

# Religion, beliefs and parenting practices

## A descriptive study

November 2008

**The influence of religious beliefs on parenting, from the perspectives of both adolescents and parents.**

Little is known about the influences of religious beliefs and practices on parenting adolescents. Yet religious beliefs and practices have the potential to profoundly influence many aspects of life, including approaches to parenting. This is particularly relevant with increasing diversity of religious affiliations in contemporary British society.

The research:

- explores differences and similarities in parenting beliefs and practices between members of the same and different faith communities;
- records the views of parents and young people as to the influence of religious beliefs and practices on family life, parent-child interaction and 'good enough parenting'; and
- identifies ways in which faith communities, religious authorities and voluntary and statutory agencies could better support families.

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# 1 Introduction

The UK is a multi-faith society, the result of a process which has taken place over many generations. Not only are there immigrants of second, third and later generations, but the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK and greater global mobility, enabled in part by the expansion of the European Union, have resulted in people coming to the UK wishing to maintain diverse beliefs and religious practices. In consequence, the UK population is becoming increasingly culturally and religiously diverse. For example, a quarter of all babies born in Britain have at least one parent born outside the UK (Addley, 2007). In addition, it is estimated that by 2017 15 per cent of the UK workforce will be Muslim (Ajegbo *et al.*, 2007). For some, maintaining religious beliefs and practices is important. However, religion is not only considered important among immigrants: 72 per cent of people in the UK state that they have a religion. This includes a range of different faiths and a spectrum of involvement in religious practices (ONS, 2004).

Religious beliefs and practices have the potential to influence many aspects of life, including family life and parenting. Although 'religiosity has been associated with protective factors that strengthen families' (Utting, 2007, p. 9), the negative influences of religious beliefs and practices on child-rearing have received the most attention. For example, in England, Lord Laming (Cm 5730, 2003), following the death of Victoria Climbié at the hands of her carers, noted that religious beliefs and practices had a negative influence on both carers' and professionals' perception of Victoria's needs. John Reid, Home Secretary in 2006, held parents responsible for their children's engagement in terrorist activity (BBC, 2006). These negative views may well be linked to 9/11, the subsequent 'war on terrorism' and increasing concern about a perceived rise in Islamic 'fundamentalism' (Osler and Hussain, 2005; Phoenix and Husain, 2007) as well as the

media attention given to child abuse by faith leaders. But is this negative link between religious beliefs and parenting practices justified? If it is not, the positive benefits of a religious upbringing are in danger of at best becoming minimised and at worst being ignored.

Originally emerging in the mid nineteenth century, secularisation theory dominated thinking in Western Europe and the USA in the latter part of the twentieth century, with regard to the place of religion in modern society (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999). This resulted in minimal research about the influence of religion on such areas as family life and parenting (Mahoney *et al.*, 2001). However, in the post-modern world policy-makers, academics and professionals are becoming increasingly aware that religious beliefs and practices appear to play a significant part in the life of many people (Frosh, 2004). Furthermore, religious beliefs and practices do not appear to be disappearing as predicted; rather the meaning of religion is changing (Blasi, 2002; Pargament *et al.*, 2005; Voas and Crockett, 2005). Pargament *et al.* (2005) argue that the construct of religion is changing from one that included the institution to one that focuses more on human potential, with an increase in forms of religiousness outside religious institutions: in other words 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1994, 2007; Voas and Crockett, 2005). If this is the case, it is inevitable that religious beliefs and practices, whether focusing on the beliefs themselves or practices including active membership of a faith community, have influenced and will continue to influence family life (Mahoney *et al.*, 2001; Mercer, 2004).

Religion and parenting is an under-researched area (Frosh, 2004; Phoenix and Husain, 2007). In the past practitioners have tended to consider religion as an 'add-on' when exploring parenting or believed that value systems are similar when it comes to child-rearing. However, the need to know more about these influences is increasing

for a number of reasons. First, as religion is a significant and in some respects a growing influence, its study is important to enable understanding of how it informs the construction of childhood and parenthood. Second, there is a need to understand the influence of different religious values in order to be able to advocate for and support, at professional and political levels, members of different faith communities. Third, conceptually and practically child welfare professionals should understand how religious beliefs and practices influence child-rearing in order to understand how the needs of children are being met. Finally, little is known about the developmental trajectories for children reared in religious families: without this knowledge we do not know if there are advantages or disadvantages to being brought up with religious beliefs and practices (Frosh, 2004; Phoenix and Husain, 2007).

The influence of religious beliefs and practices on family life is particularly significant in adolescence, with the young person developing their own identity, 'world view' and beliefs. This overlaps particularly with the cognitive and emotional changes of adolescence and with social changes and cultural practices which may find a focus through religious practices, including rites of passage. Adolescence can also be a period of change for the family as a whole and in the ways parents fulfil their formative role. In contrast to parenting younger children, where roles and responsibilities tend to be well defined and understood, there seems to be greater uncertainty in relation to parenting adolescents. For example, parents of teenagers are often unclear as to what is expected of them in relation to monitoring and supervision; setting boundaries and limits; confidentiality and consent (Coleman and Hendry, 1999, p. 91). There are particular issues affecting parents of adolescents in contemporary Western societies: a protracted period of responsibility; confusion in how to prepare adolescents for future adult roles; increased risks or perceived risks to adolescents; erosion of family and social supports (Small and Eastman, 1991). Religion and religious beliefs may play a role both in compounding some of these issues and in providing a framework within which to address them.

However, little is known about the influences

of religious beliefs and practices on parenting adolescents. This study, while only designed to begin to address some of the unanswered questions, seeks to further our knowledge and understanding of these influences.

## Aims and objectives

The aim of this study was to gain an insight into the ways in which religious beliefs and practices are perceived by parents and children to influence and impact on family life. The insights gained may help to challenge assumptions and stereotypes, improve service delivery and ultimately promote better outcomes for children. This was achieved by:

- exploring differences and similarities in parenting beliefs and practices between members of the same and different faith communities;
- gaining the views of parents and young people with regard to the influence of religious beliefs and practices on family life, parent-child interaction and 'good enough parenting';
- identifying ways in which faith communities, religious authorities and voluntary and statutory agencies could support families.

## 2 Methods

The study was carried out in a multicultural city in the north of England. The research team, sensitive to the political climate with regard to researching religion in a multicultural community, completed the research in partnership with the Local Safeguarding Children Board, Primary Care Trust and local service providers. A group of professionals working in the city from statutory and non-governmental organisations was recruited to a Local Implementation Group. The group provided a forum to identify a sample and discuss the relevance of project design and delivery. In addition a National Advisory Group was established. This group included representatives from faith communities who have particular expertise on faith and family life and experts on parenting. The Advisory Group provided advice on research design, delivery and analysis of findings.

### The samples

Given that ‘gaining children’s perspectives greatly increases understanding of the parenting process’ and ‘children should be involved in all stages of future research on parenting’ (Madge and Willmott, 2007, pp. 27–8), the research team aimed to develop a methodology in which the young people could shape and inform the research process.

Schools provided an environment where issues of religion and family life could be discussed outside the home. Consequently, ten secondary schools in the same geographical area of the city were identified by the Local Implementation Group as being in a position to provide a sample of young people likely to represent a range of religions. In addition, as the schools were recruited from the same local area it was anticipated that there would be some commonalities in terms of economic background. The ten head teachers were provided with an information leaflet about the study. Six schools chose to participate: this was therefore an opportunistic sample. The majority of the schools

were faith schools and the populations of the non-faith schools were predominantly Muslim. The schools provided interested students with information leaflets about the study and students volunteered to be considered for participation. The final selection of students was made by the schools on the following basis:

- The selected samples took account of diversity in relation to ethnicity, gender and faith affiliation.
- They did not include young people known to be currently involved in child protection procedures: it was thought this could make the young people additionally vulnerable in discussing matters pertaining to parenting.
- The young people had received the information, volunteered and obtained parental consent to participate.

Self-selection by students meant that the sample of young people was likely to consist of those who had a particular interest in religion.

The issue of ‘listening to children’, particularly with regard to sensitive family issues like religion, is acknowledged to be complex. Recognising the positive findings of other researchers who have used focus groups to explore religion and family life, these were identified as an appropriate method for data collection. Healy (2006), for example, used focus groups with 22 Christian Protestant girls aged 7–11 years living in Northern Ireland. ‘The children were given space to discuss issues of their own choice’ and ‘the role of the researcher was a “facilitator” rather than interviewer’ (Healy, 2006, p. 109). Healy’s discussions took place at school in a quiet space which was not the classroom. As they ‘became popular and were positively received by the children participating’ (Healy, 2006, p. 109), her experiences informed this study.

## Data collection

### Stage One: developing a data collection tool

Data collection began with a literature search in order to identify what is already known about the influence of religion on family life. The studies included in this literature review were identified from computer searches of six electronic data bases for the period 1996–2006. By focusing on this decade consideration was given to studies pre- and post-9/11. The databases were: Care on Line, Psych-info, Medline via Ovid, PsychLit via WebSpir, CSA Illumina, ALTA. Combinations of *religion* and the following key words were used: *parenting, children, adolescents, good-enough parenting, family life*. Further studies were identified by searching through journals that had published at least two articles on faith and family life and by reviewing the references of papers already identified. Using this approach the findings from 62 studies were explored and key themes identified.

Having identified the key themes, discussion groups were set up in schools in order to explore these themes from the perspective of young people. These groups also provided opportunities to obtain examples from young people themselves of ways in which they believe religion can influence family life in modern Britain. Using verbal and non-verbal methods the participants considered:

- what is religion;

- how religion operates in a family setting;
- why parents may choose faith schools for their children;
- perceived characteristics of ‘good’, ‘bad’ and ‘religious’ parents.

Forty young people aged 13–15 years from six schools participated in these groups.

The details of the schools participating in Stages One and Two are given in Table 1. The first six schools took part in Stage One and a further three schools took part in Stage Two.

The examples and comments provided by the young people were compared with the findings from the literature review in order to select a range of scenarios about faith and family life that would be both relevant to the study theme of parenting and appealing and familiar to young people and parents. Six themes and sub-themes were identified. These were developed into short scenarios which were filmed and made into a DVD. Table 2 provides an overview of the themes and shows the number of participants viewing the DVD.

As far as possible the scenarios were scripted using the wording supplied by the young people. These were filmed as a series of ‘talking heads’ with the help of drama students in a multicultural LEA secondary school, specialising in performing arts, in another city in the north of England. (This

Table 1: Schools participating in Stages One and Two

School ID	Type of school	Religious affiliation	Age of students	Number of students	Gender
1	Voluntary aided comprehensive	Church of England	11–18 years	1,150	Mixed
2	Voluntary aided comprehensive	Muslim	11–18 years	520	Girls
3	Independent	Christian	4–16 years	190	Mixed
4	Voluntary aided comprehensive	Roman Catholic	11–18 years	1,000	Girls
5	Voluntary aided comprehensive	Roman Catholic	11–18 years	950	Boys
6	LEA comprehensive	None	11–18 years	560	Boys
7	LEA comprehensive	None	11–18 years	940	Mixed
8	LEA comprehensive	None	11–18 years	1,040	Mixed
9	Voluntary project	Church of England	11–18 years	8	Mixed

Table 2: Number of participants viewing the DVD

Theme	Young people (n = 74)	Parents (n = 77)
Religious identity	74	77
Love and discipline	74	77
Family responsibilities	35	27
Family values	46	23
Sexual relationships	34	26
Friendships	39	23

meant that the young people and parents viewing the DVD in Stages Two and Three would be very unlikely to know those taking part in the DVD.) The final DVD was formatted in such a way that the researcher could stop and start it at any point. The examples given by the young people also appeared in written form, providing participants with a reminder of what was said during group discussions (see Appendix 2 for content of the DVD).

### **Stage Two: data collection from young people**

Each school was asked to recruit a further ten pupils, aged 13–15 years, to participate in Stage Two focus groups. The same criteria for selection were used as in Stage One. In total 74 young people took part in Stage Two (see Chapter 3 for further details). The purpose of these focus groups was to elicit their views on religion and parenting by showing the young people the DVD and asking for their comments on the various scenarios.

The Stage Two discussion groups lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and took place within the schools, usually at the time in the curriculum set aside for religious studies. All groups were facilitated by the same researcher. The discussions were tape-recorded and later transcribed and analysed in the same way as in Stage One.

The characteristics of the participants were determined by a questionnaire completed by the young people at the end of the focus groups (see Appendix 3). The data was analysed using SPSS 14 for Windows.

### **Stage Three: data collection from parents**

Having obtained the views of young people with regard to the themes identified above, the final stage of data collection involved obtaining the views of parents. Consistent methods were used in all stages of data collection to increase validation and endorse data already collected. Furthermore, in order to include aspects of parenting in ethnic, linguistic and faith diverse groups with optimum use of time and resources, focus groups appeared to be an ideal method for gathering data from parents. Focus groups are considered to be particularly sensitive to cultural variables, allowing for exploration of views that are both convergent with the dominant cultural views and divergent (Kitzinger, 2000).

In order to have a sample that mirrored the diversity of that obtained in Stages One and Two, but was unrelated to those young people, parents were recruited for Stage Three through contacts with local faith and community groups as well as the schools. The parents were either members of faith communities or attended groups organised by faith communities. However, they were not the parents of the young people who took part in Stages One and Two. Parents were recruited through the Local Implementation Group, religious networks, including the Faiths Forum (a voluntary organisation connecting local faith communities), a community radio station, newsletters, other networks and individuals (including personal recommendations provided by schools from Stages One and Two), word of mouth, and leaflets left at community and faith venues. Therefore, this was also an opportunistic sample. A total of

56 contacts were made, resulting in ten positive responses from groups of parents who were able to participate in focus groups within the time frame. Seventy-seven parents participated (for further detail see Chapter 3) and the groups are described in Table 3.

