

Parental Religiosity, Religious Homogamy, and Young Children's Well-Being

Richard J. Petts
Ball State University

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Abstract

Using longitudinal data on fragile families, this study examines the relationships between parents' religiosity, religious homogamy, and young children's well-being, and whether these relationships vary by family structure. Results suggest that weekly service attendance by both parents is associated with lower externalizing problem behavior among young children. Results also suggest that being raised by a mother who believes that religion is important to family life is associated with higher well-being among young children raised by married parents. In contrast, having only one parent who believes religion is important to family life is associated with lower well-being among children raised in cohabiting or single-parent families. Moreover, having parents with strict religious beliefs is associated with increased internalizing problem behavior, but is also associated with a decrease in externalizing problem behavior for children raised by cohabiting parents. Overall, this study contributes to our understanding of the role of religion within fragile families, as well as the role that religion may play in early child development.

The institutions of religion and family are closely linked, and research suggests that religious beliefs and practices are associated with relationship quality and stability (Edgell 2006; Call and Heaton 1997). Religion also helps to shape parental values and practices (Bartkowski and Ellison 2005; Bartkowski and Xu 2000; Edgell 2006; Petts 2007; Wilcox 1998). Thus, it is important to consider how religion may influence various aspects of family life.

There is a sizeable body of research suggesting that religion may strengthen families by providing opportunities for families to interact with one another, resources for building and maintaining healthy relationships, parenting guidance and support, and a moral community that helps to enhance feelings of connectedness with others (Abbott, Berry, and Meridith 1990; Alwin 1986; Edgell 2006). Furthermore, research suggests that religious activity may encourage parents to be more involved in their children's lives (Mahoney et al. 2003; Petts 2007).

Much is known about how religion may influence family attitudes and practices, but few studies have examined how familial religious beliefs and practices may shape the lives of young children. One recent study suggests that frequent family discussions about religion and religious participation by two parents is positively associated with pro-social behavior and negatively associated with problem behavior among young children (Bartkowski, Xu, and Levin 2008). Because experiences in early childhood can shape developmental trajectories throughout the life course (Elder 1998), it is important to further our understanding of the role that parental religiosity may play in early child development.

The current study builds on previous research by further exploring the relationship between parental religiosity and young children's well-being. Two research questions are considered. First, is parental religiosity associated with young children's well-being, and does this relationship vary by whether or not parents are religiously homogamous in regard to

religious beliefs, practices, and affiliation? Second, are the relationships between parental religious homogeneity and children's well-being moderated by family structure? That is, do the relationships between parents' religious homogeneity and young children's well-being vary between married, cohabiting, and single-parent families?

Two waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) are used in this study. These data are useful for a number of reasons. First, the use of longitudinal data is better suited to address questions of causality and selection effects than cross-sectional data (Frees 2004). By focusing on whether parental religiosity at time one is associated with children's well-being at time two, it is possible to more clearly establish the role that religion may play in influencing early child development. Second, because the FFCW contains responses from both fathers and mothers, it is possible to examine the influence of religious homogeneity on young children's well-being. Finally, the FFCW contains a sample of urban and primarily low-income families. Given the relatively high rate of family instability in this population (Osborne and McLanahan 2007), this study is useful in understanding the role that religion may play in strengthening families who may face a number of hardships, what consequences religion may have for young children raised in fragile families, and whether and how the relationship between parental religiosity and children's well-being varies by family structure.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Parental Religiosity and Children's Well-Being

Religiosity is often discussed as a single factor that may provide benefits (or disadvantages) to individuals and families. However, religiosity is a concept that encompasses a number of beliefs and behaviors that may vary in whether and how they influence well-being

(Mahoney 2010). Therefore, this study incorporates various measures of parental religiosity to better understand the link between parental religiosity and well-being in early childhood.

For example, parental religious attendance and believing that religion is an important part of family life may both be positively associated with children's well-being. Religious institutions provide teachings and support to parents that may help them to deal with the challenges involved with raising a child (Abbott, Berry, and Meredith 1990; Alwin 1986). Although specific teachings may differ between religious traditions, most religions encourage individuals to develop strong relationships and be dedicated to their family life; religious institutions offer opportunities for family members to interact with one another and provide a framework for finding greater meaning in family interactions, all of which may be beneficial to children (Abbott et al. 1990; Bartkowski et al. 2008; Mahoney et al. 2003; Volling, Mahoney, and Rauer 2009).

Children may also benefit by being immersed within a larger moral community that reinforces the teachings provided by parents and further promotes healthy developmental behavior (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Myers 1996; Smith and Denton 2005). Parents who are involved in a religious community may also have a support network to help them to cope with struggles and stresses in their lives, allowing them to focus more on providing support to their children, improving their well-being (Ellison 1991). In short, parental religiosity may be beneficial for young children for a variety of reasons, and may be especially beneficial to children raised in fragile families as they may face a number of difficulties in life (Barrett and Turner 2005; Osborne and McLanahan 2007; Petts 2007; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008).

In contrast, strict religious beliefs may have both positive and negative consequences for children. Strict beliefs may lead parents to value obedience in children to teach them to be submissive to authority, and may also increase the likelihood that parents use corporal

punishment (Ellison, Bartkowski and Segal 1996; Ellison and Sherkat 1993). These forms of authoritarian parenting may limit children's opportunities to develop self-control and make their own decisions, resulting in lower well-being (Baumrind 1991; Unnever, Cullen, and Agnew 2006). On the other hand, parents who adhere to strict beliefs may also emphasize other core religious beliefs such as being nice to others, leading parents to be more supportive and encouraging of their children (Brody and Flor 1998; Kelley, Power, and Wimbush 1992; Wilcox 1998). Indeed, research suggests that strict beliefs among low-income mothers are associated with being nurturing and responsive towards children (Brody and Flor 1998; Kelley et al. 1992).

Although there is reason to believe that parental religiosity may influence young children's well-being, research on this topic is scarce. Strayhorn, Weidman, and Larson (1990) find that religious involvement may improve parents' well-being and encourage them to engage in positive parenting practices, but find no evidence that parental religiosity is associated with children's behavior. In contrast, Volling and colleagues (2009) find that young children raised by parents who believe that religion is important to their parenting are more likely to develop a moral conscience (feeling empathy, being apologetic, etc.), but this study is limited to one measure of parental religiosity. Perhaps the most comprehensive study to date by Bartkowski et al. (2008) suggests that frequent religious participation by both parents and family discussions about religion are positively associated with pro-social behavior for young children. However, this study uses cross-sectional data and does not include measures of denominational affiliation or specific religious beliefs. Given the lack of research on family religiosity and early childhood behavior, and the inconsistent findings in the literature, additional research is needed. The current study uses longitudinal data to further explore whether and how parental religiosity may influence young children raised in fragile families.

