

The Impact of Family Religious Environment and Parental Warmth on Children's Social Competence

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Abstract: Using nationally representative data *the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K)*, I seek to investigate the effect of parental warmth and family religious environment and the interaction of the two factors on the development of social competence in early childhood. This particular study uses the 1998 - 2000 year wave with the sample size of approximately 17,500 children. Parents and teachers were presented with four different measures which examine the child's social competence – self-control, interpersonal skills, internalizing problem behaviors, and externalizing problem behaviors- from each social setting (home, school). Support was found for the hypothesis that family religious environment as well as parental warmth had a significant influence on children's social competence; further, religious environment was related to children's social skills across all levels of parental warmth. The findings have implications for future studies of social development in children and also for developing promising educational programs for parents and beyond.

Keywords: Children's social competence, parental warmth, family religious environment

1. Introduction

The development of social competence in early childhood has been found to provide a foundation for later functioning in children with respect to their relationships with peers and other groups (Keane & Calkins, 2004). Social competence is defined as the “ability to attain personal or group success in a social context” (French, 2008). Rose-Krasnor (1997) also defined social competence as the “ability to interact effectively in social relationships” . This indicates that social competence in early childhood refers to a child's effectiveness in interacting with peers and maintaining relationships with others. It is important to understand children's social competence at an early age because children's peer acceptance has been shown to be quite stable across childhood and later years (Pettitt, Clawson, Dodge, & Bates, 1996).

Although there are multiple factors that contribute to social competence in children, such as home, schools, and community, this study was particularly focused on the home environment. Therefore, two main predictors of children's social competence were examined: parental warmth and family religious environment. Recent research suggested that warm parenting predicts a higher level of social competence in children, including high self-regulation and low externalizing problem behaviors ((Eisenberg, Zhou, Spinrad, Valiente, Fabes, & Liew,

2005). Cummings and Davies (1996) found that warm parenting style is positively related to self-regulated behaviors, which are the foundation for successful social interaction.

Other studies examined the positive relationship between family religious environment and social competence in children. According to a study by Schottenbauer, Spernak, & Hellstron (2007), family religious environment, as measured by the COPE scale (Carever, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), which has been shown to have good reliability and validity, has a strong association with high self-control and low internalizing problem behaviors in children.

In this study, to assess children's social competence, I measured development in four areas: interpersonal skills, externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and ability to self-control. These four factors provide strong foundations for children's development of effective social interaction with peers and adults.

1.1 Paternal Warmth and Children's Social Competence

Parents' warmth toward children in early childhood might be especially influential for the development of children's representations of the social world. From a developmental perspective, extensive research has described the relationship between parental warmth and children's social competence. Bowlby (1969) posited that children with warm, responsive caregivers would form a secure attachment with their parents. This parent-child relationship would lead the children to be more likely to approach others during novel situations and feel confident in their ability to interact with others. Unlike these children, who view the world as a safe place to explore, children who did not experience warm and responsive caring from their parents tend to feel the world as an unpredictable and dangerous place; therefore, they tend to view themselves as incompetent and uncomfortable in social relationships. This finding underscores the significance of the warm caring of parents in early childhood.

Indeed, there are many findings indicating the relationship between parental warmth and positive social competence outcomes for children. One study found that parental warmth is associated with relatively low levels of externalizing problem behaviors in children (Caspi Moffit, Morgan, Rutter, Taylor, Kim-Cohen, & Polo-Tomas, 2004). According to Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad (1998), one of the main reasons for the association between parental warmth and low levels of externalizing problem behavior is that children raised by warm parents are more likely to regulate themselves and, therefore, less likely to display impulsive behaviors that come from emotional responses such as aggression. Children's self-control was also associated with warm parenting: Broday and Ge (2001) found that supportive parenting predicted children's self-control, which later was negatively related to problems with adjustment such as depression and hostility. Overall, parental warmth has been found to be influential in fostering children's self-regulation and decreasing externalizing or antisocial behaviors (Eisenberg, Zhou, Spinrad, Valiente, Fabes, & Liew, 2005).

