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**Research Findings on Scriptural Engagement,
Communication with God, & Behavior
Among Young Believers:
Implications for Discipleship**

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Research Findings on Scriptural Engagement, Communication with God, & Behavior Among Young Believers: Implications for Discipleship

Christianity is unique among religions in its emphasis on a relationship between God and man. For the relationship to grow and mature, it must include regular two-way communication whereby the Christ-follower hears from God (through scripture) and talks to God (through prayer). Historically, church attendance has been used as the primary measure of religiosity. More recently, researchers have begun to include other measures such as how important the individual's faith in God is to him or her and how often he or she prays. Emerging findings suggest the wisdom of including these different measures as religiosity and spirituality are multi-dimensional (Kendler, Liu, Gardner, McCullough, Larson, & Prescott, 2003). Moreover, different dimensions seem to relate to different outcomes (see, for example, Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006; Hodge, Anderek, & Montoya, 2007; Kim, 2008).

One dimension of private religiosity that has received little attention in the literature is the extent to which an individual is engaged in scripture. Recent research among adults and teens shows that the more people read or listen to the Bible, the less likely they are to engage in self-defeating behaviors such as drinking, abusing drugs, sex outside marriage, pornography, gambling, and destructive thoughts. These effects remain even when other measures of religiosity, namely religious preference, church attendance, and prayer are controlled (Cole, 2009). We have recently expanded this line of research to see if the trends observed with teens and adults also hold true for children.

In this paper, we explore children's Bible reading habits and their views of how they communicate with God and how He communicates with them. Our specific research questions are:

- 1) What are the Bible reading habits of school-age children? To what extent do they read the Bible on their own and with their parents?
- 2) How do Bible reading habits relate to other measures of spirituality?
- 3) How do children feel they communicate with God?
- 4) How do Bible reading habits relate to other behaviors?

Methods

Our data come from an internet-based survey with a random sample of 1,009 American children between the ages of 8 and 12. Table 1 displays data on the demographic characteristics of our sample.

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Survey Sampling International (SSI) maintains 24 proprietary survey panels worldwide composed of a total of about 1.6 million people. SSI recruits people to its survey pools through 3400 different broadcast points on various internet sites. To join the pool, respondents have to answer a series of screening questions and to have their names and addresses validated against U.S. mail records. Once they are in the pool, respondents periodically receive invitations to participate in certain surveys. The incentive to complete a survey is entry into a drawing for a prize.

Characteristics	Percent	N
Age		
8 years	15.6%	157
9 years	13.6%	137
10 years	16.0%	161
11 years	25.2%	254
12 years	29.7%	300
Mean	10.4 years	
Median	11.0 years	
Gender		
Female	51.3%	518
Male	48.7%	491
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	77.5%	782
African-American	8.2%	83
Hispanic/Latino	6.0%	61
Other	8.3%	83

The 45-item survey instrument used in this study contains a mix of closed- and open-ended questions about children's involvement in attending religious services, prayer, Bible

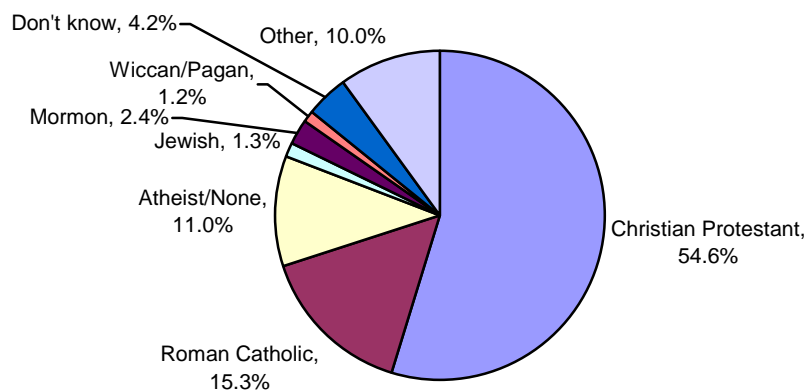
reading on their own and with their family, their beliefs about how God communicates with them and how they communicate with God. It also asks about their involvement in behaviors such as drinking alcohol, cheating, and teasing or bullying others.