Religious Homogamy and Children's Well-Being

The relationship between parental religiosity and children's well-being may also depend on the religious composition of the family. That is, children raised by parents who share a similar set of religious beliefs and practices may have different outcomes than children raised by parents who do not agree about religion. Overall, research suggests that religious homogamy among parents is beneficial for children. Shared religious beliefs may help to improve marital quality, increasing the likelihood that children will be raised in a stable family environment (Call and Heaton 1997; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007). Religious homogamy also increases the likelihood that children remain religious themselves (Bader and Desmond 2006; Williams and Lawler 2001). Furthermore, couples who identify with the same denomination may be more likely to receive social support from a religious community (Call and Heaton 1997; Edgell 2006; Heaton and Pratt 1990). Parents can rely on this community for parenting guidance, and these communities may also act as agents of social control, deterring children from engaging in harmful activities (Edgell 2006; Sullivan 2008). This additional support may be especially helpful for low-income families that may be facing adversity (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007).

In contrast, differences in religious beliefs and practices between parents may be problematic for children. Religiously heterogamous couples often have higher levels of relationship conflict and lower levels of religiosity than religiously homogamous couples (Curtis and Ellison 2002; Petts and Knoester 2007; Williams and Lawler 2001). As a result, religiously heterogamous couples may experience increased family stress and a higher risk of dissolving their relationship, both of which may be negatively related to children's well-being (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Heaton and Pratt 1990; Petts and Knoester 2007). Furthermore, children may receive

inconsistent messages about religion, perhaps leading them to be confused about what they should believe or how they should act, which could lead to behavior problems.

Although research suggests that religious heterogamy increases the risk of negative outcomes for children, any exposure to religion may provide some benefits to children. Having one parent who is involved in religion (even if the other parent is uninvolved) may expose children to religious teachings and a moral community. For example, mothers are often more involved in religion than fathers, and are also more responsible for childrearing (Miller and Stark 2002; Strommen and Hardel 2000). Thus, having a religious mother may increase the likelihood that young children receive the benefits associated with religion. This may be especially true among low-income families who face time and economic constraints that may prevent both parents from maintaining a high level of religious involvement (McLahanan and Sandefur 1994; Smith 2001; Sullivan 2008). Thus, I expect that *frequent religious involvement and believing that religion is important among both parents will be most likely to increase well-being among young children*. I also expect that *having one parent who is actively involved in religion will be associated with higher well-being for children relative to children who do not have any actively religious parents*. Finally, I expect that *having parents with differing religious beliefs or having two parents who are not religious will be negatively associated with young children's well-being*.

Variations by Family Structure

Most of the research on parental religiosity and children's well-being focuses on married families. Much less is known about whether and how parental religiosity may be related to children's well-being in other family types. This question is important to consider because rates of cohabitation and children born out of wedlock have increased, and are especially high among low SES populations (Cherlin 2010; Osborne and McLanahan 2007). There is some research to

suggest that religion plays an important role in fragile families (Sullivan 2008; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008), but studies have yet to focus on the role of religious homogamy within these family types.

Religious homogamy may be related to children's well-being in similar ways for cohabiting and married families. Being raised by two religious parents (even if unmarried) may provide children with a consistent set of beliefs and practices, resulting in higher well-being. However, religious denominations often view living together prior to marriage as sinful, which may stigmatize cohabiting families (Edgell 2006; Wilcox, Chaves, and Franz 2004). Thus, although shared religious beliefs may help to unite cohabiting families, these families may be unable to experience the full benefits of belonging to a religious community due to a lack of acceptance. Furthermore, cohabiting relationships are more unstable than marriages (Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004; Teachman 2003), and religious differences between cohabiting parents may contribute to instability within the home, resulting in lower well-being for children (Hohmann-Marriott 2006). Therefore, I expect that *religious homogamy will be less likely to increase children's well-being and religious heterogamy will be more likely to decrease children's well-being in cohabiting families than married families.*

Religious homogamy may also benefit children raised in single-parent families. Parental religious activity is associated with lower relationship conflict and increased involvement with children (Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Petts 2007; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008). As such, shared beliefs may help to sanctify the coparental relationship, leading mothers and fathers to place a greater value on their roles as parents (Mahoney et al. 2003). Parents who share religious beliefs may be more likely to work together in raising their child and provide a consistent message to children (even if not residing in the same household), resulting in higher well-being.

However, children may have only limited contact with their non-resident parent, mitigating any benefits of religious homogamy. Instead, residing with one religious parent may be more beneficial to children raised by single parents. Despite feeling stigmatized by religious communities, single parents believe that religion is an important resource that helps to promote well-being among children (Sullivan 2008). Involvement in a religious community may be beneficial to single parents, as these parents may benefit most from the support and guidance that religious communities may provide. For example, single parents who are religious may be surrounded by other like-minded individuals that provide parenting support and act as agents of social control to children (Edgell 2006; Myers 1996; Sullivan 2008). Religion may also act as a coping mechanism that helps single parents to understand and deal with difficulties in life (Hill et al. 2008; Sullivan 2008). Thus, I expect that *having only one religious parent will be more likely to increase children's well-being in single-parent families than other family types.*

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

Data from two waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) are used in this study. This is a longitudinal, birth cohort study that follows 4,898 children born to both married and unmarried parents between 1998 and 2000. The FFCW is an urban study that focuses on fragile families, which are defined as unmarried parents and their children. Thus, the data contains high percentages of low-income, minority, and unmarried parents.¹ Both parents were interviewed shortly after the child's birth. In addition, all parents were contacted for a

¹ When weighted, the FFCW data is representative of all non-marital births in cities with populations of over 200,000. Weights are not used here due to a loss in sample size and a focus on different family structures.

follow-up interview approximately one, three, and five years later. Parents who completed the three- and five-year follow-up studies were also asked to complete a separate survey that focused on the child's behavior and well-being (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, and McLanahan 2001).

