

## **FATHERS' RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD BEHAVIOR**

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## **Fathers' Religious Involvement and Early Childhood Behavior**

### **ABSTRACT**

Previous research suggests that many men increase their religious involvement after the birth of a new child. This study extends this research by examining whether fathers maintain a higher rate of religious participation as children get older and how fathers' religiosity may influence children's behavior. Results suggest that many fathers maintain a higher level of religious participation during the early years of their child's life. Although fathers' religious involvement does not appear to directly influence children's behavior, there is evidence that fathers' religiosity moderates the influence of other family characteristics on children. Parental relationship quality and mothers' religiosity are associated with fewer problem behaviors among children when fathers believe that religion is important to family life. Results also suggest that being raised by a non-religious father is associated with increased externalizing problem behavior among young children. Overall, this study suggests that religious communities may be a source of support that encourages fathers to be more active in their family life and promote positive development among children.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the role that fathers play in children's lives and reasons that may explain why fathers become more or less involved in family life. Studies have found that resident status, employment status, co-parenting relationship quality, and attitudes about parenting all influence the degree to which fathers are involved in their children's lives (Lamb, 1997; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Research also suggests that having an engaged father is beneficial to children; youth who reside and/or interact frequently with their birth father are more likely to experience fewer behavioral and psychological problems, increased educational attainment, and higher well-being (Lamb, 1997; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Pleck, 2007; Sarkadi et al., 2007).

Within the fatherhood literature, there is evidence that religion may be one important factor that leads men to become more involved in their children's lives. Being actively involved in a religious community may be beneficial to fathers (and families in general) by providing opportunities for families to interact with one another, resources for building and maintaining healthy relationships, parenting guidance and support, and a moral community that helps to enhance one's feeling of connectedness with others (Alwin, 1986; Abbott, Berry, & Meridith, 1990; Wilcox, 2004; Edgell, 2006). Indeed, recent research suggests that men increase their religious involvement after the birth of a child (Petts 2007), and religious participation appears to strengthen co-parenting relationships and encourage fathers to be more involved in their children's lives, both of which are beneficial to children's development (Call & Heaton, 1997; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; King, 2003; Mahoney et al., 2003; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008).

Although studies have linked father's religiosity to positive outcomes for adolescents (Wilcox, 2002; Regnerus, 2003; King, 2003; Smith & Denton, 2005), little is known about how father's religious beliefs and practices may influence early child development. Two recent studies provides some evidence that parents' religiosity is associated with greater self-control, development of a moral conscience, and fewer externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008; Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009). However, these studies are constrained by the use of small sample sizes and cross-sectional data.

The aim of this study is to use longitudinal data to provide a more comprehensive examination of the relationship between fathers' religiosity and early childhood outcomes. Specifically, this study focuses on three research questions. First, do fathers increase their religious involvement after the birth of a child and maintain this higher rate of religious participation as their children get older? Second, how do fathers' religious involvement, affiliation, and beliefs influence the behavior of their young children? Third, does fathers' religiosity moderate the relationships between paternal involvement, family structure, co-parenting relationship quality, mothers' religiosity, and early childhood behavior? Paternal religiosity may directly influence children's behavior; religious fathers may have greater access to networks of social support and control than nonreligious fathers, perhaps making them better able to provide their children with the support and guidance they need to develop in positive ways. Alternatively, religion may influence children's development by enhancing other family characteristics; religious fathers may be more involved in their child's life, have stronger bonds with the child's mother, and be more likely to be married to the child's mother than nonreligious fathers, all of which may lead to positive outcomes for young children.

Four waves of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study are used for this study. These data are useful in that fathers were interviewed shortly after the birth of their children and then again when the child was one, three, and five years old, allowing for an analysis of how fathers' religious involvement may change over the first five years of their children's lives, and also whether fathers' religiosity influences children's behavior at age 5.

#### *Fathers' Religious Participation*

Having a child is an important milestone in life that often causes men to reevaluate their priorities and become more committed to their families (Snarey, 1993; Marsiglio, 1998; Wilcox, 2002). As part of this transition, many men become more involved in religion to provide a sense of meaning and purpose for this life event (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Petts, 2007). In addition, religious organizations often provide child-rearing and parenting guidelines, as well as resources and support networks to help parents raise their children (Alwin, 1986; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Ellison et al., 1996; Wilcox, 1998). Although

guidelines may differ between religious denominations, most religions place a strong emphasis on family life and provide teachings, and support for families (Wilcox, Chaves, & Franz, 2004; Edgell, 2006).

New fathers may also increase their involvement in a religious community so that their children can have the opportunity to participate in rituals such as baptisms (Wilcox, 2004). Even men who were not religious prior to becoming a parent often feel a desire to expose their children to religious teachings (Berman, 1968; Abbott et al., 1990). Therefore, many fathers become more active in a religious community when they have a new child to benefit themselves as parents as well as their children.

The current study builds on this research by exploring whether fathers maintain a higher level of religious involvement as their children grow older. If fathers become more involved in religious communities to provide their children with a religious background, it is reasonable to expect that they will remain religiously active in order to allow their children to become involved in various religious activities. I hypothesize that *fathers will increase their religious participation after the birth of a child and maintain this higher rate of religious participation five years after their children are born.*

#### *Fathers' Religiosity and Child Behavior*

Religion may provide a number of benefits to men making the transition to parenthood, but fathers who increase their religious activity may do so, at least in part, to improve their child's well-being. However, research on the relationship between parental religiosity and young children's well-being is scarce; only three studies have focuses specifically on whether parental religiosity influences early child development. Strayhorn, Weidman, and Larson (1990) find that parental religiosity is associated with positive parenting practices and parents' well-being, but unrelated to children's behavior. In contrast, Bartkowski et al. (2008) find that parental religious participation, religious homogeneity, and family discussions about religion are each associated with positive outcomes for young children. Moreover, Volling et al. (2009) find that children are more likely to develop a moral conscience (feel empathy towards others, be apologetic, etc.) when parents believe that religion plays an important part in their parenting. Given the lack of research on parental religiosity and child development, it is important to

examine whether (and what aspects of) parental religion, and specifically fathers' religiosity, may influence early childhood behavior.

