

Introduction

According to a 2014 Pew US national survey, teaching children to be responsible emerged as the top goal that parents endorsed out of twelve options, with 94 percent saying this child-rearing outcome was “especially important.” Instilling the ability to work hard was the second most endorsed goal (92 percent), followed by rearing children to be helpful (86 percent), well-mannered (86 percent), and independent (79 percent). In short, almost all US parents wanted their children to become good (i.e., prosocial) people per these criteria. Furthermore, these top five parenting goals did not vary according to parents’ religious affiliation or lack thereof. Echoing centuries of exhortation from religious leaders, however, a growing chorus of social scientists urge parents to facilitate their children’s religious and spiritual (RS)¹ development to help them become good as well as happy people (e.g., Miller, 2015; Roehlkepartain, 2014). This focus on families makes sense given that parents are the biggest influence in their children’s RS development, at least based on scientific data drawn largely from Western societies (Bengtson, Putney, & Harris, 2013; 2013; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021). For example, according to a 2019 US national survey, teens who say they attend religious services at least monthly (44 percent) have parents who do the same (43 percent; Pew, 2020). Such data exemplify a long-standing emphasis in human societies on the transmission of RS beliefs and practices from families to offspring as an important road for children to traverse to be well-adjusted across the lifespan (Bengtson et al., 2013; Smith & Adamczyk, 2021).

Most parents living with children around the world also say that religion is an important dimension of their family life. In a 2008 cross-cultural survey spanning China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States, mothers and fathers strongly agreed, on average, that religion influences their parenting and is important in their lives (Bornstein et al., 2017). Also, in the United States, 79 percent of married mothers, 77 percent of single mothers, and 68 percent of cohabiting mothers reported that religion is “somewhat” or “very important” to their daily life based on 2011–13 national surveys (Mahoney, Larrid, Payne, & Manning, 2015). In short, many millions of families across the globe likely view bestowing their children with RS resources as important to supporting their children’s development.

¹ The abbreviation RS is used throughout this Element to denote Religious/Religion (R) and Spiritual/Spirituality (S) because these complex, multifaceted domains overlap conceptually and empirically. Refer to the section “Defining of Religious/Religion and Spiritual/Spirituality” for elaboration.

Despite these statistics, rising secularization in many regions of the world suggests dwindling success by adults to foster children's RS development (Voas & Chaves, 2016). For example, as of 2019, US teens are far less likely to pray daily than their parents (27 percent of teens versus 48 percent of parents), say that religion is very important in their lives (24 percent versus 43 percent), and believe in God with absolute certainty (40 percent versus 63 percent; Pew, 2020). Annual US surveys between 1974 and 2014 also document marked declines in young adults (ages 18–29) labeling themselves as being a spiritual or a religious person, viewing the Bible as literally true, and having confidence in organized religion (Twenge, Sherman, Exline, & Grubbs, 2016). Although as of 2017, 83 percent of US young adults still report believing in God or a higher power or spiritual force, only 43 percent endorse belief in God as described in the Bible (Pew, 2018a). Data on young adults in other Western democratic countries that have historically been predominantly Christian (e.g., Europe, Canada, Australia) also show marked declines in personal (e.g., prayer) and public participation in religion (e.g., religious attendance; Pew, 2018b). Adolescents' participation in organized religious groups across most other countries has also declined relative to older generations, although less sharply (Pew, 2018b). Simultaneously, Western societies have witnessed a rapid rise in the young adults identifying as atheist or agnostic and rejecting any religious affiliation (Thiessen & Wilkins-Laflamme, 2020).

Overall, these shifting patterns in the intergenerational transmission of RS hint at a growing polarization across the globe about which children may gain the benefits and be exposed to the risks of RS becoming a core part of their identity. Furthermore, potentially escalating divisions could emerge about whether and how to foster a child's (non)faith development between generations and across societies. Given these tensions, it is perhaps all the more important to know what science currently does and does not tell us about the nature and implications of children's RS development up to age twelve. This Element addresses this topic. More specifically, this Element aims to help readers understand what social scientists know about children's RS development. The primary audience for this Element consists of social scientists who are curious about this topic, a largely neglected subject within academia. As of 2017, for example, Richert, Boyatzis and King (2017) estimated that fewer than 0.5 percent of developmental science has focused on RS development for youth of any age, with the overwhelming emphasis on adolescents (ages 13–20) rather than children (ages 3–12). Nevertheless, many researchers as well as parents, educators, and helping professionals may be eager to learn what we know empirically about children's RS development.