Data from the three- and five-year follow-up interviews are used. Specifically, the current study focuses on 1,717 families in which both parents were interviewed at the three-year interview and the child survey was completed in each wave. Of the 3,165 families in which both parents were interviewed at the three-year follow-up, 1,218 families were excluded because they did not complete either the three- or five-year child surveys. Also, 107 families who were not part of the 18-city sub-sample were excluded because they were not asked all of the questions of interest for this study. Finally, 123 families in which children reside with a biological parent and the parent's cohabiting partner are excluded because there are no indicators of religion for the cohabiting partners.

Although these data are well-suited for this study, results from this study may not be generalizable to all populations. Supplementary analyses suggest that attrition rates are higher among couples who dissolved a relationship, and religious participation is negatively correlated with union dissolution. Moreover, families who did not complete the child surveys may be more disadvantaged than the families included in this study.² Therefore, the sample used here may be skewed towards families who are more religious and more stable than other fragile families.

² Results from t-tests suggest that families who did not complete the child surveys had a lower average level of income, were more likely to be black, and were more likely to be single-parent families. However, there were no significant differences in average education level, and fathers had a higher rate of religious participation in families who did not complete the child surveys.

Dependent Variables

Three measures of well-being taken from the five-year in-home survey are used in this study as dependent variables. Children's behavior was measured using indicators from the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Rescorla 2000) and the Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (Hogan, Scott, and Bauer 1992).

Externalizing problem behavior. Externalizing problem behavior is taken from mothers' responses to the aggressive behavior scale ($\alpha = .85$). The aggressive scale consists of 20 items (responses range from 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very or often true*) about whether the child boasts, argues, bullies others, destroys things, is disobedient, is easily jealous, screams a lot, shows off, threatens people, gets into fights, demands a lot of attention, has temper tantrums, and is unusually loud. Responses to these items are summed.

Internalizing problem behavior. Internalizing problem behavior is taken from mothers' responses to the withdrawn and anxious/depressed scales ($\alpha = .76$). The withdrawn scale consists of 9 items that assess whether the child would rather be alone, refuses to talk, is secretive, is shy, sulks, is unhappy, is withdrawn, and stares blankly. The anxious/depressed scale consists of 14 items about whether the child complains of loneliness, cries a lot, feels inferior, feels guilty, worries, feels no one loves him/her, is nervous, and is suspicious (responses for each scale range from 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very or often true*). Responses to these 23 items are summed.

Positive behavior. Mothers were asked to report the frequency (0 = *not true* to 2 = *very or often true*) that their child exhibited positive behaviors such as whether the child understands others' feelings, is sympathetic to other children, is open and direct about what he/she wants, plays with other children, will join other children playing, is confident, is proud of what he/she

does, is interested in many things, and enjoys talking with his/her mother ($\alpha = .77$). Responses to these 9 items are summed.

Independent Variables

The measures of parental religiosity used assess whether active involvement in religion (either practices or beliefs) by one or both parents (resident or nonresident) is associated with young children's well-being relative to families in which both parents have low or moderate levels of religiosity.³ All measures are taken from the three-year follow-up interviews.

Weekly service attendance. Families were sorted into one of four categories to indicate religious participation: (a) both parents attend religious services at least once a week, (b) only the mother attends religious services weekly, (c) only the father attends religious services weekly, and (d) neither parent attends religious services weekly (reference group).

Religion important to family life. Parents were asked whether they use their religious faith as a guide for the way they treat their family (0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*). Families were sorted into one of four categories based on each parent's response to this question: (a) both parents strongly agree to this statement, (b) only the mother strongly agrees to this

³ More refined categories of parental religiosity (i.e., exploring various combinations of high, moderate, and low religiosity) were examined in supplementary models. Overall, the categories used in this study consistently had the largest (or smallest, in the case of strict religious beliefs) coefficients in each model. Levels of statistical significance were also fairly consistent across these models. Because the focus of this study is on whether parental religiosity is associated with children's well-being, analyzing whether children raised by religiously active parents have differing levels of well-being than other children is appropriate.

statement, (c) only the father strongly agrees to this statement, and (d) neither parent strongly agrees with this statement (reference group).

Strict religious beliefs. Parents were asked the degree to which they agreed with a specific religious belief associated with their self-reported religious denomination (0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*). Protestants were asked whether they believed that the Bible is the inspired word of God and should be read literally. Catholics were asked whether they believed that the Eucharist is the real body and blood of Jesus Christ. Muslims were asked whether they believed that the Koran is the inspired word of God and should be read literally. Finally, Jewish parents were asked whether they believed that keeping Kosher was an important part of being Jewish. Families were sorted into one of four categories based on each parent's response: (a) both parents strongly agree to the belief for their denomination, (b) only the mother strongly agrees to this belief, (c) only the father strongly agrees to this belief, and (d) neither parent strongly agrees to their denominational belief (reference group).

Denominational heterogamy. A final set of indicators is used to indicate consistency in denominational affiliation. Faith-none heterogamy indicates couples in which one parent claims a religious affiliation and the other claims no affiliation. Across-religion heterogamy indicates couples in which both parents identify with a different religious denomination, and both are not Protestant. Inter-Protestant heterogamy indicates couples in which both parents identify with a different Protestant denomination. A final dummy variable is used to indicate couples in which both parents claim no religious affiliation. The reference group (religious homogamy) indicates couples in which both parents identify with the same religious denomination.

To create these variables, religious denominations were first sorted into the following categories: no religious affiliation, Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black

Protestant, other Christian affiliation, and other religious (i.e., non-Christian) affiliation (Steensland et al. 2000). The measures of denominational heterogamy were determined by similarities or differences between these categories.

Family Characteristics

Family structure. Three variables indicate family structure at the three-year interview: child resides with married biological parents (reference group), child resides with cohabiting biological parents, and child resides in a single-parent family. Two additional variables indicate a change in family structure between the three- and five-year interviews: (a) transition to a two-parent family indicates families who transitioned from a single-parent family to a cohabiting or married family (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), and (b) transition from a two-parent family indicates families who transitioned from a cohabiting or married family to a single-parent family (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*).

Parental involvement. Parental involvement is indicated by the number of days per week that parents spent participating in twelve activities (sing songs or nursery rhymes, hug or show physical affection, tell child that you love him/her, let child help with simple chores, play imaginary games, read stories, tell stories, play inside with toys with child, put child to bed, assist child with eating, take to visit relatives, and tell child that you appreciate something he/she did) with the child at the three-year follow-up ($\alpha = .86$ for fathers, $\alpha = .65$ for mothers). The mean score for both parents is used as the scale score (responses range from 0-7 days per week).