Focus group discussions were carried out in a similar manner to those for Stage Two, using the DVD in the same way. The facilitator was the same researcher who had gathered the data in Stages One and Two. Discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed in the same way as in the previous two stages. All groups were carried out in English, with the support of an Urdu-speaking community interpreter for one group (Group 3).

As with Stage Two, the characteristics of the participants in Stage Three were determined by a questionnaire completed by the parents at the end of the focus groups (see Appendix 4).

### Use of the DVD

As described above, all participants in the study (young people at Stage Two and parents at Stage Three) were shown a DVD containing scenarios generated by young people during Stage One. All of the participants viewed the scenarios on religious identity and love and discipline. This was done because the literature review to

date indicated that these are the major areas of influence in respect of religious parenting. Members of each focus group were then invited to view up to two other sections of the DVD from the remaining four. These were selected by the research team to ensure that a cross-section of participants discussed each scenario. Table 2 indicates the number of young people and parents who discussed each section of the DVD. Table 4 provides an overview of the contents of the DVD, the script for which is in Appendix 2.

### Data analysis

All the focus group data was analysed and coded using NVivo 7, a software programme that enables the storage and organisation of qualitative research data. Following the principles of grounded theory, themes and sub-themes were identified within a descriptive framework. Initially the data from Stages Two and Three was analysed separately for emergent themes within four key domains: perceived needs of young people; approaches to parenting; the influence of faith beliefs and practices on parenting; other factors influencing approaches to parenting and young people's needs. Because the researchers have their own world views all the data was interrogated by at least two members of the research team.

Table 3: Parent groups participating in Stage Three

Group	Name	Religious affiliation	Women	Men
1	Mixed Protestant Christians	Christian	3	1
2	Muslim fathers	Muslim	0	7
3	Muslim women	Muslim	14	0
4	Protestant mothers	Christian	5	0
5	Church of England mixed	Christian	4	4
6	Hindu mixed	Hindu	5	3
7	Muslim mothers	Muslim	2	0
8	Muslim mothers of disabled children	Muslim	4	0
9	Mixed mothers of disabled children	Mixed	3	0
10	Catholic women	Christian	2	0
11	Catholic mixed	Christian	4	2
12	Mixed Protestant Christians	Christian	9	5
	Total		55	22

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Table 4: Contents of the DVD

Theme	Content
Religious identity	Following a faith in religious and non-religious families, extremism, standing up for beliefs
Love and discipline	Parenting styles and discipline practices
Family responsibilities	Life goals, careers and wealth, religious observance, parenting a disabled child
Family values	Choice of music and clothes, respect for the body, communication with parents
Sexual relationships	Sex in marriage, sex education, homosexuality, relationships across faiths
Friendships	Friendships across and between faiths, bullying

### 3 Participants

According to the Equality Act 2006, ‘religion’ means any religion and ‘belief’ means any religious or philosophical belief (OPSI, 2006). However, as Regnerus and Burdette (2006, p. 179) note, ‘religiosity is a complex, multidimensional concept with private and public aspects that defy simple explanation’. The way in which religion is defined may admit or exclude certain well-known world faiths (Sharpe, 1988). For example, the word ‘religion’ has Latin roots and therefore a Western and Christian base and implies a theistic belief (Sharpe, 1988; Jackson, 1997), excluding non-theist traditions like Buddhism. As many non-Western languages lack a term that corresponds to ‘religion’, Jackson (1997) argues that the term ‘world religions’ should be used critically because of its clear Christian and Western origins and bias.

Some researchers of religion focus on participants’ self-definition. Bao *et al.* (1999) do not attempt to define religiosity as anything more than ‘the importance of religion in a person’s life’. However, they also believe that ‘it is important to distinguish between religious beliefs and practices’ (p. 363). Sharpe concluded that it is more important to be able to recognise religion than to define it and that the only real definition is ‘*on the believer’s part* (not the observer’s)’ (Sharpe, 1988, p. 48, italics and brackets as in original). This is the approach to defining religion which was taken in this study. It is therefore important, before

reviewing the qualitative data, to gain an overview of the participants and how they define themselves in respect of religion.

#### Characteristics of the young people

Of the 74 young people who participated in the study, 39 were female and 35 were male. Forty-nine participants attended faith schools and 25 non-faith schools. Most were aged between 13 and 14 years:

- 22 aged 13;
- 35 aged 14;
- 17 aged 15+.

They represented five faith-community/religious traditions:

- 20 Catholic;
- 22 C of E/other Christian;
- 26 Muslim;
- 5 No religion;
- 1 Hindu.

Table 5: Self-reported religious characteristics of the young people

	Catholic	C of E/ other Christian	Muslim	Hindu/ other faith	No faith group	Total
Belief in God (%)	62	76	96	x	0	74
Self-categorisation as ‘religious’ (%)	38	38	58	x	0	43
Regular (at least weekly) worship (%)	29	62	96	x	0	60
Regular (at least weekly) prayer (%)	76	85	100	x	0	82

## Religious beliefs and practices among the sample of young people

The self-reported religious characteristics of the young people in the study are summarised in Table 5.

The majority of young people expressed a belief in God. Older teenagers were more likely to describe themselves as 'religious', while those aged 13 and 14 were more likely to be unsure or describe themselves as not religious. A higher proportion of young people at non-faith schools than at faith schools expressed a belief in God and described themselves as religious. Those from religious families were more likely to believe in God and describe themselves as religious, while those from non-religious families were more likely to not believe in God and describe themselves as non-religious.

One of the strongest influences on belief appears to be the faith community with which the young person identifies: 26 Muslim young people all described themselves as religious. However, among the Christian groups there was a mixture of self-categorisation from religious to not religious.

Regular attendance at public worship was more likely in the older age groups. More young people at non-faith schools attended worship regularly compared to those at faith schools. Regular attendance was more likely for those

from religious families compared to those who described their families as not religious. Attendance at public worship was related to faith community. Those from Muslim families were most likely to attend regular public worship, with the majority of these attending daily. Within the Catholic and other Christian traditions there was more of a mixture of participation in public worship; those from a Catholic tradition were most likely to attend on special occasions only.

The majority of young people ( $n = 65$ ) reported regular (at least weekly) routines of private prayer which did not vary significantly by age, sex or type of school. Those from Muslim families all said they prayed daily or weekly, while those from Christian backgrounds were less likely to say they prayed on a regular basis. Those who reported that they prayed regularly were more likely to say that they believed in God and to describe themselves as religious.

## Characteristics of the parents

A total of 77 parents participated in the focus groups, of whom 74 completed questionnaires afterwards. Table 6 details the characteristics of the parents in respect of gender, ethnicity and age of children. The median number of children in each family was three (range 1–10) with 61 parents having between two and four children.

Table 6: Characteristics of the parents

Characteristics	Number
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	51
Male	20
No data	6
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
White British	39
Asian/British Asian	22
Other	3
No data	13
<i>Age of children</i>	
Children within the 11–16 age range	49
Children under 11 years only	9
Children over 16 years	12
No data	7

## Religious beliefs and practices among the sample of parents

The self-reported religious characteristics of the parents in the study are summarised in Table 7.

Almost all parents reported that they believed in God ( $n = 72$ ), with just one (who reported no religion) saying they did not believe in God and one (a Catholic) being uncertain. Most parents described themselves as religious ( $n = 61$ ). The majority of parents from all faith backgrounds, with the exception of 'other' Christians, described both themselves and their families as religious. The relatively high number of other Christians describing themselves as 'not religious' may reflect a negative connotation placed on the term 'religion' among such groups. The majority of parents from all faith groups reported engaging in private prayer on a daily basis ( $n = 61$ ). There were significant differences in the patterns of weekly

worship, with the Christian denominations and the Hindu group predominantly reporting weekly worship, and the Muslim group predominantly reporting daily worship.

Overall, both the young people and parents sampled described a high level of religious behaviours, beliefs and practices, with the parents reporting higher levels of belief and practice than the young people. In contrast to the sample of young people participating, there was a higher degree of certainty about religious beliefs, affiliations and practices among the parents. The majority (86 per cent) of the parents participated in worship at least on a weekly basis, compared to 60 per cent of the young people. Parents were more likely than young people to engage in prayer on a daily basis, although even among the young people 82 per cent reported praying on at least a weekly basis, compared to 99 per cent of the parents.

Table 7: Self-reported religious characteristics of the parents

	Catholic	C of E/ other Christian	Muslim	Hindu/ other faith	No faith group	Total
Belief in God (%)	91	100	100	100	x	99
Self-categorisation as 'religious' (%)	82	69	96	100	x	84
Regular (at least weekly) worship (%)	82	86	83	100	x	86
Regular (at least weekly) prayer (%)	100	97	100	100	x	99

## 4 Religious traditions, beliefs and practices

The findings from the study explored in this and the two following chapters are:

- religious traditions, beliefs and practices;
- parenting adolescents in religious families;
- religion and the impact on life for adolescents.

It should be emphasised from the outset that it is not possible to generalise from the sample whether some opinions were specifically related to the response of a particular faith tradition. What the study provides are the views of young people and parents from faith schools and faith communities living in an urban, multicultural setting in England.

### What does it mean to be ‘religious’?

As a starting point, the research sought to understand what ‘religion’, and being a ‘religious’ person, meant to the participants (Sharpe, 1988). The 40 young people who took part in Stage One provided definitions. Some were quite simple:

*Being holy. Following the religion.*  
(Muslim boy, non-faith school)

Other definitions were more complex, focusing on participating in religious activities, including praying, reading holy books, discussing religious issues, giving to charity and fasting. Young people also referred to taking part in the activities of the religious community: attending worship and taking part in pilgrimage and festivals. Both young people and parents recognised that religion was more than just a set of behaviours and extended to all aspects of life:

*Not only having a belief in the heart but also by actually affecting your morals and behaviour.*  
(Muslim boy, non-faith school)

*I know people who [just] go to church on Sunday, and they’re not living a very Christian life. I know other Christians who really apply the Christian faith and they go out and they help people.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

*I think it’s sometimes difficult to separate religion from your daily life because being polite, being nice to others, looking after your neighbour; all these are religious instructions.*  
(Muslim father)

For most parents, and some young people in the study, the emphasis was on a way of life which is transmitted between generations.

*I see it as a way of life, which I have learnt from my parents.*

(Hindu mother)

*Sometimes you follow in your mum and dad’s footsteps because you’re part of them.*  
(Catholic girl, faith school)

The young people also recognised that religion can have negative connotations:

*[One] can use it as a means to be racist.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*A lot of wars are about religion as well.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

The parents understood that young people’s belief in a God might cover a range of perceptions:

*Children do say ‘Oh I believe in that God and this God’, but it needs explaining actually what*

*God is. Actually, everybody's perception's quite different.*

(Hindu mother)

*What we learnt from our parents, we try to practise the same and talk to our children.*

(Hindu mother)

Both parents and young people acknowledged a difference between religion and spirituality, a finding which is consistent with Good and Willoughby (2007) in which non-church attendees also said they believed in God but were not attracted by organised religion.

*I think teenagers are very spiritual but they're not very religious.*

(Catholic father)

*I think a lot of young people believe in God but it doesn't mean they follow a religion.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Both parents and young people recognised the tensions that can occur when parents are from different faiths, as discussed in Chapter 6.

During adolescence young people become concerned with 'questions of who they are, not just in the context of other people but of life's greater meaning and their reason for being' (Ream and Savin-Williams, 2003, p. 53). Religion provides the answers for some of them. Adolescence can therefore be a time of developing a separate religious identity from family. The young people discussed how, as one matures, one begins to develop one's own religious identity rather than following family faith and practice. There is no set age at which this occurs but both young people and parents recognised the process:

The parents in this study had different views on how religion might be perceived within non-religious families:

*I haven't heard many young people saying that they're interested in religion if their family isn't.*

(Muslim mother)

*It comes upon you some time. You'll start thinking for yourself, thinking maybe there is a good reason why religions are around.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*Sometimes families that are not interested in religion are okay with people finding out a bit more, if it actually helps them in their own life development.*

(Christian mother)

*I think that in teenage years, you don't see that link so much as when you grow up to be an adult, and then you can connect [with religion] a little bit more.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

## Developing a religious identity

One of the key themes to emerge from the study, particularly in the parents' responses, was the concept that religious parents are likely to bring their children up in the religion of the parents. Having grown up with it themselves they see it as part of their parenting responsibility to pass it on.

*I think most parents teach the kids about religion: we're all born in a Muslim family, so we're Muslims, so we basically follow our religion. We grew up with it.*

(Muslim father)

If young people come from a religious minority and feel their religion is threatened, parents may need to offer extra support, according to this Muslim father:

*Young people may see their identity in a particular way and want to hold on to it and they think their parents are being too passive about it. I think it's the whole thing's about security and about feeling insecure.*

(Muslim father)

## The role of parents in developing a child's religious identity

What it means to be a religious parent, including some of the dilemmas faced, was summed up by some of the parents:

*Normally we'd teach children, don't hit anybody, not to be horrible to anybody, no killing and trying to be vegetarian, again explain the reason why. I've given them options and told them I believe that's the route I'm following at the moment and by giving them options and explaining the reason and just having a simple, practical life.*

(Hindu mother)

*Parents actually need to be prepared themselves to look into what it is their children are getting into because I think sometimes our kids are experiencing aspects of faith that maybe we ourselves haven't experienced and we need to be open to that. What is bad to do as a parent is if you do genuinely think they're getting into something that is not healthy or safe. Then we need to know enough and we need to do it from an informed basis and I think sometimes there's a temptation for us as parents just to not have that, not maybe be as informed, dare I say, as our kids are sometimes.*

(C of E parent)

## The interface between religion and culture

In this study the focus was on perceptions of the way in which religion influenced parenting. However, the young people and parents recognised that there was a complex relationship between religion and culture and it was not always easy distinguishing between the two. For example, this Christian young person, when asked about favouritism towards children of a particular gender in a family, said:

*I think there still is favouritism but it probably isn't as much as a religious way but it's probably more of a cultural way.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Parents recognised different cultural influences on religion. Here are some examples of British Asian parents talking about the influence of Indian subcontinent culture on the religious practices of British Asians: one is Hindu, two are Muslim:

*Language is probably the only barrier I think, and there are different cultural practices. There'll be people at this temple who've got slightly different cultural practices than North Indian Hindus will have but it's just the way they do it.*

(Hindu father)

*Even in the mosques you know, where at one time you'd go in with a cap on, now you see some practices change and I think you know those are just kind of facts of life, you know. They are not the core things [about religions]; they're just ways people practise. It's probably more cultural based I think.*

(Muslim father)

*I think a lot of religions are deeply embedded in culture as well and cultures will change. Say for example you come from the Indian subcontinent and you may have a particular culture there. And your practice as a Muslim, you might have a particular cultural concept but when you come to the UK you adopt a different lifestyle because your culture changes. Your way of life changes, your way of thinking changes and you adopt a different lifestyle, so it's the mix in between them two. I think that kind of confuses young people and it can be very confusing for other people as well.*

(Muslim father)

This last quote seems to point to the core dilemma for young people growing up in religious families: the difference between the culture as expressed locally and the family's interpretation of religion.

