

Does the Family That Prays Together Really Stay Together?

by Ashley McGuire | April 20, 2016 8:00 am

Closing my three-year-old daughter's door at bedtime, I heard a quiet, "Mommy, will you say one more prayer?" It was a delay tactic that I've heard from other religious parents is a bedtime show-stopper where small children have the upper hand. As a parent, how do you say no to prayer, even when it's probably partially a ploy to stall going to sleep?

In religious circles, the old adage "The family that prays together stays together" still makes the rounds. But is it true?

A lot of research has been devoted to the question of whether religion is a force for good among today's families, and while the findings are mixed, studies have found plenty of reason to believe that faith can be a powerful adhesive for families working hard not to come undone. Regular religious service attendance[1] is tied to lower divorce rates, for example, and religious institutions[2] can be powerful intermediaries in helping families in crisis and promoting chastity and fidelity, which in turn affect social ills like out-of-wedlock childbearing and divorce.

But the saying isn't "The family that goes to church together..."—it's "The family that prays together..."

What makes prayer special in family life, and in a day and age when families can hardly find time for dinner together, are any of them actually finding time to pray together?

There isn't a lot of data on prayer specifically among families, but one 2015 survey[3] found that 50 percent of couples never pray together outside of family meals. On the flip side, the other half of American couples do at least once a year, with 11 percent reporting that they do so daily and a third, overall, doing so at least monthly. The study found that the numbers for couples who worship together closely track those of couples who pray together. Older research[4] found that at least one-fifth of respondents report participating in "extended prayer time" with other family members.

And people certainly are praying *for* their family; a *Newsweek* poll[5] about prayer found that of those who do pray regularly, 82 percent pray for the "health or success of a child or family member" when they do so. Another poll found that a majority of those who pray report their family as the thing they pray most about. That same poll found that the most likely place a person will pray is in his or her own home.

That individual prayer can improve the lives of those who undertake it is a well-documented fact supported[6] by even the secular, medical world. Its benefits can include reduced stress, increased self-awareness, better communication, and a more empathetic and forgiving attitude towards others.

It's hardly a stretch to suggest those benefits would expand to families that then pray together. For starters, family prayer time is quality time together, time not spent in front of the television or a smartphone, but rather, time spent communicating on a deeply personal level. One study[7] found that children with parents who pray more than once daily report better relationships with their parents, even if that prayer is not done with their children, implying that there is something contagious about the positive effects of prayer in family life. Another study[8] found a positive correlation between increased trust and prayer time between couples.

Other sociologists have argued that joint prayer can be a powerful mediation tool that leads couples to be more forgiving. As Mark Butler, a professor of marriage and family therapy at Brigham Young University, put it[9]: "When people pray (about tensions in their relationship) they are helped to see their part in the problem. They're helped to see what they can do themselves to make a difference. And they are helped to soften. All these things help with conflict resolution."

The Pew Research Center routinely finds that a lot of Americans[10] pray every day and consider prayer to be very important. Most often, discussion about prayer and its benefits is focused on the individual. But the fact that individuals who pray often do so for their families and in their own homes suggests that prayer has a naturally family-oriented component. And the data points to only benefits for couples and families that pray together, supporting the idea that prayer may very well help families stay together. For faith leaders and clergy looking to have a positive impact on family cohesion, offering believers simple and concrete ways to practice family prayer inside the home could make a world of difference.

Endnotes:

1. Regular religious service attendance: <http://family-studies.org/better-together-religious-attendance/>
2. religious institutions: <http://family-studies.org/can-americas-religious-traditions-strengthen-marriage/>
3. 2015 survey: https://csed.byu.edu/AnalyticsReports/American%20Family%20Survey_Final%20Report.pdf
4. Older research: <http://www.the7greatprayers.com/prayerstats.aspx>
5. *Newsweek* poll: <http://www.churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/150915-u-s-statistics-on-prayer.html>
6. supported: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/more-mortal/201406/5-scientificallly-supported-benefits-prayer>
7. One study: http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/assets/102508/family_religious_involvement_and_the_quality_of_parental_relationships_for_families_with_early_adolescents_pdf
8. study: <http://www.fincham.info/papers/2012-prs-pray-together.pdf>
9. put it: <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865647560/Praying-together-to-stay-together-The-role-prayer-plays-in-relationship-conflict.html?pg=all>
10. a lot of Americans: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/06/5-facts-about-prayer/>

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