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## Faith Formation from Birth to Age 20: A Psychology Professor's Insights for Strengthening Congregational Ministry

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## Ages 0-2

### I. Relationship with early caregivers is the foundation for moral/spiritual development.

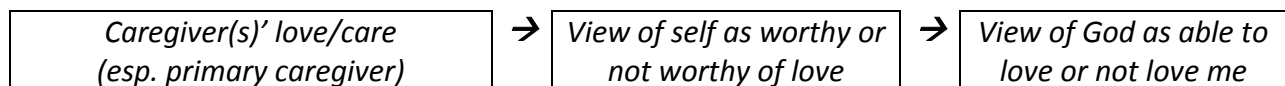
Although much of our early behavior is reactive, not proactive, the brain is very busy engaging in *pre-conscious frequency analyses*. Some of the most important things the brain keeps track of are supportive and unsupportive care experiences.

A. The *frequency* with which we experience positive caregiving influences how many neural pathways are preserved for the experience of positive emotions later in life. Babies with infrequent positive care pare down the number of neural pathways on which positive emotions are experienced (i.e., a person who has not experienced much closeness/delight in parent-child interactions may always have a diminished neurological capacity to "feel" God's love and joy later).

B. The *ratio* of positive to negative interactions influences our **internal working model (IWM) of relationships**.

1. IWM: Set of partially conscious, *partially unconscious* expectations for how something works.
  - difficult to change (possible, but takes extended experience with a consistent alternative)
  - "known by the body" more than the linguistic part of the brain
2. IWM of close relationships (aka attachment model) is:
  - result of a *hardwired drive* to mentally order our world and then resist re-ordering (generally speaking, being able to predict aspects of the environment contributes to a species' survival)
  - derived from interactions with early caregivers (via implicit frequency analyses)
  - extended to all close relationships
  - extended to self-concept (Winnicott: "*Our mother is our first mirror*")
  - extended to our God-concept

Anna-Marie Rizzuto's extension of Attachment theory to faith:



### II. Socialization implications

- Faith is rooted in an embodied/visceral/sub-conscious openness (or wariness) toward God.
- While many teach that Christians derive their identity from God, this model suggests that each person's God-concept is an extension of his/her own identity (developmentally, the child's own identity comes before the identity of an abstract being).

**Babies need:** to experience fellow-humans as loving, and themselves as loveable, or they will likely always have difficulty experiencing God as loving and able to extend grace.

## Ages 2 - 6

### I. Young children's understanding of faith is in keeping with their general cognitive capacity.

For preschoolers, we particularly need to keep in mind ....

**A. Limited working memory:** Most preschoolers can hold/work with only one or two things in their mind at once. This means that they often:

- focus on one aspect of a Bible story that captures their attention (often not the main point)  
e.g., the story of Moses in the bulrushes is remembered as "the princess story"
- have trouble ordering several events in a story
- have trouble recognizing cause and effect patterns
- want/need to organize the world into rigid, mutually-exclusive categories  
(people are good OR bad -- good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell)  
Because of this, some children are reluctant to admit any sin at all.

### B. Difficulty understanding others' intentions or perspectives

- Most children *begin* reckoning humans' intentions between ages 4 & 5. Ascribing intentions and emotions to God (who is more abstract) often does not happen until around age 7. Prior to this, God is often viewed as a super-agent (e.g., one that can make thunder), but this agent is psychologically "flat" (i.e., lacking emotions and intentions), unpredictable, distant, and largely tangential to the child's own life.

Teacher: *Could God see Jonah when he was hiding in the boat?*

3 year old: *I don't know.*

Teacher: *Can God see you when you are hiding under the bed?*

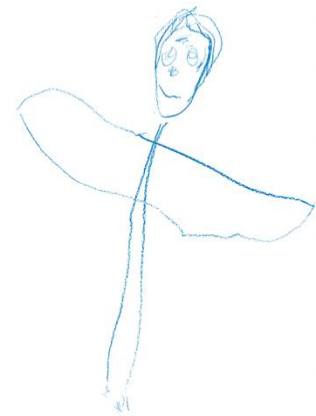
3 year old: *No ... but my mom can.*

4 year old (asked to draw a picture of God— at right):

*He has eyes and a mouth and his legs are giant.*

Teacher: *Is God a giant?*

4 year old: *Yes. I'm done now.*



### C. Unfettered imagination and intense emotions (positive and negative)

## II. Socialization implications

- Children are easily confused and can be easily frightened in this stage.
- Children often take home the *wrong* "take-home message."

