Published in final edited form as:

J Res Adolesc. 2019 June ; 29(2): 357–368. doi:10.1111/jora.12409.

PATTERNS OF SHARED RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE AND POSITIVE STEPFAMILY FUNCTIONING

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Abstract

This study used data from Add Health to examine the relationship between shared participation in religious activities and positive stepfamily functioning as indicated by the closeness of the stepfather-stepchild bond, the closeness of the mother-child bond, the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship, the adolescent's perception of family belonging, and the stability of the mother-stepfather marriage. The study incorporated information on shared religious participation between adolescents and their mothers and stepfathers by examining whether adolescents reported frequently attending religious services or church-related events with both parents, with one parent, or with neither parent. Shared religious attendance was positively associated with several aspects of stepfamily functioning above and beyond the positive association of family members' engagement in other types of shared activities.

High rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and remarriage mean that many U.S. children will experience living in a stepfamily. Almost 8% of all U.S. children were living with a stepparent in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011), and estimates of children ever spending some time in a stepfamily are much higher, at approximately 30% (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995). The vast majority of stepfamilies involve married couples and residential stepfathers, although children are increasingly likely to be living in cohabiting stepfamilies (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Most cohabiting stepfamilies, however, transition to marriage or dissolve within a few years of forming (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), with different implications for child well-being.

Prior research indicates a great deal of variability in the quality of family relationships within stepfamilies (King & Lindstrom, 2016), and scholars have recently focused on elucidating factors that are associated with positive stepfamily functioning (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). A largely neglected factor in this research is the role of religion (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). Higher levels of religious involvement have been linked to the closeness and quality of ties between biological parents and their children (King,

2010;Mahoney, 2010), as well as to marital quality and stability (Mahoney et al., 2001;Teachman, 2008). Therefore, stepfamily ties may be enhanced to the extent that stepfamily members participate in a religious culture. However, stepfamilies are less likely than married biological parent families to participate in a religious culture (Petts, 2015), and even when they do, they may not experience the same benefits from religious participation. For example, given that many stepfamilies are formed after divorce, and divorce is frowned upon by many religions, stepfamilies may receive less social support from their church networks (Taylor & Chatters, 1988).

We draw on Waves I and III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) to examine the relationship between shared participation in religious activities and positive stepfamily functioning as indicated by the closeness of the stepfather-stepchild bond, the closeness of the mother-child bond, the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship, the adolescent's perception of family belonging, and the stability of the mother-stepfather marriage over time. Most prior research on the association between religiosity and family relationships focuses either on the religiosity of an individual family member, such as the adolescent or mother, or on the congruence between a particular dyad, such as between the mother and child (Mahoney, 2010). A strength of the current study is that it incorporates information on shared religious participation between all members of the triad -- the adolescent, the mother, and the stepfather -- by examining the extent to which adolescents report frequently attending religious services or church-related events with both their mothers and stepfathers, attending religious services with only one parent, or not attending services with either parent.

We also control for family members' participation in other types of shared activities in order to test whether shared religious participation has unique effects above and beyond participating in other kinds of activities. Religious parents are more likely to be involved with their children (Petts, 2007), and parent-child participation in shared activities is positively associated with parent-child relationship quality (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Is there something special about going to church together as opposed to going to movies or shopping together?

The current study will provide a better understanding of stepfamily processes during adolescence, a critical stage of the life course. Parent-child conflict tends to increase and engagement in shared activities declines (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). Although adolescence can be a challenging time for all families, these processes are exacerbated in stepfamilies (Bray & Easling, 2005). Yet close parent-child relationships are important for adolescents in stepfamilies given that these youth are especially vulnerable to peer influence and at greater risk for poor outcomes (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). When parent-child relationships remain close, parents and stepparents continue to be valuable resources for their children. In addition to parent-child closeness, a stable home environment and feelings of family belonging can promote positive adolescent development (King, Boyd, & Pragg, 2017).

Religious Participation and Family Functioning

Why would religious participation enhance family functioning? We draw on Smith's (2017) framework of the causal capacities of religion. When people practice religion, they create a variety of new social features and powers that are able to influence people's lives. Examples include new forms of identity, meaning, expression and experiences, community, social control, and legitimacy of various kinds. These new powers and capacities come to shape the thinking, desires, feelings, experiences, and actions of religious people. Thus there can be a number of ways that religious participation may enhance family functioning in terms of promoting family cohesion, positive parent-child relationships, and stronger marriages.