Paternal religiosity may be beneficial to young children for a number of reasons. Involvement in a religious community may help men become better fathers. Religion provides individuals with social support and control as well as a set of teachings and guidelines for how to live one's life, providing men with a sense of connectedness as well as deterring men from engaging in risky behaviors (Ellison & Levin, 1998). Religion may also provide men with a sense of purpose and meaning in life and a framework for understanding life's difficulties, all of which may increase men's well-being and reduce stress (Ellison, 1991; Ellison & Levin, 1998). By being involved in a community that provides purpose in life and resources to cope with struggles, religious men may be more prepared for the challenges of parenthood and better equipped to promote positive development among their children than nonreligious fathers.

Involvement in a religious community may also encourage men to be more active and involved in their family life. Most religious institutions place a high level of importance on the family and promote strong family bonds (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Wilcox, 2002; King, 2003; Edgell, 2006). Religion may also enhance family relationships; religious parents may place a higher level of significance on family relationships and feel more connected to their families (Mahoney et al., 2003; Pearce & Haynie, 2004). By adhering to religious teachings and messages about the value of family relationships, religious fathers may place a greater importance on family life, leading them to be more engaged in their children's lives (Dollahite, 1998; Wilcox, 2002; Bollinger & Palkovitz 2003). Furthermore, fathers who are religiously active are enmeshed in a social network that provides parenting support and guidance as well as activities that encourage family interaction (Abbott et al., 1990; Edgell, 2006). Religious communities may also act as agents of social control, reinforcing parents' messages and promoting positive behavior among children (Myers, 1996; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Smith & Denton, 2005). By being enmeshed within a moral community, placing greater meaning on family relationships, and being more committed to family life, religious fathers may be better equipped to provide their children with the support and guidance

needed to promote positive development than non-religious fathers. Thus, I expect that *more frequent religious participation and a greater importance placed on religion among fathers will be associated with fewer behavior problems for young children.*

Although religious involvement may be beneficial to both fathers and children (Alwin, 1986; Bollinter & Palkovitz, 2003), certain religious denominations may be more likely to promote family commitments among fathers. Specifically, research suggests that evangelical Protestants place a greater emphasis on involved parenting, child discipline, and traditional family structures than other religious groups (Wilcox, 2002; 2004). Even though most religious traditions value family life, conservative theology places a particular emphasis on active fathering (Ellison et al., 1996; Wilcox, 1998; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). As a result, evangelical Protestant fathers are more likely to be warm and expressive towards their children and more likely to hug and praise their children than fathers of other religious denominations (Wilcox, 1998; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Wilcox, 2004). Although recent research suggests that unmarried evangelical Protestant fathers are less involved in their children's lives than other unmarried fathers, no studies have explored how the frequency or quality of involvement among evangelical Protestant fathers may influence early childhood behavior (Wildeman, 2008). Thus, I hypothesize that *children raised by evangelical Protestant fathers will experience the fewest behavior problems, whereas children raised by fathers with no religious affiliation will experience the most behavior problems.*

#### *Moderating Factors*

Young children may receive direct benefits from being raised by a religiously active father, resulting in fewer behavior problems. However, it is also possible that fathers' religiosity may moderate the influence of paternal engagement with children, relationship quality with the birth mother, mothers' religiosity, and family structure on early childhood behavior. For example, religion may help to 'sanctify' relationships, leading religious fathers to place a greater significance on their relationship with their child than nonreligious fathers (Mahoney et al., 2003). By finding greater meaning in parent-child relationships, religious fathers may be more likely to interact with children in positive ways. Indeed,

research suggests that religiously active fathers report higher levels of involvement with young children, increased parental supervision, and greater relationship quality with children (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Cook, 2002; Wilcox, 2002; King, 2003). Furthermore, positive paternal engagement is associated with fewer behavioral and psychological problems among children, higher educational attainment, and greater social capital (Lamb, 1997; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Pleck, 2007; Sarkadi et al., 2007). Thus, I expect that *frequent involvement by religious fathers may be more likely to deter problem behavior among children than frequent involvement by nonreligious fathers because there is greater meaning and significance placed on these interactions.*

Religion may also help to sanctify co-parental relationships, leading fathers to place more importance on their relationship with the birth mother (Mahoney et al., 2003). Relationship quality with the birth mother is important to consider because the frequency and quality of contact that fathers (especially nonresident fathers) have with children is often influenced by the effectiveness of the co-parenting relationship. Stronger co-parenting relationships, or relationships in which parents agree and support one another on how children should be raised, can lead fathers to become more active in their children's lives and consequently improve their children's well-being (McHale, 1995; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Fathers who are religious may be more likely to work together with the mother to develop effective strategies for raising their child than nonreligious fathers. Indeed, studies suggest that religious involvement is associated with lower relationship conflict and higher marital happiness and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Therefore, I expect that *fathers' religiosity may increase relationship quality with the birth mother, resulting in fewer problem behaviors among young children.*

Fathers' religiosity may also moderate the relationship between family structure and early childhood behavior. Young children are less likely to experience problem behaviors when residing with two parents, and also experience fewer problems when residing in a stable family structure throughout childhood (Cavanagh & Huston, 2006). Fathers who are actively involved in a religious community are more likely to be resident, married fathers and less likely to divorce than nonreligious fathers (McCarthy,



1979; Larson & Golz, 1989). Furthermore, many religious traditions stress the importance of traditional values such as an opposition to premarital sex and a belief in the sanctity of marriage (Hunter, 1983; Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1997), both of which may increase the likelihood that religious fathers remain married to the birth mother, receive greater support from a religious community, and raise children in a stable, intact family. Thus, I expect that *children raised by married, resident fathers who are religious will display fewer problem behaviors than children raised by married, resident fathers who are not religious.*

Young children may also benefit from residing in a household in which parents have similar beliefs. Children are more likely to internalize the values of their parents when their parents are providing a consistent message (Nelsen, 1990). Thus, fathers' religiosity may be more likely to promote positive development among young children when mothers are also religiously active. Religious homogamy between parents may increase the likelihood that families are attending religious services together and receiving the social support, integration, and control that religion provides (Abbott et al., 1990). Thus, I expect that *fathers' religiosity will be more likely to reduce problem behaviors among young children when mothers are also religious.*

## DATA AND METHODS

### *Sample*

Data from four waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW) are used in this study. This is a longitudinal, birth cohort study that follows 4,898 children born between 1998 and 2000. The FFCW is an urban study that is representative of all non-marital births in cities with populations of over 200,000, but there are also a sizeable number of married parents included in the study. Both parents were interviewed at the hospital shortly after the child's birth and then again for follow-up interviews approximately one, three, and five years after the child's birth. In addition, a subset of families participated in an interview at the three- and five-year follow up that focused on the child's health, behavior, and well-being. Specifically, 4,798 mothers and 3,830 fathers in 20 cities were interviewed for

the baseline survey, and retention rates for each of the follow-up interviews are over 80% (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001).