The parent seems to understand that this is a changing situation and one which young people and parents have to negotiate. This reflects Slay and Gilbert's (2007, p. 16) view that as a result of immigration identity, including religious identity, is 'more elastic and less stable'.

## Other influences on the development of religious identity

According to parents there were tensions between the desire at home to develop a particular religious identity and pressure from those outside the family:

*I mean I would say that that's quite an easy thing for teenagers to feel [pressured] in a family in a Christian household, because they get pulled in every direction at school.*

(C of E mother)

The development of religious identity among young people is influenced by a range of factors including the faith community, friends and school, along with wider society and current events, as expressed by these parents:

*I became a Christian as a 15 year old, on the lifestyle and witness of the Christian family next door, an RAF family. I became a Christian by going with him to church, but when I came home my parents weren't religious at the time.*

(Christian father)

*If you have good friends, if they go to mosque, he [your child] can follow them.*

(Muslim father)

*I mean that's why we would have sent our children to a faith school, because we want them to know more about their religion and have it more as part of their life, their family life, so it's part of their school life as well.*

(Catholic mother)

*Nationally, internationally, we see things on the media and they [young people] are trying to*

*find out well what does it actually mean? What is it saying? What does this actually mean for us? And people are getting out there and getting more educated.*

(Muslim mother)

## Religious observance

All faith traditions have their own religious observances based on the traditions and practices of the faith community. The discussion by 35 young people and 27 parents focused on three main themes in relation to this: religious activities in religious families, for example attendance at places of worship; choice and age considerations, for example the age at which young people should decide whether they want to engage in religious activities; and finally how parents and young people manage differences regarding religious observance (see Appendix 2, Section 3 for further detail).

### Religious activities in religious families

Young people acknowledged that attending worship might be an important family activity in religious families even if the young people themselves do not always want to participate:

*I think they should go [to worship] sometimes just to show your parents that you do love them because if they like going to church then you should go with them because it's spending family time together.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Furthermore, young people recognised that for some parents religious activities are a duty.

Parents acknowledged that it can be disappointing for religious families to find that young people do not find religious activities appealing but this is common. A number related it to their own experience:

*If it isn't becoming relevant for him, then he's going to be straight out of the church at 18 or less, 15 even. It's sad that church isn't working for him.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

*I can remember going to church on Sunday, in a draughty old church with old ladies. Oh God; I used to hate it.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Even so, parents thought some young people do become more interested in religious activities as they grow up:

*My son wanted to start going to Sunday school so I said to a friend if he wants to go will you take him? And she said I'd be happy to take him. She knows that I won't go to church.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Some parents thought that faith schools can provide worship and religious activities in a more attractive form for young people:

*I think the difference possibly for a child who's in a faith school is that they do, in my opinion get a better all-round experience of their faith, because they don't just get what they get in church, they're getting more vibrant liturgy in a Catholic senior school than they get down at Mass.*

(Catholic mother)

### **Religious activities: choice and age considerations**

The expectation that young people will engage in religious activities was an issue for negotiation between young people and parents:

*You might be forced to do something you're not really going to like but you grow up and you might try to go to church or something, you might end up actually liking it but you were forced when you were young and just hated it.*

(C of E student, faith school)

The majority of young people thought they should not be forced to attend public worship. The obligation to attend was well known among young people across all faith groups:

*That's common because you know a lot of parents do that to their Muslim children, go to*

*the mosque, they have to, they have to go.*

(C of E student, faith school)

*And I've got a friend and she's just fed up with her mum, because she doesn't believe in Christianity. Her mother's a Christian and she makes her go to church and she says I hate going to church and I pretend I'm poorly on Sundays. She gets very depressed.*

(Muslim girl, faith School)

In respect of this issue parents were aware that they should 'practise what they preach': i.e. be consistent in their own behaviour with regard to being religious:

*If there is some kind of tension or some kind of ambiguity or some hypocrisy or some gap between what parents are promoting and perhaps what they're modelling then I can understand that being quite a pressure for a young person.*

(Christian mother)

One young person thought there were other things young people might prefer to do instead of attending worship:

*Because there's so many things you can do in the time, you could be at church, you could be doing something worthwhile.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Even quite young children might resent having to attend worship:

*I think that my brother, he doesn't like going to the mosque. He's five. And then he gets fed up and he doesn't want to go. But he has to go ... He gets fed up.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

The young people had different ideas about the age at which children could take responsibility to choose whether or not to engage in religious activities. These depended on the tradition from which they came:

*I'd say round about ten.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*very careful how they handle that kind of thing because that can become a big fighting point.*  
(Christian father)

*Well like in Islam for a boy it's ten and for a girl it's eight.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

There may be many reasons why young people do not want to take part in religious activities. This Christian parent suggested finding out why a young person does not want to attend church:

## Conflict and strategies

As far as religious activities are concerned, parents are aware of a range of conflicts or tensions when it comes to the parental responsibilities of religious parents in Western society:

*I know that many parents who have faith really struggle with this issue of bringing up children in a secular society where they are influenced by their friends and by the school and by society. On the other hand we are entitled as parents to express our faith.*  
(Mother, mixed faith group)

*Need to see why he doesn't want to go to church: he might find it totally boring because there's nothing going on for him. He might actually be quite spiritual but not enjoy what's going on.*  
(Mother, mixed faith group)

And one young person thought that before deciding to opt out young people should understand why their parents want them to take part:

Furthermore, it can be a dilemma of whether or not to insist young people take responsibility for attending worship or engaging in other religious practices:

*Do you make them go or do you give them a bit of space and hope that they'll make the right choice in the end? I don't know to be honest because I'm there with my son at the moment you know, he doesn't want to go to church at the moment and what do you do? Do you push him, do you leave him?*  
(Christian mother)

*Just get a better understanding of why their parents want to take them to a church or mosque that the parents should tell their children and understand why, what are the benefits. Maybe they'll change their mind.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Young people and parents also recognised that faith communities, and indeed parents themselves, need to accommodate young people. One young person gave an example of a faith community that had encouraged young people to take part:

Parents acknowledged that within a religious family such conflicts can test family relationships:

*I think we were largely able through the strength of our relationship with our children to fairly positively and amicably get them to agree to come to church with us up to 16 and even though we knew that they found aspects of church boring or irrelevant. Then I think we realised once they'd got to a certain point that there had to be an element of choice. It does test your relationship. I think parents have to be*

*What they used to do at our old church was there used to be some kids off the estate; if they wanted to go to church but the parents wouldn't take them they got a minibus and drove it around the estate and picked up people. I thought that was a good idea because you don't have to involve your parents and nag them to take you.*  
(Christian student, independent faith school)

# 5 Parenting adolescents in religious families

Baumrind (1971) described two dimensions of parenting behaviour: parental responsiveness and parental demandingness. Macoby and Martin (1983) developed this further to describe four types of parenting behaviour:

- *authoritative* (high demandingness, high responsiveness – warm but firm, set standards, hold to boundaries, more likely to give explanations and reason rather than punitive);
- *authoritarian* (high demandingness, low responsiveness – high value on obedience and conformity, punitive, do not encourage autonomy);
- *indulgent* (low demandingness, high responsiveness – permissive, passive, few standards or expectations);
- *indifferent* (low demandingness, low responsiveness – neglectful, not involved).

However, while drawing on this work we do so with caution. It should be noted that these terms reflected parenting styles among white middle-class North American families (Phoenix and Husain, 2007). This study afforded an opportunity to explore how the young people and parents perceived parenting styles and parenting practice and whether they viewed these as being influenced by religion – for example, perceptions of appropriate discipline, relationships with parents and family headship. (See Appendix 2, Section 2 for further detail.)

As noted in the Introduction, in contrast to parenting younger children, where roles and responsibilities tend to be well defined and understood, there seems to be a lot of uncertainty in relation to parenting adolescents. Parents of teenagers are often unclear as to what is expected of them in relation to monitoring and supervision;

setting boundaries and limits; confidentiality and consent (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). This dilemma was expressed clearly by a mother taking part in this study :

*But I find though that there have been a lot of resources about parenting young children, which I have to say is really fundamental because I think that gives you the grounds for later on, but there's less about teenagers.*

(C of E mother)

## The concept of 'good' parenting

The young people and parents appeared to describe 'good' parenting in terms of the characteristics of authoritative parenting as described by Macoby and Martin (1983): parents who are responsive, loving and involve the children, but who are also firm and set clear boundaries.

*Cares for you. Encourages you. They will always be there to help you.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*Tell me what's right and what's wrong in life and stuff like that.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*If you're a religious parent or a good parent, you should encourage your child to do what's best for them.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*They'll always love you but they're strict as well.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*I think that in a family everybody should be involved and everybody's points should come across.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*As a parent we always think about their safety and that's the main concern.*

(Christian mother)

One young person summed up the concept of authoritative parenting as incorporating both appropriate discipline and loving, unconditional support:

*I suppose when parents are strict they won't let you do certain things and go out beyond a certain time but when you make a mistake or you've done something wrong, they'll always be there behind you to give you the love that you need and support and everything and if you make a mistake they're behind you one hundred per cent of the way.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Authoritative parenting appeared to lead to mutual respect:

*If you respect your parents for what they do and what they're trying to teach you, then it gets better because you're respecting them, so they'll respect you and you'll get along fine.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*If your parents tell them to do something you can just ignore them. If you love and respect them though then won't your actions be that you listen to what they say?*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

A number of young people described more authoritarian, as opposed to authoritative, parenting in negative terms, with such parenting leading to feelings of fear, a lack of independence in the children and a lack of harmony in the family:

*The child can't always be expected to change whatever they're going to do just for whatever*

*the parents say because it's just harsh.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*I reckon their family's scared of their dad because they won't dare say owt back to him because they don't know what might happen to them.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

A few young people seemed to perceive religion as condoning authoritarian parenting, potentially leading to strict parenting, restricting choice or promoting a male-dominated system:

*All Catholics used to be right strict and the man always [in charge].*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*Most religions, not being sexist or anything but they seem to be male dominated.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

Only one parent appeared to convey a more controlling, authoritarian style of parenting, expressed in terms of keeping a tight grip and not wanting the family to be split up:

*It's a good thing, you don't want your family to be split up ... control and that's what he wants to keep a tight grip on.*

(Muslim father)

However, some of the parents spoke in terms of having experienced more authoritarian parenting in their own childhood in a religious family:

*That's my recollection of my own childhood ... I knew they loved me but I think the boundaries that they set were too tight.*

(Christian mother)

*Possibly parents of a religious background may set more boundaries.*

(Christian mother)

The parents described how their religion supported or hindered their parenting. Several gave the impression that it would affect how they interact with their child:

*I've known people talk about the teenage rebellion. Most of the situations could happen in any family but you'd hope this family would deal with them slightly differently. I mean religious values do play a big part in how you come to situations like this.*

(Christian parent)

*I would say my faith has made it [parenting] easier.*

(C of E parent)

While for most this seemed to come across as a positive aspect, a small number of parents expressed a view that being a member of a faith group could add extra pressures, as there may be a perceived expectation that you will be a good parent and that your family will function well. Consequently any failings in a parent would be frowned upon:

*I don't think that my kids feel comfortable talking to other adults in the church about problems in their relationship with me. I think they would feel under pressure to present a kind of happy family.*

(Christian mother)

## 'The family'

On the whole there appeared to be agreement that the family is a unit. The majority view was not that a mother or father should make all the decisions, rather:

*It's like teamwork.*

(Hindu mother)

Some religious parents felt that family life worked best when parents and young people worked together to make it successful:

*You shouldn't just say to kids, well we're telling you to do this, you do this, you have to involve them in discussions.*

(Hindu mother)

*Children's views are very, very important.*

(Hindu mother)

One mother based her view on her memory of her own parents' practice:

*My mum always used to say what do you think? You always have a very sensible thing to tell me. So that's what I try to do with my children, so I think if you've been valued you feel that your children hold that value in the family.*

(Hindu mother)

Another parent advocated joint family activities:

*And it's important to incorporate their views and their practices within, within family life. So you make them a part of the, of everyone working together, like supposing you're cooking, you involve children to help you. And so they learn from that process.*

(Hindu mother)

It was suggested that the ultimate aim of working together as a family team was the development of trust between parents and children, which was seen as essential to the eventual independence of young people:

*Saying that, because my daughter's she's in upper sixth form. I can't really watch what she's got on. What sort of music she's listening or whatever she's watching on ... because I just have to trust her.*

(Hindu mother)

The concept of 'headship', meaning leadership within the family, was discussed by young people and parents (scenario in section 2 of the DVD). The young people appeared to interpret this as someone who brings things together and who is the final arbiter or decision-maker, in the context of full family involvement:

*It's what their dad says, but maybe it's everyone's point of view grouped together. Everyone should be in charge, I'd say they both should be in charge together, discuss together and then the kids should have a say, they should.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

This view was echoed by many of the parents, who recognised the importance of all the family being involved and having a say, but stressed that the final decisions on what is fair rested with the parents:

*It's not just the parents' opinion on what is fair. The kids can't have the last word on what's fair but obviously you need to consider their opinion, you don't have to take it on board, consider it.*

(Christian parent)

Parents were split on the issue of leadership in the family. Some parents approved of a move towards a more equal relationship between men and women within the household. Others thought that traditional religious beliefs and practices promoted male headship in religious families:

*They say man is the head of the house.*

(Hindu mother)

*And I think where faith is concerned, it is a routine thing from all different faiths, the man is the head of the family.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

*I know families where both parents you know play an equal role in this.*

(Muslim father)

*I would have thought from a religious side there would be an equal balance from both, you know a mother and father draw the line for the child regarding his boundaries.*

(Muslim father)

Young people did not necessarily see male headship as best for the family as a whole:

*When you're parents you're supposed to become a team and do what's best for your child and if it's just the man saying whatever happens then it's not going to be best for the kids.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Parents thought the pattern of male headship was not necessarily confined to religious families or religious issues:

*Could equally apply to a religious family as a non-religious family couldn't it? How Dad is with his family.*

(Christian mother)

There were some parents who thought that families were led by women:

*So in that case it's the dad, but it easily could be some families that are led by the mum.*

(Muslim mother)

*I think they always have a lead person in the family, whatever they say goes. But it's not necessarily always dad.*

(Muslim mother)

## Love and discipline

The term 'discipline' has been widely used in the literature on religion and family life and was also used by the young people in Stage One of the study. We are mindful that when used in the literature it is often in relation to physical punishment. However, it can also mean 'to instruct, educate, train' (OED Online, 2008), and it is important to note that this is how it was used by the young people and parents in this study.

