Youth Participation in Religious Activities
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This fact sheet is based on a paper, “Children’s Participation in Faith-Based Organizations,” written by the author in June 2000 for a symposium sponsored by Childwatch International and UNESCO, held in Oslo, Norway, on the topic of Children’s Participation in Community Settings.

The Importance of Youth Participation
Youth participation in religious activities helps children and youth learn ideas and values that are not as easily understood if they are passive learners. Also, engaging youth in decision making communicates a sense of respect for them, which helps them develop a positive sense of self and self-respect, as well as a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Forms of Participation
“Socialization is the process by which the child learns the values, beliefs, and traditions of a religion, and ultimately becomes a fully participating member of that religion.”

- Rituals and Ceremonies
  Most religions ease children into religious participation by engaging them in the religion’s rituals and ceremonies. For example, Jewish children begin fasting at Yom Kippur at about age 10. Catholic children begin participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion around the age of 6 or 7. Muslim children begin participating in Ramadan (a month of fasting during the daylight hours) at age 9, although only on weekends.

- Religious Education
  The most common form of youth participation in religion is through education. For example, many Christian religions conduct a children’s story, sermon, or song during (usually at the beginning of) the regular worship service. Other congregations hold “junior church” where children receive some form of religious education during the standard worship service. Others have religious instructional time after church or on a day after school. Many churches also have special youth groups and activities for youth (e.g., church camps, vacation Bible schools). Community service opportunities provide another way for youth to become involved in religious organizations.

- Parental Instruction
  The opportunity to participate in religion often begins at home. Most, if not all, religions place a special duty on parents to guide children in learning religious principles. For example, parents in the Sikh religion are obligated to teach their children the truths of Sikhism and noble ideas of the Gurus. “The Sikhs believe that denying children religious instruction is to deny them the moral assistance that the teachings of the Gurus can provide.” In the Islamic religion, parents are entrusted with passing religious knowledge to children. Catholicism requires parents to begin educating their children in the faith in the child’s earliest years.

Factors That Influence Religious Participation
Researchers have identified several elements that influence youth participation in religious activities:
Church attendance is strongly related to the religious behavior of a youth’s parents. In fact, the principal determinant for church attendance is parental attendance and parental religious values.

Youth’s attitudes towards church depend on past religious education, types of leaders, and beliefs.

Children and youth need opportunities to be involved as active participants and leaders in the life of the congregation.

Youth need ways to participate that are meaningful to them and help them relate their religious education and practice to everyday life. For example, children can serve as liturgists in worship, greet worshipers, and offer prayers. Also, they can be involved in mission projects in the church and community.

Endnotes