This study focuses on 1,503 families consisting of fathers who were interviewed at each wave and families in which the five-year child survey was completed. Of the 3,830 families in which fathers were interviewed at the time of their child's birth, 1,541 were excluded because fathers were not interviewed in each of the follow-up waves. An additional 633 were excluded because the 60-month child survey was not completed. Also, 81 families who were not part of the 18-city sub-sample were excluded because they were not asked all of the questions of interest for this study, and 72 families were dropped because fathers did not report their religious participation at each wave. Although these data are not generalizable to all families, the longitudinal nature of the data, the breadth of questions on early childhood behavior, and the variety of religious and relationship indicators make these data well-suited for an exploration of whether and how fathers' religiosity may influence early childhood behavior.

#### *Dependent Variables*

The two dependent variables used in this study are each taken from the Five-Year In-Home Longitudinal Study of Pre-School Aged Children. Children's behavior was measured using indicators from both the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) and the Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (Hogan, Scott, & Bauer, 1992). For each indicator, mothers report the extent to which the statement is true of the child's behavior (ranging from 0 = *not true* to 2 = *very true or often true*).

Externalizing Problem Behavior. Externalizing problem behavior is taken from mothers' responses to the aggressive and delinquency scales included in the survey ( $\alpha = .86$ ). The aggressive scale consists of 20 items about whether the child boasts, bullies others, destroys things, threatens people, gets into fights, demands a lot of attention, and is unusually loud. The delinquency scale consists of 10 items that assess whether the child hangs around with others who get into trouble, sets fire, steals, swears, vandalizes, runs away from home, and cheats or lies. Responses to these 30 items are summed.

Internalizing Problem Behavior. Internalizing problem behavior is taken from mothers' responses to the withdrawn and anxious/depressed scales included in the survey ( $\alpha = .75$ ). The withdrawn scale

consists of 9 items that assess whether the child would rather be alone, refuses to talk, is secretive, is shy, sulks, is unhappy, is withdrawn, and stares blankly. The anxious/depressed scale consists of 14 items about whether the child complains of loneliness, cries a lot, feels inferior, feels guilty, worries, feels no one loves him/her, is nervous, and is suspicious. Responses to these 23 items are summed.

### *Independent Variables*

Religious Participation. How often fathers attend religious services is coded as a scale with the following values: 0 = *never*; 1 = *hardly ever*; 2 = *several times a year*; 3 = *several times a month*; 4 = *once a week or more*. The indicator of religious participation is taken from each of the four waves of the survey in order to assess changes in religious participation over time.

Religious Affiliation. Three dummy variables are used to indicate fathers' religious affiliation: evangelical Protestant, other religious affiliation (both Christian and non-Christian, used as reference group), and no religious affiliation. Each of these variables is taken from fathers' responses at the third wave of data collection.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a dummy variable is included to indicate whether fathers experienced a change in religious affiliation between the baseline survey and the three-year follow-up.

Religious Attitudes. Two variables are taken from the three-year follow-up survey to indicate fathers' religious attitudes. First, religious family environment indicates whether fathers use their religious faith as a guide for the way they treat their family. Responses range from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*. Second, a variable is included to assess religious literalism. Fathers were asked the degree to which they felt that religious texts (either the Bible or the Koran, depending on religious affiliation) are the word of God and should be read literally. Responses range from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 3 = *strongly agree*. For Jewish fathers, they were asked whether keeping kosher is an important part of being Jewish.

### *Moderating Variables*

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<sup>1</sup> Expanding the categories of religious affiliation to include additional variables for Catholic, mainline Protestant, etc. does not alter the results presented in this study. Also, using baseline indicators of religious affiliation and controlling for religious switching in later waves produces similar results as presented here.

Father Involvement. Father involvement is indicated by the number of days per week that fathers spent participating in eight activities (sing songs or nursery rhymes, hug or show physical affection, tell child that you love him/her, let child help with simple chores, play imaginary games, read stories, tell stories, and play inside with toys with child) with the child at the three-year follow up ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Responses ranged from 0 to 7 days a week, and the mean for the eight activities is used as the scale score.

Relationship Quality. Relationship quality is indicated by six statements taken from both mothers' and fathers' reports about the other parent (i.e., mothers reported about fathers and fathers reported about mothers). All statements are taken from the three-year follow up survey (0 = *never* to 2 = *often*): (a) he/she is fair and willing to compromise, (b) he/she expresses affection or love for you, (c) he/she insults or criticizes you or your ideas (reverse coded), (d) he/she helps you do things important to you, and (e) he/she listens to you when you needed someone to talk to, and (f) he/she understands your hurts and joys. The mean of each response is taken from both mothers' ( $\alpha = .86$ ) and fathers' ( $\alpha = .82$ ) reports, and the mean of both parents' reports is used as the indicator of relationship quality.

Family Structure. Family structure is indicated by whether the father is married to the birth mother, cohabiting with the birth mother, or is a nonresident, unmarried father (reference group). I also include a dummy variable that indicates whether fathers had experienced a break-up with the birth mother prior to the three-year follow up survey. This variable indicates whether fathers experienced the dissolution of a married or cohabiting union between the baseline survey and the three-year follow-up.

Mother's Religious Participation. This variable uses the same scale as fathers' religious participation, and the mean value from all four waves of data is used to indicate mother's religious participation.