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This Element is structured as follows to provide readers with a comprehensive but concise account of the available scientifically based information about children's RS development. I start with a historical sketch of the difficulties in defining the domains of religion and spirituality and the four loosely organized communities of social scientists who appear to have most often grappled with children's RS development. These groups include (1) RS educators and scholars, (2) social scientists especially interested in RS and children's well-being, (3) sociologists especially interested in intergenerational transmission of religious traditions' affiliation, beliefs, and practices, and (4) social and cognitive-developmental scientists especially interested in children's supernatural cognitions. The bulk of this Element is then devoted to four major sections about children's RS development as follows.

The first major section addresses ways that social scientists rooted in Western cultures have attempted to define and measure children's RS development. This section highlights the lack of consensus on these two most basic issues and reveals remarkable disconnects between abstract theoretical definitions of children's RS development versus the nitty-gritty empirical questionnaires used to investigate wholistic models of children's RS development. Notably, although wholistic models avoid theistic terminology, nearly all of the corresponding quantitative studies with children as participants ask the children about their thoughts or feelings toward "God." In the second major section, I elaborate on emerging and intriguing empirical research on the potential benefits and risks of children's RS for their psychosocial adjustment. In addition, I summarize evidence of parents' RS functioning shaping their parenting practices in positive and negative ways that contribute to children's psychological functioning.

The third and fourth major sections of the Element shift toward factors thought to shape the development of children's RS thoughts and feelings rather than possible outcomes tied to their RS functioning. Ideally, related scientific evidence would fit neatly into Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) familiar bioecological model of human development that highlights biological, child, family, peers, school, and local religious communities, as well as broader cultural contexts that reciprocally and interactively shape children's development over time. The reality, however, is that the bulk of this literature addresses (1) the intergenerational transmission from parents to youth of an affiliation with a major world religion and associated beliefs and practices and (2) children's cognitions about supernatural phenomena during early and middle childhood. Hence, the third major section summarizes quantitative evidence about the influence of parents on their children's RS (non) socialization. The fourth major section focuses on a complex body of quantitative surveys and experimental laboratory research on children's cognitions

about God/deities and prayer, noting the virtual absence of research on children's views of evil supernatural powers. The Element concludes with a fifth section on the challenges that researchers face to advance the science of children's RS development.

Historical Sketch of Science on Children's Religious and Spiritual (RS) Development

This portion of the Element provides a primer on conceptual complexities in defining Religious/Religion (R) versus Spiritual/Spirituality (S) within social science literature. Understanding these issues is necessary to appreciate the nature of the empirical findings delineated throughout this Element. I also offer a historical sketch of four loosely organized groups of social scientists who have explored the topic of children's RS development.

Defining of Religious/Religion and Spiritual/Spirituality

Perhaps the most basic point to understand about children's RS development is that a clear consensus does not exist among social scientists about the overarching definitions and boundaries between the multifaceted domains of being Religious/Religion (R) versus being Spiritual/Spirituality (S) when studying people across the lifespan (Hill & Edwards, 2013; Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Oman, 2013). In general, being R is portrayed within sociological and psychological literature as public engagement in a given organized sociocultural-historical religious tradition; adherence to theologically orthodox beliefs, dogmas, or rituals, especially in relationship to supernatural entities; and external pressure to conform to social norms promoted by a religious group (Pargament, Mahoney, Exline, Jones, & Shafranske, 2013). One widely used definition of religion in the social science literature, for instance, has been:

an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols that serve (a) to facilitate individuals' closeness to the sacred or transcendent other (i.e., God, higher power, ultimate truth) and (b) to bring about an understanding of an individual's relationship and responsibility to others living together in community (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001, p.18).

Along these lines, attendance at worship services and endorsement of conservative Christian beliefs (e.g., literalist interpretations of the Bible) have typically been labeled as being "religious," "religiousness," or "religiosity." Notably, some scholars have recommended that the term "religion" per se be reserved for scholarship about organized religious institutions that promote particular theological worldviews and practices whereas the term "religiousness" be used for social science investigations into the characteristics of people who report on

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their experiences, cognitions, or behaviors consistent with one or more religion's teachings (Paloutzian & Park, 2021). This semantic distinction encourages social scientists not to portray themselves as experts on the history, theology, or veracity of truth claims promoted by various world religions, leaving such work to philosophers, theologians, and/or religious studies scholars.

