

# Religion, beliefs and parenting practices

Findings  
Informing change

November 2008

Religion has the potential to influence many aspects of parenting. For this project, researchers asked young people and parents in Bradford, predominantly from Christian and Muslim backgrounds, how their religious beliefs and practices affected family life.

## Key points

- The majority of young people and parents in the study felt religion was more than a set of behaviours and would affect family life.
- Most parents, and some young people, emphasised a religious way of life is transmitted between generations and grandparents maintain a significant influence. Parents saw passing on their faith as an important part of parenting.
- Parents saw how encouraging a religious identity at home conflicted with other pressures on their children, including negative portrayals of religion in the media.
- Most young people thought they should not be forced to attend public worship. Some parents acknowledged children might be spiritual without attending formal worship. Parents and young people accepted religion could be important to those who believed without belonging to a faith community.
- Parents generally equated 'good' parenting with being warm and loving, while setting boundaries and standards for their children. This conforms to a model of 'authoritative' parenting thought to promote healthy development and wellbeing. A few young people described religious parenting that was more controlling and 'authoritarian'.
- Parents saw two-way communication with children as crucial. There were some subjects young people, and a few parents, found difficult to discuss, including sexual relationships.
- Although some young people and parents claimed religious authority for strict views on issues such as sex outside marriage and homosexuality, parents were more tolerant than young people anticipated.
- Parents acknowledged that young people should choose for themselves whether to adopt religious values in adult life, but views differed about the age at which they could make informed choices.
- Parents with disabled children had mixed views on the support received from their faith communities. Some said they had not received adequate help or been welcome with their child at places of worship.

## The research

By a multidisciplinary team from the Universities of Sheffield and Warwick in partnership with Bradford Local Safeguarding Children Board.

## Background

Britain is a multi-faith society whose population has become more culturally and religiously diverse in recent years. Some existing research studies have associated religious observance among parents with their children's positive social development. However, terrorist attacks, the rise of 'Islamophobia' and some high-profile child abuse cases within faith communities have resulted in negative publicity concerning the influences of religion on families.

This study considered the role of religious faith and religious practices on the parenting of adolescents, which has been a neglected area of research. It was based on focus group discussions in schools with young people aged 13 to 15 from mainly Muslim and Christian (Catholic and Protestant) backgrounds in the City of Bradford, and on separate focus groups with (unrelated) parents from mainly Muslim, Hindu or Christian backgrounds. Two-thirds of the young people who took part were attending faith-based secondary schools. The research provides qualitative insights into the views of young people and parents from faith backgrounds, but it is not possible to generalise from the sample about the views of those from particular faith traditions.

### Religious traditions, beliefs and practices

**"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 school student)**

'Religion' and 'being religious' were interpreted in different ways by the study participants, from simply holding a belief to belonging to a faith community and engaging in religious activities. For most, however, it meant putting religious beliefs into practice through the way they conducted their lives. It was recognised that parents have a significant part to play in shaping the faith identity of children and engaging them in religious activities. Most parents saw religion as a way of life that was transmitted between generations. They considered it part of their parenting responsibility to pass on their faith.

Although young people understood that formal worship could be an important shared activity in religious families and a duty for some of their parents, most thought they should not be forced to attend. Parents recognised that it could be disappointing when young people found religious activities unappealing, but acknowledged that as children grew up they had to make their own choices about their beliefs. However, there were differing views about the age at which young people could make informed choices, including whether to engage in religious activities.

### Parenting adolescents in religious families

**"I suppose when parents are strict they won't let you do certain things...but when you make a mistake, or you've done something wrong, they'll always be behind you to give you the love that you need..." (Protestant student at an independent Christian school)**

Parents and young people in the study were in conspicuous agreement about 'good' parenting, describing it in terms of being warm and affectionate, but also setting boundaries and standards for children. This conformed closely to the model of 'authoritative' parenting that research in Europe and America suggests is likely to promote children's healthy development and wellbeing. Many expressed a strong conviction that a family was a team led by parents, although there were mixed views regarding family 'headship' and the appropriate roles of fathers and mothers. A few young people in the study described a style of parenting that was more controlling and 'authoritarian'. However, many parents said they generally found it difficult to determine the appropriate amount of structure and autonomy to give young people in their teenage years.

Parents saw open, two-way communication and respect for young people's values and beliefs as crucial to effective parenting. However, they acknowledged that communication could be difficult when discussing some topics, including sexual relationships and disability. The reasons most often given by young people for a lack of discussion about sex were embarrassment and discomfort. Some parents also accepted that sex was an awkward topic, although they generally felt that young people were more awkward talking about it than they were.

A significant number of the young people and parents agreed that parents could influence the choices children made as teenagers, including career selection. Participants in the parents' focus groups frequently spoke of the influence their own parents continue to exert on them in adult life. They continually referred to ways in which their parents' religious beliefs had influenced their own approach to parenting and life choices.

