

RESEARCH You May Have Missed

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
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RESEARCH YOU MAY HAVE MISSED . . . provides brief summaries of recent research relevant to youth development practice. It is designed to help youth development professionals keep up-to-date with contemporary research.

Editor's Note: These reviews focus on spiritual growth and character. These are two of the indicators of thriving, as described in the Step-it-up-2-Thrive theory of change. We will review research on other indicators of thriving in subsequent issues of *RYMHM*.

- Benson, P.L. (2004).
Emerging themes in research on adolescent spiritual and religious development.
Applied Developmental Science, 8(1), 47-50.

This essay which opens a special issue of *Applied Developmental Science* discusses the recent and emerging research in the area of spiritual development. Benson comments that three primary themes are emerging: developmental, ecological, and strength-based perspectives in spiritual development research. Ecological research emphasizes the importance of the context in which spiritual development is taking place, although these articles have primarily examined the impacts of home and school; relatively little research has taken place that includes information specific to the congregation of which a young person may be part. Religious or spiritual development has been demonstrated to be associated with positive youth development. Some possible reasons for this association include personal identity, thriving, and the development of social capital. There are several areas within the field

of spiritual development which remain less explored and provide possibilities for future research. These include the definitions and measures of spiritual or religious development, and the relationship between religion and spirituality, as well as the dimensions of spirituality that may occur within and outside of religious traditions. Most existing research has also been conducted on the most common religious group in the United States, i.e., Christians; research is limited on the impact for youth of participation in other forms of spirituality and other religions. The growth of religion and spirituality throughout adolescence, and the participation among adolescents in their own spiritual development, are also relatively under-studied. Spiritual development is an important component of youth and human development which needs further research and exploration. **-KH**

- Benson, P.L., Roehlkepartain, E.C., & Rude, S.P. (2003).
Spiritual development in childhood and adolescence: Toward a field of inquiry.
Applied Developmental Science, 7(3), 205-213.

The article invites scholars to explore important issues in spiritual development during childhood and adolescence by arguing that the research will strengthen the understanding of human development in general. Spiritual development encompasses religious development, which is formed by an individual's ecological influences. Although it is the least understood of human capacities, there have been some recent

attempts to understand the concept across the disciplines in social sciences and psychology. The authors define spiritual development as "the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred" (p. 205). The authors feel that their working definition does not include the multiple domains that spirituality has. They review the research

on the relationship between religion and spirituality and its link to young people's health and development. The authors conclude that, because of its multiple facets and

domains, our understanding of spirituality still remains incomplete. **-APS**

- Crawford, E., Wright, M.O., & Masten, A. (2006).

Resilience and spirituality in youth.

In E.C. Roehlkepartain, P.E. King, L. Wagener, & P. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 355-370). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The authors review the literature on religiosity and spiritual development as it may influence resiliency. Spirituality and religion may foster resilience through a number of fundamental human adaptive systems including i) attachment relationships, including relationships with the divine, marital relationships and family cohesion, prosocial peers and mentors, ii) social support, such as providing a sense of belonging, rituals, prayers, counseling, support groups, and sanctuary, iii) guidelines for conduct and moral values, such as fostering a sense of integrity, compassion, forgiveness, empathy, altruism and kindness or love, iv) personal growth, development or transformation,

such as encouraging self-regulation, prayer and meditation, music, providing meaning and philosophy of life, reframing trauma, and a sense of acceptance. Through these various adaptive mechanisms, young people may be able to make sense of their adversity or trauma. The authors caution that spirituality and religion can also have negative influences in the lives of youth. Overall, the authors suggest that there are many gaps in the literature, especially with respect to the risk and vulnerability of the protective influence of religious faith, practices or organizations on the lives of children and young people, and how these relate to developmental or contextual change. **-AS**

- Glanville, J.L., Sikkink, D., & Hernandez, E.I. (2008).

Religious involvement and educational outcomes: The role of social capital and extracurricular participation.

Sociological Quarterly, 49(1), 105-137.