Within the social science literature, the domain of being spiritual tends to be framed as a personal search for a connection to divine entities or supernatural phenomena; a private quest for enlightenment or virtues; and/or internal motivation to seek out meaning, purpose, and self-transcendence within or outside of the self or organized religion groups. Koenig et al. (2001), for example, defined spirituality as “a personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community” (p. 18). Importantly, in an effort to be maximally inclusive and based on the assumption that all humans are inherently “spiritual” by nature, some social scientists argue that the boundaries of spirituality encompass children organizing their sense of meaning and purpose around anything perceived as “larger than the self” (Roehlkepartain, 2014). From this vantage point, self-transcendence as a prototypical element of spirituality does not need to involve supernatural entities or experiences (Miller, 2015; Roehlkepartain, 2014). Likewise, spirituality need not involve organized religious traditions. To illustrate, Boyatzis (2012, p. 153) argued that “children are spiritual beings first and then are acculturated (or not) in a religious tradition that channels intuitive spirituality into particular expressions (rituals, creeds, etc.) that have been passed through the faith tradition.”

Given the expansive definitions of S used in social science literature, a persistent and elusive definitional problem is what makes either R or S substantively distinctive from any other domain of life (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010; Pargament et al., 2013). The first major section of this Element that covers wholistic models of children's spiritual well-being will vividly illustrate this issue and the conclusions section of this Element will revisit the difficulties of polarizing R versus S in research on children's RS development given available theoretical and empirical knowledge. In the meantime, I use the abbreviation RS throughout this Element to refer to research on children's RS development because, when models and measures are closely examined, findings seem to converge on one construct that has been uniquely and consistently studied for children – namely, their perceptions of God. For additional cogent elaborations on defining R and S, see Nelson (2009) and Oman (2013). A brief sketch of four loosely organized communities of scholars

and social scientists who have most often grappled with children's RS development is instructive to begin to understand the sometimes bewildering language used in scientific literature on children's RS development.

Four Loosely Organized Communities of Scholars and Social Scientists

Although the domain of RS was at the forefront of work by early pioneers in psychiatry (e.g., Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung), psychology (e.g., William James), and sociology (e.g., Emile Durkheim), social scientists devoted to the field of child development in the twentieth century seemed to have generally been disinterested in the topic (Boyatzis, 2013; Holden & Williamson, 2014). The major exception was Fowler (1981), who in the late 1970s proposed an influential stage model of RS development that integrated concepts from Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Fowler proposed that humans pass through three primitive stages of faith development from birth to adolescence (i.e., primal faith, intuitive-projective faith, mythical-literal faith) and that RS primarily emerges as important after the onset of the cognitive stage of formal operations in adolescence and into adulthood. Fowler viewed mature cognitive skills as necessary for individuals to comprehend RS issues and make upward progress across adulthood through what Fowler viewed as increasingly sophisticated stages of faith. Fowler's assumptions perhaps helped to dampen interest by mainstream developmental scientists in investigating children's RS. However, the following four communities of scholars and social scientists have been steadily increasing the body of empirical research focused on children's RS over the past two to three decades.

Religious educators and scholars. In opposition to Fowler's assumptions, scholars with a strong interest in children's RS education were among the first to interview young children to solicit their stories and artwork (e.g., drawings, paintings) about their experiences of God, religious teachings, scriptures, and interconnectedness with nature and other people. Leading figures include psychiatrist Coles (1990), who wrote an influential narrative account of children's spirituality rooted in psychoanalytic theory, and Hay and Nye (1998), who interviewed thirty-eight 6- to 11-year-old children from the United Kingdom, most of whom (74 percent) were not affiliated with a religious tradition. Based on these and other studies (Mata-McMahon, 2016), scholars in this area encouraged religious educators to avoid didactic and rote instruction of orthodox religious belief or practices, and instead nondirectively explore children's sense of in-the-moment flow (awareness sensing), wonder and awe

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(mystery sensing), and feelings of ultimate goodness and meaning underlying being alive (value sensing). Mata-McMahon (2016) has written an analysis of this largely ethnographic and qualitative body of literature. A major journal that has published work by these scholars is the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*.