1.2. Family religious Behavior and Children's Social Competence

Previous research also has suggested that religion is a psychological force that can influence the outcomes of individual human lives (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Many studies have shown that most religions around the world, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, appear to value social harmony and positive social relationships more than individualistic pursuits (Roberts & Robins, 2000; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). It is possible that people learn to be more socialized in a positive way when growing up with a religious background that emphasizes social harmony.

Although there has been some controversy over these findings, most researchers have agreed that there is a small but consistent link between religion and social competence development in adults. Welch (2006) reported that there was a strong association between personal religiosity and behavioral self-control. Moreover, he also pointed out that stronger self-control was related to lower externalizing problem behaviors, both of which are important factors for the development of social competence. Bergin, Masters, & Richards, (1987) found that intrinsic religiousness was associated with self-control by using a measure from Rosenbaum's (1980) scale. This finding was also supported by Fishbah, Friedman, & Kruglanski, (2003), who found that religious people had greater self-control abilities. One possible explanation for this finding is that religious mental content that makes sin and temptation less accessible is activated in religious people, which may allow them to better control themselves.

Whereas most studies have found that religion is an influential force for adults who have faith, less is known about the impact of family religion on children or adolescents. The evidence is mixed: Some of the few studies that investigated the association between family religious environment and children's social competence found that religious parents and families tended to have children who had high levels of self-control and low levels of impulsiveness (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Brody, Stonesman, and Flor (1996) studied the relationship between parental religiosity and children's social competence during early adolescence among rural African Americans and found that parental religiosity was related to stronger family relationships, fewer family conflicts, and fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. Brody & Ge (2001) also found that adolescents from a religious environment tended to have stronger self-control.

A study by Schottenbauer, Spernak, & Hellstron (2007) also supported the positive link between family religious environment and children's social competence. The researchers found that family religious attendance was negatively related to prevalence of children's internalizing behaviors, and parent prayer and meditation were significantly related to children's social skills, cooperation, and self-control and were inversely related to prevalence of internalizing behaviors.

However, other studies have suggested that there is no relationship between religion and social competence in children. One study by Strayhorn, Weidman, & Larson (1990) found that parental religiosity was related to better parental care but failed to predict children's behaviors. The results showed that parental religiosity was a predictor for many positive

outcomes for adults (e.g., parental mental health, positive parenting style) but not for positive behaviors in children. Given that the evidence is mixed, it remains unclear whether a family religious environment is associated with social competence in children.

1.3 Linking Parental Warmth and Family religious Environment to Children's Social Competence

In this study, I examined whether parental warmth and family religious environment predict children's social competence. Based on the available literature, I hypothesized that parental warmth and family religious environment are positively associated with self-control and interpersonal skills and inversely related to internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. I also investigate whether there is an interaction between parental warmth and family religious environment—that is, whether different levels of parental warmth predict different levels of relationship strength between religious environment and children's social competence.

If there is an interaction effect between parent's warmth and family religious environment, it is plausible that a stronger relationship between the religious environment and children's social competence will emerge when parents display greater warmth. However, if there is no interaction effect, parental warmth and religious environment will separately be associated with social competence. I predict that when a parent displays greater warmth toward a child, there will be a stronger relationship between religious environment and social competence than when parents display less warmth.

Before examining the interaction effect, however, a concern arises. It is possible that parental religion is linked to parental warmth; that is, the more religious parents are, the warmer they tend to be toward their child, as supported by numerous studies (Boyatzis, 2006; Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney, Paragament, Murray-Swank, & Murray- Swank, 2003). According to Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer (2009), highly religious parents tend to view parenting as a task assigned by God; therefore, it requires personal sacrifice and becomes a central priority. Accordingly, religious parents often feel that it is their strong spiritual duty to care for their child with all of their effort and love. Religious parents may view parenting as a manifestation of God and may perceive that "the parenting role is a reflection of God's will" (Mahoney , Paragament, Murray-Swank, & Murray- Swank, 2003). Therefore, ideally, religious parents show religiously inspired love and warmth toward their children (Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009).

Other studies have supported the findings that higher religiosity is significantly associated with less parental verbal aggression and more nurturance for, and consistency with, children (Schottenbauer, Spornak, & Hellstron, 2007; Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). Moreover, research examining the father-child relationship in particular has found that higher religiosity correlates with lower paternal absence rates and increased paternal devotion and commitment (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 1998; Fischter, 1962). Therefore, when exploring the relationship between family religious environment and children's social competence, I

controlled for parental warmth to see if there was still an association between religion and social competence when parental warmth was held constant.

