

Teens maintain their religion

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High school is a turbulent time for adolescents. Every parent knows these are the years when teens begin to spread their wings, develop their own self-awareness and confirm their identification with specific social groups and cultures. In short, they find their niche. But a new finding out of UCLA shows there is one aspect of their lives that basically stays the course — religion.

Andrew J. Fuligni, a UCLA professor of psychiatry, and colleagues found that teens, regardless of their ethnic background, retained their religious identity even as their participation in religious activities, such as attending church, declined. Further, they found that adolescents' ethnic background shaped their religious identity and participation.

The study appears in the current edition of the journal *Child Development*.

The researchers examined three groups of teens — [adolescents](#) from Asian, Latin American and European backgrounds — and found that after controlling for ethnic differences in religious affiliation, socioeconomic background and generational status, religious identity remained stable throughout [high school](#), even as religious participation declined. Teens from Latin American and Asian backgrounds reported higher levels of religious identity, while adolescents from Latin American backgrounds reported higher rates of religious participation. When changes in religious identity did occur in this age group, they were associated with changes in ethnic and family identities, suggesting important linkages in the development of these social identities during

adolescence.

"Adolescence is a critical time for [self-awareness](#) and exploration," said Fuligni, whose research focuses on family relationships and adolescent development among culturally and ethnically diverse populations.

"There's been a lot of research about adolescents' social identities in the areas of ethnicity and gender but very little on the role of religion, and even less work on the degree of religious identification and participation among adolescents from ethnic minority backgrounds."

The researchers recruited students from three ethnically diverse public high schools in the Los Angeles area. The first school consisted primarily of students from Latin American and Asian backgrounds whose parents had lower-middle-class to middle-class occupational and educational backgrounds. The second school consisted of students predominantly from Latin American and European backgrounds and from lower-middle-class to middle-class backgrounds. The third school consisted of students from families with Asian and European backgrounds, with middle-class to upper-middle-class backgrounds. In all, and after obtaining consent from parents, nearly 500 students completed an annual questionnaire during their sophomore, junior and senior high school years.

The results, said Fuligni, were not a complete surprise. Despite all the turmoil of those years, kids still have a routine and consistency to their day.

"Greater change likely occurs at prominent points of transition, such as the upcoming transition to adulthood," he said. "Moving away from home, encountering new work environments, attending college, developing long-term romantic relationships — those markers in our lives — are all features of the period after high school that may cause more significant change in religious identity."

The drop-off in religious participation, such as church attendance, was not too surprising either, Fuligni said.

"While there was a significant decline across the high school years, it's possible that teens were simply busy doing other things, perhaps a part-time job, taking part in extra-curricular activities or simply socializing with peers," he said. "Plus, kids are beginning to make their own decisions, and where attendance at religious services and activities is driven by parents earlier in childhood, parents may be allowing their teens to make their own decisions about participation as they progress through high school."

Other authors on the study included Virginia W. Huynh, a graduate student in Fuligni's lab, and lead author Anna B. Lopez, now at Loma Linda University. Support for this study was provided by the Russell Sage Foundation. The authors report no conflict of interest.

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