## Parenting disabled children

**“You have trials in your life, so having a child with autism is just something I’ve been given.”**  
(Christian mother from a mixed faith group)

The research also invited parents and young people to discuss perceptions of religion, family life and disability. Parents of disabled children who took part in the study tended to hold positive views of their parenting role and believed that their religious faith had contributed to this. A number of young people suggested that caring for a disabled child might make a religious family stronger. However, some also saw how the experience of growing up with a disabled sister or brother might turn some young people away from religion. Parents with experience of raising disabled children felt in principle that faith communities should be a positive asset for families. However, they expressed mixed views about whether sufficient support was provided in practice. Not all parents felt able to take their disabled child to their place of worship and others had felt their faith communities were too judgmental and intolerant of the way their children behaved.

## Religion and life for adolescents

**“You want to make sure you give them the right direction.”** (Muslim father)

Parents in the research saw the transmission of religious values as a way of providing direction for their children and creating a strong base on which they could build the rest of their lives. Most young people said they appreciated and respected their parents' values, even though they might eventually choose to hold different beliefs. They expected to make their own career choices, but recognised that parents had a contribution to make in influencing or advising them. Some also said there were career choices of which their parents would disapprove, especially if they were thought to involve religious taboos such as gambling, alcohol or indecent behaviour. In general, the idea of pursuing a religious vocation did not appear to attract the young participants, although some thought it would please their parents.

Parents and young people alike recognised pressures from peers, the media and mainstream adolescent culture for young people to make choices that did not necessarily fit with their family's religious beliefs and practices. This was evident in the discussions about sex before marriage and sexual orientation. Although some young people and parents from different faith groups claimed religious authority for strict views on issues such as sex outside marriage and homosexuality, parents often seemed more measured and tolerant about these issues than young people anticipated. More generally, young people and parents considered it was crucial that parents, from early childhood, begin to provide young people with the skills to resist external pressures on their religious way of life and choices.

## Implications for policy and practice

The study underlined how important faith can be to families holding a range of religious beliefs. Religion was a way of life for the parents and young people who took part, influencing family relationships, decision making, life choices and styles of parenting. The research findings suggested that policy makers could not afford to be complacent about the influence of religion on family life. Nor could they presume that religion only has negative influences as some recent statements by politicians and media commentators have implied.

Parenting and family support practitioners would also be unwise to assume that religion is unimportant to a parent, child or young person just because they are not active within a faith community; or that it does not exert a significant influence on their values and overall approach to family life. The research showed that religion could be as important to those who just 'believed' as it was to those who both 'believed and belong'.

National instruments currently used by social workers, health workers, teachers and other professionals when assessing families and parenting, such as the *Common Assessment Framework* and the *Framework for Assessing Children in Need and their Families* take little account of the ways that religion can influence different dimensions of parenting capacity. Yet the research findings indicate that those influences are very relevant, and would need to be clearly understood before the needs of children and parents in religious families could be properly recognised and met. This suggests that more attention should be given in national and local guidance to the influence of religious beliefs and practices on parenting. When parents state they have a religious belief, professionals should at the very least be asking '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?'

## Implications for faith communities

The findings hold implications for faith leaders, particularly with regard to competing influences on young people from within and outside their families. It appears especially important that they recognise the struggles of parents and young people trying to match their religious beliefs and values with those of wider society.

Most young people and quite a few parents in the study recognised that life in the faith community, particularly formal, public worship, often had little appeal to young people. Faith communities might, therefore, need to be more inclusive and find better ways to harness young people's energy and enthusiasm in order to avoid losing their appeal to the next generation. Parents also wanted more support from their faith communities with the task of parenting adolescents. This would need to be provided with the full participation of young people who, in this study, demonstrated a balanced understanding of their parents' feelings and concerns. Although a relatively small number of parents in the research had disabled children, they emerged as a group that needed particular support from their faith communities of a kind that was not always forthcoming.

## About the project

The project was carried out in Bradford among 13- to 17-year-olds from six faith and three LEA schools and parents from ten community and faith groups. 40 young people initially identified potential ways in which religion affected parenting. These were collated into a DVD of 'talking heads'. A further 74 young people mainly Muslims and Christians aged 13-15 years commented on the scenarios in school based focus group discussions. In the final stage 77 parents commented on the scenarios in faith focus groups. These parents were primarily Muslims or Christians, with a minority of Hindus, and a few who did not claim affiliation to a particular faith group. Nearly all parents and the vast majority of young people in the study expressed a belief in God.

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## For more information

The full report, **Religion, beliefs and parenting practices: a descriptive study** by Jan Horwath, Janet Lees, Peter Sidebotham, John Higgins and Atif Imtiaz, is available at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk) as part of the Parenting series.

For further information about the project, please contact:

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