

Study explores spirituality's role in children's mental health

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A Brock University-led international team's recent research suggests that spirituality be added to factors that determine children's mental health. "[Establishing spirituality as an intermediary determinant of health among 42,843 children from eight countries](#)" appears in the February issue of *Preventive Medicine*.

The research team, led by Brock Assistant Professor of Health Sciences Valerie Michaelson, explored spirituality as a potential "non-tangible determinant of health" in adolescents aged 11 to 15 years.

The researchers define 'spirituality' as being in connections with others, nature, the transcendent, and within themselves, through the importance of having a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

"Determinants of health" include factors such as adequate housing, food security and a living family income.

Researchers in eight countries—Canada, England, Scotland, Wales, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova and Poland—surveyed 42,843 children ages 11 to 15 years about their health, health behaviors and the factors that influence them.

The research team found that:

- Higher socio-economic status appears to be correlated with higher spiritual health in most populations of children.
- There seems to be a consistent protective effect of spirituality on the mental health of young people.
- These effects seem to be driven by having a sense of "meaning and purpose" in life.
- Western and Eastern cultural contexts shape results in interesting and nuanced ways.

The research team's findings were "striking," says Michaelson.

The spiritual domain of "connections to themselves," which included consideration of experiences of meaning and purpose in life, was strongly and consistently protective of adolescent mental health. These experiences were also unequally experienced by young people in relation

to their socio-economic circumstances, she says.

If young people were socio-economically advantaged, they reported a high sense of meaning and purpose in life, while much lower levels of meaning and purpose were reported among disadvantaged children, she says.

"This is a matter of social justice," says Michaelson. "When it comes to [mental health](#), having a sense of meaning and purpose in life is really important, but the resources that foster this seem to be inequitably distributed."

She says the study's findings "draw attention to the urgent need to equitably distribute health-promoting resources—including intangible resources—that help children to thrive."

The child participants were recruited through the World Health Organization's Health Behavior in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, an ongoing, cross-national research study of youth aged 11 to 15 years old that collects data every four years on young people's well-being, health behaviors and social contexts.

Brock Professor of Health Sciences William Pickett, who is a member of the research team, co-leads the [HBSC study](#). He worked with the international HBSC network to recruit the child participants.

He points to the value of the HBSC study to identify new and innovative findings on the health of [young people](#).

"HBSC represents one of the largest and most diverse population health surveys of its kind in North America and Europe and provides opportunities for researchers to explore complex ideas about the determinants of health in child populations," he says.

More information: Valerie Michaelson et al, Establishing spirituality as an intermediary determinant of health among 42,843 children from eight countries, *Preventive Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2024.107846](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2024.107846)

Provided by Brock University

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