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Church Attendance Boosts Student GPAs

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If you want to boost your teenager's grade point average, take the kid to church. Or, a new study suggests, find some similar social activity to involve them in.

Researchers found that church attendance has as much effect on a teen's GPA as whether the parents earned a college degree. Students in grades 7 to 12 who went to church weekly also had lower dropout rates and felt more a part of their schools.

On average, students whose parents received a four-year college degree average a GPA .12 higher than those whose parents completed high school only. Students who attend religious services weekly average a GPA .144 higher than those who never attend services, said Jennifer Glanville, a sociologist at the University of Iowa.

The study does not suggest God is smiling on the students, per se. Rather, it identifies several reasons the students do better:

- They have regular contact with adults from various generations who serve as role models.
- Their parents are more likely to communicate with their friends' parents.
- They develop friendships with peers who have similar norms and values.
- They're more likely to participate in extracurricular activities.

Those factors account for only half the predicted effect, Glanville and colleagues say.

"There are two directions you can go with this research," she said. "Some might say this suggests that parents should have their kids attend places of worship. Or, if we use it to help explain why religious participation has a positive effect on academics, parents who aren't interested in attending church can consider how to structure their kids' time to allow access to the same beneficial social networks and opportunities religious institutions provide."

Other studies have shown that regular church-goers breathe easier and live longer. And kids whose parents go to church are better behaved and more well-adjusted. In each of these studies, the researchers cite the social-network and psychological benefits of churches.

Glanville and colleagues David Sikkink and Edwin Hernandez of the University of Notre Dame analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative sample of 7th- through 12th-graders that began in 1994. Students from 132 schools in 80 communities participated.

Kids who attended church were also more likely to have friends with higher GPAs who skipped school less often, Glanville said.

The study also showed whether the teens said religion was important to them.

"Surprisingly, the importance of religion to teens had very little impact on their educational outcomes," Glanville said. "That suggests that the act of attending church -- the structure and the social aspects associated with it -- could be more important to educational outcomes than the actual religion."

Religious-service attendance had the same effect across all major denominations, the researchers found. The results are detailed in the winter 2008 issue of the *Sociological Quarterly*.

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