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# THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN RELIGIOSITY AND SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AMONG CHILDREN: A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract**

For children, a proper environment will support the development of pro-social characteristics, while a hostile environment is likely to lead to anti-social development. Starting from this premise, the main purpose of this work is to determine if and to what degree children's involvement in Christian practices, acquired as a result of living in a Christian environment, is reflected in their socio-emotional development. This possible association was assessed using Spearman and Pearson correlations and simple linear regression on some religious attributes (as independent variables) and some positive and negative age-specific social manifestations (as dependent variables). The results of the study show that an increased level of religious behaviour could predict a higher chance of positive social behaviour outcomes. Thus, religiosity may be regarded as one possible good influence on children's development in future adults.

**Keywords**

temporal religiosity, behavioural religiosity, aggressive behaviour, social skills, quality of friendship

## Introduction

By nature, humans are social beings. In „The Social Construction of Reality", Berger and Luckmann (1991) empirically state that human existence occurs in the context of stability, direction and order. Because human development is impossible in solitude, it is necessary for them to establish interactions with other people throughout their life (Card et al., 2002). These interactions are established mostly within the social institutions, i.e. public organizations with operational rules, regulated by law, and with legal status, having an important role in fulfilling different needs of citizens. Thus, it is believed that social institutions use social control in order to regulate patterns of thinking and behaviour, the organization of social relations between members of society being based on meeting their needs and defending social values (Dincă & Lucheș, 2018). Social institutions constitute the framework for the resilience process, through which individual and collective actions are enforced at the level of local communities, which by adaptation and effective response contribute to diminishing the negative effects of general threats (Saghin et al., 2022). A church is an example of a social institution, studies in this area showing that religiously involved people tend to have greater family stability, better physical health, and can cope more easily with traumatic losses and stress (Jeynes, 2003). In the same context, the specialized literature on children's social development indicated that their

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behaviour and decisions are significantly influenced by the environment, based on their tendency to assimilate habits and social norms from peers (Dokuka et al., 2020). This hypothesis is sustained by the social learning theory, according to which observing others in their social context is important in moulding one's behaviour, attitudes and emotional reactions. The child's inclinations and moral cognition are established through social learning and is gradually constructed by observations, modelling and consolidation (Chandra Sekaran et al., 2021; Kristjansson, 2004). Thus, socialization can represent a process through which a child acquires standards, values and practices from the society in which he/she was raised, gradually coming to share different aspects of the emotions, cognition and behaviour of the members from that society (Bennett, 2005).

In literature, negative social behaviour ("antisocial") refers to opposing the principles, values and norms of the community. In this category is included aggression, defined as any kind of action or behaviour intended to cause psychological/physical harm to another person. In children, the first manifestation is the aggression towards other. Instrumental aggression is observed starting with 6 months, while the physical aggression peak is considered to be between 2 and 4 years old, decreasing until maturity. During the early childhood, starting with the development of linguistic abilities and cognition and as a result of increasing the frequency of interaction with peers, children develop subtler types of aggression which serves different functions in their relation to others. Consequently, as the child gets older, the verbal aggression decreases and the aggressive behaviour becomes more sophisticated and subtle (Bonino et al., 2005; Naylor, 2011; Paquin et al., 2017). Huesmann explains aggression starting from the social knowledge theory, i.e. social behaviour is controlled through some cognitive scenarios learned by children during early individual development, based on which they construct solutions for solving social problems. Starting from this consideration and in accordance with the cognitive-behaviour theory, it was determined that the child living in a climate of violence learns aggression scenarios by observation, consolidation and personal experimentation. These scenarios are then coded, repeated, stored, and retrieved, thus becoming resistant to change. Social influence affects children's socialization process, i.e. in order to be socially accepted, children learn various norms from their colleagues and act accordingly. If these norms promote aggression, then they will be tempted to manifest aggressively (Huesmann & Reynolds, 2001; Shechtman, 2009). All of these aspects make aggression one of the most destructive types of behaviour to which children can be exposed, either as assailants, or as victims. The negative effects of violence on the psychological well-being and health are strongly supported by specialized literature. School performance is also negatively affected by the aggressive behaviour: both committing acts of violence against colleagues and experimenting victimization are associated with high degree of school absenteeism and with low academic performance (Park et al., 2017; Corboz et al., 2018).

