

Is your teen walking a tightrope?



Research shows that children raised with a sense of spirituality are safer, happier, and healthier during the vulnerable teenage years, and face fewer emotional and behavioral challenges. In fact, statistics reveal that a relationship with a higher power can play a critical role in adolescent well-being.

A 2012 study conducted by the Department of Child and Family Services at the University of Tennessee examined data from 9,300 teenagers across six countries and regions. The study referenced earlier findings which indicated that teens without religious influences were significantly more likely to experience depression, anti-social behavior, substance abuse, weapon-carrying, suicidal thoughts, risky behaviors such as drinking and driving.

By contrast, teens who reported religious involvement exhibited what researchers called “**pro-social behavior**,” including positive traits such as volunteerism, greater school engagement, and emotional resilience:

- Teens who were more religious than their peers reported **lower rates of depression** and **higher self-esteem**.
- Those who felt a **sense of spirituality or meaningfulness in religion** reported significantly **lower levels of emotional distress**.

Perhaps most strikingly, an intense personal relationship with God was found to be **more protective than any other factor** against the "big three" dangers facing adolescents:

- **Substance abuse**
- **Risky sexual behavior**
- **Physical danger**

Teens involved in organized religion were:

- **40% less likely** to abuse alcohol or drugs
- **60% less likely** to suffer from depression
- **70% less likely** to transition from experimental to regular substance use
- **80% less likely** to engage in unprotected sex

These benefits are not just spiritual, they're also neurological. During adolescence, the brain undergoes rapid development. It becomes more intellectually capable while losing some emotional regulation, making teens especially vulnerable. Amidst this surge of change, researchers have found a corresponding **increase in spiritual yearning**.

A 2002 study published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, based on a survey of 3,300 teen girls in North Carolina, found that a **higher frequency of prayer or meditation** correlated with a **lower risk of depression**.

Further support comes from a Boston University study, which found that **religiosity is associated with improved executive function and self-control**, offering long-term protection against a wide range of mental health issues.

Key Insights from Related Research:

- **Social Support:** Religious communities often offer strong social networks.
- **Healthier Behaviors:** Many faith traditions promote physical and mental well-being.
- **Reduced Risk-Taking:** Religiously involved individuals tend to avoid high-risk behaviors.
- **Mental Health:** Regular participation in spiritual practices often leads to a greater sense of purpose, hope, and reduced stress.

What Parents Should Know: Spirituality clearly contributes to human health and well-being and can be a powerful support system for teens as they navigate the complexities of growing up. Parents don't need to have all the answers. What matters most is **showing up, taking an interest**, and letting adolescents know that their search for meaning and connection, **matter**.



Sources: <http://www.macleans.ca/society/science/god-is-the-answer/>