Most adolescents want to maintain, as far as possible, close positive relationships with their parents, and want their support and help (Noller and Callan, 1991). The parents said that from their perspective this remains no matter how old the child:

*Of course the parents care for the child, don't they? No matter how old or how young they are, they still care for them.*

(Muslim father)

*What's the point in having loving parents if they're letting you do whatever you want, so you get into trouble all the time? It's not.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*The main thing, every parent in this world, especially mothers, loving their child, nobody can harm their child.*

(Hindu father)

The young people also recognised that discipline can be too strict, and this could be seen as being restrictive or overprotective, leading to rebellion, or to the child being scared of the parent and therefore not able to talk with them:

*We say I love you all time and I wonder if we've made it too much the other way: it's just summat we say.*

(Christian mother)

*If they're too strict their children just want to rebel against their parents.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

Almost without exception, discipline was viewed as an important and positive aspect of loving parenting. The following quotes illustrate how this was perceived by the young people:

*If they're too strict with them then they might become scared of them ... then they'd never be able to talk about something ... too scared to tell them what they think.*

(C of E student, faith school)

*They're strict because they care about you.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

The parents considered discipline fundamental to the scriptures of several religious traditions:

*To be loving parents have to be strict because if they love you, they're going to want what's best for you, so they've got to punish you if you do something that's, that's going to have consequences when you're older.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*The basis for religion is discipline, it is there in the Koran, it's there in the Bible and it's guidelines for living, and if you do these then these will be, right from Genesis right through to the New Testament. It underpins everything, discipline.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Conversely, a lack of discipline, or just letting the child do what he or she wants, is not seen as loving and shows that parents do not care. This could lead to bad behaviour by the child:

When discussing discipline, both young people and parents spent some time exploring what they perceived to be the difference between 'firm' and 'strict':

*Then there's a lot of parents, some of their kids, they don't tell them off for anything they do. Those kids are the ones who always like get in trouble.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*Strict can mean anything.*

(Muslim mother)

*If you're not firm then the kid will be spoilt and then he can get away with anything.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*I don't think there's much between them.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

*You know one person's firm might not be another person's.*

(Christian mother)

And 'fair':

It has to seem fair to the whole family.  
(Christian mother)

*I prefer to say consistent and fair.*  
(C of E father)

In an ideal situation:

*I would hope that in a family everyone would share the same definition. I mean you'd be having problems if they didn't really.*  
(Christian mother)

The difference between 'firm but fair' and 'strict but loving' might just be a matter of parenting style:

*Two children with two different parents, with two different parenting styles.*  
(Muslim father)

The parents' groups talked about the importance of discipline, and the need for a balance between strictness and love:

*Strict in a sense but then loving as well; it's a balance.*  
(Muslim mother)

*I suppose we are strict with them, and in some ways we're not. We're not very strict on what they ought to do, and it's interesting that they tend to behave fairly well.*  
(Catholic father)

[The girl in the DVD section 2] is making a statement saying my parents are very loving, so she feels that they're very loving towards her but also very strict. And because she's put loving first and then she's put strict, she perhaps understands a lot more and she's okay with them being strict because they're loving.  
(Muslim mother)

Discipline was seen as providing important training for later childhood and adulthood: something the young people said instils values in the child that stay with them as they grow:

*It'll teach the child how to behave and how to do things when they get older and how to control their own family.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

## Boundaries and guidance

Both parents and young people spoke about boundaries either giving the young person a much needed sense of security or being there for a child's safety:

*As a parent we always think about their safety.*  
(Hindu mother)

*They don't understand the dangers involved, they're not old enough to understand you're saying it for a reason, maybe financial reasons.*  
(Catholic mother)

One parent suggested that boundaries may play a more prominent role within religious families:

*Possibly parents of a religious background may set more boundaries.*  
(Christian mother)

One young person even went so far as to suggest that he sought out boundaries for his own security:

*If I have to go somewhere, I make sure that I have the guidance of my parents and I always make sure that I have a deadline before I have to come home so that I know that I'm safe, that my parents know, but if you go without telling your parents then they are going to be worried and it's going to feel that nobody knows where you are so it can be a bit dangerous.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Parents were more likely than young people to express the concept of guidance within a religious framework:

*I think Christians, if they are genuine about their faith, have got a framework to hand, to love their children and to discipline their children and because there's a framework it's easier possibly to explain why you're asking certain things or making certain decisions in the area of love and discipline.*

(Christian parent)

*I think having a faith that you're living out affects your moral outlook on life and so therefore your boundaries are connected with your moral outlook on life.*

(Christian mother)

Both parents and young people also spoke about the right or wrong path:

*When a child does anything wrong then parents know they're doing it on the wrong path, then we try to put them on the right track.*

(Hindu father)

*She's saying that they're loving but very strict, that might be because they're looking out for her and they're just trying to show her that she is still loved but they're still going to put her on the right path of life.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

For some parents there was fear that their children would be led astray from influences outside the family:

*I know that many parents who have faith really struggle with this issue of bringing up children in a secular society where they are influenced by their friends and by the school and by society.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

In a study of adolescence by Gillies *et al.* (2001), parents expressed a perceived change in the nature of parental support from care and control to guidance and advice as children grew up. This was recognised by some of the young people and

parents in the study:

*I think that when you get older the discipline has to get different. When they were small their parents used to tell them what to do but when they grow older they make their own choices so they have to be disciplined in a way in which is going to meet the needs of the parents and the child.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*They need guidance up to a certain age. Say after like they're 17, 18 ... And then it's their choice because even God says that you're responsible for your own action after a certain age. So, but up to that age they do need guidance.*

(Muslim mother)

From a parental perspective, the changes in acceptable behaviour, and therefore the guidance provided and the boundaries negotiated, had changed a great deal in one generation:

*Whether it's good or bad society has moved towards a more lax attitude towards what children can do. And certainly religions, the religious part of society hasn't moved as quickly has it? It's dragging.*

(Catholic father)

*I was 22 before I was allowed to go off with friends and I think the age limit's getting lower and lower.*

(Hindu father)

This was perhaps particularly noticed by families who continued to see their family's origins as outside the UK:

*For example my parents, who have lived double their lives here than they have in India, still consider themselves Indian, and I was born and brought up here, but my values are not as strict as my parents, but they're certainly not as liberal as some of my children's friends.*

(Hindu father)

## Communication

Parents in the study believed that open communication was vital to building good relationships between parents and young people. Factors perceived to influence the development of open communication included parents' working patterns and recognising that young people change with age and maturity. Listening was crucial:

*Start listening.*

(Muslim father)

*You want people to listen to what you're saying.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Self-evidently, effective communication has to be a two-way process between parents and young people:

*When discussion takes place, it's then, I respect the way you feel, this is the way I feel, this is why I feel this way, I respect that but allow them the opportunity to feel, leave it as an open dialogue so you're not questioned too much, you'll always leave that door open because I find with my teenagers if you, if you close that door it's very difficult to get it open again.*

(Christian mother)

Real communication may reveal commonalities between young people's views and those of their parents:

*They [young people] feel pressured because they think their parents will expect that without their parents actually expecting it.*

(Catholic mother)

The way in which parents and young people in religious families talk to each other was something these two mothers, one Muslim and one Hindu, had seen change since their own youth:

*My oldest son asks me sometimes, some things we could never do that to our parents.*

*But the world that we're living in now, we've got to be open to children, got to be.*

(Muslim mother)

*We accepted what my parents said as certain things. But now my children will ask why do we put oil at the door, why do we put this red bindi, why do we, they ask questions and sometimes you have the answers, sometimes you don't.*

(Hindu mother)

Furthermore, there were situations in which young people might know more than their parents, as this mother said:

*Because nowadays you've got more to say to your parents: they [the parents] can't read or write anyway. You know the parents' side of it and they might not be that much educated, they know the basics but they don't know the in-depth, and so she obviously knows more because obviously you seek knowledge, you gain knowledge by reading that and you're going into places where to find out a bit more, obviously she's got more knowledge, that's why she's going back to her parents saying this, this or this, so that's where she's coming from, I do understand her point as well.*

(Muslim mother)

Beyond the immediate family both teachers and members of the extended family were mentioned by parents as those who might help communication issues. Teachers could be an alternative source of advice and family members might ease communication within the family:

*If they need any help they should talk to a teacher, if they need any answers.*

(Muslim father)

*Go talk to someone else in your family.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Faith communities and organisations also have to be ready to listen to young people and be more accommodating and supportive:

*I think that for them [young people] religion is too inflexible, whereas spirituality isn't inflexible so they're much more likely to experiment with spiritual things rather than religion and they can't experiment with the Catholic Church: the Catholic Church is like take it or leave it.*

(Catholic father)

### Talking about sex

There were some subjects which young people said they found difficult to discuss with their parents. This could be because they found the subject embarrassing, in particular sex:

*I think it's sometimes hard as well for families like to talk about it [sex].*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

The reasons given for the general lack of discussion most frequently related to embarrassment and discomfort:

*Seems vulgar ... you can't say vulgar stuff in front of your parents.*

(Christian student, faith school)

When the young people were asked if it was particularly difficult discussing this topic in a religious family, the responses were mixed. Some indicated that it did not make a difference:

*No I don't think it's religion or culture. I think nobody like feels comfortable when they're talking about sex.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

One young person described how being Christian influenced whether sex was discussed in the home or not:

*In my house we don't talk about sex because it's not really something that really we need to talk about because a lot of Christians, most people really don't need to go around talking about sex unless you're asking something, a serious question.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

As parents reflected on their relationships with their own parents, they acknowledged that they had been embarrassed about talking about sex and sexual relationships with their parents. One Catholic parent said:

*That's what you have when you're a Catholic of our generation.*

(Catholic parent)

Another stated:

*I learned as I was growing up never to mention sex.*

(Catholic parent)

One of the fathers in the group said the only information his father gave him about sex was:

*Just remember boys are different from girls.*

(Catholic father)

This embarrassment continues for some parents:

*Even now I would never dream of talking to my mum about sex.*

(Catholic mother)

*I'm a mother of two and she's a mother of two but I wouldn't.*

(Catholic mother)

Parents also reported that talking about sex with young people could be difficult:

*I think we do better with our children than our parents did, but I think it's by no means easy.*

(Catholic parent)

However, they felt their children were far more embarrassed about it than they were:

*My children cringe.*

(Christian mother)

*I bring it up and they all scuttle out of the room.*

(Catholic parent)

One mother concluded:

*I think younger, possibly younger teenagers are a bit cringey, I think as they mature and get older, they're more able to talk.*

(Christian mother)

Another parent recognised that:

*Sometimes children don't know how we [parents] will respond so we obviously haven't communicated that well.*

(C of E parent)

Only one parent acknowledged that parents may also be embarrassed to talk to their children.

While recognising that it can be difficult talking about sex, a number of the young people believed it should be discussed in the family. One young person took a more ambivalent approach:

*As long as you know what your parents and your family feel about sex, I don't think you need to talk about it. I don't think they [parents] need to talk about it but if they have a problem, I think it's always good that you've found someone that you can go to and talk about it.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

The parents were much more uniform in their opinion that sex should be discussed in the family. As one parent put it:

*You want them to be open because if you can talk about sex you can probably talk about most things.*

(C of E parent)

The parents also recognised the importance of open and frank discussion where there were possible issues. For example, in relation to having a relationship with someone from a different faith:

*We would like to think that we communicate well with our children and that they would be able to, we would be able to listen to them without hitting the roof.*

(C of E parent)

## Choice

Non-directive support is particularly significant to young people and many feel that space to make decisions without pressure or influence from parents is an important right (Gillies *et al.*, 2001). The young people believed they had a right to make choices about how they conducted their life and should not have views imposed on them by their parents. Key to these discussions was consideration about the age at which young people could make informed choices. Parents expressed this right to choose in terms of showing respect to the young person while encouraging them to respect the family too:

*I think a lot of it's about respect. We try to foster self-respect and respect for other people constantly, all the time.*

(Catholic mother)

*You've got to recognise him as a person and respect him and therefore if you're making plans to do things then you're beginning to take that into account in the family plans. If there are special events that we want you to be at, we give as much warning as we can: please don't arrange something for that day because such and such is happening and we want us to go together as a family. As they get older you need to be doing that, rather than dictating what they're going to do.*

(C of E parent)

Issues of choice were discussed in relation to values and religious observance.