As many scholars have noted, religious teachings and values emphasize and support the centrality of family life, the importance of positive family relationships, and a focus on the concerns and needs of others over the self (Ellison, 1992; Wuthnow, 1991). Religious institutions promote pro-family messages through sermons, scriptural stories, church publications, and other church teachings. Thus religious participants are involved in a culture that shapes their values and behaviors by emphasizing the importance of family relationships and a commitment to others that encourages parents to be actively involved in the lives of their children (Wilcox, 2002), and promotes marital commitment, forgiveness, and sacrifice between couples (Mahoney, 2010). Relatedly, religious individuals may sanctify family roles or relationships, infusing them with religious or spiritual meaning that results in placing a high priority on fostering close marital and parent-child ties (Mahoney et al., 2001, 2003).

Church services and related religious activities provide opportunities for family members to interact and share experiences with one another, potentially enhancing the quality and closeness of their relationships (Ellison, 1992; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). This may be especially helpful for integrating stepparents into the family. Religious rituals celebrate family events, enhancing family cohesion and identity (Chatters & Taylor, 2005). In addition, individuals who participate in religious communities are surrounded by like-minded coreligionists and may seek out friends who share similar beliefs, which can also reinforce pro-family teachings and family-oriented activities. Religious communities may also provide support and assistance to families in need or that experience problematic family relationships, such as by offering marital counseling (Chatters & Taylor, 2005). Both the social control and social support functions of religion (D'Antonio, Newman, & Wright, 1982) are conducive to family solidarity (Cornwall, 2013). Families that have experienced a divorce or separation, however, may encounter a certain amount of stigma that may limit support from church members (Taylor & Chatters, 1988).

As both Smith (2017) and King and Boyatzis (2015) point out, religion does not exclusively provide these kinds of opportunities or benefits that can lead to enhanced family ties, but it may be particularly effective at it. These scholars note that religious institutions can be particularly effective in offering and generating social capital or social relationships of trust and reciprocity. This in turn can enhance cohesion and belonging. Further, the different ways that religious participation can promote family ties noted previously may have synergistic and mutually reinforcing effects. In this way, shared religious participation is more than just a shared activity between parents and children or between spouses. Although participating in

non-religious activities together may also promote family ties, as the extant literature suggests (e.g., Meier & Musick, 2014), shared religious participation may be associated with positive family functioning above and beyond participating in other types of shared activities.

A number of prior studies have found a positive association between an individual's level of church attendance and parent-child ties. Studies focusing on parental religious participation suggest that this association holds for both mothers (e.g., Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Smith & Kim, 2003) and fathers (e.g., King, 2003, 2010; Petts, 2007). A few studies examining the association between a child's religious participation and positive parent-child ties reach a similar conclusion (e.g., King, Ledwell, & Pearce-Morris, 2013; Mahoney, 2010). As noted previously, however, most research has examined ties between biological parents and their children (or is based on samples largely composed of biological parents and children).

Fewer studies have considered concordance or discordance in religiousness between parent-child dyads, but findings suggest that religious concordance is associated with higher quality parent child relationships whereas discordance can be associated with lower quality relationships (Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Stokes & Regnerus, 2009). These findings indicate the importance of looking beyond individual indicators of religious participation, but studies rarely go beyond considering one parent-child dyad.

With regard to couple relationships, prior research suggests that higher levels of religious participation at the individual level or joint participation is positively associated with marital quality and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). This may be especially pertinent for stepfamilies as they are at higher risk of dissolution (Teachman, 2008).

The Current Study

The current study examines the association between frequent shared religious participation and family functioning in stepfather families. We hypothesize that if children are regularly attending church with both their mothers and stepfathers, any advantages that flow from religious participation to positive stepfamily functioning could be amplified over situations where only some family members, or none, are religiously involved. For example, if a single mother and her children participate in a religious community together, and a stepfather enters the household and shares in this activity, both the stepfather-child bond and the couple relationship may be enhanced. By attending church together, stepfathers may signal commitment to the family that mothers in particular appreciate, and this could lead to a happier marriage (Kalil & Rege, 2015; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). To the extent that the stepfather does not participate or attends a different church, one potential avenue for integrating the stepfather into the family will be lacking. Indeed, as past research suggests, religious dissimilarity can work against high quality relationships between parents and their children or between spouses.

