

The Role of Religion

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Community Youth Development

Adolescents in the United States are more religious than adolescents in virtually any other industrialized country in the world (Arnett, 2010). According to the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR), the largest and most extensive study conducted on religious beliefs of adolescents in the United States, religion plays a significant role in the lives of American teenagers. According to NSYR, 84% of teenagers (aged 13-17) believe in God, 65% pray weekly, 51% say that their religious faith is important to them, 63% believe in angels, and 71% believe there will be a judgment day where God will hand out both rewards and punishments (Arnett, 2010).

The Search Institute, whose primary objective is discovering what kids need to succeed, has developed a list of 40 Developmental Assets that they believe will enable adolescents to grow into healthy, caring, and responsible adults (<http://www.search-institute.org>). These assets are broken down into two primary categories, external assets and internal assets. Many of these assets can be cultivated through religious participation.

External Assets

Adolescents that are actively engaged in religious beliefs and practices will develop many external assets as a result of their religious participation. Religion has been credited with an increase in **parental** and **other adult support, school bonding** and **school engagement**, value in helping others and **volunteering** (King and Furrow, 2004).

Social capital, the resources that individuals have access to through a network of institutionalized relationships, also increases through religious participation. Through membership in their religious community, adolescents are often more involved in intergenerational relationships via parents, **peers** and nonfamilial adults (King and Furrow, 2004). These intergenerational relationships often result in adolescents **caring more about their neighborhoods** as well as **community members being more invested in their youth**.

Internal Assets

Many internal assets can also be developed as a result of religious participation. According to Smith & Faris (2002), high school seniors have significantly higher self esteem and a more positive attitude about life when they also view religion as being important to them. Smith & Faris (2002) list nine attitudinal variables where there was a significant difference in the viewpoints of

12th graders for whom religion is very important compared to their non-religious counterparts. The nine positive attitudes are as follows:

- **Have positive attitudes toward themselves**
- Enjoy life as much as anyone
- **Feel like their lives are useful**
- **Feel hopeful about the future**
- Feel satisfied with their lives
- Feel like they have something of which to be proud
- Feel good to be alive
- **Feel like life is meaningful**
- **Enjoy being in school**

Additional Benefits

In addition to several of the Search Institutes developmental assets being cultivated in religious adolescents, there are several risk reduction activities and health benefits that religion influences that are worthy of mention. Wallace & Forman (1998) found that religion serves as a secondary socialization influence on teenagers. This socialization influence resulted in the decreased use of cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. It also reduced the instances where adolescents reported drinking and driving as well as riding in automobiles where the driver had been drinking. Adolescents cite their religion as influencing their beliefs regarding sexual activity as well. NSYR found that religious teenagers engaged

in lower levels of sexual activity, had a reduced number of partners and retained their virginity longer than non-religious adolescents. This was especially true for teens that took part in a ceremonial promise of abstinence, or Virginity Pledge (Regners, Smith and Fritsch, 2003). Religious engagement also promoted several healthy lifestyle behaviors to include improved nutrition, more exercise and better sleep patterns.

Conclusion

Although there are multiple ways in which parents, teachers and youth development professionals can encourage the establishment of the 40 developmental assets, risk reduction activities and healthy lifestyle choices in adolescents, religious participation and association should not be overlooked. According to the Search Institutes website, “Regardless of faith tradition, spiritual development is a key component in youth development, and helps kids discover a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging.” It is this sense of meaning, purpose and belonging that will guide the youth of today into the healthy, caring and responsible adults of the future.

References

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