Social scientists interested in children's RS and psychosocial well-being. Beginning in the 1990s, social scientists started to formulate conceptual models and quantitative assessment tools to capture wholistic portrayals of children's RS well-being. Drawing on the qualitative work mentioned earlier, this research emphasizes the language of "children's spirituality," although most measures assess children's understanding of God and/or activities encouraged by organized religious groups (e.g., prayer). Fisher (1998), in particular, spearheaded such work by interviewing teachers from Australia about their ideas of the best ways to facilitate children's RS formation. Fisher then developed separate structured tools to assess adolescents' and children's "spiritual well-being" based on his model that spirituality encompasses human potential for life-enhancing experiences of the self, others, God, and nature. In the 2000s, numerous social scientists from Canada and the United States, such as those with backgrounds in social development, human development, and family studies, began to design additional quantitative measures to capture children's spirituality well-being. In addition, social scientists with medical, counseling, or clinical psychology training started to adapt adult measures of RS for use with children and link their self-reported RS to their psychosocial adjustment. Generally, findings have been published in journals that specialize in empirical research on RS, such as the *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*.

Social scientists and the intergenerational transmission of religion. In contrast to the previous groups, scholars focused on the intergenerational transmission of religion have adhered closely to the language of "religious" or "religion" when examining children's RS. Sociologists have employed national or large regional surveys to document the socialization of worship attendance as well as RS beliefs and practices endorsed by major religious traditions from parents or grandparents to adolescents or young adults. Some leading scholars include Bengtson (Bengtson et al., 2013), Pearce & Denton (2011), Smith & Adamczyk (2021), and numerous other researchers who occasionally publish studies on the intergenerational transmission of RS. Especially relevant to this Element are studies focused on parents' reports of their own role in shaping their children's RS development, with a 2021 book by Smith and Adamczyk epitomizing this work. Mainstream sociology and family journals as well as journals specializing in the science of RS have often been outlets for this work.

Social and cognitive-developmental scientists. A distinctive body of basic research that has steadily gained momentum since the early 2000s involves social and cognitive-developmental scientists examining how children think about supernatural concepts and, especially for this Element, their cognitions about God and prayer. Intersections between attachment theory and RS also fall under the umbrella of social-cognitive developmental research on children's experiences of God. Some leading scholars in this area include Barrett and Richert (Barrett, 2012; Barrett & Richert, 2003; Richert & Smith, 2009), Granqvist (Granqvist, 2020; Richert & Granqvist, 2013), and Lane (Lane, 2020; Lane, Wellman, & Evans, 2010), among numerous others. Initial literature framed findings in terms of children's "religious cognitions," but some work within cognitive and developmental science has shifted toward the language of RS cognitions (Boyatzis, 2013). See Boyatzis (2013), Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2018), and Richert and Granqvist (2013) for chapters that emphasize social and cognitive-developmental research on children's RS. Findings appear in journals focused on child development as well as those specializing in research on RS.

Rising attention to children's RS. As mentioned earlier, scant attention has been paid to children's RS development within the mainstream scientific community that studies children's development. This situation has begun to change, however, with biannual preconferences on children's RS development at the Society for Research in Child Development and several special issues in major journals focused on children's RS development that were championed by Boyatzis (Boyatzis, 2003, 2006; Richert et al., 2017), along with the publication of a handbook on the topic (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). The topic has also begun to attract major grant funding, such as funding in 2020 from the Templeton Foundation to build an international community of social scientists to investigate the development of children's RS beliefs across diverse religious contexts and countries, headed by Richert (University of California, 2020).

Children's Wholistic RS Development: Conceptual Models and Measures

Having established the general networks of primarily Western social scientists who conduct empirical research on children's RS development, I turn to a summary of available basic descriptive data about children's reports of their own RS development over time based on global indicators of explicit RS activities or beliefs. Next, I discuss the various conceptual models and measures that quantitative researchers have developed to capture a wholistic description

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of children's RS functioning. I then highlight areas of convergence and divergence about the nature of "children's spirituality" across these efforts.