Of course, there are other ways and other types of activities that could promote positive ties in stepfamilies. Coleman and colleagues (2013) point to the importance of parental engagement in activities with children as well as everyday talk for positive stepfamily

functioning. Adolescents also report being more satisfied in stepfamilies if they have positive communication with their parents (Henry & Lovelace, 1995). Family dinners can also be important for positive stepfamily functioning as they provide a routine time for parents to connect with each other as well as with their children. Shared meals provide opportunities for communication, transmitting values, establishing family identity, and promoting family belonging (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). Greater family meal frequency is associated with adolescent reports of higher quality family relationships (Musick & Meier, 2012) as well as mothers' perceptions of marital quality and a lower risk of parental relationship dissolution (Kalil & Rege, 2015). Although we expect that family members' participation in other types of shared activities will be positively associated with stepfamily functioning, we hypothesize that shared religious participation will be positively associated with stepfamily functioning above and beyond participating in other kinds of activities.

We control for a number of background and family characteristics that are often associated with religious participation (Hardie, Pearce, & Denton, 2016; Smith et al., 2002) and stepfamily functioning (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014) that could potentially confound any relationship between them, including adolescent age, gender, and race, mother education, household income, years in a stepfamily, number of siblings, and whether there were any half-siblings or stepsiblings in the household.

METHOD

Data and Sample

We used data from Waves I and III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health). The Wave I in-home interview includes 20,745 adolescents in grades 7-12 during the 1994-1995 school year, and is nationally representative when appropriate sample weights are used. Parent data ($n = 17,670$) were collected from one parent, usually the biological mother. In 1996, 14,738 of the adolescents were re-interviewed (the Wave II sample design purposefully excluded adolescents who were in 12th grade at Wave I). Wave III data were collected from 15,197 of the original adolescent respondents in 2001-2002 when these youth were in their early adult years, ages 18 to 26, and includes some of the youth who were not interviewed at Wave II (see Harris, 2013 for more details). The primary analytic sample for the current study was restricted to adolescents with valid sample weights who reported living with their biological mothers and married stepfathers in Wave I ($n = 2,085$ for the Wave I analysis predicting the quality of stepfamily relationships), and who were re-interviewed in Wave III ($n = 1,523$ for the final analysis predicting separation of the mother and stepfather). The sample included both stepfamilies that began as cohabiting partnerships and transitioned into marriage prior to Wave I and those formed directly through marriage.

Measures

Unless otherwise noted, all measures come from Wave I adolescent interviews. Descriptive statistics are based on weighted, imputed data. *Stepfather-adolescent closeness* was measured using five items ($\alpha = .90$) to create a standardized scale (with a mean of zero and a

standard deviation of 1). Adolescents were asked to rate how close they felt to their stepfathers, how much they felt their stepfathers cared about them, if their stepfathers were warm and loving toward them, if they were satisfied with their communication, and their satisfaction with their relationship (1 = *not at all/strongly disagree* to 5 = *very much/strongly agree*). There were 440 cases where adolescents did not answer these questions about their stepfathers at Wave I because they referred to them as their “mother’s husband.” If it was available, the Wave II value for stepfather-adolescent closeness was used as a substitute for closeness at Wave I (n = 256). *Mother-adolescent closeness* was a standardized scale using the same five items asked about mothers ($\alpha = .85$).

The *mother-stepfather relationship* was measured using a standardized scale of three items reported on by mothers in the Wave I parent interview: how happy her current relationship with the stepfather is (1 = *completely unhappy* to 10 = *completely happy*), whether they talked about separating in the past year (0 = *yes*, 1 = *no*), and how much they fight (1 = *a lot* to 4 = *not at all*). *Family belonging* was measured with a standardized scale using four items ($\alpha = .74$) that asked adolescents to rate how much they feel their family understands them, how much they feel like they have fun in their family, how much they want to leave home (reverse coded), and how much they feel their family pays attention to them (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).

Separation of the mother and stepfather by Wave III was reported by the (now adult) child in the Wave III interview regarding whether the mother and stepfather were still living together in the same household (0 = *still together*, 1 = *separated*, 21%).

Religious attendance was constructed from two separate questions asking adolescents whether they had gone to a religious service or church-related event in the past four weeks (a) with their stepfathers (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), and (b) with their mothers (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). The final variable was coded as a set of dummy variables indicating the adolescent *frequently attends with both the mother and stepfather* (18%), the adolescent *frequently attends with one parent* (13%), or the adolescent *does not frequently attend with either parent* (69%). Because the attendance questions only asked about the past four weeks and there is no other information about the stepfather’s religious attendance in Add Health, we were unable to distinguish further between other categories of attendance patterns (e.g., less frequent joint attendance, couple attendance without the adolescent).