On the other hand, positive social behaviour is known in literature as taking different forms. Some authors include in this category the volunteer actions, made with the intent of helping or to be in the benefit of another person or group. In a different approach and related to children, Epps et al. state that "positive social behaviour" is more than the opposite manifestations of problematic behaviour, the prosocial abilities being important especially for the attitudes towards peers. From the authors' perspective, the main components of positive behaviour are social competence with peers and adults, compliance with adult rules and guidelines, autonomy and self-confidence, along with empathy, self-control and taking responsibility (Kastenholz & Erdmann, 1992; Wispe, 1972; Epps et al., 2005). Thus, as researchers' interest in studying social phenomena increased, the term came to include also the abilities which increase the probability of success and of personal satisfaction in familial, social, recreational and academic environment (Wispe, 1972; Carr et al., 2002). Human relations are

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important for the psycho-social development due to the fact that they represent the context in which basic abilities and competence are elaborated and resurfaced, offering the emotional and cognitive resources required for adaptation and functioning in the social world (Costin & Jones, 1992). Thus, one may say that all humans have an innate fundamental motivation to establish positive, significant and lasting interpersonal relationships. The need for belonging can be accomplished through affective enjoyable and frequent interactions which are manifested in the context of a stable environment, characterized by emotional concern for others (Adams et al., 2005). Starting from these considerations, one can regard sociability as a positive social behaviour attribute. There are many ways to express sociability, one of them being the child's ability to establish friendly relationships with peers. In general, friendship can be described as a relationship which is characterized by mutuality, reciprocity and emotional attachment and is established voluntarily between individuals who are neither relatives nor partners (Naylor, 2011; Hernández-Hernández et al., 2016). In particular, "friends" are considered individuals which have affection for each other, respect each other, spend quality time together, manifest "give-and-take" behaviour and this relationship brings comparable benefits from their social interaction. Literature studies assessed that children form friendships starting with early ages but their understanding of friendship changes over time, its quality and nature being modified based on the children's activities and expectations as they mature. Among the factors which are important in the selection of friends are: similar age, gender, physical proximity and similarity in behaviour and interests. Thus, as they get older, the children have the tendency to establish friendships with children who are similar with them in temperament, prosocial and antisocial behaviours, and levels of acceptance by others (Morris & Eisenberg, 2002; LeBlanc et al., 2006). At the same time, the adolescents spend more time with friends than with family, the established friendships becoming an important source of influence on psycho-social development (e.g. conflict is positively associated with depression, while support is inverse correlated with anxiety). Friendships can also have motivational significance by modelling some positive forms of social behaviour, influencing school performance and engagement. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that friends interact and observe each other, the moral actions development being facilitated by frequent involvement in positive social interactions (Bond et al., 2014; Li & Rogers, 2006; Barry & Wentzel, 2006). Quality friendships influence children's general psychological adjustment by contributing to their happiness and wellbeing, and by helping develop their coping mechanisms. Lack of friends is associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms, with tendency to internalize problems and with development of some negative emotions which in time could become promotors of peers' victimization and aggression (Adams et al., 2005; Gasser-Haas et al., 2021). In other words, one may state that for children, connecting with family, friends and school represents a key protective factor, associated with low degree of involvement in health-risk behaviours, and a precursor of good mental health and better educational outcomes (Bond et al., 2014).

On the other hand, the origin and functions of religion were studied in literature by authors such as Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud or William James, each one of them having their own different approaches in defining this concept. James considers religion as a multitude of feelings, experiences and actions which are manifested in solitude by an individual, in relation to what he or she considers being divine. Freud states that the humans' necessity to protect themselves from the destructive and uncontrolled force of nature stays at the origin of religious ideas. Jung regards the absence of religion as the primordial cause of psychological disorders manifested among adult population, and claims that religion has an important role in the everyday life of every human being, regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or country of residence (Quintar, 2011; Schieman, 2010). Starting from these considerations, various researchers argue that religion has a positive effect on child's development, due to the fact that

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religious exposure contributes in shaping some internal self-regulation standards (e.g. those normative convictions against aggression) (Huesmann et al., 2011). It was ascertained that in case of both children and adults, a strong religious background assists them in making important decisions, in solving difficult challenges and in finding answers for important questions in life (Goodman, 2002). In addition, Olson-Ritt et al. proposed that spirituality determines the development of prosocial coping manifestations in children, which in turn contribute to reducing problematic behaviour. Thus, Knight et al. observed on adolescents a correlation between the reduced alcohol consumption and the presence of forgiveness (Olson-Ritt et al., 2004; Knight et al., 2007; Scales et al., 2014). Other studies revealed that adolescents involved in religious activities are less predisposed to alcohol and substance abuse, while Koubek obtained a positive correlation between academic performance and the degree of religious involvement among high school Christian students. This phenomenon can be explained by the tendency, among children from a Christian environment to refrain from negative behaviour which can decrease their academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003; Koubek, 1984).