Results

Religious Preference and Spiritual Activities

When asked their religious preference, the majority of children identified as Christian Protestant (54.6%, see Figure 1). Roman Catholic was the next most common preference, followed by atheist or none. A separate question asked if the respondent would say he or she is a “born-again Christian”. Slightly less than one-third (31.1%) of children answered yes to this question.

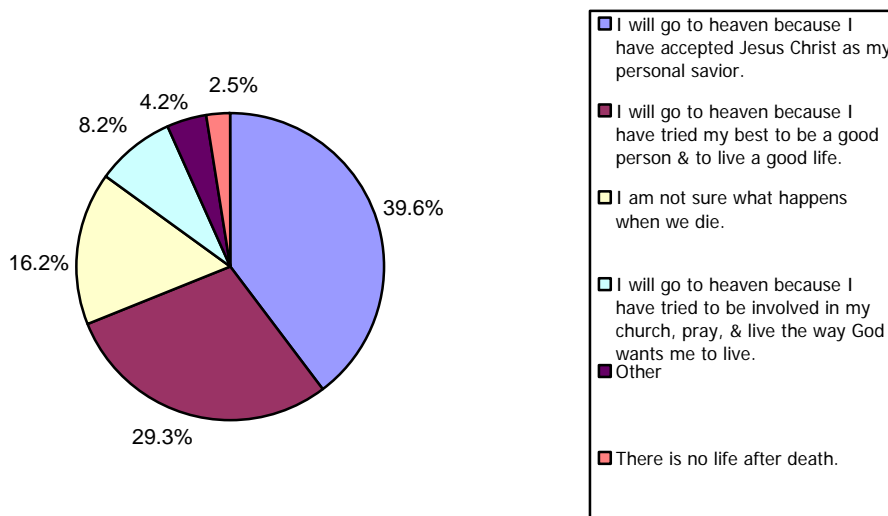
Figure 1: Children's Religious Preference



To gain a better understanding of children’s spiritual beliefs, we asked what they believe regarding about what happens when you die. The most common response, given by almost two

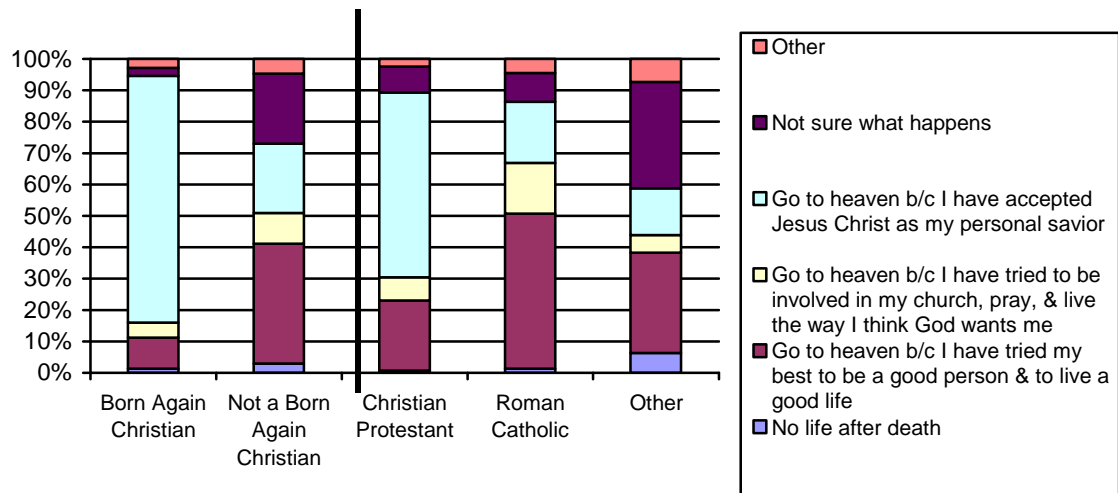
out of five children, reflects biblical Christianity: "I will go to heaven because I have accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior." Another significant minority of children felt that they would go to heaven because they have tried to be a good person and live a good life. Notably 16.2% of 8 to 12 year olds said that they were not sure what happens when we die.