The adolescent’s *age* was measured in years ($\bar{x} = 15.39$, $SE = .13$). *Gender* was a dichotomous variable (0 = *male*, 1 = *female*, 51%). *Race* was coded as a set of dummy variables with *White* as the reference category (69% *White*, 13% *Black*, 12% *Hispanic*, 6% *other race*). The number of *years in the stepfamily* was a continuous variable ($\bar{x} = 7.18$, $SE = .17$). The *total number of siblings* the adolescent reported living with was a continuous variable ($\bar{x} = 1.54$, $SE = .04$), and dichotomous measures indicated whether the adolescent resided with *any half-siblings* (1 = *yes*, 40%) or with *any stepsiblings* (1 = *yes*, 11%).

The *mother’s level of education* was reported by mothers (or taken from the adolescent interview when mother reports were missing) and was coded as a set of dummy variables (16% *less than high school*, reference category, 35% *high school degree or equivalent*, 32%

some college, 17% *college degree*). Family *income* was reported in the parent interview and indicated the family's yearly combined income in dollars. The log of income was used in all analyses ($\bar{x} = 3.61$, $SE = .04$).

Shared activities was constructed from 16 items. Adolescents were asked whether they had done each of the following eight activities (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*) with their stepfathers in the past four weeks: went shopping; played a sport; went to a movie, play, museum, concert, or sports event; worked on a project for school; talked about someone the adolescent was dating, or a party they went to; talked about a personal problem the adolescent was having; talked about schoolwork or grades; and talked about other things the adolescent was doing in school. The same eight questions were asked with regard to participating in these activities with mothers. The final variable was a count of the number of activities the adolescent did with each parent (0 = *none* to 16 = *all of them*; $\bar{x} = 5.42$, $SE = .11$). Although it is not known if adolescents are doing these activities with mothers and stepfathers at the same time, higher scores on this measure identify families in which adolescents are doing a lot of these activities with both parents. Middle range scores include both adolescents who do a lot with one parent but not as many with the other, as well as adolescents who do just a few activities with each parent. Lower end scores identify families in which adolescents are not doing much with either parent. The frequency of *family dinners* is a single item reported by adolescents regarding how many of the past 7 days at least one of their parents was in the room with them while they ate their evening meal (0 to 7 days; $\bar{x} = 4.51$, $SE = .10$).

Analysis Plan

We began by examining the background characteristics of families associated with different patterns of religious attendance. We then examined how patterns of religious attendance were associated with four indicators of the quality of stepfamily relationships: the closeness of the stepfather-stepchild bond, the closeness of the mother-child bond, the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship, and the adolescent's perception of family belonging. Finally, we examined how patterns of religious attendance were associated with the likelihood of parental separation by Wave III. We also examined a model in which we included the quality of stepfamily relationships at Wave I to see if they help account for any association found between religious attendance and parental separation. To examine differences between all three attendance groups, we tested regression models rotating the omitted comparison group.

Data analysis was conducted using STATA version 15.0. Missing data were handled using the multiple imputation procedure ICE with 25 imputations. Results are based on weighted data, with standard errors adjusted for clustering and stratification in the Add Health sampling design (Chen & Chantala, 2014).

RESULTS

How often do adolescents attend religious services with mothers and stepfathers?

Among our stepfather families, 18% of adolescents reported attending religious services or events with their mothers and stepfathers in the prior four weeks. Another 13% of adolescents reported attending religious services with only one of their parents in the past

four weeks. In these cases, it was almost always with just the mother rather than with just the stepfather (91% vs. 9%, respectively). The majority of adolescents, 69%, did not attend religious services with either parent in the past four weeks.

What family characteristics are associated with frequently attending religious services together?

Table 1 reports the means for all control variables displayed by the three patterns of religious attendance. Five characteristics significantly distinguished families that were more likely to attend religious services together: they were significantly more likely to be black, they had more highly educated mothers, they had a larger number of children in the household, they were more likely to engage in other types of shared activities, and they ate family dinner together more frequently.

Is religious attendance associated with the quality of stepfamily relationships?

Table 2 reports the results from ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models examining the association between religious attendance and stepfamily relationships. Model 1 included controls for all background and family characteristics except shared activities and family dinners. Adolescents who reported attending religious services with both of their parents in the prior four weeks reported feeling significantly closer to their stepfathers than both adolescents who reported attending religious services with only one parent and those who reported that they did not attend religious services with parents. Adolescents who reported attending religious services with both parents also reported feeling closer to their mothers than adolescents who did not attend services with parents, though this association was not as strongly significant ($p = .049$) as it was for the stepfather-stepchild relationship.