Starting from the idea that Christian teachings can have a positive influence in every aspect of a child's life, the aim of this post facto study was to determine whether the religious involvement (operationalized as frequency of church attendance and degree of involvement in Christian practices) can be associated with proper development of some socio-emotional characteristics in case of children who have been raised in Christian families and who are frequently exposed to Christian environment through a Christian day centre. Thus, we hypothesized that a high level of religious involvement would be associated with low level of aggressive behaviour and with high level of sociability.

## Materials and methods

We selected as the sample thirty-five children which attend different Christian day centres, having the age between 8 and 18 years old. After obtaining the necessary approval, they were asked to complete the questionnaire in the presence of an adult, each item being rephrased in such a way to be understood more easily.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts. The first part contained items regarding the age and the religious affiliation of children's mother and father. The items from the second section measured the children's religious involvement on two levels. We considered as "temporal religiosity" the frequency of church attendance, with values ranging from 1 to 4, 1 = hardly ever, 2 = only on important religious holidays, 3 = several times a month and 4 = every Sunday. We used the term "behavioural religiosity" in order to describe the most commune religious practices specific to Christianity (e.g. „I pray", „I read the Bible", „I sing in a choir"); the value 1 was assigned to each activity, this variable being computed by accounting all the activities in which children are involved. The third section denotes the dependent variables and was constructed based on a Likert model of frequency, the respondents being asked to answer the statement by assigning a number ranging from 1 to 6, with 1 = never, 2 = hardly ever, 3 =rarely, 4 = often, 5 = very often, and 6 = always. In order to assess the aggressive behaviour, we used a 4 item scale (e.g. „I behaved in an uncivilized way with my parents", „I fight with my siblings"). The sociability was analysed from two perspectives using a 10-item scale with 2 subscales. The first one, with 4 items („I get along well with my classmates", „I easily make friends with other children") was used to assess the children's social skills, and the second one, with 6 items („My friends and I go to the same church", „My friends warn me when I'm wrong") was used to evaluate the quality of friendship established with other children.

For data analyses we used IBM SPSS Statistics version 21. All variables were tested for normality using 1-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. We characterized the participants in this study using descriptive statistics analysis by computing percentage, means and standard

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deviations. In order to investigate the associations between religious involvement and the indicators for aggression and sociability, we performed bivariate correlation analysis (Pearson and Spearman coefficients according to the results obtained for Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test) and linear regression analysis.

## Results and discussions

Results of descriptive statistics show that the children in the study were in similar percent belonging to childhood and adolescence (Fig. 1a). The religious affiliation of parents was conceptualized based on the Pettis's study. The author considers as religious homogamous a family where both mother and father are affiliated to the same denomination and share a similar set of practices and religious beliefs, and as across-religion heterogamous a family where both mother and father are not Protestants and belong to different religious denominations (Pettis, 2011). In our case, the percentage distribution of the sample shows that 94.28% of children live in religious homogamous families and 5.72% of children live in across-religion heterogamous families (Figure 1b).

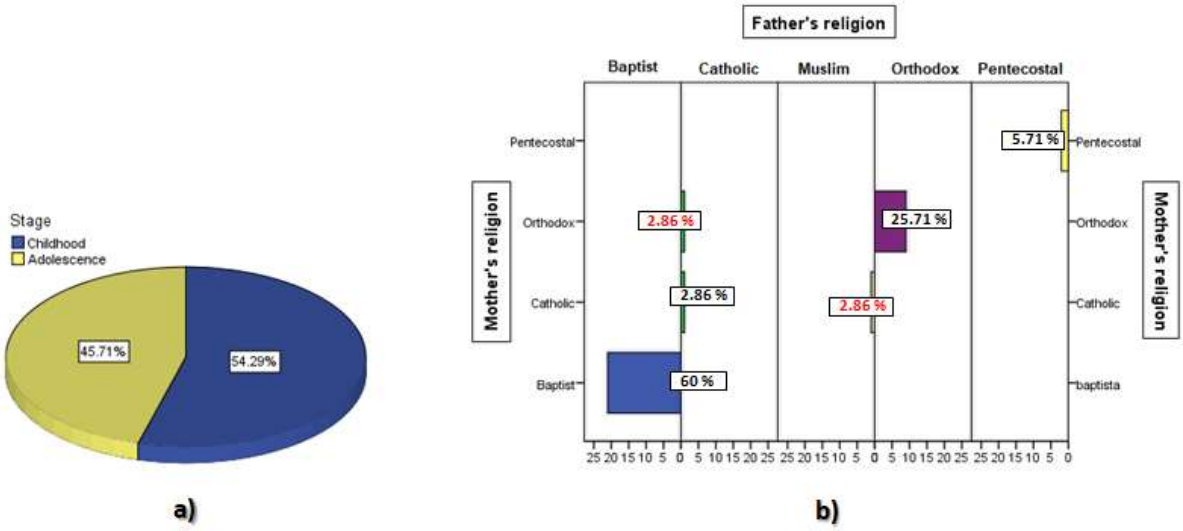


**Figure 1. Percentage distribution of sample according to age (a) and family religious' affiliation (b)**

All variables in this study were tested for normal distribution using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of goodness-of-fit. According to the results, "temporal religiosity" score was significantly non-normal (exact $p$ = .000 (2-tailed)), while the scores for all the other variables did not deviate significantly from normal (exact $p$> .05 (2-tailed)).