Father supportiveness. Mothers were asked about how the father helped to raise their child at the three-year survey. Mothers were asked how frequently (0 = *never* to 3 = *always*): (a) the father acts like the father you want, (b) you can trust the father to take care of the child, (c) the father respects schedules and rules that you make, (d) the father supports the way you want to raise the child, (e) you and the father talk about problems that come up in raising the child, and

(f) you can count on the father for help when you need someone to look after the child for a few hours ($\alpha = .88$). The mean score is used as the measure of father supportiveness.

Change in religious participation. Two variables are included to indicate a change in religious participation between waves: (a) increase in weekly service attendance indicates families in which at least one parent increased their religious participation between waves (0 = no, 1 = yes), and (b) decrease in weekly service attendance indicates families in which at least one parent decreased their religious participation between waves (0 = no, 1 = yes).

Control Variables

A number of variables that may influence the relationship between parents' religiosity and children's well-being are included as controls (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). All measures are taken from the three-year follow-up interview. These include mothers' age (measured in years), gender of the child (0 = male, 1 = female), the number of hours that both the mother and the father work per week, and the number of additional children that the mother has. Five variables are used to indicate the racial composition of the relationship: (a) both parents are white (reference group), (b) both parents are black, (c) both parents are Latino, (d) both parents are another racial group, and (e) both parents have different racial backgrounds. Six variables are also used to indicate the highest educational attainment that the parents' received: (a) both parents have below a high school education, (b) both parents have a high school diploma (reference group), (c) both parents completed some college work, (d) both parents have a college degree, (e) parents have small differences in educational attainment, measured as parents who are one level from each other (e.g., one parent has a high school education and the other has completed some college), and (f) parents have large differences in educational attainment, measured as parents who are two or more levels from each other (e.g.,

one parent has a high school education and the other has a college degree). Finally, household income measures the amount of income within the household that the child resides, and responses range from 0 = *No income* to 5 = *\$40,000 or more*.

Analytic Strategy

Ordinary least squares regression models are used in this study. For each child outcome, two models are used. The first model includes measures of parents' religiosity, family characteristics, and control variables to assess whether parental religiosity is associated with children's well-being after accounting for socio-demographic characteristics.⁴ Interaction terms are included in the second model to examine whether the relationship between parents' religiosity and young children's well-being is moderated by family structure. Possible interaction effects between each measure of religiosity and family structure were tested in supplementary models, and each interaction term that was statistically significant ($p < .05$) is included here. Summary statistics for all variables used in the study are included in Table 1.

----- Insert Table 1 About Here -----

Missing Data

Most variables have few (less than 5% of total cases), if any, missing values. To preserve sample size, multiple imputation is used to account for missing data. The *ice* and *micombine* commands in STATA are used for the analyses (Royston 2005). Missing values are imputed using all available data; combined results from five imputed models are used. Once this is done,

⁴ Results from supplementary analyses that included each set of religious variables in separate models are consistent with those presented here.

any cases with missing values on the dependent variables (prior to imputation) are excluded from the model (von Hippel 2007). This results in a slightly different sample size for each model.⁵

RESULTS

Results exploring the relationship between parental religiosity and each of the indicators of young children's well-being are presented in separate tables. Table 2 presents results examining the relationship between parental religiosity and young children's externalizing problem behavior. As expected, results in Model 1 show that having two parents who frequently attend religious services is negatively associated with externalizing problem behavior when children are five years old ($b = -1.23, p < .05$). A comparison of beta coefficients shows that the magnitude of this effect is similar to a \$10,000 increase in household income ($B = -.08$ for weekly religious service attendance by both parents and household income), suggesting that having actively religious parents can be an important influence on children's well-being.

----- Insert Table 2 About Here -----

Similarly, having a mother who believes that religion is important to family life is associated with fewer externalizing problems ($b = -.98, p < .05$). Also as expected, being raised by non-religious parents ($b = 1.70, p < .05$) is positively associated with externalizing problem behavior. Religious organizations provide teachings that deter individuals from engaging in deviant activity, as well as hold individuals accountable for their actions. Thus, children who are exposed to religion may be less likely to act out and engage in problem behavior.

----- Insert Figure 1 About Here -----

The possibility of moderating effects is explored in Model 2. One interaction term is significant; children raised in a cohabiting family in which only the mother has strict religious

⁵ Descriptive statistics from imputed models are almost identical to the non-imputed data.

beliefs display fewer externalizing behaviors than children in other families. This result is further illustrated in Figure 1. Among cohabiting families, children who have a mother with strict beliefs display the fewest externalizing behavior problems, and being raised by a mother with strict religious beliefs is more beneficial to children in cohabiting families than children raised in other family types. Although I expected that religious heterogamy may lead to lower well-being in cohabiting families, having a mother with strict beliefs may help to provide structure to cohabiting families, reducing the likelihood that children engage in problem behavior.

----- Insert Table 3 About Here -----

Results exploring the relationship between parental religiosity and children's internalizing problem behavior are displayed in Table 3. Similar to the results in Table 2, having a mother who believes that religion is important to family life is negatively associated with internalizing problem behavior ($b = -.43, p < .05$). Also, having two parents ($b = .90, p < .01$) or a father ($b = .78, p < .05$) with strict religious beliefs is positively associated with internalizing problem behavior. These findings provide some evidence for the argument that having parents with strict beliefs may limit children's sense of independence and self-control, increasing the likelihood that they display internalizing problem behaviors. Moreover, parents' gender seems to matter; mothers' religious salience may be beneficial to children because they are more likely to be responsible for religious socialization, whereas fathers may be more likely to be the family disciplinarian, and their strict beliefs may have negative consequences for children. Somewhat surprisingly, inter-Protestant religious heterogamy is negatively associated with internalizing problem behavior ($b = -.73, p < .05$). Having parents who adhere to different (yet similar) denominations may suggest that children are being raised in an environment that is more tolerant

and accepting, which may help to improve children's sense of well-being during their early developmental years.

The possibility of moderating relationships is explored in Model 2. As expected, there is some evidence to suggest that religious heterogamy is more detrimental for children in cohabiting families than married families; being raised in a family with a cohabiting father who believes that religion is important to family life is associated with increased internalizing behavior problems. Children in these families may be confused about how to act because only one parent is highly religious, leading them to feel more insecure. In contrast to my hypothesis, children raised by single parents who believe that religion is important to family life also face an increased risk of displaying internalizing behavior problems. Although I expected that religion would provide benefits to single mothers, the lack of acceptance within religious communities may be problematic for families who are highly religious but are unable to experience the full benefits that these communities may provide. These findings are further illustrated in Figure 2.