Frequently attending religious services with both parents was also significantly and positively associated with mother's reports of the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship compared with attending religious services with only one parent and not attending with either parent. Finally, adolescents who frequently attended religious services with both of their parents reported significantly stronger feelings of family belonging than adolescents who did not attend religious services with parents or who only attended with one parent.

Model 2 included shared activities and family dinners as additional control variables. Higher levels of shared activities and more frequent family dinners were each significantly and positively associated with all four measures of stepfamily relationships, with one exception being a lack of association between shared activities and the mother-stepfather relationship. After controlling for shared activities and family meals, the associations between religious attendance and stepfamily relationships were attenuated in magnitude and statistical significance. The differences between families in which adolescents frequently attended with both parents and those that did not attend religious services with parents remained significant for the stepfather-adolescent relationship ($p < .01$), became marginally significant for the mother-stepfather relationship ($p = .07$), was of borderline significance for family belonging ($p = .05$), and was reduced to non-significance for the closeness of the mother-child relationship.

Differences between families in which adolescents attended religious services with only one parent and those who attended with both parents were also attenuated. Although these differences remained strongly significant for the stepfather-adolescent relationship ($p < .001$), they became marginally significant for the mother-stepfather relationship ($p < .05$ in Model 1 vs. $p = .06$ in Model 2), and non-significant for family belonging ($p < .05$ in Model 1 vs. $p = .11$ in Model 2). Similar to Model 1, there were no significant differences between families in which adolescents attended with only one parent and those who attended with neither parent, although the difference approached significance ($p = .06$) for the stepfather-adolescent relationship. Adolescents who attended with only one parent reported feeling less close to their stepfathers than adolescents who did not attend with either parent. Given that adolescents who attended religious services with only one parent were much more likely to attend with mothers than stepfathers, this finding may reflect religious dissimilarity between the adolescent and the stepfather (and perhaps between the mother and stepfather).

Is religious attendance associated with stepfamily stability?

As shown in Table 3, stepfamilies in which adolescents reported frequently attending religious services with both parents were significantly less likely to have separated by Wave III, approximately 7 years later, compared to stepfamilies in which adolescents did not frequently attend religious services with either parent (see Model 1). Stepfamilies in which adolescents reported frequently attending services with only one parent did not significantly differ on the likelihood of separation from either stepfamilies where adolescents frequently attended with both parents or from stepfamilies where adolescents did not frequently attend with either parent. The difference between frequently attending with both parents and not frequently attending with either parent remained significant when shared activities and family dinners were included as controls in Model 2, and both shared activities and family dinners were unrelated to the likelihood of stepfamily dissolution. The association between shared religious attendance and stepfamily dissolution was somewhat attenuated and reduced to marginal significance ($p = .07$) when the quality of family relationships at Wave I were included in Model 3, and in particular, the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship. Families in which mothers reported higher quality marital relationships in Wave I were significantly less likely to experience stepfamily dissolution by Wave III. This finding suggests that religious attendance may be associated with stepfamily stability in part through its positive association with the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship.

DISCUSSION

Despite increasing secularization, the U.S. is still a comparatively religious country with relatively high rates of religious participation. Estimates suggest that approximately 25% of Americans attend some type of religious service in a given week (Ellison & Hummer, 2010; Ellison & Xu, 2014). At the same time, U.S. families are becoming more diverse and children are growing up in a variety of family structures. Although there has been an increasing focus on the link between religion and families, we still know little about these linkages in diverse family forms. The current study helps address this gap in the literature by focusing on stepfather families and examining a number of indicators of positive stepfamily functioning.

Consistent with our hypothesis, frequently attending religious services together was positively associated with all five indicators of stepfamily functioning compared to not attending frequently with either parent, and in a few cases, attending services together was associated with more positive stepfamily functioning than frequently attending with only one parent. Adolescents who reported attending religious services with both of their parents in the prior four weeks reported feeling significantly closer to each of them, and also reported stronger feelings of family belonging than adolescents who did not attend religious services with either parent. Frequently attending services together was also significantly associated with mothers' reports of the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship as well as with the long-term stability of their marriages compared to not attending with either parent.