#### *Control Variables*

A number of variables that may alter the relationship between fathers' religiosity and early childhood behavior are also included as controls. Fathers' age is measured in years, and is taken from the three-year follow up. A dummy variable is included to indicate the gender of the child (1 = *male*). Four dummy variables are used to indicate fathers' race: White (reference group), Black, Latino, and other

racial group. Father's educational attainment indicates the highest level of education that the father has received by the third wave of interviews, and is categorized as (a) less than high school (reference group), (b) high school diploma, (c) some college,<sup>2</sup> and (d) four-year college graduate. Household income measures the amount of income within the household that the children resides, and responses range from 0 = *No income* to 5 = *\$40,000 or more*. Fathers' reports of household income are used when the father resides with the child, and mothers' reports are used when the child has a nonresident father or when the resident father does not report household income. Controls are also included for the number of hours fathers work per week, whether fathers had an involved biological father while growing up (1 = *yes*), whether the focal child is the father's first child (1 = *yes*), and the number of additional children that the father reported at the three-year follow-up.

#### *Analytic Strategy*

A number of steps are taken to assess whether fathers maintain a higher level of religious participation five years after the birth of a child, and also whether father's religiosity is associated with early childhood behavior. First, group-based trajectory modeling is used to obtain estimates of fathers' religious participation over the first five years of their child's life. This method is a type of finite mixture modeling that uses maximum likelihood techniques to estimate each group's trajectory, the proportion of the sample assigned to each trajectory group, and the probability of membership in each group for all individuals in the data (Nagin, 1999; Jones, Nagin, & Roeder, 2001; Nagin, 2005). This methodology is useful for this study because it is able to uncover longitudinal patterns of fathers' religious participation without forcing the researcher to make arbitrary group cutoffs. Although these trajectory groups are only approximations, they are helpful in illustrating the different patterns of religious participation that fathers may experience after the birth of a child.

Because the measure of religious participation is a scale ranging from 0 to 4, a censored normal model is used to estimate the trajectories. The basic model estimating each trajectory specifies the link between interview year and religious participation as a polynomial function:

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<sup>2</sup> This category includes fathers who completed some type of trade school.

$$y_{it}^j = \beta_0^j + \beta_1^j \text{YEAR}_{it} + \beta_2^j \text{YEAR}_{it}^2 + \beta_3^j \text{YEAR}_{it}^3 + \varepsilon_{it}.$$

In this model,  $y$  is the predicted rate of religious participation for person  $i$  in trajectory group  $j$  at time  $t$ ,  $\beta_0$ ,  $\beta_1$ ,  $\beta_2$ , and  $\beta_3$  are parameters that determine the shape of each trajectory, and  $\varepsilon$  is an error term for each group. Because a unique set of parameters are used to estimate each trajectory, the shapes of the trajectories can vary by group (Nagin, 2005). A procedure in SAS (PROC TRAJ) is used to estimate trajectories of religious participation (Jones et al., 2001). Once the trajectory estimates are obtained, these estimates are used as the indicators of fathers' religious participation in the second part of the analysis.

For the second part of the study, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models are used. For each child outcome, variables are entered into stepwise models. First, I include all measures of fathers' religiosity. The second model adds all moderating and control variables. Finally, I test for interaction effects between family characteristics and fathers' religiosity, and a third model is presented that includes any interaction effects that are statistically significant.

#### *Missing Data*

Most variables have few (less than 10% of total cases), if any, missing values. To preserve sample size, multiple imputation is used to account for missing data. Specifically, the *ice* and *micombine* commands in STATA are used for the analyses (Royston, 2005).

## RESULTS

In order to obtain the correct model for group-based trajectory analysis, the researcher must specify the number of groups and the order of the trajectory (linear, quadratic, etc.) prior to estimating the models (Nagin, 2005). BIC (Bayesian Information Criterion) statistics are used as the primary formal test to determine the optimal number of groups, but model parameters and researcher judgment are also helpful in specifying the correct form of each trajectory. The goal is to use a combination of researcher judgment and diagnostic statistical tests to determine a best-fitting model that conveys all of the substantive features of the data while remaining parsimonious (Nagin, 2005).

Using BIC statistics and model parameters as a guide, a five-group model emerged as the best-fitting model; two of the groups follow quadratic trajectories, one group follows a linear trajectory, and two groups attend religious services at a constant rate.<sup>3</sup>

----- Insert Figure 1 About Here -----

Trajectories from the five-group model are presented in Figure 1. Consistent with previous research, most fathers increase their religious involvement after the birth of a child (Petts, 2007). Furthermore, results in Figure 1 suggest that 66% of fathers continue to attend religious services more frequently as their child ages. Specifically, 51% of fathers (moderate increasing attenders) experience a slight increase in religious participation from hardly to several times a year in the year following their child's birth, and maintain this level of involvement when their child is three and five years old. In addition, 15% of fathers (high increasing attenders) increase their religious participation from several times a year to several times a month in the year following their child's birth. These fathers continue to attend religious services more frequently over time, and these fathers are attending religious services at least once a week by the five-year follow-up interview.

Although most fathers increase their religious participation when their child is young, there are also fathers that maintain a constant rate of religious involvement or decrease their religious involvement during their child's early life. Approximately 14% of fathers never attend religious services throughout the first five years of their child's life, and 11% of fathers consistently attend religious services at least weekly. Finally, approximately 9% of fathers are classified as high decreasing attenders. These fathers experience a slight increase in religious participation after the birth of a child (attending services between several times a month and weekly), but then slightly decrease their religious involvement as their child gets older. Overall, results in Figure 1 suggest that most fathers maintain a higher level of religious

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<sup>3</sup> Other diagnostic tests suggest that this is a good-fitting model. For example, Nagin (2005) suggests that the average posterior probability (the average probability that each individual assigned to that group actually belong to the group based on their pattern of religious participation) for each group should be at least .70. The average posterior probabilities in this study are .92, .92, .81, .82, and .93.

participation for a least a few years after the birth of a child. The next stage of the analysis examines whether these patterns of religious participation are associated with children's behavior.

