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

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**Research Summary presented to the Forum of Bible Agencies
December 2009**

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

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Christianity emphasizes 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). Surprisingly, little attention in the literature has been paid to 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, 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. We 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 consider how engaged children are with the Bible, how they view communicating with God, and how Bible engagement relates to their moral behavior.

Methods

Our data come from an internet-based survey of a random sample of 1,009 American children between the ages of 8 and 12. The 45-item survey instrument 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 moral behavior.

Findings

Religious Preference and Spiritual Activities

The majority of children identified as Christian Protestant (54.6%) as their religious preference. 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.

To gain a better understanding of children's spiritual beliefs, we asked what they think 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 (29.3%) 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.

In terms of spiritual disciplines, 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 as born again Christians have significantly higher participation in the spiritual disciplines examined. Even among this group, 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.

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?”

Three out of four children indicate that they communicate with God through prayer. Fewer than one in ten stated either that they do not communicate with God or that they do not believe in God. Others mentioned communicating with God through church, singing, their thoughts or their actions.

We found greater diversity in answers to the second question about how God communicates with you. One out of five said that they did not know how God communicates with them or 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:

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

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

Children 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.

Children who identified as born-again Christians 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.

Bible Engagement & Risk Behaviors

Research among adults and teens documents a fairly strong relationship between spirituality and less involvement in behaviors that either deemed immoral by most faith communities and/or pose a risk to the individual or others. To what extent do these relationships hold for children as well?

In our survey, we asked children 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. Behavioral Risks consist of smoking, drinking, sexual activity, viewing pornography, “sexting” (i.e. sending or posting naked pictures), and gambling. These behaviors share the common characteristic that they are prohibited by society and generally limited by parental monitoring and control.

Relational risks include gossiping, cheating, lying, teasing or bullying others, and destructive thoughts. In many respects, these behaviors are beyond the control of parents and may be morally ambiguous. They also all concern our relationships with others.

Most tweens reported that they do not participate in any Behavioral Risks. Relational Risks, however, are fairly common. For example, half of tweens report lying at least once every few months, a third says that they gossip and one-fifth teases or bullies others. Perhaps most sobering is that nearly one in five has destructive thoughts about themselves and others.

Does how often a child reads or listens to the Bible predict lower levels of Behavioral and Relational Risks? Our analyses show that Bible engagement does in fact predict moral behavior. Each additional day spent reading the Bible decreases their Relational Risk score by .103. 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 at all. Odds for children reading the Bible one to three days a week are 43% lower.

The effects of Bible engagement on Relational Risks remain when we consider church attendance as well. In fact, church attendance does not predict Relational Risks at all among children. However, the Bible engagement effects for Behavioral Risks disappear when church attendance is also considered.

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. 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 the Bible regularly. Even among born-again children, one-quarter to one-third do not read 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 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 behaviors that are less subject to parental control and monitoring. We believe that this shows the power of God's Word to change hearts. 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. Previous studies with teens suggest that Bible engagement emerges at this developmental stage as the best spiritual predictor of behavior. 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.