## Values

*Everybody should be able to have their own opinion and they should be entitled to it.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

For some young people God is the ultimate authority as far as values are concerned:

*If God says it's wrong therefore it's wrong.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*God's given you life and then just don't go out and be stupid.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

Some young people did recognise that choice of values might be difficult in some families:

*Some parents think they are right all the time and it's hard to tell them that they're not.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Basic morality seems to be at the heart of these values, for example knowing right from wrong and making ethical decisions:

*If you know in your heart that you've got a really strong sense of what's right and wrong.*  
(Christian student, independent faith school)

Religious parents see this as a foundation for a 'good life'. However, parents also understand that young people have to make their own choices about values:

*I mean at the end of the day, it's the child's choice.*  
(Muslim father)

In order to develop a better understanding of values to make informed choices, young people should find out and ask questions about values:

*You shouldn't believe everything the media says; it's not always true.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*You should know the facts about it and then you can make your own decision.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

### **Religion and religious observance**

Young people believed religion and taking part in religious activities should be a free choice. Referring to the first two scenarios in Section 1 of the DVD, in which reference is made to choice or coercion in religion:

*I think it's his choice if he wants to go for this religion, he doesn't have to do what his parents or his brother or sister does.*  
(Catholic boy, faith school)

Like the young people, the majority of the parents recognised that religion is not something young people can be forced to choose:

*You can't force religion upon anyone really.*  
(Muslim mother)

*The more you force it on somebody the further away they go anyway, so, there's no point forcing it.*  
(Muslim father)

Yet the parents were aware that young people can feel pressurised to follow a religion:

*When I was about twelve, thirteen it was as if it was just all God in my house and nothing else and I felt really pressured by it. And I just wanted to get away from it.*  
(C of E mother)

But they also recognised that the influence of parents can be positive:

*If this young person admires his parents, and part of what he admires about them is their religious integrity then he might perhaps be more open in that process but nevertheless he's got to make his own choices.*  
(Christian father)

They also thought that young people might choose religion for themselves, even if it was not promoted by parents:

*In my own case I was religiously sent to Sunday School until I was about sort of 13 and then when I was about 14 I decided that I wanted to go and from that moment onwards I was told you don't have to go and I was put under pressure almost not to go, it was a strange situation.*  
(C of E father)

Some parents also thought it important they should be willing to help children find out about and try to understand other religions:

*I've got a son who wanted to go to church for a while but after that he wanted to go to a synagogue. He goes to a synagogue; we talk about my religion but we talk about other religions.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Parents recognised that it could be frustrating for a young person to feel confined by a religion if they wanted to explore others:

*I am a member of a religious commune. The children there they're not allowed to join [other faiths]. It must be very hard even being brought up in that, oh I want to go and be a Jehovah's Witness or I want to go and be a Muslim.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Furthermore, a young person might find it difficult to contradict parents over matters of religion:

*And I know as a teenager I found it very difficult to say actually no, I don't want to do that. My parents would never have said to me you've got to, but I felt as if I couldn't tell them that I didn't want to do it.*

(C of E father)

Those outside the family might not feel able to intervene:

*I'd be very loath to be encouraging him to do something that actually was dead against the interest of his parents and he would then be suffering for.*

(C of E father)

However, a certain amount of conflict between young people and parents was not unusual:

*I'm thinking about myself, you always want something different to what your parents said, no matter whether it's good or bad, whatever they tell you, you want something different.*

(Muslim mother)

Parents also expect different young people will respond in different ways:

*You'll always find children that will conform to it [religion] and some that you know want to rebel.*

(Muslim father)

Therefore, religious parents have to work through the challenges of parenting young people:

*I think there is that time when parents are able to influence their children as they're nurturing towards their religious values and ideals but there does come a time where parents realise that pressure to be Christian or live up to some kind of parental expectations can be very negative and damaging and most parents have to work that through.*

(Christian father)

In the same way, the participants in the study believed young people should have a choice about religious observance. Parents thought that not giving young people a choice about involvement in religious activities can lead to resentment:

*And the last thing you want in that situation is resentment. If you do force them to go then maybe they'll resent it.*

(Christian mother)

Some young people spoke about making their own positive choice to be involved in religious activities:

*Sometimes I go to the mosque, because you can learn stuff there as well, about your religion.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Once again age was a factor in determining choice of whether to take part in religious activities or not. Different ages were suggested by young people depending on their own experience of their own faith group:

*It depends on the different people because if they understand what they're doing at a*

*younger age they can choose whether or not they should be allowed, I mean not like a five year old, if they say they don't want to go to church they can't really be left by themselves.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*Maybe when they're seven they should start, and then by the time they're ten they should [be able to say their daily prayers].*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

## Parenting disabled children

Few studies have focused on religious attitudes and beliefs in relation to parenting disabled children. Moreover, even fewer studies have engaged with disabled young people to ask them directly about their understanding of religion and disability (Lees, 1997, 2007). The study therefore included an opportunity for young people (n = 35) and parents (n = 27) from different faiths to discuss their perceptions of religion, family life and disability. There was general agreement that disability is a difficult issue to talk about. However, the participants went on to discuss the effect of disability on parenting practices and on non-disabled siblings. In addition, parents with experience of parenting disabled children brought a depth of experience to the discussion and went on to talk about the importance of support from the faith community and from professionals.

Young people provided different explanations for the actions and decision of the religious parents in respect of the disabled child in the DVD in which a boy says 'My sister has cerebral palsy. My parents think God let this happen for a reason' (Scenario 7 in Section 3):

[Parents might think] *Better this child than your child.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*I think that if parents are religious, they say it must have all happened for a good reason in the end, it's just not a mistake.*  
(Catholic boy, faith school)

The majority of the parents of disabled children who took part in the discussions held positive views about disability and believed that their religious faith had contributed to this:

*I always feel that I've been given this job because I can [cope].*  
(Mother, mixed faith group)

*You have trials in your life, so having a child with autism is just something I've been given.*  
(Mother, mixed faith group)

*It's a privilege rather than a job.*  
(Mother, mixed faith group)

Some of the parents debated whether having a disabled child was perceived as a punishment or something that made their family 'special':

*The reason [for having a disabled child] could be because of being punished or it could be because we're learning about something, it's making us better people.*  
(Muslim mother)

*I think maybe in terms of punishment, that's also tied in with religion. The punishment thing is just a tactic to keep individuals under control. God's going to punish you, that sort of thing. There's a reason that God has for it to happen.*  
(Muslim mother)

A number of young people also held positive views, believing that having a disabled child might make the religious family stronger:

*It can strengthen people's faith. And make them like stronger and encourage them.*  
(Christian student, independent faith school)

However, they recognised its potential negative effects. It could turn a family member, especially a sibling, off religion. Referring to the boy in the scenario:

*He's growing up thinking now his sister's disabled because God made her that way for a reason. I mean he's not going to want to follow something like that.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

Overall, the view that family life might be hard in these circumstances echoed the views of mothers of disabled children from a study by Green (2007), who talked about the burden of care which caused not sadness but fatigue:

*Still be a hard time ...*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

One group of parents explored the way in which the disabled child, referred to in the DVD, was perceived:

*The sister seems to have become a scapegoat. I mean, it shows you that she isn't really valued so much.*

(Christian father)

Parents felt that young people could not always expect to receive information about disability from outside the family. The family was therefore an important and sometimes major source of information about disability. Clear, factual information was important:

*Couldn't count on getting information about that kind of thing from outside: in the general population, people don't always know about disabilities to that extent do they?*

(Muslim mother)

Young people could empathise with how a young person, like the one with the disabled sibling on the DVD, might feel:

*He might only have that sister so he might feel oh my friends have got all these sisters and they're fine and why me?*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

When the young people were asked to suggest how a young person with a disabled sibling growing up in a religious family might react, a

range of suggestions and advice were given. This included finding out more:

*Try and learn more about God, so if you do believe that it happens, try and understand why he does it.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Accept it:

*Just tell him it's just a part of life.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*But that's happened: you can't change it now. God let it happen for a reason: just move on and deal with it now.*

(Muslim mother)

Be caring:

*Maybe I would say to him look after your sister.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

Furthermore, parents agree that young people do need to come to their own understanding concerning disability:

*I think often as adults we think that children don't understand or they can't cope with issues, but in my experience I found that if you spend time explaining to your child what's going on that they actually cope with that situation a lot better and that they do come to their own understanding of the situation really.*

(Christian father)

Parents thought that support for siblings of a disabled child was very important, both to the individuals and to the family unit:

*I think because you've got to give time to all of them [the siblings]. You've got to have time but it does affect elder siblings. It does because you can't go anywhere; you've got to make arrangements for all of them.*

(Muslim mother)

## Discussing disability

For young people, disability appeared to be one of the more awkward subjects to discuss, partly because not everyone knew what cerebral palsy (the disability referred to on the DVD) was or had direct experience to draw on. For parents, disability could be difficult to talk about in the family because there are no specific words in the language spoken by the family for that disability or because limited education meant that family members had limited understanding of the subject:

*It's still hard for me to explain to my family what does autism now mean. I mean there's no word in our language for autism. Because it's not a physical disability, the only word that I can recall is mentalism.*

(Muslim mother)

*My son's got Down's syndrome. I think they're getting used to the Down's syndrome now. Again autism's going to take quite a while for them. Some that have been educated it's easy but some of them it's going to be so hard.*

(Muslim mother)

Other researchers have noted that language may restrict the discussion of disability in families (Hatton *et al.*, 2004; Rao, 2006) where a word for a particular condition may not be available in a particular language. In turn, this limitation will also contribute to the challenge to educate other family members about a disability.

## Role of the faith community in parenting a disabled child

Those parents who had experience of parenting a disabled child thought that the faith community should be a positive asset for families with disabled children:

*They have that community as well, or even religion around that family, the faith.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

However, these parents had mixed views as to whether or not faith communities really were supportive of families with disabled children.

Although they felt they should be, they were also experienced as judgemental:

*As a Christian and as a faith person, I always think that autistic children are far better off in faith communities because there's that support there but sometimes it's not there, sometimes it's judgemental.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

*Sometimes it [faith community] is judgemental: sometimes [the attitude is], they [disabled children] must behave like us.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

Although religious communities might be expected to be more tolerant of disabled individuals, Crabtree (2007), in a study of the experiences of Muslim families with disabled children in the United Arab Emirates, also noted incidents of intolerance of disability, including from faith leaders.

One aspect of religious beliefs and practices for some, although not all, religious families involves attending places of worship. Not all religious parents felt able to take their disabled child to their chosen place of worship. Here three Muslim women with disabled children discuss whether or not an autistic child would be able to attend the Mosque and its related education activities for children:

*And I know my son can't go [to Mosque]. I wouldn't put him in that.*

*But some, I mean there's some obviously do go. They do really well; just got to explain to them, they don't like too much noise.*

*My friend's son's just started going. It's his first week but she thinks he's coping all right. He just started. We explained to the teacher and that that he doesn't like too much noise, got to be really sensitive with him and I think it does work.*

*Well I accept it [that he can't go]. I don't know about other parents.*

(Muslim mothers)

### **Professional understanding of religious families with disabled children**

Although religion may influence family life, parents suggested that professionals working with disabled children and their families should be careful not to make assumptions about this:

*For example, your job's a social worker, your job's not there to promote a particular religion, your job's there to offer that support regardless of what religion or not religion.*

(Muslim mother)

*If the parents say to you 'I believe that God's done this for this reason', you need to be able to listen to that and actually try to understand it from their side.*

(Muslim mother)

Parents thought children with some disabilities were additionally vulnerable, particularly those with little or no speech:

*What really worries me, I mean I've got another three children and I know they can come and talk to me, because of his speech, he's got no speech, that's the big one for all the parents whose children can't talk. Because they say the children are more vulnerable.*

(Muslim mother)

# 6 Religion and life for adolescents

A number of the scenarios provided an opportunity for young people and their parents to discuss adolescent life and the influence of parents on values, responsibilities and relationships. The number of participants who considered each section varied as not all groups discussed all sections (see Table 2 in Chapter 2 for details of this).

## Values

According to Herbert, one aspect of teenage identity development includes 'working out for oneself many of one's own values' and 'not passively accepting conventional wisdom at all times' (Herbert, 1987, p. 17). Values are 'desirable abstract goals that apply across situations' and 'serve as guiding principles in people's lives, as criteria they use to select and justify actions and to evaluate people and events' (Knafo and Schwartz, 2003, p. 595). For the adolescent in a religious family, questioning 'conventional wisdom' could involve conflict between the religious values of the family and those in the surrounding non-religious culture.

Five scenarios illustrated situations in daily life commonly encountered by young people to serve as a background to a discussion of commonalities and differences in values by 46 young people and 23 parents. The scenarios selected for discussion provided opportunities to discuss a young person's choice in relation to the music they listened to and their right to wear what they want, including religiously significant clothing. A further scenario focused on a young person wanting to talk to family members about 'the important things in life' and being ignored, and the final scenario under this theme centred on values associated with body image. (See Appendix 2, Section 4 for more detail.)