----- Insert Table 1 About Here -----

Table 1 includes mean values within each trajectory group for all variables used in the analysis. These results provide some insight into the differences between fathers following unique patterns of religious involvement. On average, frequent attenders report higher levels of father involvement, higher relationship quality, are more likely to be married, and have children who display fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors than non-attenders and moderate increasing attenders. Because the mean values for frequent attenders suggest that children of these fathers may experience the fewest problem behaviors, the remaining analyses focus on whether the other four trajectories of religious participation are significantly different from frequent attendance in predicting early childhood behavior.<sup>4</sup>

----- Insert Table 2 About Here -----

Results examining the relationship between fathers' religiosity and children's externalizing problem behavior are presented in Table 2. In support of my hypothesis, results in Model 1 suggest that children raised by non-attenders ( $b = 2.34, p < .05$ ) and moderate increasing attenders ( $b = 1.78, p < .01$ ) are more likely to display externalizing problem behaviors than children of frequent attenders. Moreover, children raised by fathers with no religious affiliation are more likely to exhibit externalizing problem behaviors than fathers with a religious affiliation ( $b = 1.69, p < .01$ ). Taken together, these results provide some evidence that children raised by religious fathers are less likely to experience externalizing problem behaviors.

When other variables are added in Model 2, patterns of religious participation are no longer associated with children's externalizing behavior. However, there is still some evidence that parental religiosity may influence early childhood behavior; having a father with no religious affiliation is positively associated with children's externalizing problems ( $b = 1.20, p < .05$ ). This result seems to highlight the social control that religion provides. Fathers who identify with a religious denomination may

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<sup>4</sup> Supplementary models using non-attenders as a reference group produced similar results as those presented.



pass on these rules and guidelines to their children. Furthermore, these rules may be reinforced by a larger religious community, decreasing the likelihood that young children engage in delinquent acts. In addition, mother's religious participation is negatively associated with children's externalizing problems ( $b = -.50$ ,  $p < .05$ ), suggesting that mother's religiosity may play a more important role in early childhood development than father's religiosity.

Interaction terms are introduced in Model 3, and results provide some evidence that father's religiosity may enhance the influence of parental relationship quality on children's behavior. The interaction term in Model 3 suggests that relationship quality between parents is associated with fewer externalizing problem behaviors when fathers believe that religion provides an important guide for how to treat their family ( $b = -1.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Consistent with my hypotheses, religion may lead fathers to place greater meaning and significance on family relationships, and this commitment may be beneficial to the co-parental relationship. Moreover, parents who share a strong relationship may be more likely to provide social control and support for their children, reducing the potential for their children to display externalizing problem behaviors.

----- Insert Table 3 About Here -----

Results examining the relationship between father's religiosity and children's internalizing problem behaviors are presented in Table 3. Overall, results are strikingly similar to those presented in Table 2. Fathers' religious characteristics are presented in Model 1. Children raised by fathers following a trajectory of moderate ( $b = .77$ ,  $p < .05$ ) or high increasing attendance ( $b = .90$ ,  $p < .05$ ) are more likely to exhibit internalizing problem behaviors than children raised by fathers who attend religious services weekly. Although these findings provide some evidence that fathers' religiosity is associated with internalizing problem behaviors, these results are no longer significant when other variables are included in the model (Model 2).

Similar to the results in Table 2, parental relationship quality ( $b = -1.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and mother's religious participation ( $b = -.30$ ,  $p < .05$ ) are both negatively related to children's internalizing problem behavior (Model 2). These results provide further evidence of the benefits of the co-parenting relationship

and mother's religiosity for young children's well-being. Furthermore, one significant interaction term highlights the benefits of being raised in a family in which both parents are religious. The interaction term in Model 3 suggests that mother's religious participation is especially likely to reduce internalizing problem behavior among children when fathers also feel that religion is an important guide for how to treat their family ( $b = -.23, p < .05$ ). Once this interaction term is introduced into the model, the coefficient for mother's religious participation is no longer significant, suggesting that mother's religiosity is only beneficial to children when fathers also feel that religion is important. Being raised by two religious parents may increase social support for children, making them feel secure and reducing the likelihood that they experience internalizing problem behaviors.

## DISCUSSION

The two goals of this study were to examine whether fathers maintain a higher level of religious participation during the early years of their child's life as well as whether father's religious beliefs and practices were associated with early childhood behavior. Overall, results indicate some support for my hypotheses, showing that most fathers maintain a higher level of religious participation three and five years after their child's birth and that father's religiosity may help to increase family support and stability and reduce the likelihood that children exhibit problem behaviors.

One contribution of this study is the illustration of patterns of religious participation that men experience for five years following the birth of a new child. Consistent with previous research, 75% of new fathers increase their religious involvement in the year following their child's birth, and most of these fathers maintain this higher rate of religious participation throughout the early years of their child's life. Men who turn to religion when they transition to parenthood for support and guidance may continue to rely on this support as they face new parental challenges during early childhood. Results also suggest that many men seem to be entrenched in their religious beliefs and practices, and maintain a consistent rate of religious involvement (or non-involvement) throughout the first few years of their child's life. Somewhat unexpectedly, 9% of men experience a decrease in religious participation when their child is two or three years old. These fathers may have to sacrifice time spent at religious services for time spent

with children. Although these patterns of religious involvement do not appear to directly influence young children's behavior, results suggest that many men attend religious services more frequently when they have a young child, perhaps to have access to the support and parenting guidance that many religious institutions provide.

The second goal of this study was to examine whether fathers' religiosity was associated with early childhood behavior. For the most part, fathers' religiosity does not appear to be directly related to problem behavior among young children. However, results from this study provide three interesting and useful insights into the role of parental religion on early childhood development. First, being raised by a mother that is active in a religious institution is associated with fewer problem behaviors among young children. Mothers often play an important role in the socialization of young children, and may be more involved in their child's daily life than fathers. Moreover, women are more likely to be religiously involved than men, perhaps resulting in greater access to the parental support and guidance that many religious communities provide (Krause, Ellison, & Marcum, 2002; Miller & Stark, 2002). Thus, children may receive benefits from being raised by a religious parent, and it appears that mothers' religiosity may be more directly related to children's behavior than fathers' religiosity.