----- Insert Figure 2 About Here -----

Finally, results exploring the relationship between parental religiosity and positive behavior are displayed in Table 4. Consistent with the other indicators of well-being, results in Model 1 suggest that being raised by a mother ($b = .45, p < .05$) who believes that religion is important to family life is associated with an increase in children's positive behavior.

----- Insert Table 4 About Here -----

The possibility of moderating relationships is examined in Model 2. Results again suggest that religious heterogamy may be more problematic for children raised in cohabiting families; having only a mother or only a father who believes that religion is important to family life is negatively associated with positive behavior among young children. Children may be

receiving conflicting messages from cohabiting parents, reducing the likelihood that they engage in positive behavior. These findings are further illustrated in Figure 3.

----- Insert Figure 3 About Here -----

DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to better understand the relationship between parental religiosity and young children's well-being by using longitudinal data to examine whether religious homogamy among parents is related to well-being among children raised in fragile families, and whether this relationship varies by family structure. Overall, results provide evidence that different aspects of parental religiosity may have positive and negative consequences for young children's well-being, and that these relationships may be conditioned by the family structure in which children reside.

Consistent with previous research (Bartkowski et al. 2008), there is some evidence suggesting that religious homogamy may be beneficial for young children regardless of family structure. Specifically, having two parents who frequently attend religious services is associated with lower levels of externalizing problem behavior. Having two parents who are religiously active increases the likelihood that children are exposed to and engaged in a moral community that may help to reinforce both parental and religious teachings, deterring young children from engaging in problem behavior (Myers 1996; Smith and Denton 2005).

Other than attendance homogamy, the relationship between parental religious homogamy and children's well-being appears to be mixed. For example, being raised by two non-religious parents increases the risk that children display externalizing problem behavior, perhaps due to a lack of social control that comes with adherence to a set of religious rules. However, being raised by parents from different religious backgrounds appears to provide some benefits for children.

Religiously heterogamous families may have a greater level of tolerance and respect for others that helps children to feel secure and contributes to positive developmental behavior early in life (Ho 1984; Petts and Knoester 2007).

Results from this study also suggest that the relationships between parental religiosity, religious homogamy, and young children's well-being vary by family structure. The only relatively consistent finding across each measure of children's well-being is that being raised by a mother who believes that religion is important to family life is beneficial to young children being raised by married parents. Mothers are often more involved in their child's daily life than fathers. Moreover, women are more likely to be religiously involved than men, perhaps resulting in greater access to the parental support and guidance that religious communities provide (Miller and Stark 2002; Strommen and Hardel 2000). Therefore, mothers who adhere to this traditional role within married families may help young children to develop a conscience and feel a greater sense of belonging by incorporating religious beliefs and attitudes into their family life (Mahoney et al. 2003; Sullivan 2008; Volling et al. 2009).

Although religious heterogamy appears to provide some benefits to children within married families, this relationship does not hold true for children in other family types; being raised by cohabiting or single parents in which only one parent believes that religion is important to family life is associated with lower well-being among children. Religious differences between parents may be more likely to create conflict and increase instability within nontraditional families, resulting in lower well-being for children (Hohmann-Marriott 2006). Moreover, believing that religion is important, but not being accepted within a religious community may create stress, resentment, and doubt among parents, all of which may reduce support and stability within the family and potentially reduce children's well-being (Sullivan 2008)

Results from this study also highlight the potentially contradictory relationship between strict religious beliefs and children's well-being. Results suggest that children display higher levels of internalizing problem behavior when parents adhere to strict religious beliefs. Yet, results also suggest that mothers' strict beliefs are associated with fewer externalizing problems among children raised by cohabiting parents. As other scholars have argued, strict beliefs may lead parents to use harsh disciplinary practices⁶ and stress obedience among children. Thus, children may have fewer opportunities to develop a sense of self-control and make their own decisions, increasing the likelihood that they display internalizing problem behaviors (Baumrind 1991; Unnever et al. 2006). However, strict religious beliefs may also help to provide structure and guidance to children, especially in families that are more likely to be unstable. Thus, strict religious beliefs within a cohabiting family may expose children to a greater number of rules and expectations, reducing the likelihood that they engage in problem behavior.

Although there are a number of strengths in this study, there are also some limitations. This study improves on previous research by utilizing longitudinal data to allow for a more plausible causal pathway between parents' religiosity and children's well-being. However, the possibility of reverse causality still remains; having children who engage in problem behavior may lead parents to become more involved in religion for parenting support and guidance. Supplementary analyses including a lagged dependent variable to reduce this problem produced results that are largely consistent with those presented. However, these results are not included due to the problems associated with lagged dependent variable models (e.g., Markus 1979).

⁶ Spanking was included as an indicator in supplementary models. However, strict religious beliefs were still statistically significant when spanking was included in the model.

This study is also limited by a lack of information about the specific ways in which religion may be incorporated into family life. There appears to be some evidence that children benefit from residing in a religious family, but how are families utilizing these religious beliefs and practices? Understanding some of the ways in which parents introduce their children to religion may help us to better understand the ways in which religion may be beneficial or detrimental to children's well-being. Future research such as a recent study by Sullivan (2008) should incorporate qualitative data to increase our knowledge of these processes. Furthermore, the various items that comprise the strict religious beliefs measure may not be equivalent across each denomination; believing that religious texts (Bible, Koran) should be read literally may be a stricter belief than the other indicators included in the measure. Future research should explore how parents' adherence to specific religious beliefs may influence family life.

A final limitation is that the measures of children's well-being are reported by the mother. Although mothers likely have a good sense of their children's behavior, their perceptions of this behavior may be shaped by their religious beliefs. Unfortunately, outside reports of children's well-being are not available in the FFCW data with one exception: teachers' reported on externalizing problem behavior for a subset of the FFCW sample. When included as a dependent variable, coefficients for the measures of parental religiosity were in the expected direction, but none were statistically significant. This is likely due to a small sample size (40% of the sample used in this study), but future research should further explore the influence of religion on children's well-being using external reports of early childhood behavior.

