

**The Importance of Spiritual Activities for Children and Teens: A Barna Report
Summarized and posted with observations, by Bob Young
December 2009**

“What, if any, is the connection between childhood faith and adult religious commitment?” A recent Barna study (www.barna.org) sought to answer that question. Obviously, parents and religious leaders are interested in knowing if the investment of time, money, and effort in the spiritual growth of children and youth pays off. The survey questions asked adults to think about their childhood and adolescence and to describe the frequency of involvement in Sunday school or religious training. Then researchers compared the reported early-life experiences with the respondents’ reported current levels of faith activity and faith continuity. The primary survey limitation is that it asks about and evaluates the results of activities that occurred some years ago, and does not necessarily have application to today’s youth ministry programs and activities. Given the significant changes in our culture with increased non-Christian influences on today’s youth, the solutions of the past may not be sufficient in today’s world. A second limitation is that the past experiences are self-reported.

An Overwhelming Majority Recall Spiritual Activities during Youth or Adolescence

One of the remarkable facts about the current U.S. adult population is the number of people who recall spiritual training as children and teenagers. More than eight out of every 10 adults remembers consistently attending Sunday school or other religious training before the age of 12. Those who recall being involved typically say they were engaged every week. In fact, seven out of 10 adults (69%) said they attended some religious activity weekly.

Respondents recall their church involvement as teenagers as less frequent than their participation as children. About seven out of 10 recall going to Sunday school or other religious programs for teens at least once a month; half (50%) indicated they had gone to such teen programs at least once a week, on average, when growing up.

Impact on the Adult Faith Journeys

How do childhood and teen engagement connect to adult spirituality? The research examined four elements of adult religious experience: attending church, having an active faith (defined as reading the Bible, praying, and attending church in the last week), being unchurched, and switching from childhood faith.

Concerning the first two elements those who attended Sunday school or other religious programs as children or as teens were much more likely than those without such experiences to attend church and to have an active faith as adults. The last two elements—being unchurched and changing from childhood faith—provide measures of disassociation. These also correlated (negatively) with spiritual activity before age 18. The highest proportion of unchurched adults was found among those who had never attended as children or teenagers. Spiritual activity as a child or teen lowered the probability of church inattendance as an adult.

A person’s likelihood to switch faith views also correlated to their early-life spiritual experiences. The survey asked if people had the same faith perspectives today as when they were a child or if they had ever significantly changed their faith views. The study indicates that individuals who recalled frequent religious attendance as a child were less likely to have changed central faith views than were those who attended less often.

Significance of the Results

David Kinnaman, president of Barna Group, observed that correlation does not imply causation. The research does not *prove* that spiritual activity as a young person *causes* spiritual engagement as an adult. In fact, the research confirms that many who are active early in life disengage from their faith as they get older. Kinnaman continued, “...the study shows that most American adults recall frequent faith activity when they were growing up. Moreover, it provides clarity that the odds of one sticking with faith over a lifetime are enhanced in a positive direction by spiritual activity under the age of 18. And it raises the intriguing possibility that being involved at least a few times a month is correlated with nearly the same sticking power as weekly involvement – especially among teenagers.”

AMERICAN FAITH ENGAGEMENT AS CHILDREN					
ATTENDED CHILDREN’S RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS WHILE UNDER AGE 12	CURRENT ENGAGEMENT AS ADULTS				
frequency of attending during childhood years	attended church in the past week	active faith*	unchurched**	changed from childhood faith***	sample size
every week	50%	32%	26%	22%	689
2-3 times / month	46%	28%	36%	18%	128
less often	35%	25%	36%	47%	91
never	26%	17%	61%	24%	78

AMERICAN FAITH ENGAGEMENT AS TEENAGERS					
ATTENDED RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS AS A TEENAGER	CURRENT ENGAGEMENT AS ADULTS				
frequency of attending during teen years	attended church in the past week	active faith*	unchurched**	changed from childhood faith***	sample size
every week	58%	39%	19%	21%	501
2-3 times / month	58%	35%	17%	20%	154
less often	30%	19%	42%	28%	176
never	19%	11%	69%	30%	163

NATIONAL AVERAGE	46%	30%	32%	24%	
* active faith = prayed, read the Bible, and attended church in the last week, as adults ** unchurched = individuals who have not attended a church worship service in the last six months, not including holidays or special events. *** changed faith = response to the following survey question: Question posed: Some people have the same faith perspective for their entire life while other people change faiths or significantly change their faith views as they get older. Thinking about your life, are you part of the same religious faith today as you were when you were a child or have you ever changed to a different faith or significantly changed your faith views since then?					