. Further validation of the questionnaire was done by experts in the field such as Christian spiritual leaders, priests and psychologists, post which the questions were finalised for administration to the research sample.

Scoring: Each question is given with four options like strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. So the scoring will be like for strongly agree- 3, agree- 2, disagree-1 and strongly disagree-0. Hence the maximum score will be 60 which show the parental influence level is very high and minimum score will be 0. At last the scores are added to analyze and compare the level of influence.

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Procedures

The study was conducted based on the convenience sampling technique. The referred subjects were met based on the requirements of the study. And a letter, containing the consent form and explaining the purpose of the study along with the ethical issue was given to the participants. The questionnaire has two sections to study. The first section obtained the demographic details of the client which consisted aspects like name, age, gender, education, religion and caste. The second section questionnaire to measure the parental influence on adolescents was administered on all subjects. The subjects would be asked to read the instructions of the questionnaire carefully and mark the response appropriately: any doubts raised were clarified. The scores of the samples were tested to check the normality of the selected samples. Then mean and standard deviation of the data found using basic statics to check the level of parental influence. In the third step, since the data is not normally distributed Mann Whitney U test is used to compare parental influence on spirituality on male and female adolescents.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION OF HYPOTHESIS I

Table 2 Showing the mean, median and standard deviation of parental influence scores

Variable	N	Mean	Median	SD
Parental influence	300	47.76	49	6.301

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation value of the scores obtained by the samples. The total score on the parental influence on spirituality scale is 60. The total mean obtained by the group is 47.76 which can be regarded as an average score. The median or the 50th percentile in the data lies at the point 49. The standard deviation value for the sample is 6.301 which indicate that most of the data lies roughly around the mean value and there are no extremes in the data scores. The finding from the above results confirms the first hypothesis of the study, it is very clear that parents play a major role in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude in all the adolescents of the sample.

The highest score obtained in the sample was by the female participant which is 58 as the highest level of parental influence. High scores indicate that the parents of the respective adolescents encourage daily bible reading and personal prayer time. Additionally, they emphasize on the famiy coming together for prayer time. Church attendance and participation in the activities conducted there, following special observances such as fasting and lent and charitable activities are fostered from childhood and continuing into adolescence. The lowest score obtained, in the sample, is by the male participant, with a score of 28 indicating lower parental influence and monitoring on the various realms of Christian spirituality particularly in prayer life, church activities, reading Bible, depending on God and fostering faith in the existence of God.

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and Mann Whitney U test comparing parental influence on spirituality on male and female adolescents

Variable	Sex	N	Mean Rank	K	U	Sig.
Parental Influence	Male	132	140.29	.000	9740.00	.070
	Female	168	158.52	.000		

* $p < .05$

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The Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used to check for the normality of the data as the sample size (N) is 300. The K value for the sample is .000 which indicates a significant difference in the sample and thus the sample is not normally distributed at 0.05 level of significance.

As the data is not normally distributed, the Mann Whitney U test was used to compare the level of parental influence on spirituality between boys and girls. The Mann Whitney U test is a non-parametric test that is used to compare the means of two independent samples (boys and girls) on a dependant variable that is not normally distributed (parental influence on spirituality).

The above table shows that the U value of Mann Whitney is 9740.00 and shows significance value .07 which is not significant at the .05 level. This indicates that there is no significant difference between the male and female scores on parental influence on spirituality. This result is different to the second hypothesis of this study. As per this study both boys and girls are equally influenced by their parents in forming and sustenance of spirituality.

CONCLUSION

The present study was conducted to measure the influence of parents on adolescents' spirituality formation and sustenance on age group from 13 to 16 years. And the spreading of the sample is shown in detail in table 1. The main focus was to find if adolescents are influenced by parents in developing their spirituality. And then to check if there is significant difference between boys and girls on parental influence. The self constructed questionnaire which consists of 20 questions was administered. There were totally 300 samples for the study in which 132 boys and 168 girls residing in Ernakulam, Kerala. The score obtained were statically analysed using basic statistics and Mann Whitney U test for comparing parental influence on spirituality on male and female adolescents.

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was used to check for the normality of the data as the sample size (N) is 300. The result showed that the sample is not distributed normally which will affect the result of the study. The finding shows that parental influence plays a major role in the life of adolescents in forming and sustenance of spirituality. This result has been proved by many other studies conducted in foreign countries. The results of Mann Whitney U test (table 3) was against the hypothesis of the study. It shows that there is no significant difference between boys and girls while comparing the parental influence on spirituality. This backs that the parental influence has equal effect on both genders formation and sustenance of spirituality.

After studying the obtained results, based on the hypothesis following conclusion were drawn. From the above description it is clearly evident that parents has to take their role seriously in forming and sustenance of spirituality in adolescent. And the result shows that adolescents from both the genders have equally influenced by their parents.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is the non-availability of a standardised tool that measures the construct of parental influence in a child's spiritual formation. The lack of local literature in this area and also of tools that are suited to the Indian cultural setting has led to the construction of the questionnaire used in the study. Other limitations include small sample size and the risk of socially desirable responses being given to the questionnaire.

Suggestions

The present study and its findings pave way for more research that ought to be conducted in this area, particularly in the Indian context. Future studies could focus on the construction of standardized tools, with studies conducted on large samples. Qualitative studies would provide a theoretical understanding of spiritual formation, and would help in identifying the various realms of parent- child interaction and mediating variables in this area

Implications

The current study has provided some important results that have implication in community. It has helped us in understanding the parental influence on adolescents which can create better communication patterns in the family. This study makes parents to become more aware of their social life style and religious life style. This study will help adolescents to think and evaluate about their spiritual life formation and present status in relation with God.

The finding of this study has definite implications for intervention in pastoral counseling settings. The results can be used in the ministry of the church as well as in the general society. This result can be used in family therapy for developing enhanced relationship between parents and adolescents. New interventions in ministry can be derived out of this study.

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Acknowledgements

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interests.

How to cite this article: M Kuriakose & E Shaji (2019). Parental influence in the formation and sustenance of spiritual attitude in Christian adolescents. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 7(4), 327-335. DIP:18.01.036/20190704, DOI:10.25215/0704.036