### Parents' values and their influence

The majority of young people said they appreciate

and respect the values they have been brought up with:

*If from an early age you've had that drummed into you, then you're going to be brought up thinking that that's the right thing to do.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*They [parents] do not want the child to be led astray from their beliefs.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

However, they also thought that young people, in general, might develop different values and beliefs from those of their parents:

*She might want to say to her family that what you [parents] are following doesn't make sense but what I've been reading about is making a lot of sense to me. I decided to follow this path.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Some young people do think parents should have a say in their lifestyle choice:

*If they [parents] are allowing their child to go and buy music or listen to music then they should have a bit of say. They should be responsible for their child's music or what type of music they listen.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*I think that if she is going to wear the clothes that she chooses to wear, I think that she should wear them in a way which doesn't impact badly on her family.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Parents saw an important role in the transmission of religious values. It is a way of giving guidance

and serves an important purpose: it provides direction, a strong base on which to build the rest of your life:

*If you build the base strong, then you don't have to worry.*

(Hindu father)

*We must tell them principle of lives: what we are expecting from you. What they must not do.*

(Hindu father)

*You want to make sure you give them the right direction.*

(Muslim father)

A subsidiary to this, in the view of one parent, was that parents had a duty to educate themselves in their parenting role in order to be a good role model:

*I think parents also have to educate themselves. Parents have to be more educated as well and slightly more broad-minded and be able to accept as well and be friendly with the children. Be open, regarding education, but I think parents also have to educate themselves.*

(Hindu mother)

### Contemporary culture

Young people and parents cited other factors beyond parents and family that could influence values. These were common aspects of contemporary culture such as popular music, films, the internet and the media:

*Listening to music that's got loads of swearing and other stuff it's eventually going to get in your mind.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*You can also get influenced by maybe television or the internet and other types of media like that.*

(Muslim student, non-faith school)

*And you have to basically monitor what they're watching, what they're listening, what they're doing and take part in as well.*

(Hindu mother)

Some young people had experienced a struggle between contemporary culture and religious values:

*Either you sort of go along with the Western culture and the girls dress in a way that their parents consider is not appropriate or they go along with their religious culture and then the parents are worried about that.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

Where there is conflict between parents and young people over values, parents believe this is a normal part of growing up:

*You have to accept your children for who they are and what they are and, and realise that they're influenced by fashions and trends. It's just typical growing up.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

### Life choices

As teenagers grow towards independence they negotiate roles and responsibilities within the family and wider community. Young people, growing up in religious families, may adopt the roles and responsibilities their families promote, such as doing voluntary work in the community, charitable giving or other forms of altruism. Moreover, they may choose careers or leisure activities valued by the religious family and/or faith community. The freedom for a young person to choose different roles and responsibilities and the influence of parents on this choice is the focus of this section.

### Careers

A number of factors influenced both young people's and parents' attitude towards careers. As far as career was concerned, the majority of young people expected to be able to make their own career choice. However, they also recognised that parents have a contribution to make when

influencing or advising about a career, but this should not be the only influence:

*I think it should be up to you what job you get.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

Young people thought that parents would prefer their children to choose:

*All the jobs that help people.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

For parents employment versus unemployment was a primary consideration. However, parents also considered:

*Job satisfaction is important.*  
(Muslim mother)

Young people thought that some ways of earning a living would not be encouraged by religious parents if they involved religious taboos like alcohol, gambling or indecent behaviour:

*Oh my God if the parents found out, I've got a few cousins and it's shame on the family. Some of them [the cousins] don't care. Some of them just say oh we've got money, we can buy a new house or whatever.*  
(Muslim girl, faith school)

Parents agreed that some career choices were less acceptable than others. The use of alcohol or possible illegal activities was not generally endorsed:

*Stuff like prostitution, dancing, selling drugs; the things that you just think are a bit illegal.*  
(Muslim mother)

Young people and parents saw education as key to achieving career choices, as the following discussion illustrates:

*There's not a lot of people in our community that have done well in school, they all just doss about ... a lot of parents put great emphasis on like working well, working hard at school so you can do what you like. You know my mum,*

*she left school when she was 16 because her mum passed away. She had to go get a job so she knows that first hand, you need education.*  
(Muslim girl, faith school)

*If she's got a good education and she left school good and she can get a job, a good job.*  
(Muslim mother)

### **Attitudes towards money**

The discussions about wealth included salary considerations, family attitudes towards money, and the financial help parents might give children. In response to a scenario about salary considerations, young people said wealth could be a religious issue. A job you enjoy and which reflects your religious beliefs is more important than earning a lot of money:

*She should aim to get her money but she should remember that money isn't everything, and that she shouldn't push out God or walk all over people just so she can get what she wants.*  
(Christian student, independent faith school)

Some young people thought a well-paid job might be important in order to enable them to look after their family:

*You want to make lot of money, make it then look after your family. That would be priority.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

There were essentially two contrasting views about the importance of money or financial success among the young people and parents:

*I think earning lots of money is a priority because if you don't earn a lot of money well you won't be able to afford as much you know, pleasures.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*And money is a priority, maybe not the main priority but it should be a priority I think.*  
(Muslim mother)

Other young people agreed that ‘enough to live on’ was adequate:

*They want enough money to live. I think that’s what they want.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

Parents also thought it was important to consider what the young person wanted to do with any surplus:

*Depends what she wants to do with the money as well.*  
(Muslim mother)

### **Religious vocation**

In the main, the idea of a religious vocation did not appear to attract young people, although they thought it was more attractive to religious parents:

*But if someone did do it [a religious vocation] they [parents] would be really proud of them.*  
(Muslim girl, faith school)

Even so, young people thought that not all families, religious or not, would think a religious vocation to be a positive choice:

*If you’ve got religious parents that are the same religion as you then they might be quite pleased for you but if they really are proper Christians or Muslims or Catholic then they would want to make sure that it’s what you really wanted to do and that they’d support you, they’d test you and make sure that you really knew what you were doing.*  
(Christian student, independent faith school)

*Some families might not want their daughter to become a nun because they might not want them to devote their life to something like that.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

Although religious parents endorsed the right to choose a religious vocation, most saw it as a commitment more than a career or job choice, and something that was likely to have far-reaching consequences. Therefore, it required significant preparation and thought:

*It’s not just a job is it? It’s a lifestyle as well.*  
(Muslim mother)

*To become a nun you’ve got to give a lot of things up, certain things. They’ve got to make sure that they’re ready to do that.*  
(Muslim mother)

Few parents seemed to have direct experience of young people’s interest in a religious vocation. However, one Muslim parent spoke about her son’s interest in religious scholarship:

*Well with my older son, he loves every religion. He says he wants to be a scholar. That’s what he says now, but again he can change. I’ve said to him whatever he does I’ll back him up.*  
(Muslim mother)

### **Community involvement**

Recent government initiatives have emphasised encouraging young people to develop a positive engagement with the community through citizenship education (Ajegbo, 2007). In our study young people considered it natural for parents to want their children to contribute in a positive way to community life in the form of voluntary activity or other type of community involvement:

*Well everyone wants to do something that’s a value to their community, really. You would want your child to make a difference.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

However, one young person questioned her parent’s motives:

*They look good because that’s what my mum does, why don’t you do this, why don’t you do*

*that? Just because she looks good to other people.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

From the parents' perspective voluntary work was considered valuable.

*Maybe they're talking more about some kind of active involvement, volunteering or something like that. He can come here and volunteer.*

(Muslim mother)

Parents thought some young people might be willing to comply with parents' wishes about community involvement:

[On the DVD, Section 3] *He starts off with 'my parents think I should', so at the moment he's perhaps not laying his own cards on the table but he's very clear what his parents want.*

(Christian father)

Parents also thought young people might need to:

*Be able to express it [community involvement] in his own way.*

(Mother, mixed faith group)

This might mean choosing a non-religious activity, like joining a football club, rather than a religious one, perhaps in order to join in with their peers.

## Relationships and responsibilities

The research provided some insights into ways in which parents and young people perceive that religious beliefs and practices inform their attitudes towards aspects of sexual relationships. Scenarios designed to elicit responses focused on discussing sex with parents, sex before marriage, sexuality and inter-faith marriage. (See Appendix 2, Section 5 for more detail.) These responses were provided by 34 young people and 26 parents.

### Preparing for sexual relationships

Few young people made reference to sex education in school although some of the parents considered sex education in school was important:

*You must have some forum in school there to do that [learn about sex] but you must be able to allow them to do that and it must be brought up.*

(Catholic parent)

Friends, rather than parents, are an important source of information, particularly among girls, in relation to learning about sex. The young people indicated they felt more comfortable discussing sexual relationships and activity with their peers rather than their family:

*You don't really mind obviously talking about it with friends.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

One girl made the point that actually friends are 'family':

*Other girls and stuff but you know like he said, in our house, that's a family.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

The parents recognised that information about sex was far more accessible than when they were young and it can be easy to presume that young people know about sexual relationships. However, the group of Catholic parents acknowledged that young people may think they know it all but there are still 'quite a few who don't' and there is:

*Mass ignorance but they still know more than we knew.*

(Catholic parent)

A few young people indicated that sexual activity was something that should only be discussed between married couples and which raises issues as to whether young people holding these views believe one should enter marriage with no knowledge about sex or one only needs to learn about sex prior to marriage:

*We don't talk about sex in our house ... No, that's just between you and your husband what you do.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

## Sex and marriage

The message given by all the faiths included in this study is that sex is for marriage and the young people recognised that, for many holding religious beliefs, sex before marriage was unacceptable:

*That's what the Bible says.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

The parents were not as unequivocal:

*It's individual choice but as a Muslim I would strongly say sex should be after marriage and not before marriage.*

(Muslim mother)

They recognised that saving sex for marriage is not a commonly held view. Some of them considered that young people who make this stand need support:

*As a Christian church we need to be helping youngsters to make these sorts of statements and lead them and understand them.*

(C of E parent)

Other reasons over and above religious beliefs were given by the young people as to why people may wish to save sex for marriage:

*I think it's just setting an example but it's one of them ones where you don't have to stick to it but they're saying you should really.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

The parents also discussed the advantages of saving sex for marriage:

*It means security and stronger bonds.*

(Muslim father)

*I think a lot of young people would be thinking about it but they don't want to get a reputation for sleeping around.*

(Christian mother)

## Relationships with people of a different faith

Young people considered the dilemmas encountered by parents in a situation where a young person was dating someone from a different faith:

*They've got them traditions haven't they? If I'm in a Catholic family and you've been doing the Catholic traditions for so long, the parents might feel worried that you're going to go to other faiths.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

*I know my granddad would be so mad, he really would be; he'd be really mad.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

This suggests an awareness of the intergenerational desire to pass on the faith that is also part of the development of religious identity, as discussed by the parents in the early part of Chapter 4.

One of the parents was quite pragmatic about such situations:

*Parents will struggle with that, it will be difficult, not that it won't work out nicely.*

(Catholic parent)

While other parents in the group considered it could be positive:

*If it was either of mine and they had another faith it's OK isn't it? It's good.*

(Catholic parent)

The parents themselves gave some indication as to when they would be concerned and what they would do:

*I'd just tell them to watch and wait ... to see if it's serious.*

(Christian mother)

*I would want to know what he felt was important about his own faith and if he talked about faith with his girlfriend.*

(Christian mother)

There was also a sense, from the parents, of wanting what is in the best interests of their child while recognising that it could be a difficult situation:

*I think any child of any faith or non-faith would find it hard ... the kid is signing up for a tough life.*

(Catholic parent)

*I don't see really the point, if you're a Christian you start going out with a Muslim or he says I'm going out with someone from another faith, a non-Christian, somebody, maybe like a Sikh or a Muslim, there's really no point because you can't have a proper relationship with someone if you disagree on like the most important things in your life.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Other young people took a different approach:

*Can't do owt about it can they?*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

*Faith might break up a relationship.*

(Muslim father)

*Just don't tell them.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

One Catholic parent described from personal experience how it can work:

Some of the parents also believed:

*Kids have got to make choices haven't they?*

(C of E parent)

*Others have said to me do you think mine would stop going because their dad's not a Catholic? And I said no, their dad has never been a Catholic from the day they were born so it's not like he's stopped going so they [don't] say oh well we're not going now you know they've never known him to go. I've always taken them [to church].*

(Catholic mother)

The young people and parents considered the consequences of marrying someone from a different faith. A number of these comments focused on the consequences for children born out of the relationship. For example, how do they choose which religion to raise their children?

*If they had children or whatever, what religion are they going to have? The parents, they know that their religion's right, that's why they follow it, and want their kids to ... just be of the same right religion.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

### **Sexuality and choice**

The young people considered a young person's right to choose his or her sexuality. A number of comments related to personal experiences of gay family members. These expressed support for the gay person and tolerance and support for that young person's right to choose their sexuality:

And the difficulties in choosing one religion over another:

*The children would be really confused: if he stuck to his faith and she stuck to her faith, what about the children, they'd be so confused.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

*If my cousin turned gay now, I wouldn't change towards him because I've known him nearly all my life and he's one of my best mates almost. I'm not going to change him.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

Others considered the consequences for the married couple:

*I think it's wrong to tell them that they can't have sex because of what he is. As long as they know what effects it's going to have on them and what everyone is going to think of them if they do it, then I think it's up to them if they want to go and just do the business.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

Some parents spoke positively about gay friends and members of their faith community.

*We've got a couple of close friends who are gay men who I'd use as an example when my kids use gay as a term of abuse in the playground.*

(Christian mother)

*When you've got a lot of friends who are gay, they love them, they can't understand why God doesn't love them.*

(C of E parent)

The legalising of same-sex relationships from 18 years of age and the introduction of civil partnerships has gone a considerable way to normalising same-sex relationships. Moreover, young people are continually seeing same-sex relationships in the media. Yet same-sex relationships go against the preaching of several faiths, thereby adding to the confusion for young gay people who are members of faith communities.

Some of the young people believed that their faith would not support same-sex relationships:

*It clearly says in the Bible that it's wrong.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*I don't believe that anybody could be gay.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

As with sex before marriage the responses of the parents were more measured, although they recognised that same-sex relationships could be 'a bigger issue' for some religious families (Christian mother):

*I think for the kids of faith who maybe reflect their parents' views are struggling with some of those difficult gay issues.*

(C of E parent)

*I think the vast majority [of Catholic parents] would struggle with it.*

(Catholic parent)

*It's a thing that religion isn't easy with things that it doesn't know about and it doesn't know about this and it's a bit of a hot potato isn't it?*

(Catholic parent)

And there may be negative responses, particularly from older people:

*I often think if one of the boys had told us he was gay my first reaction would be God how will I tell Mum and Dad.*

(Catholic parent)

The anticipated approach taken by parents was also discussed by the young people. It ranged from blaming the parents:

*It's his parents' fault they're gay ... It's the genes ... They don't choose to be gay ... It's something they're born with.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

to parents needing to recognise that the young person is the same person they have brought up:

*Plus if his family love him so much, they'll understand.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*Parents should accept them for what they are.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Some of the young people distinguished between the responses of mothers and fathers:

*Does it matter to mums if they've got gay daughters or gay sons or not? I don't think it should.*

(C of E student, faith school)

*Your dad might be disappointed in you, so he's like wanting to bring him up as a man or something.*

(C of E student, faith school)

One of the parents also made this distinction:

*He [the Dad] would struggle with it, yeh he would.*

(Catholic parent)

Overall, these findings are consistent with the review of Racikowsky and Siegel concerning reactions of parents to homosexuality in young people in non-religious families, which they ascribe to a bias against homosexuality that 'is deeply ingrained in most aspects of society, including social, religious, and legal institutions' (Racikowsky and Siegel, 1997, p. 213).