Figure 2: Children's Beliefs about What Happens When You Die



Not surprisingly, children's beliefs about what happens when you die vary with their religious preference. Among children who identify as a born-again Christian and those who express a Protestant religious preference, the most common belief is that you'll go to heaven if you have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior. Among those who do not identify as a born-again Christian and Roman Catholic children, belief that you'll go to heaven because you have tried to be a good person dominates. Most children who espouse a religious preference other than Protestant or Catholic either believe that they will go to heaven because they have tried to be a good person or say that they do not know what happens when you die.

Figure 3: Beliefs about Life after Death & Religious Preference



In terms of spiritual disciplines, Table 2 shows that prayer is almost universal among 8 to 12 year olds, regardless of religious preference. Most children also attend church at least once a month. However, very few read or listen to the Bible either on their own or with their family. In the previous week, three-fifths (59.7%) of tweens had not read or listened to the Bible on their own and two-thirds (66.7%) had not done so with their family.

Children who identify themselves as a born again Christian have significantly higher rates of engaging in the various spiritual disciplines examined. Even among this group though, one-third had not read or listened to the Bible on their own and two-fifths had not done so with their families in the past week.

Table 2. Spiritual Disciplines and Activities.

	Identifies as a Born Again Christian		
	No	Yes	Total
Church Attendance***			
Weekly	31.1%	64.0%	41.3%
A couple of times a month	10.1%	12.4%	10.8%
About once a month	4.9%	2.2%	4.1%
Less than once a month	6.5%	4.8%	5.9%
Only on special occasions	17.8%	7.6%	14.7%
Do not attend	29.6%	8.9%	23.2%
Involved in a youth group***	22.0%	51.9%	31.3%
Prays at least once a day***	72.9%	97.1%	80.5%
Mean number of times a day respondent prays*	3.8	6.2	4.5
Days spent reading or listening to the Bible in the past week on your own***			
None	71.1%	34.4%	59.7%
1 to 3 days	22.6%	40.1%	28.0%
4 to 7 days	6.3%	25.5%	12.3%
Mean number of days engaged in scripture***	0.7	2.2	1.2
Days spent reading or listening to the Bible in the past week with your family***			
None	76.1%	45.9%	66.7%
1 to 3 days	19.0%	36.9%	24.6%
4 to 7 days	4.9%	17.2%	8.7%
Mean number of days engaged in scripture***	0.6	1.6	0.9
Days spent reading or listening to the Bible in the past week total***			
None	64.7%	25.8%	52.6%
1 to 3 days	22.3%	34.7%	26.2%
4 to 7 days	12.9%	39.5%	21.2%

Not surprisingly, fairly strong correlations exist among these different spiritual activities. Reading or listening to the Bible on your own and reading or listening to the Bible with your family are the most strongly correlated with $r = 0.621$. The relationships between church attendance and participation in a church youth group ($r = .550$) and church attendance and prayer ($r = .478$) are the second and third largest. Bible reading correlates modestly with church attendance ($r = 0.386$ on your own, $r = 0.347$ with family), involvement in a church youth group ($r = 0.334$ on your own, $r = .284$ with family), prayer ($r = 0.285$ on your own, $r =$

0.248 with family) and identifying as a born-again Christian (0.346 on your own, $r = 0.273$ with family).

Communicating with God

In order to better understand how children perceive communication with God, we asked two simple open-ended questions. The first was “How do you communicate with God?” followed by “How does God communicate with you?” Answers to these questions were analyzed using SPSS Text Analysis.

Consistent with the data presented in Table 2, the majority of children (75.9%) indicate that they communicate with God through prayer. Most often they simply said “by praying” or “through prayer”. However, some elaborated a bit more. For example:

“Talk to Him as I would anyone”

“Through my soul and my mind, He knows what I’m doing every day, every second, and I also communicate with Him when I pray”

“When I go to bed to pray to Him and thank Him for what He has done for me”

“Sometimes I talk out loud to God or I will pray”

“Praying, having faith in Him, and hoping that He can help me make the right decisions”

Fewer than one in ten (7.8%) respondents stated either that they do not communicate with God or that they do not believe in God. Others mentioned communicating with God through church (4.5%), singing (0.7%), their thoughts (1.1%) or their actions (0.5%).

We found greater diversity in answers to the second question about how God communicates with you. More than one in ten (13.7%) said that they did not know how God communicates with them and an additional 8.4% felt that God does not communicate with them at all.