Overall, this study contributes to our knowledge of family religiosity by using longitudinal data and various indicators of parental religiosity and children's well-being to better understand the ways in which different aspects of parental religiosity (and religious homogamy

in particular) may be both positively and negatively related to young children's well-being. The role that religion plays in young children's lives has been understudied, and this study highlights some of the ways in which parental religiosity may be associated with children's well-being within fragile families. Future research needs to continue to examine how and why specific religious beliefs and practices may influence early childhood development.

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Table 1. Summary Statistics

	M	SD	Min	Max
Children's Well-Being				
Externalizing Problem Behavior	10.58	6.25	0	35
Internalizing Problem Behavior	5.38	4.42	0	26
Positive Behavior	15.65	2.58	0	18
Religious Characteristics				
Weekly Service Attendance - Both Parents	0.20	0.40	0	1
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Mother	0.13	0.34	0	1
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Father	0.18	0.39	0	1
Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents	0.37	0.48	0	1
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother	0.21	0.41	0	1
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father	0.19	0.39	0	1
Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents	0.33	0.47	0	1
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother	0.19	0.40	0	1
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father	0.22	0.41	0	1
Faith-None Heterogamy	0.25	0.44	0	1
Across-Religion Heterogamy	0.15	0.35	0	1
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	0.12	0.32	0	1
Both No Religious Affiliation	0.05	0.23	0	1
Family Characteristics				
Cohabiting	0.24	0.43	0	1
Single-Parent	0.37	0.48	0	1
Transition to Two-Parent Family	0.04	0.21	0	1
Transition from Two-Parent Family	0.13	0.34	0	1
Increase in Weekly Service Attendance	0.20	0.40	0	1
Decrease in Weekly Service Attendance	0.21	0.41	0	1
Parental Involvement	4.83	0.86	0	7
Father Supportiveness	1.96	1.01	0	3
Controls				
Mothers' Age	28.54	6.11	16	47
Child is Female	0.47	0.50	0	1
Black	0.40	0.49	0	1
Latino	0.17	0.37	0	1
Other Race	0.01	0.12	0	1
Racial Heterogamy	0.22	0.42	0	1
Below High School Education	0.11	0.32	0	1
Some College Education	0.12	0.33	0	1
College Degree	0.08	0.28	0	1
Large Difference in Education	0.13	0.33	0	1
Small Difference in Education	0.36	0.48	0	1
Household Income	3.45	1.50	0	5
Number of Additional Children	1.51	1.39	0	11
Mothers' Hours Worked	20.45	19.39	0	50
Fathers' Hours Worked	32.81	18.75	0	50
N = 1717				

Table 2. Results from Regression Models Predicting Externalizing Problem Behavior among Children at Age Five

	1			2		
	b	se	B	b	se	B
Religious Characteristics						
Weekly Service Attendance - Both Parents	-1.23	(0.53)	-0.08 *	-1.33	(0.54)	-0.08 *
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Mother	-0.76	(0.54)	-0.04	-0.73	(0.54)	-0.04
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Father	-0.23	(0.48)	-0.01	-0.28	(0.48)	-0.02
Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents	-0.65	(0.51)	-0.05	-0.63	(0.51)	-0.05
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother	-0.99	(0.49)	-0.07 *	-0.99	(0.49)	-0.07 *
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father	-0.05	(0.52)	0.00	-0.06	(0.52)	0.00
Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents	0.67	(0.48)	0.05	1.03	(0.70)	0.08
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother	0.84	(0.48)	0.05	1.40	(0.74)	0.09
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father	0.16	(0.47)	0.01	-0.22	(0.74)	-0.01
Faith-None Heterogamy	0.32	(0.41)	0.02	0.27	(0.41)	0.02
Across-Religion Heterogamy	0.73	(0.46)	0.04	0.78	(0.46)	0.05
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	0.16	(0.52)	0.01	0.24	(0.52)	0.01
Both No Religious Affiliation	1.67	(0.71)	0.06 *	1.59	(0.71)	0.06 *
Family Characteristics						
Cohabiting	0.24	(0.45)	0.02	1.18	(0.76)	0.08
Single-Parent	0.70	(0.48)	0.05	0.38	(0.79)	0.03
Transition to Two-Parent Family	-0.09	(0.78)	0.00	-0.05	(0.78)	0.00
Transition from Two-Parent Family	0.35	(0.50)	0.02	0.35	(0.50)	0.02
Increase in Weekly Service Attendance	0.44	(0.39)	0.03	0.33	(0.39)	0.02
Decrease in Weekly Service Attendance	0.61	(0.43)	0.04	0.68	(0.43)	0.04
Parental Involvement	0.17	(0.20)	-0.01	0.16	(0.20)	-0.01
Father Supportiveness	-1.25	(0.32)	-0.12 ***	-1.23	(0.32)	-0.12 ***
Controls						
Mothers' Age	-0.03	(0.03)	-0.03	-0.02	(0.03)	-0.02
Child is Female	-0.55	(0.30)	-0.04	-0.59	(0.30)	-0.05 *
Black	-1.01	(0.50)	-0.08 *	-0.99	(0.50)	-0.08 *
Latino	-0.24	(0.56)	-0.02	-0.25	(0.56)	-0.02
Other Race	0.64	(1.42)	0.01	0.61	(1.41)	0.01
Racial Heterogamy	-0.52	(0.53)	-0.04	-0.48	(0.53)	-0.03
Below High School Education	0.38	(0.60)	0.02	0.47	(0.60)	0.02
Some College Education	-0.61	(0.57)	-0.03	-0.57	(0.57)	-0.03
College Degree	-1.25	(0.72)	-0.05	-1.21	(0.72)	-0.05
Large Difference in Education	0.11	(0.56)	0.01	0.14	(0.56)	0.01
Small Difference in Education	0.56	(0.44)	0.04	0.63	(0.44)	0.05
Household Income	-0.36	(0.13)	-0.08 **	-0.36	(0.13)	-0.08 **
Number of Additional Children	0.31	(0.12)	0.07 **	0.31	(0.12)	0.07 **
Mothers' Hours Worked	0.00	(0.01)	-0.01	0.00	(0.01)	-0.01
Fathers' Hours Worked	0.00	(0.01)	-0.02	0.00	(0.01)	-0.02
Interactions						
Cohabiting x Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents				-1.50	(1.02)	-0.06
Cohabiting x Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother				-3.22	(1.17)	-0.10 **
Cohabiting x Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father				0.42	(1.08)	0.02
Single-Parent x Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents				0.08	(0.93)	0.01
Single-Parent x Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother				0.60	(1.05)	0.03
Single-Parent x Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father				0.76	(1.03)	0.03
R ²	0.08			0.09		
*p < .05; **p < .01; *** p < .001						
N = 1663						