Controlling for shared activities and family dinners, however, reduced the magnitude of the associations between attending services together and stepfamily functioning. Attending church services together remained associated (albeit sometimes only marginally) with most indicators of stepfamily functioning, except the closeness of the mother-adolescent relationship. That is, compared to not attending frequently with either parent, adolescents who attended religious services with both parents reported feeling significantly closer to their stepfathers and they were significantly less likely to experience a parental separation. Adolescents who attended religious services with both parents also reported stronger feelings of family belonging (borderline significant), and their mothers reported higher marital quality (marginally significant). Notably, there were no significant differences on any indicator of positive stepfamily functioning between families in which adolescents frequently attended religious services with only one parent and those in which adolescents reported not attending with either parent (although adolescents who frequently attended with only one parent reported feeling less close to stepfathers than those who did not attend with either parent, a difference that was marginally significant). Family dinners and family members' participation in other types of shared activities, which were significantly correlated with attending services together, were also significantly associated with most indicators of stepfamily functioning except stepfamily dissolution.

Taken together these findings provide some evidence for our hypothesis that shared religious attendance would be positively associated with stepfamily functioning above and beyond the positive effects of family members' engagement in other types of shared activities including family dinners. It should also be noted that the reduction of the magnitude of the associations between shared religious attendance and stepfamily functioning after accounting for shared activities and family dinners may indicate the possibility that such activities could be partial mediators of these associations. That is, family engagement in shared activities and family dinners may be two of the pathways through which family religious attendance is associated with positive family relationships. To the extent that religious institutions encourage parents to be actively involved in the lives of their children and with each other (Wilcox, 2002), our findings are consistent with the possibility that families who frequently attend religious services together may be more likely to be engaged with one another across a range of other activities, which in turn may promote closeness, feelings of family belonging, and marital stability.

Because this study is limited by not being able to determine the causal pathways, we also cannot rule out other possible explanations. It could be that in families where everyone is close and gets along well together, family members are more likely to then want to attend church and do other activities together, indicating reverse causation. There may also be reciprocal effects between shared religious participation and stepfamily functioning whereby shared religious participation enhances family relationships and positive family relationships in turn encourage joint participation in religious activities. Finally, there could be an unmeasured third variable that is responsible for both the frequency of shared religious participation and positive stepfamily functioning, which could account for the positive association between them.

Nevertheless, our findings point to the potential importance and efficacy of incorporating information on shared religious participation that goes beyond a single parent-child dyad. Future research would benefit from more attention to this issue as well as exploring other facets of religiousness beyond service attendance. How best to measure “shared” or congruent religiousness beyond the dyad also deserves future attention. An important limitation of the current study is that the attendance measure only captured whether the adolescent had attended religious services with each parent in the past four weeks, precluding a more detailed examination of the frequency of religious service attendance. Is there a certain threshold of attendance that is associated with more positive stepfamily functioning? Does it make a difference if family members sometimes attend together but other times attend separately, or if adolescents sometimes attend with both parents and other times attend with only one parent, or frequently attend but by themselves? Are there still benefits for the quality of the mother-stepfather relationship and marital stability if only the parents attend church together? The differences we found between families in which adolescents frequently attend church with both parents and adolescents who do not attend frequently with either parent for these latter two indicators of the marital relationship might have been even larger if we could have distinguished families where the parents were attending church together without the adolescent and those where no one was attending church together.

Given prior theory and research, we would expect that there would be some positive effects that flow from individual or couple religious attendance to the quality of family relationships, but our study was unable to differentiate among these different types of attendance patterns. That we found some differences between families in which adolescents frequently attended church with both parents and those where adolescents hadn’t attended with either parent in the past four weeks (which would include less frequent joint attendance or frequent individual attendance as well as families where nobody attends) suggests the possibility that there may be additional benefits from frequently attending all together above and beyond individual or couple attendance. Our study may be a very conservative test of the association between religious participation and positive stepfamily functioning, but this remains for future research to examine.

We could also not examine the role of siblings or other family members with regard to how much they were participating in these religious activities. Yet despite the limited nature of

our measure of shared religious participation, it was associated with several indicators of stepfamily functioning, suggesting that this is a fruitful area for future research.

Future research would also benefit from incorporating longitudinal data that followed stepfamilies over time to examine the linkages between shared religious participation and positive stepfamily functioning. Also unknown is how stepfamilies negotiate any differences in religiousness over time that might exist at the beginning of their formation. For example, how often do stepfathers, or mothers and their children, change their level or type of participation after stepfamily formation?