About half of adolescents participate in a religious organization. Previous research on adolescents has found religious participation to be related to psychological well-being, healthy behaviors, academic success, and a reduction in delinquency and other risk behaviors; these effects appear to be stronger among lower socioeconomic status youth. This research used the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine the relationships among religious participation, social capital, and academic outcomes. The authors theorized that participation in a religious organization may influence friendships as well as relationships with adults (such as parents, parents' friends, or other adults in the congregation), establishing social capital, and that this social capital may impact educational outcomes. Developing peer networks within a religious community may help reinforce prosocial values. In addition, they theorized that religious participation that leads to extracurricular participation in activities such

as youth groups may affect educational outcomes, since extracurricular participation is associated with academic success. The authors used structural equation modeling with the friendship network data from the study to examine the relationships among these variables. Results confirmed the initial hypotheses. Religious involvement increased young people's reports of interactions with friends' parents and other adults. In addition, youth who participated in a religious group were more likely to be located in a social network that had higher grade point averages, and religious youth had friends who reported skipping school less often. The social capital measures, as hypothesized, predicted educational outcomes including dropout, school attachment and grades. These results provide support and to some degree explanation for the relationship between religion and educational outcomes, and support the idea that educational outcomes are impacted by external factors in addition to individual ones. **-KH**

- Harris, S.K., Sherritt, L.R., Holder, D.W., Kulig, J., Shrier, L.A., & Knight, J.R. (2008). **Reliability and validity of the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality among adolescents.** *Journal of Religious Health*, 47, 438-457.

In this study the authors explore the validity of using the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS) to reliably measure a range of religiousness and spirituality dimensions with adolescents. The BMMRS was developed for use in health research for adults. Interest in the effects of religious involvement and spirituality (R/S) on adolescent health has grown in recent years, partly as a result of the focus on factors that promote youth well-being and resilience. The research on adolescent R/S and its effects on health, however, is limited. The purpose of the current study was to measure the internal consistency reliability and test-retest reliability of the BMMRS constructs when used among adolescents. Additionally, the authors examined the association between the BMMRS measures and depressive symptoms, a health indicator which has been found to have a negative association with some R/S measures. The sample included 305 adolescents, aged 12-18, who were asked to complete the BMMRS and the Beck Depression Inventory-II. Of the 305 who completed the first questionnaire, 93 returned one week later, for the retest. One of the domains of the BMMRS is

the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) which separates the constructs religiousness and spirituality. Results indicated that 80% of the respondents reported a religious affiliation. About half (52%) of respondents rated themselves as being not at all or only slightly religious or spiritual, while 24% reported being “moderately” or “very” religious and spiritual. The measures showed adequate internal consistency and moderate one-week retest stability; more work is needed to explore the relationship of the BMMRS measures with different aspects of adolescent depression. The authors believe the study adds to the small body of research that is utilizing the BMMRS among adolescents, and that their findings suggest that most of the measures are reliable and valid for use among adolescents. A strength of the study is the ethnically diverse sample; however, a limitation to the study includes the possibility of not being able to generalize the findings to youth in other parts of the country, as the sample was drawn from large, urban clinic populations in one city in the Northeast. The study provides a view of the importance religiousness and spirituality can have in the lives of adolescents. **-RC**

- Hart, T. (2006). **Spiritual experiences and capacities of children and youth.**

In E.C. Roehlkepartain, P.E. King, L. Wagener & P. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 163-177). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