Table 3. Results from Regression Models Predicting Internalizing Problem Behavior among Children at Age Five

	1			2		
	b	se	B	b	se	B
Religious Characteristics						
Weekly Service Attendance - Both Parents	-0.33	(0.38)	-0.03	-0.38	(0.38)	-0.03
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Mother	-0.12	(0.38)	-0.01	-0.17	(0.38)	-0.01
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Father	-0.13	(0.34)	-0.01	-0.11	(0.34)	-0.01
Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents	-0.78	(0.36)	-0.09	-0.90	(0.52)	-0.10
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother	-0.44	(0.35)	-0.04 *	-1.42	(0.54)	-0.13 **
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father	-0.12	(0.37)	-0.01	-0.95	(0.61)	-0.08
Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents	0.90	(0.34)	0.10 **	0.82	(0.34)	0.09 *
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother	0.55	(0.34)	0.05	0.50	(0.34)	0.04
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father	0.78	(0.34)	0.07 *	0.74	(0.34)	0.07 *
Faith-None Heterogamy	-0.06	(0.29)	-0.01	-0.10	(0.29)	-0.01
Across-Religion Heterogamy	0.03	(0.33)	0.00	0.06	(0.33)	0.00
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	-0.73	(0.37)	-0.05 *	-0.74	(0.37)	-0.05 *
Both No Religious Affiliation	0.56	(0.51)	0.03	0.49	(0.51)	0.03
Family Characteristics						
Cohabiting	0.54	(0.32)	0.05	-0.06	(0.57)	-0.01
Single-Parent	0.17	(0.34)	0.02	-0.41	(0.59)	-0.04
Transition to Two-Parent Family	0.02	(0.55)	0.00	0.09	(0.56)	0.00
Transition from Two-Parent Family	0.33	(0.35)	0.03	0.31	(0.35)	0.02
Increase in Weekly Service Attendance	0.13	(0.28)	0.01	0.15	(0.28)	0.01
Decrease in Weekly Service Attendance	0.48	(0.31)	0.05	0.53	(0.31)	0.05
Parental Involvement	0.09	(0.14)	0.01	0.11	(0.13)	0.02
Father Supportiveness	-0.73	(0.20)	-0.10 ***	-0.70	(0.20)	-0.10 ***
Controls						
Mothers' Age	0.00	(0.02)	0.00	0.00	(0.02)	0.00
Child is Female	-0.04	(0.21)	0.00	-0.04	(0.21)	0.00
Black	-0.07	(0.35)	-0.01	-0.10	(0.35)	-0.01
Latino	1.57	(0.40)	0.13 ***	1.59	(0.40)	0.13 ***
Other Race	1.49	(1.06)	0.03	1.52	(1.06)	0.04
Racial Heterogamy	0.34	(0.38)	0.03	0.35	(0.38)	0.03
Below High School Education	0.46	(0.43)	0.03	0.42	(0.43)	0.03
Some College Education	-0.63	(0.40)	-0.05	-0.63	(0.40)	-0.05
College Degree	-0.32	(0.51)	-0.02	-0.31	(0.51)	-0.02
Large Difference in Education	-0.13	(0.40)	-0.01	-0.11	(0.40)	-0.01
Small Difference in Education	0.16	(0.32)	0.01	0.18	(0.31)	0.02
Household Income	-0.13	(0.09)	-0.04	-0.13	(0.09)	-0.04
Number of Additional Children	0.09	(0.09)	0.03	0.09	(0.09)	0.03
Mothers' Hours Worked	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.05 *	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.06 *
Fathers' Hours Worked	-0.01	(0.01)	-0.03	0.00	(0.01)	-0.02
Interactions						
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents				0.12	(0.72)	0.01
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother				1.33	(0.82)	0.06
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father				1.69	(0.86)	0.08 *
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents				0.19	(0.68)	0.01
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother				1.73	(0.75)	0.11 *
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father				1.03	(0.80)	0.06
R ²	0.07			0.08		

*p < .05; **p < .01; *** p < .001

N = 1659

Table 4. Results from Regression Models Predicting Positive Behavior among Children at Age Five

	1			2		
	b	se	B	b	se	B
Religious Characteristics						
Weekly Service Attendance - Both Parents	-0.14	(0.22)	-0.02	-0.13	(0.22)	-0.02
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Mother	-0.01	(0.22)	0.00	0.02	(0.22)	0.00
Weekly Service Attendance - Only Father	-0.14	(0.20)	-0.02	-0.14	(0.20)	-0.02
Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents	0.41	(0.21)	0.08	0.61	(0.30)	0.11 *
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother	0.45	(0.20)	0.07 *	1.02	(0.31)	0.16 ***
Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father	0.05	(0.21)	0.01	0.58	(0.35)	0.09
Strict Religious Beliefs - Both Parents	-0.13	(0.20)	-0.03	-0.12	(0.20)	-0.03
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Mother	0.34	(0.20)	0.05	0.33	(0.20)	0.05
Strict Religious Beliefs - Only Father	0.04	(0.20)	0.00	0.03	(0.19)	0.00
Faith-None Heterogamy	0.05	(0.17)	0.01	0.06	(0.17)	0.01
Across-Religion Heterogamy	-0.03	(0.19)	0.00	-0.05	(0.19)	-0.01
Inter-Protestant Heterogamy	-0.10	(0.21)	-0.01	-0.10	(0.21)	-0.01
Both No Religious Affiliation	-0.46	(0.29)	-0.04	-0.44	(0.29)	-0.04
Family Characteristics						
Cohabiting	-0.27	(0.18)	-0.05	0.21	(0.33)	0.03
Single-Parent	-0.14	(0.20)	-0.02	0.23	(0.34)	0.05
Transition to Two-Parent Family	0.32	(0.32)	0.02	0.31	(0.32)	0.02
Transition from Two-Parent Family	0.29	(0.20)	0.04	0.32	(0.20)	0.04
Increase in Weekly Service Attendance	-0.06	(0.16)	-0.01	-0.04	(0.16)	-0.01
Decrease in Weekly Service Attendance	-0.07	(0.18)	-0.01	-0.10	(0.18)	-0.01
Parental Involvement	0.03	(0.08)	0.01	0.02	(0.08)	0.00
Father Supportiveness	0.03	(0.12)	0.02	0.02	(0.12)	0.02
Controls						
Mothers' Age	-0.03	(0.01)	-0.06 *	-0.03	(0.01)	-0.06 *
Child is Female	0.35	(0.12)	0.07 **	0.34	(0.12)	0.07 **
Black	-0.22	(0.20)	-0.04	-0.23	(0.20)	-0.05
Latino	-0.68	(0.23)	-0.10 **	-0.73	(0.23)	-0.11 ***
Other Race	-0.84	(0.55)	-0.04	-0.84	(0.55)	-0.04
Racial Heterogamy	0.07	(0.22)	0.01	0.05	(0.22)	0.01
Below High School Education	-0.07	(0.25)	-0.01	-0.05	(0.25)	-0.01
Some College Education	0.85	(0.23)	0.11 ***	0.86	(0.23)	0.11 ***
College Degree	0.71	(0.29)	0.08 *	0.69	(0.29)	0.08 *
Large Difference in Education	0.17	(0.23)	0.02	0.19	(0.23)	0.03
Small Difference in Education	0.69	(0.18)	0.13	0.66	(0.18)	0.12 ***
Household Income	0.17	(0.05)	0.08 **	0.17	(0.05)	0.08 **
Number of Additional Children	-0.09	(0.05)	-0.05	-0.09	(0.05)	-0.05
Mothers' Hours Worked	0.01	(0.00)	0.05 *	0.01	(0.00)	0.06 *
Fathers' Hours Worked	0.00	(0.00)	0.00	0.00	(0.00)	0.00
Interactions						
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents				-0.04	(0.41)	0.00
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother				-1.14	(0.47)	-0.09 *
Cohabiting x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father				-1.29	(0.49)	-0.11 **
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Both Parents				-0.45	(0.39)	-0.06
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Mother				-0.75	(0.43)	-0.08
Single-Parent x Religion Important to Family Life - Only Father				-0.48	(0.46)	-0.05
R ²	0.08			0.09		
*p < .05; **p < .01; *** p < .001						
N = 1704						