### Teachers should:

- focus lessons on one or two simple themes
- review the order of events in a Bible story several times (and ask children to order the pictures after the story is told)
- explicitly state causes and effects
- *gently* encourage children to acknowledge their own sin, recognizing that denial of sin may be more the result of having only two mutually-exclusive mental categories (good/bad person) than a "hard heart."
- avoid scare tactics (that an unfettered imagination may amplify)

## Ages 7-11

I. Advances in logical reasoning *within the bounds of concrete reality* prompt school-age children to construct a **story-based theology** based on literal, concrete (not abstract), mechanistic causes and effects.

- Stories become the main vehicle for children's construction of a personal faith.
- Children in this stage can retell a story in the correct sequence, extract the main point, apply it to their own lives, and may even generate their own concrete/mechanistic stories to explain theological mysteries (like how Jesus can bear our sin in his own body, per I. Peter 2:24).

Interviewer (asking about a drawing of God): *And tell me about this pink hair....*

7 year old:

*It's pink because it's shooting out to the people. God shoots it out to the people and then it gets black because of all the sin and then God takes it back and eats it all. Then he makes it pink again and spits it back out so it can take more sin. God has to take the sin because otherwise it would just bag you down you know.*

Caveat: Although most school-age children can easily grasp an individual Bible story, most will have difficulty articulating how all the Bible stories fit together. Asked whether the Bible is many stories or one story, many will still answer "many stories."

II. Advances in children's understanding of how human relationships work (better perspective-taking skills, understanding of intentions) help them make sense of why God does what God does. Qualities that define good human relationships, especially **fairness and reciprocity**, are not only ascribed to God, but **almost become the reason for God's existence**.

- Good and evil are balanced by a God who is bound by an inherent natural law of justice, impartiality, & *reciprocity*.
- The strict preschool distinction between good and bad people now becomes nuanced. (All people do *both* good and bad; God keeps track and rewards accordingly.)
- God is trusted to be completely fair and rationale, but is still not someone that school-age children feel particularly close to.

### III. Socialization implications:

The intense drive to impose logic and make sense of the world makes school-age children...

- particularly distressed and/or reluctant to acknowledge that bad things happen to good people (e.g., they may rationalize misfortune, insisting that a person must have done something bad we don't know about).
- susceptible to works-righteousness theology
  - *You have to be good to get to heaven.*
  - *If I pray hard enough God has to give me this*  
(and if I don't get it, I'm not praying hard enough/being good enough, etc.).

### Teachers should provide:

- Interpersonally-complex Bible stories in which good people do bad things and vice versa
- Intentional *grace-focused* instruction (to counter this group's tendency to develop a works-righteousness theology in which people get what they deserve)

## Early Adolescence (more related to puberty than age/grade)

### I. The paradoxical adolescent brain (PAB)

- Teens who can win a forensics award for arguments disparaging drinking, ride with a drunk driver.
- Teens who can compute the likelihood of pregnancy within a year's time, have unprotected sex.

PAB is explained by the juxtaposition of different puberty-related developments in the brain.

- **Myelination in the academic areas** permits young teens to escape the concrete, literal, strict-reciprocity world of middle childhood and contemplate abstract, theological concepts.
- **Deconstruction/reconstruction in the frontal lobe** (which is responsible for social decisions, planning, impulse control) causes *cognitive chaos reminiscent of the early childhood period*. Often evident are ..
  - feelings that trump logic
  - a "throw back" to the use of non-nuanced, inflexible social categories
  - difficulty seeing things from another's perspective
  - a desire for trusted adults to tell them the right answers

### II. Healthy faith in early adolescence will generally include:

- intense, emotional relationship with God ("God is my best friend")
- complete trust and uncritical acceptance of their tradition's "whole package"
- values/beliefs that are strongly felt ("I know it in my heart") rather than reasoned
- difficulty understanding how one's upbringing influences what one believes
  - Because young teens tend to see truth as unambiguous and knowable, those who believe differently may be viewed as stupid/brainwashed/missing the obvious.
  - Professions of "faith" in early adolescence are often more a profession of what the teen views as obvious indisputable fact than a profession of something one can't know for sure but accepts by faith.
- ability to tell the "meta-story" of their theological tradition (i.e., the Bible as all one story)
- ability to articulate basic doctrines of their theological tradition (e.g., salvation by grace)

### III. Unhealthy faith in early adolescence often looks like one of these:

A. Teens have already stopped trusting the religious community due to ...

- bad behavior on the part of adults (recall that 7-11s define Christianity in terms of visible behavior)
- teen senses that self or parent is unwelcome at church (sometimes for doctrinal reasons)

and/or ..