In this article, the author provides qualitative and descriptive evidence that children have spiritual capacities and experiences that shape their lives in enduring ways. The author defines spiritual moments as direct, personal experiences that may have the effect of expanding our understanding of who we are and what our place is in the universe. The article shares narrative quotes from the author's own qualitative study of more than 150 individuals and families over a span of five years, as well as from autobiographical documents of historical figures. In addition, data from a survey of 450 undergraduate students (recalling childhood spiritual experiences) supplements the narrative information to assess the frequency and variety of these occurrences. The idea was to categorize the types of spiritual experiences as well as understand its prevalence in the general population so as to verify whether it occurs to

a small group of individuals – such as in the case of child prodigies, or whether it occurs over a larger group, in which case it would point to a more widespread occurrence. Four themes were identified related to childrens' spiritual experiences: wonder, wondering, wisdom, and between you and me. Each of the themes showed a widespread prevalence before the age of 18 and a minority before the age of 6. The author provides rich quotes that illustrate the meaning of each category and overall provides a holistic picture of how children experience spirituality and may express it in unique and individualistic ways. Based on these findings, the author suggests that childrens' spiritual capacities have been overlooked or underestimated based on a more narrow developmental science notion of childrens' cognitive stages. In fact, childrens' unique developmental situation may afford them certain spiritual experiences more

easily than for adults (such as a sense of wonder or novelty about the world, or empathy for animals and other beings). The author cautions us from thinking in adult-centric ways about childrens' spiritual capacities

and encourages educators to allow children to share their inherent spirituality and learn from them rather than imposing adult theologies and notions of what constitutes spiritual growth on to them. -*AS*

- Lerner, R.M., Alberts, A.E., Anderson, P.M., & Dowling, E.M. (2006).

On making humans human: Spirituality and the promotion of positive youth development.

In E.C. Roehlkepartain, P.E. King, L. Wagener, & P. Benson (Eds.), *The handbook of spiritual development in childhood and adolescence* (pp. 60-72). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The authors review the concepts of developmental systems theory and notions of thriving and how these may be related to spirituality and religiosity in childhood and adolescence. The authors describe a study which tested three models of spirituality, religiosity and thriving, using data from the Search Institute. In the first model, it was hypothesized that spirituality would be related to thriving, in addition to being mediated by religiosity. In addition, spirituality and religiosity would be related to each other. The second model proposed the relation between spirituality and thriving would be

fully explained by religiosity as a mediating variable. The third model proposed that spirituality and religiosity would both be independently related to thriving. The data seems to support the first model the best – i.e., both spirituality and religiosity are related to thriving, and religiosity mediates spirituality. Based on these results, the authors suggest that spiritual development is a variable of independent interest, in addition to religious development, and both these variables' relationship to thriving needs to be explored. -*AS*

- Park, N. (2004).

Character strengths and positive youth development.

Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 591, 40-54.

This article discusses the relationship between moral development and positive youth development. Good character represents a cluster of traits that may in some cases vary across cultures. Moral virtues include characteristics such as wisdom, courage, justice, humanity, and transcendence. Character strengths include psychological processes that help to define the virtues, such as kindness, curiosity, optimism, love of learning, social responsibility, modesty, fairness, hope for the future, and self-control. These characteristics have been demonstrated to be associated with mental health and life satisfaction, and are protective against the negative effects of traumatic events. Most youth development programs in one survey included character development as a primary goal. Modeling of prosocial

behaviors such as demonstrating empathy by youth development program workers is one way youth development programs can help to build character strengths. Close relationships with caring adults, and role models, affect character development. Park and her colleagues have developed a values classification inventory to assess 24 character strengths among youth. Further research is needed to determine the relationships between character strengths and their ability to prevent negative outcomes and poor mental health, as well as more about the specific process needed to build and develop character strengths. In addition, more information is needed about the how character strengths act to result in positive behaviors, such as avoiding substance abuse. -*KH*

- Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2008).

The cultivation of character strengths.

In M. Ferrari and G. Potworowski (Eds.), *Teaching for wisdom: Cross-cultural perspectives on fostering wisdom* (pp. 59-77). Springer Science+Business Media BV: Netherlands.

In this chapter, the authors present what they view as the implicit components of wisdom. Wisdom, they believe, are instances of good character, and the focus

of the chapter is to describe possible interventions that might encourage the cultivation of character strengths, particularly those that comprise wisdom.