Results of this study also suggest that fathers may influence early childhood behavior indirectly by believing that religion is an important part of family life. Believing that religion is an important part of family life may lead fathers to place a higher value on family relationships (Wilcox, 2002; Mahoney et al., 2003). Religious fathers may be more involved in family life and more considerate towards other family members, all of which may increase social support and integration for young children and reduce the likelihood that they display problem behaviors. In addition, fathers' religious attitudes appear to condition the influence of mothers' religious participation on early childhood behavior. Mother's religious participation is more likely to reduce problem behaviors among young children when fathers reinforce and value this religious message within the home. Children may be best able to benefit from the support and guidance that religious parents may provide when they are receiving a consistent message from both parents.

Finally, there is some evidence showing that being raised by a religious father may provide social control in a child's life. Most religious traditions provide standards and guidelines for how people should live their lives, and religious fathers likely pass these teachings on to provide some structure in their children's lives. In contrast, children raised by fathers who do not claim a religious affiliation may lack some of these social controls and be more likely to exhibit externalizing problem behaviors such as fighting and other types of delinquent behavior. Although I did not make any specific hypotheses on how religion may be related to externalizing and internalizing behavior in different ways, this finding is consistent with other research on religion, social control, and delinquency and suggests that paternal religiosity may begin to provide social control to children from an early age.

Despite the numerous strengths in this study, there are also some limitations that need to be acknowledged. One limitation is that the data used for this study are not generalizable to all fathers or families. The FFCW is an urban sample that includes an oversample of unwed and minority fathers. Furthermore, because this study is restricted to families in which fathers were interviewed at each wave of data collection, the sample is likely biased towards fathers who are more engaged in their family life and have higher SES than fathers who may have dropped out of the study.<sup>5</sup> Although these results are not generalizable, using four waves of data allows for a more thorough analysis of how fathers' religiosity and changes in fathers' religiosity may influence young children, providing some insight into a topic that has been understudied. Furthermore, the data focuses families in which fathers are perhaps most likely to disengage from family life. This study suggests that religious institutions may help to promote positive outcomes for young children by providing a number of resources to these fathers, and researchers should continue to examine how various aspects of parental religiosity may influence early childhood behavior.

This study is also limited by the questions that are available at each wave. Ideally, it would be useful to analyze each measure of fathers' religiosity over time to see how changes in these responses (or consistency over time) may influence their young children's development. Unfortunately, religious

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<sup>5</sup> Supplementary analyses suggest that the mean income in this sample is approximately \$5,000 higher than average income for all families at the three-year follow-up interview.

participation is the only religious question that is asked of fathers in each wave. Religious affiliation is measured at two time points (baseline and three-year follow-up), and all of the other religious questions are only asked at the three-year follow-up. Thus, this study is designed to use as much of the data as possible while still allowing for a causal pathway between fathers' religiosity and children's behavior (by using wave three variables to predict child behavior at age five).

Finally, this study focuses primarily on the influence of fathers' religiosity on early child behavior. However, results from this study suggests that mothers' religiosity may be equally, if not more, important in predicting problem behaviors among young children. A full examination of the influence of mothers' religiosity on children is outside the scope of this study, but future research needs to consider how the larger religious family environment may influence early childhood behavior independently and in conjunction with other family characteristics.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the literature on family and religion by using longitudinal data to explore how fathers' religious beliefs and practices may influence early childhood behavior. This study highlights five trajectories of religious participation that fathers may experience after the birth of a new child. Furthermore, this study suggests that fathers' religious beliefs and practices may enhance family relationships and contribute to positive development among young children. Overall, results from this study provide further evidence that fathers may turn to religious institutions for support and guidance after having a child, and extends this knowledge by showing how fathers' religiosity may work in conjunction with other family characteristics to reduce problem behavior among young children. Future research should continue to explore how parental religion may shape children's lives from an early age and whether these experiences continue to shape outcomes as children transition into adolescence and later into adulthood.

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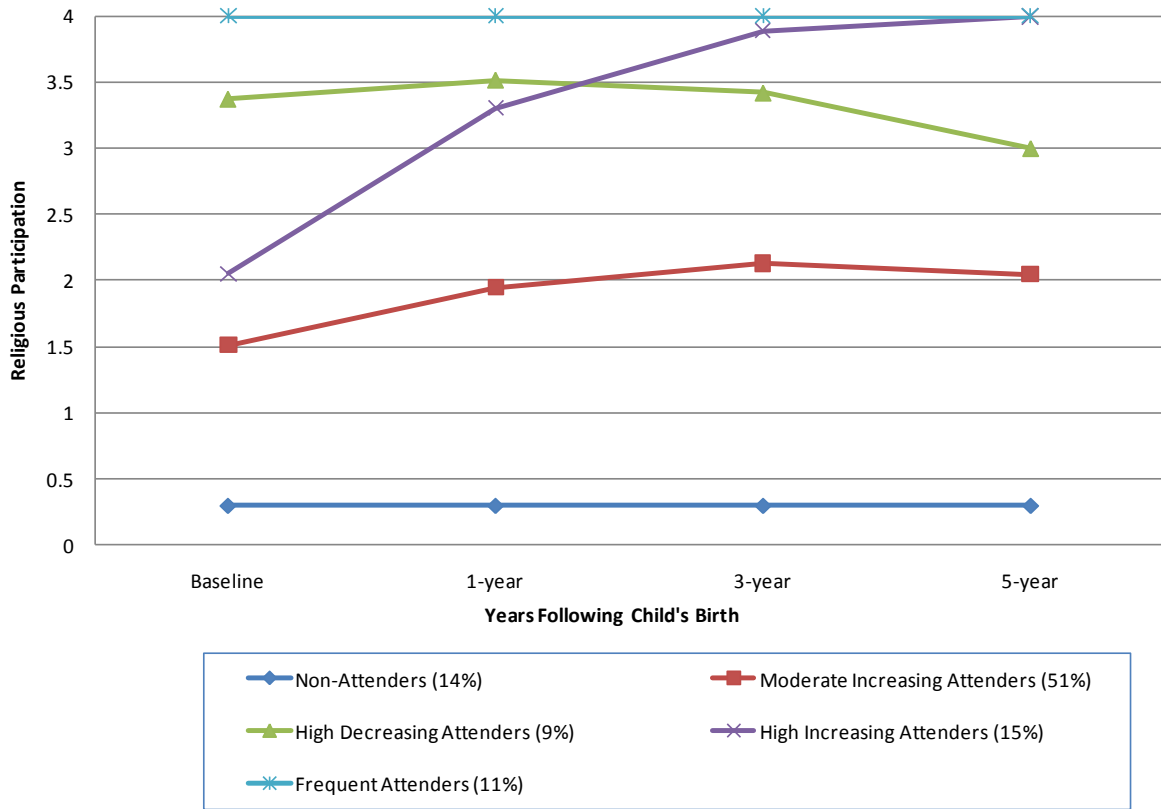
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**Figure 1: Trajectories of Fathers' Religious Participation**