Prior research on the correlates of positive stepfamily functioning has largely ignored the role of religion. The current study extends prior research on stepfamilies by examining adolescents' shared religious participation with both mothers and stepfathers. Findings suggest that shared religious participation may be an important element in strengthening stepfamily relationships.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by funding from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) to the Population Research Institute at The Pennsylvania State University for Population Research Infrastructure (P2C HD041025) and Family Demography Training (T32 HD007514). This research uses data from Add Health, a program project directed by Kathleen Mullan Harris and designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and funded by grant P01 HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Special acknowledgment is due Ronald R. Rindfuss and Barbara Entwisle for assistance in the original design. Information on how to obtain the Add Health data files is available on the Add Health website (<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/addhealth>). No direct support was received from grant P01 HD31921 for this analysis.

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Table 1

Means (and Standard Errors) of Background Variables by Religious Attendance Groups

	Attends with both parents (1) (18%)	Attends with one parent (2) (13%)	Attends with neither parent (3) (69%)	Differences, $p < .05$
Age	15.28 (.17)	15.20 (.19)	15.46 (.13)	None
Female	.49 (.04)	.55 (.04)	.50 (.02)	None
Race				
White	.65 (.04)	.60 (.05)	.72 (.03)	(omitted)
Black	.20 (.03)	.23 (.04)	.09 (.01)	1, 2 > 3
Hispanic	.07 (.02)	.12 (.03)	.13 (.02)	None
Other	.07 (.02)	.05 (.02)	.06 (.01)	None
Mother's education				
< High school	.07 (.03)	.12 (.03)	.18 (.02)	(omitted)
High school	.27 (.03)	.35 (.04)	.37 (.02)	1 < 3
Some college	.39 (.03)	.36 (.04)	.30 (.02)	1, 2 > 3
College degree	.27 (.04)	.18 (.03)	.15 (.02)	1 > 2, 3
Logged family income	3.67 (.06)	3.56 (.08)	3.60 (.04)	None
Years in stepfamily	6.97 (.33)	6.76 (.29)	7.32 (.20)	None
Total # siblings	1.74 (.10)	1.68 (.11)	1.47 (.05)	1 > 3
Any half siblings	.42 (.04)	.40 (.04)	.40 (.02)	None
Any step siblings	.12 (.02)	.16 (.04)	.10 (.01)	None
Shared activities	6.42 (.27)	5.59 (.27)	5.13 (.14)	1 > 2, 3
Family meals	4.99 (.18)	4.67 (.24)	4.36 (.11)	1 > 3

Note. $N = 2,085$. Missing data are imputed. Means are based on weighted data. Standard errors are adjusted for weighting, clustering, and stratification. Significance tests for group differences are based on multinomial logistic regression.

Table 2
Coefficients from Ordinary Least Squares Regression Models Predicting the Quality of Stepfamily Relationships.

	Stepfather-Adolescent Relationship		Mother-Adolescent Relationship		Mother-Stepfather Relationship		Family Belonging	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Religious Attendance ^a								
Attends with both parents	.34 *** (.07)	.21 ** (.06)	.11 * (.06)	.02 (.06)	.15 * (.06)	.11 + (.06)	.23 ** (.06)	.12 + (.06)
Attends with one parent	-.11 <i>ddd</i> (.09)	-.16 +, <i>ddd</i> (.09)	.05 (.06)	.02 (.06)	-.05 <i>d</i> (.09)	-.07 <i>e</i> (.09)	.03 <i>d</i> (.07)	-.01 (.06)
Control Variables								
Age	-.07 *** (.01)	-.04 ** (.01)	-.05 *** (.01)	-.03 ** (.01)	.02 (.01)	.03 (.01)	-.08 *** (.01)	-.06 *** (.01)
Female	-.06 (.05)	-.09 * (.05)	-.18 ** (.05)	-.20 *** (.05)	.00 (.05)	.00 (.05)	-.12 * (.04)	-.14 ** (.04)
Race ^b								
Black	.08 (.06)	.11 (.07)	.05 (.06)	.07 (.06)	-.18 * (.07)	-.14 (.07)	.01 (.07)	.05 (.06)
Hispanic	-.04 (.07)	-.04 (.06)	-.02 (.08)	-.01 (.07)	.04 (.09)	.04 (.10)	.13 * (.07)	.14 * (.06)
Other	-.04 (.10)	-.04 (.09)	.14 * (.09)	.14 * (.06)	-.17 (.10)	-.17 (.10)	-.02 (.07)	-.01 (.07)
Mother's education ^c								
High school	.05 (.08)	.07 (.07)	.17 * (.07)	.18 * (.07)	-.00 (.07)	-.01 (.07)	.12 (.08)	.12 (.07)
Some college	-.02 (.09)	-.01 (.08)	.14 (.08)	.14 (.08)	-.07 (.08)	-.07 (.08)	.07 (.08)	.07 (.08)
Bachelor's or higher	-.17 (.10)	-.12 (.09)	.06 (.10)	.09 (.10)	-.23 * (.09)	-.22 * (.10)	.03 (.10)	.07 (.10)
Logged family income	.04 (.04)	-.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	-.01 (.03)	.06 (.04)	.06 (.04)	-.03 (.04)	-.06 (.04)
Years in stepfamily	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.02 *** (.01)	-.02 *** (.01)	-.00 (.01)	-.00 (.00)
Total # of siblings	.06 ** (.02)	.04 * (.02)	.02 (.02)	.01 (.02)	.00 (.02)	-.00 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Any half-siblings	-.15 ** (.05)	-.14 ** (.05)	-.06 (.05)	-.05 (.05)	-.03 (.04)	-.03 (.04)	-.10 (.06)	-.09 (.05)
Any stepsiblings	-.11 (.08)	-.08 (.08)	.06 (.06)	.09 (.06)	.02 (.06)	.03 (.09)	-.02 (.07)	.01 (.07)
Shared activities		.08 *** (.01)		.06 *** (.01)		.01 (.01)		.06 *** (.01)
Family dinners		.04 *** (.01)		.03 ** (.01)		.03 ** (.01)		.04 *** (.01)