However, consistent with the findings of Madge and Willmott (2007), the parents were often more tolerant and supportive than the young people expected:

*You bring children up to know that they're loved and wanted no matter what they do or what they are.*

(Christian mother)

*Surely we must as parents take a very very deep breath and then start to try and open up a conversation.*

(C of E parent)

## Relationships: peers and friends

Peer groups become increasingly important and influential during adolescence. With this in mind, young people and parents in the focus groups were asked questions designed to explore the areas where friends and peers are influential and where the young people continue to refer to parents. The discussions demonstrated how young people negotiated with their peers to gain a sense of who they are. The scenarios about relationships with peers and friends were discussed by 39 young people and 23 parents (Section 6 of the DVD).

### Friendship

The first scenario raised a question 'If you are Christian and you have non-Christian friends should you get new friends?' This question acknowledges that friendships may be drawn

from a number of formal groups (Brown and Klute, 2003): the faith community and school are just two sources. If friendships are formed with others, outside these formal groups, does it create problems or tensions for young people? The second question focused on being embarrassed by a father making a blessing when friends came around for tea and provided an opportunity to explore how young people negotiate difference in friendships.

There was an overwhelming view expressed, by young people and parents alike, that it is not problematic to have friends who are of different religions:

*You've got friends for who they are, not what religion they are.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

*It doesn't matter what faith they are, just matters how their personality is or if you're kind and everything.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*They should be all equal with each other. It doesn't matter what culture, what background, I think it's how you get on with each other as a person ... it doesn't matter what religion you are.*

(Muslim mother)

Parents also recognised:

*The chances are that most children are more likely to have more non-Christian friends than Christian friends because of the environment, school, college, university.*

(Christian mother)

Some of the young people indicated that having friends from different faith or non-faith backgrounds was about accepting and supporting people in their religious beliefs:

*It depends whether your friends are behind your religion.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

However, one young person stated that there are struggles associated with this:

*Somebody can sometimes tell something that hurts you because of your religion.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Some of the parents also discussed what would concern them about their children's friendships:

*Good non-Christian friends are fine but you know if they're a bad influence then they can be pulled to that.*  
(Christian parent)

*You don't want them going around with a load of ruffians.*  
(Christian parent)

One young person thought there were definite advantages to friendships between members of different religious groups:

*You can learn like different beliefs from your friends.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

Others thought it was an opportunity to promote their faith:

*Well you should be yourself, so people that are non-Christian can want to be Christian.*  
(Catholic boy, faith school)

*I think there you have an opportunity to convert them.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

Some of the parents discussed their role in steering their children in the right direction in relation to finding suitable friends:

*If you leave your children to find their own influences they'll find the wrong ones.*  
(Christian parent)

Others recognised the young people had some choice:

*I wouldn't just say right you can't have her as a friend.*  
(Christian parent)

*You've got to have the faith in them to make the right choice and that can't be the parent guiding them. They've got to have the knowledge to make their own decisions.*  
(Christian parent)

### **Peer pressure**

During adolescence acceptance by peers is important, with those rejected or isolated feeling lonely (Aldgate *et al.*, 2006). This can result in young people giving in to peer pressure by conforming to the norms of the friendship group. The young people and parents acknowledged that peer pressure exists and can have a negative influence on individuals:

*You can't allow peer pressure to get to you.*  
(C of E parent)

*The friends might like take him away from that certain faith, whereas his parents are trying to get him stronger.*  
(Catholic boy, faith school)

Therefore, parents need to give young people advice and strategies to manage this:

*I'm not saying go along with the crowd but don't push otherwise you'll isolate yourself from the group.*  
(Christian parent)

*You should give them the tools to enable them to do that [handle peer pressure].*  
(Christian parent)

The pressure to conform to the norms of friendship groups may result in young people

feeling embarrassed by parental behaviour that deviates from that norm, such as religious practices. This led to discussion about whether religious practices, such as blessing a meal, were embarrassing to young people or not (Section 6 of the DVD). The young people were divided about this. Some of them were clear that this was not embarrassing and was normal practice in certain homes:

*Your parents happen to always say grace: it's fine.*

(C of E student, faith school)

Others believed the girl in the scenario should be proud:

*It's cool, a blessing.*

(Muslim girl, faith school)

And one commented on the need to show respect:

*How are you ever going to get other people to respect their religion? Because you can't expect respect and not give it.*

(Catholic girl, faith school)

Some of the parents made similar points:

*This is what I do.*

(Christian parent)

*They [child's friends] were really impressed not at the blessing but the fact that we sat down together as a family and ate together: that's what impressed their friends.*

(Christian parent)

The parents were not very sympathetic that the young woman was embarrassed; they indicated that parents are always embarrassing to young people of this age and if they were not embarrassed by the blessing it would be something else:

*That's my job to be embarrassing.*

(Christian parent)

*Your parents are embarrassing full stop. It just happens to be the way your dad embarrasses you.*

(Christian mother)

Once again, some parents considered it was a phase:

*At that age it's just everything you do embarrasses them. They're just so conscious of what people think and it's a phase they've got to go through.*

(Christian mother)

However, a number of the young people were able to appreciate that such practices, as blessings, could be embarrassing, as did a minority of parents:

*I can understand them being a bit embarrassed because it's different.*

(Catholic boy, faith school)

*I used to find it uncomfortable ... we'd probably compromise and say grace or not depending on the company.*

(Christian parent)

The young people and parents also suggested strategies that can be utilised to cope with these kinds of situations. These included asking the father not to make a blessing, explaining to friends, or avoiding the situation:

*You just tell them not to.*

(C of E student, faith school)

*If you're that embarrassed about it you should just explain to your friend that your dad says grace in front of them.*

(Christian student, independent faith school)

*The girl could say 'This is what we do and I hope this doesn't embarrass you'.*

(Protestant parent)

*Invite them when her mam and dad's not in.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*themselves in a certain way but do it the right way rather than do it the violent way.*  
(Catholic mother)

*Just don't eat with them, just go and eat elsewhere.*  
(C of E student, faith school)

However, one said:

*If you're going to be embarrassed about your family you don't bring your friends home, it's as simple as that.*  
(Catholic mother)

*It's unlikely that they're going to mix with people who are likely to be confrontational or break the rules or push the boundaries. Both of our children have always managed to find a group of people who are very similar.*  
(Christian parent)

Some parents were happy to negotiate:

*We have little chats and I say well what does embarrass you and I'll do my best not to do it.*  
(Christian mother)

A number of the young people made links between religious teaching that advocates non-violence and their attitude towards fighting back:

*I think religion's got quite a lot to do with it because the only reason he's picking on you is because of religion, so it could be like to do with race, racism and stuff.*  
(Catholic boy, faith school)

### **Violence and bullying**

The question regarding 'giving as good as you get' raised issues about the use of violence and possible bullying (Section 6 of the DVD). While there is a dearth of research into how racism and religious harassment affect young people and parenting (Phoenix and Husain, 2007), young people and parents recognised that bullying was common:

*That's natural: children will always like somebody to pick on.*  
(Protestant parent)

*If you love your neighbour you're not going to want to hurt them.*  
(Musim student, non-faith school)

Parents described how they would want their children to manage situations like this:

*I've taught my sons to defend themselves but not to fight so they'll walk away. They'll walk away from any vicious or violent situation but I've told them they shouldn't stand there and let somebody hurt them so they will defend, so they will push somebody away.*  
(Christian mother)

However, a number of the young people recognised that it is not always easy abiding by religious teachings on this matter:

*Somebody comes up to you and says I don't like you, you don't just go oh no, the Bible says not to fight, so I can't fight. If someone starts hitting you you've got to stand up, but if someone's calling you names or they don't [hit you], then don't [hit them].*  
(C of E student, faith school)

*Well it depends, because the church teachings are don't hurt people but your family's teachings could be different.*  
(Muslim student, non-faith school)

One of the parents also recognised this:

*They have to stick up for themselves ... or they'll carry on getting picked on ... stick up for*

*I got it completely wrong. I took the Christian line about showing God's love and it [the bullying] got really destructive.*

(Christian mother)

Another parent referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan, saying she encouraged her son 'not to walk by on the other side' when his younger brother was being bullied even though the school line was 'he just needs to learn not to get involved and I said well that's not good enough' (Christian mother).

# 7 Conclusions

This study is unique in this field in two important respects:

- The study methodology is informed and shaped by young people.
- The participants are from both more than one faith group and different generations.

These two points are important not only in addressing the shortcomings of previous studies but also in increasing the understanding about the diversity of parenting and religion in British society (Madge and Willmott, 2007; Phoenix and Husain, 2007). Even so, we have obtained the perceptions of a relatively small localised population. Therefore, although there may be commonalities with other similar British populations, the conclusions should not be generalised too far. What should be noted is the depth and breadth of the responses of both young people and parents concerning religion in family life and parenting, which go beyond the crude stereotypes of religiosity still found in wider society.

## What is a 'good' parent?

The findings from this study provide an insight into the influence of religious beliefs on parenting from the perspectives of both young people and parents. What is most striking is the level of agreement among both groups as to what makes for a 'good parent', irrespective of religion. Their views reflect the research and literature on core components of good parenting: warmth (love and nurture), structure (expectations, rules) and autonomy support (encouraging individuality). These core components are reflected in government guidance on assessing the needs of vulnerable children and children in need (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000; Department for Education and Skills, 2004). These can be loosely aligned with the five outcomes of *Every Child Matters* (Cm 5860, 2003) – Be healthy; Stay safe; Enjoy and achieve; Make a positive contribution; Achieve economic well-being – and the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (Department of Health, 2004), and with a children's rights perspective of provision, protection and participation (see Table 8).

Table 8: Descriptions of parenting capacity

Domain	Children's rights	Every Child Matters outcomes*	Dimensions of parenting capacity in CAF and Assessment Framework
Warmth (providing love, nurture and care)	Provision rights	Being healthy Achieving economic well-being	Basic care Emotional warmth Stability
Structure (setting boundaries, expectations, rules, protection)	Rights to protection	Staying safe	Ensuring safety Guidance and boundaries
Opportunities (guiding and supporting development and participation)	Participation rights	Enjoying and achieving Making a positive contribution	Stimulation

\* Most of the Every Child Matters outcomes relate to more than one domain of parenting; here they are listed in the domain with the most apparent link.

The findings indicate, despite the diversity of religious beliefs from the traditional to the liberal, that the participants believe that their faith provides them, or in the case of the young people their parents, with a value system that promotes these core aspects of parenting. These findings are in accord with findings from previous studies. For example, Mahoney (2005, p. 697), in a review of the literature, summarises findings on religious parenting duties as 'fostering respect and obedience, encouraging self discipline and self esteem, imparting pro-social values and prohibiting antisocial behaviour'. Both the young people and parents in this study recognised the responsibilities of good parenting. This seemed to transcend particular religious beliefs or faith stance. However, for the religious family, their beliefs, religious practices or faith community involvement may provide a strong framework within which to interpret their roles as parents. It could be argued that for such families, their faith might actually strengthen their parenting.

### **The parental struggle: control versus autonomy**

While the parents in this study were not the parents of the young people who were also included in the research, both the young people and parents were aware of the delicate dynamic of choice versus autonomy in respect of faith and family life: most parents appear to be conscious of the need to parent in ways that allow young people 'to choose the combination of identities that suits them, rather than be forced to adopt ascribed identities that do not add up to a coherent whole' (Afshar, 1994, p. 145). Parents generally recognised that adolescence is a period of transition. In contrast to parenting younger children, where roles and responsibilities tend to be well defined and understood, there was a certain lack of confidence among parents in relation to parenting adolescents. Moreover, there were tensions expressed by the parents between allowing young people to do what they want to do and what parents themselves believe is in the best interest of their child. In other words they are struggling, like most parents of adolescents, between providing rules and boundaries and

developing the young person as an individual who is able to make their own life choices. Although these parents hoped young people would want to adopt religious values as a stable foundation for their lives, they are aware, as the young people themselves commented, that ultimately this is a matter of choice on the part of the young people. The parents were aware of changes that may occur as the young people's values mature. They accepted that it can be hard allowing young people to make the journey of discovery when they themselves may have different views and believe the young people could be wrong. Parents hope to be able to support and guide their sons and daughters in negotiating a path that is based on the values of their faith.

Overall, the young people could see the value in being brought up exposed to religious beliefs and traditions, in terms of its impact on later life choices. However, ultimately it was personal choice that dominated their discussion: they wanted to be allowed to choose whether to follow their family's religious tradition or not. Even if they could see the value of the influence of religion on family life they did not want to be coerced into adopting it themselves. Young people hoped to be free to choose whether to reject the family's religious values or select their own religious beliefs, whether they were more or less conservative or liberal than their parents. The young people also believed that if they wish to do so, they should be able to demonstrate their beliefs, for example by observing religious dietary rules or wearing religious clothing, without hindrance or harassment.

Crucial to these discussions, about balancing direction and autonomy, was age. There was a lack of agreement about the appropriate age for young people to make certain choices. The young people and parents had a wide range of views about the age at which independent thinking might influence action, from pre-adolescence to late adolescence. Sometimes this was due to the different expectations of particular faith traditions and the ages at which confirmation, believer's baptism or personal responsibility for prayer was usual. Other factors influenced choices, such as personal safety. But parents generally recognised that age limits for activities, like going out with friends, had lowered since they were teenagers.