**Table 1. Mean Values of All Variables by Trajectory Group of Fathers' Religious Participation**

	Non-Attenders	Moderate Increasing Attenders	High Decreasing Attenders	High Increasing Attenders	Frequent Attenders
<b>Child Behavior</b>					
Externalizing Problem Behavior	13.20 <sup>ce</sup>	12.42 <sup>e</sup>	11.42 <sup>a</sup>	12.02	10.77 <sup>ab</sup>
Internalizing Problem Behavior	5.50 <sup>o</sup>	5.40 <sup>e</sup>	5.25	5.50	4.64 <sup>ab</sup>
<b>Father's Religious Characteristics</b>					
Evangelical Protestant	0.11 <sup>bcde</sup>	0.29 <sup>ade</sup>	0.29 <sup>a</sup>	0.37 <sup>ab</sup>	0.39 <sup>ab</sup>
No Religious Affiliation	0.61 <sup>bcde</sup>	0.19 <sup>acde</sup>	0.07 <sup>ab</sup>	0.04 <sup>ab</sup>	0.03 <sup>ab</sup>
Father Changed Religious Affiliation	0.39	0.38	0.38	0.34	0.36
Religious Family Environment	1.37 <sup>bcde</sup>	2.22 <sup>acde</sup>	2.64 <sup>abde</sup>	2.84 <sup>abc</sup>	2.86 <sup>abc</sup>
Religious Literalism	1.49 <sup>bcde</sup>	2.20 <sup>acde</sup>	2.62 <sup>abe</sup>	2.69 <sup>ab</sup>	2.78 <sup>abc</sup>
<b>Relationship Characteristics</b>					
Father Involvement	4.36 <sup>o</sup>	4.31 <sup>e</sup>	4.45	4.48	4.46 <sup>ab</sup>
Parents' Relationship Quality	1.47 <sup>o</sup>	1.50 <sup>e</sup>	1.54 <sup>e</sup>	1.54 <sup>e</sup>	1.62 <sup>abcd</sup>
Married to Birth Mother	0.34 <sup>cde</sup>	0.38 <sup>ce</sup>	0.51 <sup>abe</sup>	0.45 <sup>ae</sup>	0.74 <sup>abcd</sup>
Cohabiting with Birth Mother	0.35 <sup>cde</sup>	0.28 <sup>e</sup>	0.21 <sup>ae</sup>	0.23 <sup>ae</sup>	0.08 <sup>abcd</sup>
Prior Breakup with Birth Mother	0.17 <sup>o</sup>	0.19 <sup>cde</sup>	0.11 <sup>b</sup>	0.12 <sup>b</sup>	0.08 <sup>ab</sup>
Mother's Religious Participation	1.70 <sup>bcde</sup>	2.46 <sup>acde</sup>	3.00 <sup>abe</sup>	3.21 <sup>abe</sup>	3.53 <sup>abcd</sup>
<b>Controls</b>					
Father's Age	30.39 <sup>ce</sup>	30.75 <sup>ce</sup>	32.81 <sup>abd</sup>	30.74 <sup>ce</sup>	34.13 <sup>ab</sup>
Child is Male	0.53 <sup>o</sup>	0.51	0.57 <sup>e</sup>	0.48	0.43 <sup>ac</sup>
Black	0.39 <sup>bd</sup>	0.51 <sup>ac</sup>	0.39 <sup>bd</sup>	0.53 <sup>ac</sup>	0.46
Latino	0.17 <sup>cd</sup>	0.21 <sup>cd</sup>	0.34 <sup>abe</sup>	0.31 <sup>abe</sup>	0.15 <sup>cd</sup>
Other Race	0.06 <sup>d</sup>	0.04	0.04	0.02 <sup>a</sup>	0.04
High School Education	0.32 <sup>ce</sup>	0.31 <sup>ce</sup>	0.21 <sup>abd</sup>	0.33 <sup>ce</sup>	0.22 <sup>abd</sup>
Some College Education	0.25 <sup>c</sup>	0.30	0.35 <sup>a</sup>	0.28	0.33
College Degree	0.12 <sup>e</sup>	0.13 <sup>ce</sup>	0.19 <sup>bde</sup>	0.12 <sup>ce</sup>	0.30 <sup>abcd</sup>
Household Income	3.36 <sup>e</sup>	3.55 <sup>e</sup>	3.59 <sup>e</sup>	3.34 <sup>e</sup>	3.92 <sup>abcd</sup>
First-time Fatherhood	0.50 <sup>ce</sup>	0.42	0.35 <sup>a</sup>	0.41	0.38 <sup>a</sup>
Number of Additional Children	1.46 <sup>de</sup>	1.61	1.64	1.75 <sup>a</sup>	1.82 <sup>a</sup>
Own Father's Involvement	0.62 <sup>cde</sup>	0.67 <sup>e</sup>	0.75 <sup>a</sup>	0.73 <sup>a</sup>	0.80 <sup>ab</sup>
Father's Hours Worked	32.13 <sup>cde</sup>	34.87	37.29 <sup>a</sup>	36.33 <sup>a</sup>	36.80 <sup>a</sup>
N	202	770	136	224	171

N = 1503

Note: Two-tailed t-tests used to determine differences between group means.