Note: $N = 2,085$. Missing data are imputed. Estimates are based on weighted data. Standard errors (in parentheses) are adjusted for weighting, clustering, and stratification.

^aOmitted reference group is adolescent attends with neither parent.

^b Omitted reference group is White.

^c Omitted reference group is less than high school.

^d Adolescent attends with one parent is significantly different from adolescent attends with both parents at $p < .05$.

^{ddd} Adolescent attends with one parent is significantly different from adolescent attends with both parents at $p < .001$.

^e Adolescent attends with one parent is significantly different from adolescent attends with both parents at $p = .06$.

^f $p = .06$ (stepfather-adolescent relationship), $p = .07$ (mother-stepfather relationship), and $p = .05$ (family belonging).

^{*} $p < .05$,

^{**} $p < .01$,

^{***} $p < .001$.

Table 3
Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Separation of the Mother and Stepfather by Wave III

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Religious Attendance ^a			
Attends with both parents	-.58 * (.27)	-.58 * (.27)	-.53 + (.29)
Attends with one parent	-.33 (.31)	-.32 (.31)	-.43 (.32)
Control Variables			
Age	-.09 (.06)	-.11 (.06)	-.09 (.06)
Female	-.28 (.22)	-.29 (.23)	-.23 (.23)
Race ^b			
Black	.93 ** (.28)	.88 ** (.29)	.81 * (.30)
Hispanic	.13 (.34)	.12 (.32)	.16 (.35)
Other	.70 * (.32)	.69 * (.33)	.55 (.36)
Mother's education ^c			
High school	.05 (.30)	.06 (.30)	.06 (.32)
Some college	-.67 (.39)	-.66 (.39)	-.68 (.41)
Bachelor's or higher	.25 (.42)	.25 (.41)	.13 (.41)
Logged family income	.02 (.14)	.01 (.14)	.03 (.15)
Years in stepfamily	-.06 ** (.02)	-.06 * (.02)	-.09 ** (.02)
Total # siblings	-.02 (.10)	-.01 (.10)	-.02 (.10)
Any half-siblings	.04 (.23)	.04 (.22)	.08 (.23)
Any stepsiblings	-.28 (.39)	-.28 (.39)	-.31 (.40)
Shared activities		.02 (.03)	.02 (.04)
Family dinners		-.04 (.04)	-.03 (.04)
Family Relationships			
Stepfather-adolescent closeness			-.04 (.16)
Mother-adolescent closeness			.28 (.18)
Mother-stepfather relationship			-.66 *** (.15)
Family belonging			-.04 (.17)

Note: *Note:* $N = 1,523$. Missing data are imputed. Estimates are based on weighted data. Standard errors (in parentheses) are adjusted for weighting, clustering, and stratification.

^a Omitted reference group is adolescent attends with neither parent. Results from rotating the omitted religious attendance group revealed no significant differences between attends with one parent and attends with both parents.

^b Omitted reference group is White.

^c Omitted reference group is less than high school.

⁺ $p = .07$,
* $p < .05$,
** $p < .01$,
*** $p < .001$.