## Enabling young people to make their own choices

A common theme among parents was that they hoped their children's religious upbringing would provide them with a moral base for making sound informed choices which, by implication, would meet with parents' and the faith community's approval. However, both the parents and the young people were aware of the many influences that inform the choices made by young people with regard to relationships, fashion and lifestyle, including the secular, humanistic and materialistic values also encountered in wider society. The source of these included peers, media and popular culture. Attendance at a faith school and involvement in a faith community were considered ways in which young people would be subject to influences that promoted choices that were more likely to meet with the approval of parents. The only time this was not the case was when the faith influences may result in the young person moving away from their parents' interpretations of faith and practices.

The development of personal choice has been among the most prominent of all issues for young people in the early twenty-first century (Coleman, 2000). It could, of course, be seen as an indication of the ways in which growing up in, and living in, a Western culture influences life in religious families, whether it is compatible with the world view of a particular faith tradition or not. In the findings from this study there is evidence of ways in which young people are aware of the need to renegotiate responsibilities in religious families in respect of family expectations, their own views and the influences that exist beyond the family. They have an expectation of parental support for the choices they want to make, as well as expressing an understanding of personal responsibility for those choices. They recognised the need to negotiate the balance between personal/individual and collectivistic/family responsibilities.

## Effective communication between parents and young people

One American study of this area found that 'close and communicative relationships with

their parents and siblings' were important to religious young people (Fuligni *et al.*, 1999, p. 1041). Whether the parents and young people in this study were discussing religious observance, life choices or relationships with peers, they considered that differences between adolescents and their parents can best be resolved through effective communication. They thought it was important that from an early age parents created an environment that encouraged young people to be open and honest and that their views were listened to and respected. This would enable young people to have the confidence to discuss potentially contentious issues with parents. Both parents and young people also felt that if young people did not feel able to talk to their parents or other family members it was important that others were available to them, such as teachers or family friends.

Having these communication channels ensured that preconceived beliefs held by the young people about parents' attitudes towards aspects of adolescent life could be explored. For example, young people often assumed their parents would respond negatively to some of the issues and dilemmas encountered by the young people on the DVD used in this study, particularly in respect of choices about relationships and sexuality. While the parents in the study were not the actual parents of the young people, they were far more understanding and tolerant of the young person's dilemma than the young people had anticipated. If young people do not feel able to talk to their parents, when faced with situations that they believe will gain a negative response from their parents, they may remain isolated and unsupported, and could end up making ill-advised decisions.

## Parental influence

One of the most striking findings from this study has been the influence that parents have on their children throughout their lives. Time and again the parents in the study made reference to their own parents and what they would think of a particular situation. These discussions very much mirrored the discussions that the young people had. The young people often thought parents would respond negatively to situations, such as being

gay, when in actual fact this did not occur in the majority of cases. In the same way the parents thought their parents would disapprove of many of the situations they themselves would accept. Because of the limitations of this study we do not know if this is true. However, these findings suggest that young people's parenting in religious families is influenced not only by their parents but also by their grandparents.

Most parents accepted that they played a bridging role between their parents' generation and their children and most young people appeared to be aware that this was sometimes required to ease intergenerational communication. This bridging role appears to be related to the way in which the intergenerational transmission of religious values is changing (Afshar, 1994; Fuligni *et al.*, 1999).

## Implications

These young people and their parents represent a sample that holds a diverse range of religious beliefs and is in the main involved in religious practices. The analysis of the data highlights how important religion can be to these families. It is not something limited to praying and attending places of worship but is a way of life influencing family relationships, decision-making, life choices and parenting styles. For these young people and their parents, holding faith beliefs and being members of a faith community is a significant aspect of life in the early part of the twenty-first century.

This is not readily recognised by Government or professionals working with children and their families. For example, the national guidance used for assessing children in need and their families, in England, is the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and Their Families* (the Assessment Framework) (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000). This provides a 'conceptual map' presented as a triangle. The three sides of the triangle, or 'domains', are:

- the developmental needs of the child;
- parenting capacity;
- family and environmental factors.

The framework is underpinned by an ecological approach so that social workers and other practitioners completing an assessment consider the developmental needs of individual children and ways in which parents or carers meet these needs. Each 'domain' is further divided into 'dimensions', which indicate key areas that should be considered for that particular domain. Only one dimension of the Assessment Framework makes an explicit reference to religion: this is in terms of the developmental needs of the child and relates to the child's sense of identity. Yet, as demonstrated by these findings, religion can influence other dimensions such as family and social relationships, social presentation and education. There is no mention of religion in relation to parenting capacity. However, the findings from the study demonstrate that religion can affect these dimensions, including guidance and boundaries, stability and emotional warmth. It is only in relation to the family and environmental factors that religion is considered and this is only in terms of 'places of worship' where the term 'faith community' might be more appropriate. And, as found in this study, religion also influences additional dimensions: family history and functioning, wider family and family's social integration.

The Common Assessment Framework for children and young people (CAF) (HM Government, 2006) is a new multidisciplinary assessment tool designed to assist practitioners assess needs at an earlier stage than the Assessment Framework. It uses the same domains as the Assessment Framework and makes reference within 'developmental needs' to religion (alongside race, age, gender, sexuality and disability). This is included under the dimension 'identity, including self-esteem, self-image and social presentation'. The only suggestion in the CAF guidance as to how these might impact on meeting the needs of children is in relation to bullying or discriminatory behaviour, which may occur because of religion, race, etc. (HM Government, 2006, p. 28). The emphasis is on oppression rather than recognising that religion, or indeed the other factors, can be a source of empowerment and resilience and contribute to positive self-esteem and self-image, as was found in this study. Again, religion is not mentioned in relation to parenting capacity and places of worship are considered only in relation

to access and availability (HM Government, 2006, p. 32). No consideration is given to the ways in which a faith community could support the family. Thus practitioners using the CAF could be forgiven for taking a narrow focus when considering the influence of religion on family life as part of an assessment of children with additional needs.

Policy-makers and professionals working with children and families cannot afford to be complacent about the influence of religion on family life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Neither can they presume that religion only has negative influences on family life, as the media and some politicians would have us believe in relation to Islamic beliefs. For many Hindus and Christians, too, religion has a major influence on family life. In order to appreciate this, it is crucial that if people state they have a religious belief, when filling in the inevitable forms required to access services, professionals should, at the very least, enquire 'What does your faith mean to you?', 'How does it influence your life?' and, in the case of family members, 'How do your beliefs influence your family life?'

The findings of this study also have implications for faith leaders, particularly the need to be aware of the competing influences on young people. It is also important that they recognise the struggles of parents and young people marrying their religious beliefs with the views of wider society. However, one of the most powerful messages for members of faith communities, from this study, is in relation to the needs of disabled children and their parents and siblings. The parents who had disabled children felt that their faith community did not recognise the disabled young person in the same way as they would any other member of the congregation. There is a need for faith communities to consider how they can become more welcoming and supportive towards young disabled people and their families.

Most young people and parents recognised that life in the faith community, particularly its worship but even age-related education groups, often had little appeal to young people. Sometimes quite young children could be reluctant to take part in such activities which they found boring, irrelevant or patronising. Faith communities themselves lose out on the energy and enthusiasm characteristic of the involvement of young people

and faith leaders therefore need to learn how to be more inclusive of their participation. Parents wanted more support from their faith communities for the task of parenting adolescents. There is a need to support authoritative parents, building on what is already being done, according to the literature on parenting adolescents. This needs to be completed with the full participation of young people who demonstrate a willingness and understanding of these issues in relation to their lives. It should include a more balanced understanding of the role of faith-related education and faith schools from the perspective of young people and parental choice.

## Future research

While taking a step forward in terms of research about religion and family life, this study also highlights many areas for future research.

The findings from this study supported those of Madge and Willmott (2007): what young people think is not necessarily what adults think they think. Moreover, the findings indicate that parents' perceptions of young people are not necessarily as negative or judgemental as the young people thought. All of this points to the ongoing need for the full participation of young people in future research into religion and family life. The way in which the participation of young people informed and shaped this study was effective from both the participants' and researchers' perspectives and the lessons learnt can be usefully applied to inform future studies with young people.

Although this study included participants from more than one faith group, based on its findings, more could be achieved by widening participation to include members of other faith groups not so far represented and to explore the perceptions of those who believe but do not belong to a faith community. While the conclusions point to common themes of parenting style that went beyond faith affiliation, it is still important to explore these themes with participants from other faith groups and possibly compare and contrast them to those who describe themselves as humanist, atheist or agnostic. Furthermore, this study has concentrated on the perceptions of a multi-faith urban population. Research with different ethnic groups and in other social contexts, including

rural populations, would allow a fuller picture of the influence of religion on family life in the UK. There is also significant scope for an international comparative study to explore ways in which various national socio-economic, political and cultural factors influence religion and parenting.

The focus of this study has been the influence of religion on parenting young adolescents. Bearing in mind the findings related to the development of a religious identity, further research to inform our understanding of the development of this identity and the influences at various stages of identity formation would be of considerable value in terms of identifying the needs of these young people. This study has explored perceptions of religion and family life rather than direct experiences. While perceptions may be based on experiences, these were not investigated directly. Research that focuses on the actual experiences of young people and parents would be an important subsequent step.

The finding from this study in relation to the intergenerational influences on parenting deserves further attention. For example, the views of the

parents of the parents (grandparents) need to be explored to inform our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, comments made by the participants indicated that global mobility and the reasons for this have an impact on transmission (for example, moving from a country where the religion is the main faith to one where it is a minority faith; settling in a new country as a result of religious persecution). These factors may have a considerable influence on parenting and the transmission of religious beliefs and practices.

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the perceptions of young people and parents living in a multicultural city in the north of England in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While it is impossible to make generalisations about the influence of religious beliefs and practices on parenting from this particular sample, we do conclude, in the words of a young person who participated in this study, that 'Religious parents just want what's best for their kids'.

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# Appendix 1

## Questions for Stage One discussion groups

- 1 Have you seen any TV programmes which feature stories about religion and family life?
- 2 What does being religious mean?
- 3 What is a religious family?
- 4 What is a faith school?
- 5 Why do you think your parents/family chose this school?
- 6 What is a good parent?
- 7 What is a religious parent?
- 8 What is a bad parent?

# Appendix 2

## Full script of the DVD for Stages Two and Three

### Section 1. Religious identity

I want to learn more about God but no one in my family is interested in religion

I feel pressured to follow God by my parents but I'm not sure if I want to

Although my parents believe in God they think my views are too extreme

[pause]

I think it's really important to stand up for what you believe

My parents say our religious beliefs and practices are very important but I don't see what relevance they are to the rest of my life

### Section 2. Love and discipline

My parents say discipline should be firm but fair

My parents are very loving but also very strict

Whatever my dad says goes in my family

I am expected to change all my plans if my parents want me to be involved in a religious activity

[pause]

We talk about love in my family far more than my friends would talk about it with their parents

I get on really well with my parents

### Section 3. Family responsibilities

My parents think I should do something that is of value to the community

I want to get a job that will earn me a lot of money but my parents say earning a lot of money is not a priority

I want to become a nun

I want to become a religious scholar

[pause]

I don't want to go to church but my parents make

me because they say it's good for me

I don't want to go to mosque but my parents make me because they say it's good for me

My sister has cerebral palsy. My parents think God let this happen for a reason

### Section 4. Family values

My parents say I should be careful about my music choice. They don't want me to be influenced by worldly things

Sometimes I want to talk about the important things in life but I just get ignored

[pause]

My parents don't like my clothes. They think they give the wrong impression

I'm proud of my faith and want to wear the hijab but my parents worry about the consequences

My parents say my body is a temple and I should respect it

### Section 5. Sexual relationships

I want to save having sex for marriage

I'm going out with a girl from another faith; I don't know how my parents will respond

[pause]

We don't talk about sex in our house

I think I might be gay; I'm not sure how my parents will respond [a girl]

I think I might be gay; I'm not sure how to tell my parents [a boy]

### Section 6: Friendships

What if you are Christian and have non-Christian friends. Should you make new friends?

I get embarrassed inviting friends home for tea as my dad always wants to make a blessing at the start of the meal

[pause]

My friends tell me that religion is stupid. My parents tell me I should challenge them

If someone's picking on you, you have to give as good as you get

# Appendix 3

## Post focus group questionnaire for Stage Two

1 How old are you? .....

2 What is the first part of your postcode? .....

3 Are you? (*Please tick the box*)

Female

Male

4 Please tick the box to indicate what religion you are, if any:

Catholic

Church of England

Other Christian

Muslim

Hindu

Sikh

Jewish

No religion

Other religion (*please write here*) .....

Read the following statements and tick the boxes that apply to you.

5 I believe in God

Definitely

Not sure

No

6 I go to worship

Every day

Every week

Every month

On special occasions

Never

7 I pray

- Every day
- At least once a week
- At least once a month
- Never

8 I would describe myself as religious

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

9 I would describe my family as religious

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

# Appendix 4

## Post focus group questionnaire for Stage Three

1 Are you? *(Please tick the box)*

- Female
- Male

2 How many children do you have?                      Boys    .....                      Girls    .....

3 How old are they? .....

4 What is the first part of your postcode? .....

5 How would you describe the ethnic group to which you belong (e.g. White British)?

.....

6 If you consider you belong to a religion, please indicate which by ticking the box:

- Catholic
- Church of England
- Other Christian
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Sikh
- Jewish
- No religion

Other religion *(please write here)* .....

Please read the following statements and tick the boxes that apply to you.

7 I believe in God

- Definitely
- Not sure
- No

8 I go to worship

- Every day
- Every week
- Every month
- On special occasions
- Never

9 I pray

- Every day
- At least once a week
- At least once a month
- Never

10 I would describe myself as religious

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

11 I would describe my family as religious

- Yes
- Not sure
- No

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