<sup>a</sup> = significantly different from Non-Attenders ( $p < .05$ )

<sup>b</sup> = significantly different from Moderate-Increasing Attenders ( $p < .05$ )

<sup>c</sup> = significantly different from High-Decreasing Attenders ( $p < .05$ )

<sup>d</sup> = significantly different from High-Increasing Attenders ( $p < .05$ )

<sup>e</sup> = significantly different from Frequent Attenders ( $p < .05$ )

**Table 2. Results from Regression Models Predicting Externalizing Problem Behavior among Children at Age Five**

	1		2		3	
<b>Father's Religious Characteristics</b>						
<i>Trajectory of Religious Participation</i>						
Non-Attendees	2.34	(0.95) *	-0.22	(0.95)	-0.08	(0.93)
Moderate Increasing Attendees	1.78	(0.69) **	0.02	(0.69)	0.06	(0.69)
High Decreasing Attendees	0.70	(0.90)	-0.52	(0.84)	-0.55	(0.85)
High Increasing Attendees	1.24	(0.77)	-0.23	(0.76)	-0.29	(0.76)
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>						
Evangelical Protestant	-0.21	(0.44)	-0.31	(0.48)	-0.38	(0.46)
No Religious Affiliation	1.69	(0.59) **	1.20	(0.58) *	1.16	(0.58) *
Change in Religious Affiliation	-0.03	(0.40)	-0.09	(0.39)	-0.19	(0.39)
<i>Religious Attitudes</i>						
Religious Family Environment	0.31	(0.29)	0.32	(0.28)	1.95	(0.80) *
Religious Literalism	0.31	(0.27)	-0.01	(0.25)	-0.01	(0.26)
<b>Moderating Variables</b>						
Father Involvement			0.01	(0.12)	0.05	(0.12)
Parents' Relationship Quality			-2.69	(0.59) ***	-0.43	(1.27)
Married to Birth Mother			-0.14	(0.68)	-0.12	(0.70)
Cohabiting with Birth Mother			0.10	(0.68)	0.13	(0.68)
Prior Breakup with Birth Mother			-0.81	(0.66)	-0.09	(0.66)
Mother's Religious Participation			-0.50	(0.20) *	-0.41	(0.22)
<b>Controls</b>						
Father's Age			-0.05	(0.03)	-0.05	(0.03)
Child is Male			0.92	(0.38) *	0.87	(0.37) *
Black			-0.07	(0.55)	-0.15	(0.55)
Latino			0.14	(0.61)	0.08	(0.59)
Other Race			-0.62	(1.04)	-0.67	(1.25)
High School Education			-0.81	(0.51)	-0.94	(0.52)
Some College Education			-1.13	(0.54) *	-1.30	(0.53) *
College Degree			-1.68	(0.77) *	-1.89	(0.74) *
Household Income			-0.44	(0.16) **	-0.38	(0.17) *
First-time Fatherhood			-1.03	(0.45) *	-1.05	(0.49) *
Number of Additional Children			0.18	(0.16)	0.20	(0.17)
Own Father's Involvement			-0.30	(0.43)	-0.35	(0.42)
Hours Worked			-0.02	(0.01)	-0.02	(0.01)
<b>Interactions</b>						
Religious Family Environment x Relationship Quality					-1.07	(0.51) *
R <sup>2</sup>	0.02		0.09		0.09	
*p < .05; **p < .01; *** p < .001						
N = 1503						
Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented (standard errors in parentheses).						

**Table 3. Results from Regression Models Predicting Internalizing Problem Behavior among Children at Age Five**

	1		2		3	
<b>Father's Religious Characteristics</b>						
<i>Trajectory of Religious Participation</i>						
Non-Attendees	0.80	(0.53)	-0.36	(0.56)	-0.64	(0.57)
Moderate Increasing Attendees	0.77	(0.39) *	-0.44	(0.41)	-0.38	(0.43)
High Decreasing Attendees	0.54	(0.52)	-0.02	(0.51)	-0.29	(0.51)
High Increasing Attendees	0.90	(0.45) *	0.14	(0.46)	0.06	(0.45)
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>						
Evangelical Protestant	-0.21	(0.26)	0.16	(0.28)	0.18	(0.27)
No Religious Affiliation	0.12	(0.35)	0.14	(0.35)	0.17	(0.35)
Change in Religious Affiliation	0.04	(0.24)	0.08	(0.24)	0.07	(0.23)
<i>Religious Attitudes</i>						
Religious Family Environment	-0.23	(0.17)	-0.12	(0.17)	0.33	(0.29)
Religious Literalism	0.31	(0.16)	0.09	(0.16)	0.09	(0.16)
<b>Relationship Characteristics</b>						
Father Involvement			0.04	(0.07)	0.05	(0.07)
Parents' Relationship Quality			-1.41	(0.34) ***	-0.16	(0.34) ***
Married to Birth Mother			0.19	(0.41)	0.34	(0.41)
Cohabiting with Birth Mother			0.69	(0.41)	0.76	(0.40)
Prior Breakup with Birth Mother			-0.26	(0.40)	-0.34	(0.40)
Mother's Religious Participation			-0.30	(0.12) *	0.20	(0.27)
<b>Controls</b>						
Father's Age			0.00	(0.02)	0.00	(0.02)
Child is Male			0.10	(0.22)	0.17	(0.22)
Black			-0.05	(0.33)	-0.03	(0.33)
Latino			1.34	(0.36) ***	1.29	(0.35) ***
Other Race			0.59	(0.62)	0.63	(0.61)
High School Education			-0.41	(0.31)	-0.42	(0.30)
Some College Education			-0.61	(0.32)	-0.63	(0.32) *
College Degree			-0.48	(0.45)	-0.55	(0.46)
Household Income			-0.21	(0.09) *	-0.22	(0.09) *
First-time Fatherhood			-0.51	(0.27)	-0.53	(0.27)
Number of Additional Children			-0.01	(0.10)	-0.04	(0.10)
Own Father's Involvement			-0.32	(0.25)	-0.30	(0.24)
Hours Worked			-0.01	(0.01)	-0.01	(0.01)
<b>Interactions</b>						
Religious Family Environment x Mother's Religious Participation					-0.23	(.12) *
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01		0.07		0.07	
*p < .05; **p < .01; *** p < .001						
N = 1503						
Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented (standard errors in parentheses).						