- B. Teens are unable to articulate their community's theology. Often this is the result of growing up in a faith, but never being required to formally articulate the tenets of the faith in memorized catechism answers, written work, verbal testimonies, etc.

Analogy: A child of immigrants who hears the parents' native language while growing up, but is not required to speak it herself, will have limited capacity as an adult to communicate in the parents' native language (Smith with Denton, 2005).

Results from the National Study of Youth and Religion (Smith with Denton, 2005) suggest that the majority of contemporary U.S. teens *cannot* articulate a set of beliefs resembling any major religious tradition. Smith says that contemporary youth have their own (anemic, substance-less) "religion" that he has labeled *Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD)*.

#### **The five tenets of MTD**

1. God exists, created and watches over the world.
2. God wants people to be good, fair, and nice.
3. The goal of life is happiness and self-esteem.
4. God is (mostly) for times of need (sort of a "cosmic butler" that will help if I ask).
5. Good people go to heaven.

#### **Conspicuously absent from Smith's interviews about what teens believed were references to:**

- |                      |                                 |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| being a sinner (18%) | loving neighbor (1%)            |
| obeying God (5%)     | working for social justice (0%) |
| salvation (2%)       | self-discipline (0%)            |

#### **IV. Socialization implications**

- Young teens raised by supportive religious people are generally inclined to embrace everything these mentors teach them.
- Mentors need to *behave* well.
- Congregations should provide some formal mechanism of response for young teens eager to identify with the community. Congregations that want confirmation/profession of faith to serve as an "adult" membership rite, should offer an intermediate rite (e.g., a formal welcoming to the communion table, a formal presentation as "ready for service.")
- Mentors should NOT skimp on catechism, training in doctrine, etc.  
Solid, rigorous training in doctrine (with tests) is critical, ideally before further brain maturation enables teens to become relativists or cynics in later adolescence.

(Note: This does not mean that middle-school teachers should *replace* stories with catechism. Even adults respond well to stories and early adolescents may need to be brought into doctrine/catechism via a Bible story or the historical account that prompted a religious tradition to articulate a certain doctrine.)

## Late Adolescence (high school & college years)

I. Further brain maturation, combined with life experiences, results in **different developmental trajectories** beginning in approximately 9<sup>th</sup> grade (or earlier if high IQ).

**Group 1:** Retains the faith of early adolescence, fully trusting church authorities to provide the "whole package" of beliefs. This group is typically close to their parents and/or religious mentors and have limited education and/or exposure to other belief systems.

**Group 2:** Life experiences prompt critical reflection on what the religious community has taught them. Doubts arise, and religious mentors respond in a developmentally appropriate way, acknowledging that the truth is NOT simple and knowable, *modeling* faith as an informed, intentional commitment to something we cannot fully know and actively encouraging a public commitment. Youth often develop a faith system based *largely* on what they have been taught with *some self-reasoned* components.

**Group 3:** Life experiences prompt critical reflection on what the religious community has taught them. Doubts arise, and religious mentors *fail* to acknowledge the uncertainty of faith. Teens then view their mentors as naïve, outgrow them, and leave the faith.

### II. Healthy faith in late adolescence and adulthood will generally include:

- a more reasoned, less emotion-dependent faith
- an awareness of how one's upbringing has shaped one's faith  
(and genuine respect for others who believe differently)
- understanding of religious beliefs as faith, not indisputable facts
- appropriate balance between the uncritical acceptance of church teachings and one's own critical reflection
- evidence of one's beliefs in one's behavior
- formal/overt commitment to a religious community

### III. Socialization implications

- Healthy teens begin to critically evaluate what they have been taught (in all domains, not just faith) in approximately 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Questions and doubts in the religious domain are not only normative at this point, but demonstrate that the teen values his/her faith.
- Mentors need to respond to teens' developmentally-appropriate critical reflection by genuinely considering what the teen offers, re-engaging in their own critical reflection, acknowledging the uncertainty of faith, and avoiding the temptation to give overly-certain, simplistic answers which will be rejected by contemporary youth.
- Youth with a general inclination toward a particular faith should be pro-actively encouraged to engage in a **public commitment rite** during adolescence (e.g., confirmation, profession of faith, baptism for those not baptized as infants). It is my own opinion that for some youth this is appropriate during middle school when they are *certain* of their faith; for others, it is more appropriate during high school when they have begun to appreciate the uncertainty of faith. Once teens start college, it is often too late. Many college students are so convinced of the uncertainty of faith, and so tolerant of all belief systems, that they never feel certain enough of a particular faith to make a formal, public commitment to that faith.