Figure 1: Predicted Values for Children's Externalizing Problem Behavior by Family Structure and Strict Religious Beliefs

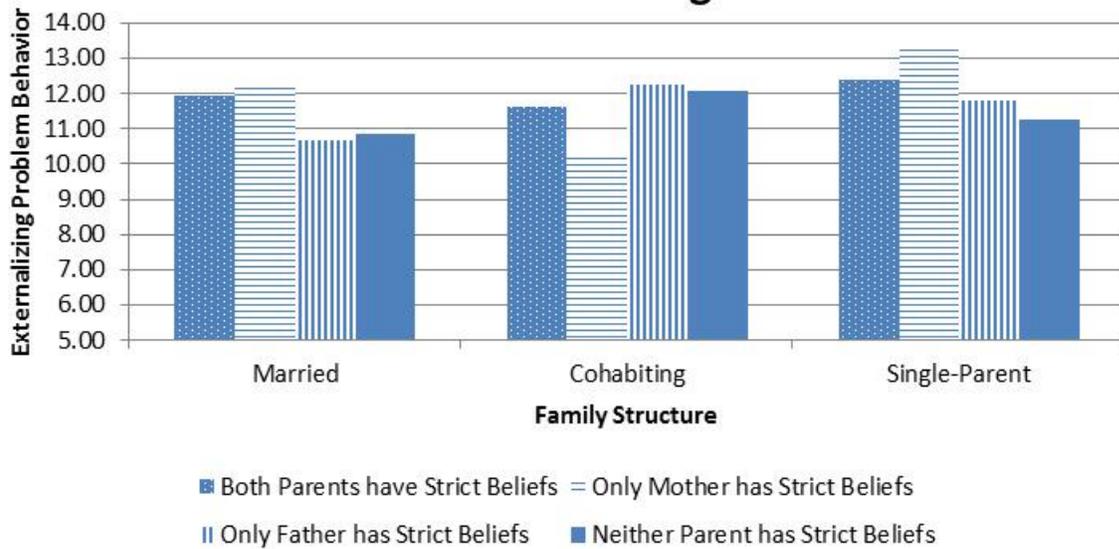


Figure 2: Predicted Values for Children's Internalizing Problem Behavior by Family Structure and Importance of Religion to Family Life

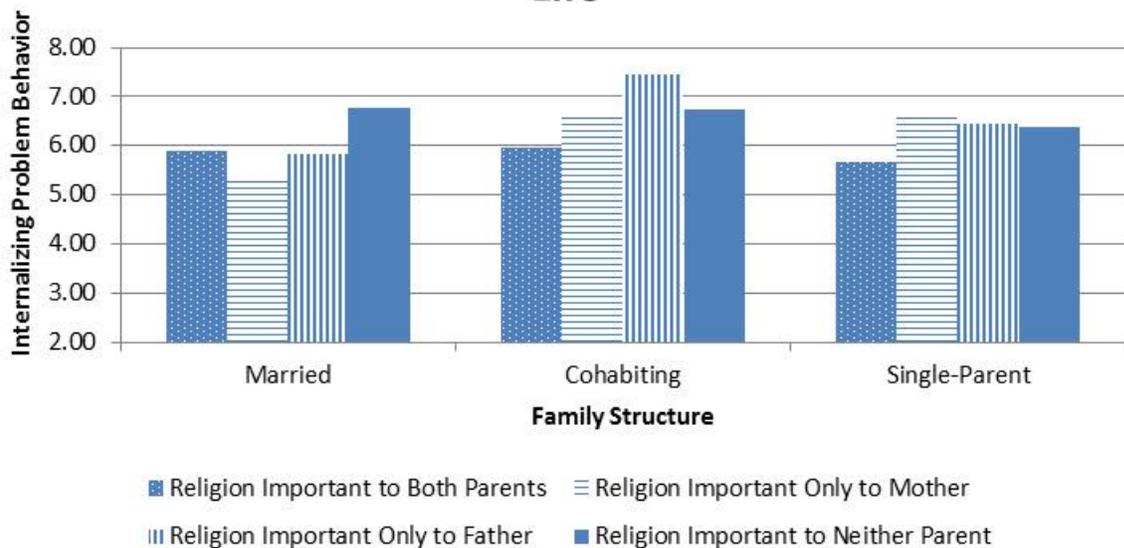


Figure 3: Predicted Values for Children's Positive Behavior by Family Structure and Importance of Religion to Family Life