Good character is comprised of a family of positive dispositions; character strengths are those various components which comprise positive dispositions. Earlier work by these authors has focused on strengths of character, positive traits like curiosity, kindness, hope and leadership. From the perspective of positive psychology, the authors identified strengths of character and ways of measuring them. These are described in The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths, which proposes 24 strengths of character, grouped under six core virtues. The core virtues include wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. (The character

strengths for each of these virtues are listed and defined in the chapter.) The authors consider perspective – being able to offer wise counsel to others - as most closely resembling the current operationalized definition of wisdom. A survey of over 12,000 adults found that perspective is very closely related to social intelligence, hope, open-mindedness, bravery, zest, authenticity, curiosity, leadership, gratitude, and love, suggesting that wisdom reflects both cognitive and emotional elements. The authors stress that good character matters; it is the foundation of wisdom and finding ways to teach the components of character to children and youth is a valuable endeavor for society. **-RC**

- Steen, T.A., Kachorek, L.V., & Peterson, C. (2003). **Character strengths among youth.** *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32(1), 5-16.

The goal of this study was to learn how youth define character strengths as identified in the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and to gain insight into how to assess a person's strengths. The authors developed the character strengths classification for the purpose of identifying characteristics and activities that make up the psychological good life; in combining positive psychology with youth development, the authors believe that positive behavior and strengths co-occur and can have desirable effects on youths' lives such as school achievement, vocational aspirations, community involvement and good interpersonal relations. Focus groups were conducted with 459 students, from five different high schools, in which students were asked about character and character strengths. Students were found to be generally open and comfortable voicing their opinions. In general, students conceptualized the strengths as existing along a continuum. Students said that life experience and the lessons learned from it, was the most frequent source of character, but did not agree that more life experience necessarily meant better character. They did not believe that wisdom necessarily came with age; and that parents could shape character development for better or worse. Students recognized that the development of certain strengths depended on the existence of others. As an example, curiosity was seen as a prerequisite for love of learning. Some character strengths were more highly valued than others.

Leadership, practical intelligence, social intelligence, love of learning, wisdom, spirituality, and the capacity to love and be loved were viewed positively, where caution and prudence were not. Based on the youth responses, the authors suggest criteria to keep in mind when teaching youth about character: a) the belief that life experience is key to building character suggests that experiential, after-school programs would be effective for adolescents. The programming can be flexible, which fits with a teen's life, and opportunities for real life experiences may give youth food for thought when discussing fairness or kindness or other strengths; b) students view strengths as interdependent so character education must present complex messages to students; c) students could name very few contemporary role models, leading the authors to suggest that students would benefit from being exposed to individuals from their communities who exemplify good character; and d) peer pressure can be a positive force when students discuss character traits. Educators and other adults can learn to use peer influence to foster a positive attitude toward character strengths. The authors suggest self-report questionnaires and responses to short vignettes as means for assessing character strengths and development. Character education should provide youth with the opportunity to develop strengths in a manner that fosters purpose in their lives. **-RC**

- Yust, K.M., Johnson, A.N., Sasso, S.E., & Roehlkepartain, E.C. (2006).

Traditional wisdom: Creating space for religious reflection on child and adolescent spirituality.

In K.M. Yust, A.N. Johnson, S.E. Sasso, & E.C. Roehlkepartain (Eds.), *Nurturing child and adolescent spirituality: Perspectives from the world's religious traditions* (pp. 1-14). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

This introductory chapter discusses the current research on childhood and adolescent religious spirituality through an international, interfaith discussion among scholars and practitioners from multiple disciplines. Over the last decade spiritual awareness has risen; however, the focus has primarily been on adult spirituality and scholars have given little attention to the spiritual lives of children and adolescents. Most

of the scholars found that religious and theological assumptions of a family are most powerful in shaping the attitude and practices of children and youth. They further discuss the difficulty of defining spirituality and negotiating similarities and differences between various perspectives, and offer evidence that much research is needed to extend the conversation in this field.

-APS

Book Reviews . . .

on topics relevant to youth development will be periodically published. We encourage submissions for future editions. Reviews may be sent to Ramona Carlos (rmcarlos@ucdavis.edu).

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