The Bible or God's Word was mentioned by 11.5% of children. As with the answers to the previous question, some children simply wrote "Bible" or "through the Bible" while others gave more details about what the Bible means to them or additional ways God communicates with them. For example:

When I read the Bible I find the answer

He shows me His will through scripture and through events in my life. He speaks to my heart/soul.

Not sure, but when I read the Bible something inside tells me stuff

By showing me how to life right thru the Bible and church

He teaches me when I read my Bible, He tells me stuff inside my heart, like be nice to my brother and sister.

He shows me what is right and wrong, and explains things in the scriptures of the Bible and from the things that my preacher says.

By answering my prayers and sometimes I find a verse in the Bible and it seems like it was written just for me

The youngsters in our sample also frequently looked to actions or the outcomes of events as communication from God. For instance, answers to prayers or good things happening in life were mentioned almost as often as the Bible.

Through what occurs around me - sometimes God answers my prayers just by taking care of me and my family. Other times He provides healing from sickness or other specific needs that I pray about.

He listens and sometimes answers my prayers

He answers my prayers but not always the way I want

He sometimes answers my prayers I have a lot of good things and people in my life

*Things go good in my life so i know it is because it is His will
He gives me a good mommy who takes care of me*

Through the good things that happen to me

Similarly, some children expressed communication from God as His taking care of them or guiding them in certain actions and decisions:

He is always watching over me.

He makes sure I'm safe

Everyday I wake up in a warm house.

He talks to me, shows me what I need to do.

I receive from him reassurance in making the right decision.

By helping me make the right choices

Helping me be a good person

Feelings, such a sense of peace, also played a role in how children feel God communicates with them:

Peace in my heart when I make decisions, clear signs like sending people to me to help with my problems or questions.

With a feeling He puts in my heart

Peaceful thoughts/feelings. New ideas. All of a sudden an answer comes.

I just feel things in my heart that Jesus puts there.

i just feel better on the inside like He is with me.

Finally, some children reported looking to the outside world for communication from God. That is, they said that they looked for signs or nature:

He talks to me in my heart when I pray. I see Him at work in all of the things around me, like, the trees moving, the wind blowing, the rain falling, the plants & flowers blooming & I know it's God at work.

Sunshine and beautiful things

He shows himself to me in nature and friends.

Signs of goodness

Thru signs I just have to be open to looking for them or thru people.

He sends me a sign from up above

By being there and listening to each and every one of His children. Having things happen in a good way mysteriously

Children who identified as a born-again Christian and those who read the Bible at least once a week were more likely to say that they hear from God through the Bible or through answered prayers. They were also less likely than other children to say that they do not know how God communicates with them or that He does not communicate with them.

Spiritual Disciplines, Bible Engagement, & Behaviors

A significant body of literature documents a fairly strong relationship between spiritual measures such as church attendance and less engagement in behaviors that either deemed immoral by most faith communities and/or pose a risk to the individual or others. To examine the relationship between Bible engagement and behavior, we asked respondents to rate on a 6-point scale from 1 (I do not currently do this) to 6 (every day) how often they participate in certain activities.

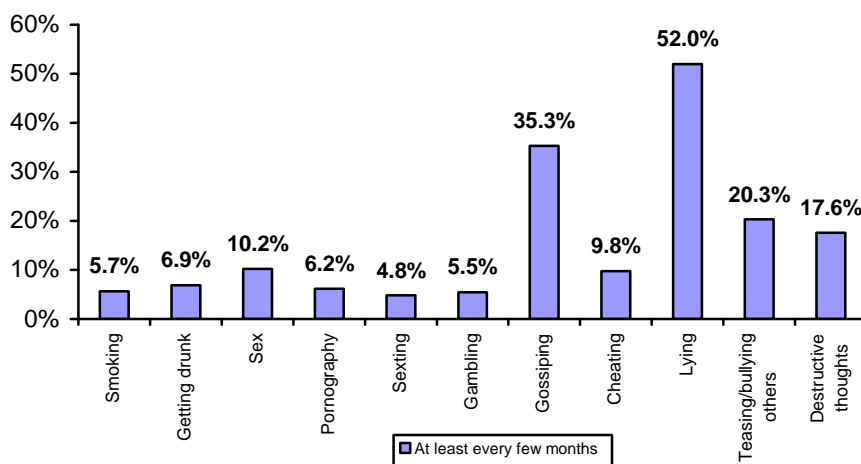
Factor analysis of our behavioral scale indicates that it measures two different types of behaviors. One factor, which we call Behavioral Risks, consists of smoking, drinking, sexual activity, viewing pornography, "sexting" (i.e. sending or posting naked pictures), and gambling. Compared to other behaviors measured, these share the common characteristic that they are prohibited by society and generally limited by parental monitoring and control. The internal consistency of the scale for the seven risk behaviors is good, with a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