Basic Descriptive Information on Children's RS Development

To fully justify using the term "development" when referring to children's RS development in this Element, ample prospective empirical studies would ideally exist that document changes over time in youth (or parent) reports about children's RS experiences from childhood to adolescence or adulthood. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I, as well as King and Boyatzis (2015), located only one peer-reviewed published study that tracked changes over time in children's RS (Tamminen, 1994). In this study, youth (ages 7–20) from Finland who belonged to the Lutheran church reported on their experiences of feeling close to God in 1974. The 9- to 10-year-olds ($N = 60$) were reassessed in 1976 and 1980, and they reported significant declines in closeness to God over time. Specifically, 57 percent initially endorsed "yes, very often" about feeling near to God, but these rates dropped to 40 percent by age 11–12 to 18 percent by age 15–16. Cross-sectional comparisons of cohorts by age in 1974 ($N = 1,558$) and in a 1986 replication sample ($N = 1,186$) likewise showed marked shifts downward in felt closeness to God as a function of age. For example, in the 1986 sample, "being alone" was the most common situation where all age groups felt close to God, with 77 percent and 73 percent of the 9- to 10-year-olds and 11- to 12-year-olds "often" or "sometimes" felt near to God during such moments; only 22 percent and 26 percent of the 14- to 15-year olds and 16- to 17-year-olds indicated the same.

Scarce cross-sectional data exist on children's reports of their RS activities based on large, representative samples drawn from anywhere in the world to give perspective on Tamminen's longitudinal findings from data gathered more than forty years ago. A laudable exception is an internet-based survey published in 2010 with a random sample of 1,009 US children between the ages of 8–12 years (Ovwigbo & Cole, 2010). The children's three most common religious preferences were Christian Protestant (55 percent), Roman Catholic (15 percent), and atheist or none (11 percent); 31 percent of the children also identified as being "a born-again Christian." For attendance at religious services, 41 percent said they attended weekly, 15 percent once or twice a month, 20 percent less than monthly, and 23 percent never. Although 80 percent reported they prayed daily, only around 30 percent belonged to a religious youth group or read the Bible. Overall, these figures are consistent with US national surveys around 2010 of parents' reports on religious affiliation and worship participation

(Ellison & McFarland, 2013). These similarities are unsurprising because children depend on adults for transportation to RS activities outside the home.

Looking ahead, a key priority for scientific research on children's RS development is collecting basic descriptive information longitudinally and cross-culturally about children's RS. One potential mechanism could be to embed global RS items in quality-of-life measures administered to children. One effort has piloted this strategy with children. Specifically, Jirojanakul and Skevington (2000) included the items "To what extent does your religion make you happy?" and "How satisfied are you with your religious practice (e.g., praying, giving food to a monk, going to a temple, or church, or mosque)?" in a pilot study for assessing quality of life using thirty-five Thai children ages 5–8 years that was modeled after the concepts and procedures based on the World Health Organization's WHOQOL measures (WHOQOL Group, 1995a; 1995b). Otherwise, efforts to include even a few global items on RS when designing cross-cultural studies of children appear to have stalled (<https://doi.org/10.1348/135910700168937>)(Cremeens, Eiser, & Blades, 2006; Fisher, 2009). However, global indicators of RS are prevalent in epidemiological and sociological studies of adolescents (Hardy, Nelson, Moore, & King, 2019), and valid subscales on RS have been developed to supplement adults' WHOQOL measures (Hammer, Wade, & Cragun, 2020). Furthermore, Ovwigho and Cole's findings suggest that children can reliably complete global items about RS. Thus, researchers could fruitfully conduct prospective longitudinal surveys to track children's self-reports of developmental changes in their public and private RS activities over time starting around age seven rather than waiting until youth have entered adolescence to establish baseline indicators of RS. Parents could also monitor their children's level of engagement in various RS activities over time.

Wholistic Models and Measures of Children's Spirituality

A handful of efforts have been made to develop wholistic conceptual models of children's RS and create corresponding multidimensional, multi-item self-report measures that are developmentally appropriate for children. A major theme in this literature is a desire to move away from single item indicators of involvement in organized religious groups (e.g., type of affiliation, worship attendance) toward more diverse RS experiences (Fisher, 2009). Table 1 summarizes each research team's abstract conceptual definitions, if provided, of R and S and concrete items used to assess theorized dimensions of children's RS development. To facilitate a later comparative discussion of these models and methods, Table 1 lists the assessment tools on a loose continuum from those that