In order to determine if there is a statistically significant association between temporal and behavioural religiosity and antisocial and prosocial behaviour, a correlation was computed. Because temporal religiosity ($M$ = 3.4, $SD$ = .976187) was not normally distributed, we calculate Spearman rho statistic to assess its correlation with the dependent variables. Based on the Spearman's correlation coefficient, we determined that there is a medium and significant linear relationship in the negative direction between temporal religiosity and aggressive behaviour, $r_s(33) = -.340$, $p = .046$. Thus, children which are frequently going to church score lower on the aggressive behaviour test, being less involved in committing violence against others.

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**Table 1. Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the studied variables (*N* = 35)**

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | M | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1.Behavioral religiosity | - | -.135 | .001 | .436* | 4.257 | 1.884 |
| 2. Aggressive behavior | - | - | -.196 | -.279 | 10.457 | 4.877 |
| 3.Social skills | - | - | - | .635* | 16.857 | 5.337 |
| 4. Quality of friendship | - | - | - | - | 20.829 | 7.073 |

*$p$< 0.1

Due to the fact that all other variables in study (except temporal religiosity) were normally distributed, we compute Pearson correlations to examine the intercorrelations between them. According to the results presented in Table 1, there is a medium and significant linear relationship in the positive direction between behavioural religiosity and quality of friendship, ($r$(33) = -.436, $p$ = .009). This means that children highly involved in religious practices are more likely to form honest and lasting friendships with similar children in terms of beliefs, values and attitudes.

**Table 2. Simple linear regression analysis summary for the studied variables (*N* = 35)**

| Variable | *B* | *SE B* | *β* | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Behavioral religiosity | 1.637 | 2.732 | .436 | 2.783 | .009 |
| Constant | 13.860 | 2.732 | | | |

*Note*. $R^2$ = .190; , $F$(1, 33) = 7.745; $p$< .01

Simple regression was conducted to evaluate how well behavioural religiosity predicts the quality of friendship. The results obtained were statistically significant, $F$(1, 33) = 7.745, $p$ = .009, and are presented in Table 2. The identified equation to understand this relationship has the following form:

$$\textit{Quality of friendship} = 1.637\times (\textit{Behavioural religiosity}) + 13.860.$$

We obtained a value of .166 for the adjusted $R^2$, which indicates that only 16.6% of the variance in quality of friendship can be explained by behavioural religiosity.

## Conclusions

In this study we investigated whether the religious components influence in some ways the psychosocial development of children raised in a religious environment. Based on the obtained results we find some evidence that the religious environment may influence the way in which children behave.

More specifically, we obtained that temporal religiosity predicted some changes in aggressive behaviour. Thus, children who regularly attend church services and were highly connected with divinity on a personal level, and with the religious community members on the relational level, reported a low frequency of manifestation of aggressiveness toward individuals. We can assume as the possible mechanism behind this association the positive message promoted by Christian teachings. Being involved in religious activities, children hear

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about the way in which they should behave and learn through example by seeing the other members of the community behaving in different social situations. At the same time, according to the Christian faith, a personal relation with God can make children be more aware about the way they relate to peers. Another possible explanation can be given by the fact that children in study are attending a Christian day centre, and in that place there are limited chances of being involved in conflicts with other children. Also, in this type of environment, children are less likely to became physical violent in an argument, so that there are small chances of learning the aggression behaviour by imitation.

We have also found evidence which partially supports the positive effect of religious involvement to sociability. In other words, the positive correlation between behavioural religiosity and quality of friendship implies that regarding friendships, religious children are looking for the same moral and spiritual values, and similar behaviour. One explanation of this tendency is given by the fact that it is much easier for children to approach and befriend children who are similar with them. At the same time, the fact that they share the same beliefs and values offers the context for long-term friendships (e.g. they attend the same places, they have common conversation topics, they relate similarly to social situations).

Although this study revealed no association between religious involvement and the other component of sociability, these results argue the necessity and the benefits of exposing children to a Christian environment

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