As Figure 4 shows, most tweens reported that they did not participate in any Behavioral Risks. The highest prevalence rate was observed for sexual activity, with one out of ten 8 to 12 year olds indicating that they have sex at least once every few months.

The other behaviors in our scale - gossiping, cheating, lying, teasing or bullying others, and destructive thoughts – loaded on the second factor and also share common traits. In many respects, these behaviors are beyond the control of parents and may be morally ambiguous. They also all concern our relationships with others. Together these five items, called Relational Risks, have reasonable consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .70.

Not surprisingly, Relational Risks are much more common among our sample. Half of tweens report lying at least every few months, a third says that they gossip and one-fifth teases or bullies others (see Figure 4). Perhaps most sobering is the finding that 17.6% indicate that they have destructive thoughts about themselves and others.

Figure 4. Behavioral and Relational Risks.



Consistent with the literature, we find that children who attend church at least once a month are significantly less likely to engage in risk behaviors such as smoking and getting

drunk. Such effects are not found for prayer. However, Table 3, following this discussion, shows that higher levels of Bible engagement are related to lower Behavioral Risks.

The bottom half of Table 3 displays data on the Relational Risks measured in this study. Surprisingly, spiritual disciplines have no statistical association with most Relational Risks. Reading or listening to the Bible is the only spiritual discipline that appears to have a positive effect on these types of behaviors. Children who read or listen to the Bible at least four days a week report less lying and a lower rate of engaging in any of the Relational Risk behaviors.

Table 3. Spiritual Disciplines & Risk Behaviors Among 8 to 12 Year Olds.

Engages in this activity at least every few months	Attend Church		Prays at Least Once a Day		Days Reading or Listening to the Bible		
	Less than once a month	At least once a month	No	Yes	None	1-3	4 or more
Smoking	10.2%***	2.3%	6.6%	5.5%	8.1%**	3.4%	2.8%
Getting Drunk	12.4%***	2.6%	8.1%	6.7%	9.6%**	4.2%	3.7%
Sex	15.6%***	6.0%	12.7%	9.6%	13.0%**	7.2%	7.0%
Pornography	10.2%***	3.2%	9.6%*	5.4%	7.9%*	5.7%	2.8%
Sexting	6.6%	3.4%	6.1%	4.5%	6.2%	3.1%	3.3%
Gambling	8.4%***	3.2%	6.1%	5.3%	6.8%	3.4%	4.7%
Any behavioral risks	24.4%***	11.3%	16.8%	17.1%	20.9%**	13.6%	11.7%
Mean scale score	2.16***	0.69	1.78	1.23	1.78**	0.90	0.80
Gossiping	34.5%	36.0%	28.4%*	37.0%	35.8%	36.7%	32.4%
Lying	49.0%	54.3%	47.2%	53.2%	52.9%**	58.0%	42.3%
Cheating	8.8%	10.6%	10.7%	9.6%	9.8%	9.8%	9.9%
Teasing or bullying others	17.8%*	22.3%	19.0%	20.6%	18.4%	21.9%	23.1%
Destructive thoughts	17.4%	17.8%	17.3%	17.7%	17.1%	16.7%	20.1%
Any relational risks	61.6%	64.8%	58.5%	64.6%	64.1%*	68.1%	56.1%
Mean scale score	3.34	3.38	3.38	3.36	3.40	3.50	3.10

Note: For Behavioral Risk and Relational Risk scales, higher scores indicate more involvement in the behaviors listed.

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

In our final analyses, we consider whether the relationships between Bible engagement and behavior displayed in Table 3 simply indicate that it is just another measure of spirituality.

