



# Helping Kids Keep the Faith

## Four Research Insights Every Parent Needs to Know

By Curtis Miller

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Photo by Dustin McClure.

My wife, Meredith, and I welcomed our son into the world last January. Like most parents, we have a lot of hopes for him. We hope he'll be happy and healthy. We hope he'll be compassionate and independent. We hope he won't grow up to be a Yankees fan.

But of all the various things we hope for his life, there is a clear one at the top: We hope he grows up to love and follow Jesus. I would venture to guess that most Christian parents would say the same.

Which is why as a parent I'm thankful there's research being done on what helps kids stick with faith into adulthood, or what FYI calls [Sticky Faith](#). The status of the next generation of Christians has been the cause of much hand-wringing, guess-making, and anecdote-peddling for about as long as there has been a next generation to worry about, but only recently has there been much reliable data from which parents and youth workers can learn. <sup>1</sup> What's even better is that more and more consensus is building around what actually works in helping faith stick into young adulthood.

A new addition to that body of research comes from University of Southern California sociologist Vern L. Bengtson in his book *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations*. The book arises out of a 35-year study of families begun in 1970, and focuses on the question of how religion is passed across generations. <sup>2</sup> This multigenerational study dispels certain widely-held myths and brings to light some very useful findings.

Here are four key findings most relevant to families and congregations:

### 1) Parents' Influence is Crucial

There is a common belief in our culture that parents wield less and less influence over their kids these days, and that those kids are increasingly abandoning the beliefs and values of their families of origin.

It is not true. It probably never has been.

What *is true*, according to Bengtson's study, is that **young adults today are just as likely to share their parents' faith as they were in 1970**. This is true whether you're looking at religious affiliation (What religion are you?), religious intensity (How religious are you?), religious participation (How often do you attend?), Biblical literalism (What's your view of the Bible?), or civic religiosity (How important should religion be in public life?). Across all these markers, parental influence is just as high as it was a generation ago.




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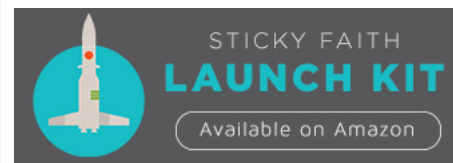
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In other words, **parents continue to be the single greatest influence on their children's faith.**

(A quick aside: Grandparents, interestingly, are a close second. The study found that grandparents, especially grandfathers, who are highly religious were more likely to have grandkids who were also highly religious. It turns out that **grandparents might be an underutilized asset** in many churches and youth groups, not to mention families themselves. Here's an article from Kara Powell with [Twenty Ideas for Grandparents](#) you can pass along right now!)

There are some differences in parental influence when the data is broken down by religious tradition, however. Mainline Protestant and Catholic parents appear to have less influence on their kids than they did in 1970. Evangelicals, Mormons, and Jews all have about the same influence. But those with no religious affiliation (often called "Nones") are significantly more influential in their kids' faith now than they were a generation ago.

In other words, the widely discussed "rise of the Nones" is not due to unprecedented numbers of young people abandoning their childhood faith. It seems largely due to families of Nones passing on that "None-ness" at a much higher rate than in the past.

The bottom line: *Parents matter.* They matter a lot. That's a very hopeful message churches could be sending to parents who are worried about their kids' faith.

## 2) Bland Faith Doesn't Transfer

The data, according to Bengtson, "indicates a trend towards polarization in religious intensity over time." <sup>3</sup> In every way that the study tested, those at either end of the spectrum of religiosity (either very religious or not at all religious) transferred that quality to the next generation at significantly higher rates than those in the middle. For example, parents who attend church "weekly or more" and those who attend "never" passed that quality on to their kids 59% and 55% of the time, respectively. Those who attend either "monthly" or "once a year," on the other hand, had young adult children who fit into the same category 31% and 26% of the time. Similar statistics carried across the various measures of religiosity.

Bengtson says that one reason for this data "is parental behavior, such as role modeling and consistency. If the parents are not themselves involved in religious activities, if their actions are not consistent with what they preach, children are rarely motivated to follow in their parents' religious footsteps." <sup>4</sup>

One of the biggest steps churches can take, therefore, to help spark faith from generation to generation is to encourage and equip parents in their discipleship. When a kid sees and hears that faith actually makes a difference in Mom and Dad's lives, they're much more likely to follow suit.

## 3) The Power of a Close Relationship

This may be counter-intuitive to a study about faith transmission, but the single greatest factor in whether a parent successfully imparted their faith to their children was the quality of their relationship with those children. By every measure in this study, a young adult was more likely to share their parents' religious beliefs and participation if they felt that they had a close relationship with those parents. This held true for all of the religious traditions studied.

Of particular interest is what happens when you break down the data between fathers and mothers. While a close relationship with her mother does significantly improve the odds of a child sharing Mom's religious beliefs when she becomes an adult, the relationship with her father is far more predictive.