In other words, does how often a child reads or listens to the Bible predict lower levels of

Behavioral and Relational Risks, beyond the effects of more traditional spirituality measures such as church attendance? Logistic regression analyses predicting the log odds of engaging in any of the Behavioral Risks are presented in Table 4.

In the first model, which does not include church attendance, age and Bible engagement are statistically significant predictors. For each year older a child is, his/her odds of participating in a Behavioral Risk increases by 13%. Children who read the Bible at least four days a week have 54% lower odds of engaging in a Behavioral Risk, compared to those who do not read the Bible at all. Odds for children reading the Bible one to three days a week are 43% lower.

When we add church attendance in the second model, age remains significant but Bible engagement does not. Attending church at least once a month lowers the Behavioral Risk odds by 62%.

Table 4. Odds Ratios from Logit Models Predicting Odds of Engaging in a Behavioral Risk.

	Model 1	Model 2
Age	1.13*	1.15*
Female	1.09	1.16
Identifies as a born again Christian	1.22	0.70
Attends church at least once a month		0.38***
Reads/listens to the Bible 4 or more days/week	0.46**	0.74
Reads/listens to the Bible 1 to 3 days/week	0.57**	0.92
-2 Log Likelihood	186.4	251.75
Model Chi Square	18.13***	40.47***

N = 1,009 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

For Relational Risks, the summed scale scores were normally distributed allowing us to conduct a multiple regression analysis. As shown in Table 5, we developed the model in three steps. In the first step, age was statistically significant,

with older children having higher Relational Risk scores. Age remained significant in each of the two subsequent steps.

In the second step, we added a flag variable indicating whether or not the child identifies as a born again Christian and how often he or she reports attending church. Neither of these variables are significant predictors of relational risk.

In the third step, the number of days the youth reads or listens to the Bible is added as a predictor. Increased Bible engagement is a statistically significant predictor of lower Relational Risk.

Table 5. OLS Results Predicting Relational Risk.

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	.376 (.094)***	.378 (.094)***	.368 (.094)***
Female	-.055 (.268)	-.062 (.268)	-.082 (.267)
Identifies as a born again Christian		-.187 (.308)	-.013 (.317)
Church attendance		.039 (.067)	.094 (.071)
Days reading or listening to the Bible			-.103 (.045)*
R square	.127	.129	.147

N = 2,159 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

Conclusions

In order to understand how best to disciple young people new to the faith, this paper presents findings from our study exploring children's spiritual experiences and their moral behavior. We add to the existing literature by focusing on the role scripture engagement plays, over and above church attendance and prayer.

The literature's neglect of the topic of scriptural engagement is unfortunate because the Bible is the only way a person truly knows that it is God's Word he or she is hearing. Some

writers have argued that the lack of a strong biblical foundation is one of the major drivers behind the phenomenon of previously active teens leaving the church. The research presented here is consistent with that argument, demonstrating that children are more likely to report hearing from God if they read or listen to the Bible on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, our data confirm that the trends observed among adults and teens are also true among children. That is, most American children do not read or listen to the Bible regularly. Even among children who identify as born-again Christians, one-quarter to one-third do not read or listen to the Bible at all in a given week. Surprisingly, children report reading the Bible less with their families, than on their own. Among born-again youngsters, only one-fourth engage the Bible at least 4 days a week, a level of engagement shown in previous studies to produce the most behavioral impact. Less than one-fifth read or listen to the Bible with their family at least 4 days a week.

Also consistent with our previous studies of adults and teens, we find significant relationships between Bible engagement and various moral behaviors. However, an important difference among children is that the effects are most prominent for those behaviors that are less subject to parental control and monitoring. We believe that this shows the power of God's Word to change hearts. Moreover, although church attendance was found to be a stronger predictor of behaviors such as smoking and drinking that fall under parental control, it is important to consider what could happen in these areas when children enter young adulthood. Our previous studies with teens suggest that Bible engagement emerges at this stage as the best spiritual predictor of behavior.

In conclusion, this study has expanded our understanding of children's spirituality by examining their Bible engagement patterns and how they say they hear from God. The ultimate implication of our findings is that in order to help children grow spiritually and be prepared to

face the temptations they encounter in the world, both now and as they move into the teen and young adult years, is to get them engaged in God's Word.

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