This effect is greatest when the data focused in on Evangelical and Mainline Protestants. Among those groups, a close relationship with Mom has a very small effect on the likelihood of religious transmission, while a close relationship with Dad has a gigantic effect. For young adults from Evangelical families, 71% of those who had a close relationship with their father shared that Evangelical faith, compared with only 46% of those who did not have a close relationship with their father. While this is only one study, these findings are certainly worth wondering about.

Churches who want to see faith shared between generations need to encourage and equip parents to build warm, affirming, close relationships with their kids. God loves and is patient with us. Is it any wonder that when we do the same for our kids they're more likely to meet that God?

## 4) Love the Prodigal

This close relationship becomes even more important when a child walks away from God.

Even the best parenting can't guarantee that children won't for a time walk away from the faith they were raised to believe, but what happens next can be the determining factor in whether those children eventually return. "The prodigals in our sample were rebels who later came back to the family religion; **in almost every case we found that their parents have been patient and supportive** – and perhaps more tolerant and open than they had been before the prodigal's departure." <sup>5</sup> It turns out that the best way to bring a prodigal back is to love them even more tangibly than before they left.

You'd think that as Christians we wouldn't have to hear this truth. After all, Jesus compares the Father's love for us with a father who runs with joy to meet his lost son (Luke 15). But we do need to hear it. Our love and acceptance of our kids is never more important than when they rebel against us. It is then that they will truly see the God who searches after and even dies for them. And it is then that we will truly see the God who forgave and pursued us even when we had rejected him.



## Action Points for Families

1. Take a look at the faith you're passing on. With the help of your spouse or a trusted friend, ask yourself: What practices and/or beliefs do you hope your kids will inherit from you? How do they see those things naturally and consistently displayed in your own life? Where could you be more intentional about passing faith on?
2. Get a hand from Grandma and Grandpa. Is there a grandparent or another senior adult who can reinforce what you hope your kids learn about Jesus? Maybe they can take the grandkids to church one week, pray with them, read the Bible with them, or talk about their own relationship with Christ.
3. Learn from your kids. Ask your kids how they know Jesus is important to you and that you love him. See if they've noticed your faith. Say something like: "Jesus is really important to me, and I was wondering if you felt you could see that in my life?" You might learn a lot from their response.
4. Spend regular quality time together. Find out what your kids most like to do with you, and plan ways to turn up the warmth in your relationship. Especially if this is new, it may be a little strange at first. That's okay! Keep at it, building a normal routine of fun and meaningful time together. Maybe you can start a new tradition like After-School Ice Cream Day on Wednesdays, Dinner/Breakfast Date on Thursdays, Hiking Day on Saturdays ...
5. Get help. Sometimes a family needs an outside perspective to help get the warmth back in a relationship that has grown a bit cold. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to find a counselor who can help. A warm relationship with you is a significant force in your child's faith development, and it's never too late to work at restoring one with your child of any age.

Bonus: [Watch a video](#) of Dr. Bengtson presenting in a research colloquium at Fuller to hear more insights from this study!



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1. See FYI's Sticky Faith resources; Chap Clark's Hurt 2.0; Chap and Dee Clark's Disconnected; Christian Smith's Soul Searching, Souls in Transition, and Lost in Transition; and Kenda Creasy Dean's Almost Christian. Together they paint a very complementary picture of adolescent and emerging adult spirituality and the transfer of faith to the next generation. ↩
2. For those interested in the basic methodology: the findings come from a 35-year longitudinal study of families drawn from a representative sample of southern California in 1970. Those families were surveyed and periodically interviewed from 1970-2005 about a variety of topics, one of which was religion. The sample is therefore not nationally representative; for example, it has a relatively higher percentage of people with no religious affiliation than it would if the sample were taken from the South or the Midwest. It also includes fewer racial/ethnic minorities than would likely be the case if the sample were taken today rather than 1970. ↩
3. Bengtson, Vern L. with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 61. ↩
4. Ibid, p. 72 ↩
5. Ibid, p. 189 ↩

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Curtis Miller grew up in suburban Northern California and rural Michigan, and after a (very cold) four years in Boston made his way to L.A. He likes California because the weather doesn't drive you indoors for four months out of the year. Curtis completed an MDiv at Fuller, is currently pursuing a DMin at Duke, and is an associate pastor at Hillside Community Church in Rancho Cucamonga, CA.

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Barb Mandley · a month ago

This is a wonderful article. My first book has just been published, it's on parenting and It's called "Parenting with a Wise Heart." I approached all of what I wrote with the thoughts you mentioned in mind, but it's just cool to know that there are now statistics to back up how faith gets passed along. If an opportunity presents itself please tell Kara hello for me, she was a high school student at San Diego First Assembly when we first started attending there. Thanks again for such a good article.

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