In summary, there were three main research questions in the study: (a) Are children of parents who exhibit warmth more likely to have a higher level of social competence than those of parents who do not exhibit warmth? (b) regardless of parental warmth, is a family religious environment associated with children's social competence? and (c) what are the interaction effects between parental warmth and family religious environment on children's social competence? To measure the level of social competence in children, four different areas were examined: self-control, interpersonal skills, internalizing problem behaviors, and externalizing problem behaviors.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The data for this study were obtained from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class (ECLS-K). The ECLS-K is a longitudinal data set collected by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics that focuses on children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. This nationally representative data set consists of a wide range of samples recruited both from public and private schools, including both full- and part-day programs. The data are not limited to specific areas but cover a nationwide sample. Approximately 23 kindergarteners from each kindergarten were recruited, with some variation. The sample included participants from diverse socioeconomic and racial/ethnic backgrounds, which allowed for analysis of a variety of populations across several years. Table 1 describes the ECLS-K sample characteristics.

The first wave of ECLS-K data was collected in 1998–1999. Several additional waves were collected through 2007. This study used two waves from the ECLS-K data set: the base school year (1998–1999) and the school year after that (1999–2000). These two years featured the most in-depth information about family religious environment, parental warmth, and children's social development outcomes. Approximately 17,500 students were sampled from kindergarten to first grade. I carefully selected this period for this study because the main purpose of this study was to examine the influence of religious environment and parental warmth on young children transitioning from kindergarten to elementary school.

2.2 Procedures

ECLS-K researchers conducted a direct evaluation of all of the kindergarteners who participated. The researchers assessed the students' cognitive abilities in diverse subjects, physical development, social development, and emotional development in multiple aspects. To obtain such data, information was drawn from parents, teachers, and schools. Evaluators were trained to observe and access children in their schools and to make telephone calls

directly to parents. During the telephone calls, data about the home environment and parental assessment of the children were collected using an interview format. To obtain as much data as possible, Spanish translators interviewed Spanish-speaking families, and translators for all other languages were used to the greatest possible extent.

Parents were a rich source of information because they provided not only an assessment of their child's cognitive and social abilities, but also a description of the demographic environment, including family type, religious beliefs, and home environment. Teachers who were contacted through the schools were asked to complete a questionnaire for each child and provide information about their teaching style, personal characteristics, and educational beliefs.

2.3 Instruments

2.3.1 Dependent variables: Children's social competence assessed by parents and teachers

The ECLS-K consists of data about a wide variety of children's developmental outcomes in several different fields (e.g., socio-emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development). The study focused in particular on measures of social competence in children. The ECLS-K research team developed several scales to gauge social competence, four of which were used for the present study: (a) self-control, (b) interpersonal skills, (c) internalizing problem behaviors, and (d) externalizing problem behaviors. These measures from the ECLS-K data were adapted with permission from the instrument Social Skills Rating Scale (SSRS): Elementary Scale A ("How Often?") by Gresham and Elliott (1990).

Each scale contained 4–6 strongly related items, which were fused into one composite variable by the ECLS-K research team. For more accurate measurement of social competence of children, the four scales were assessed by both parents and teachers. Both groups were asked to choose from four answer choices: *never*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *very often*. A *no opportunity to observe this behavior* option was also included in the answer choices but was regarded as missing data and excluded from the analysis for the current study. Responses in the four categories were used to represent overall social competence in children. Cronbach's alpha for self-control, interpersonal skills, externalizing problem behaviors, and internalizing problem behaviors was .581 for parents and .824 for teachers.

To gauge the self-control skills of the child, parents and teachers were each presented with measures that examined self-control behaviors in each social setting. Parents were presented with five items with which to gauge the child's ability to control his or her behavior at home, such as fighting, arguing, and throwing tantrums ($\alpha = .89$). The self-control scale administered to teachers was composed of four items. Examples of the items include controlling behavior by respecting the property rights of others, accepting peers' ideas for group activities, and responding appropriately to pressure from peers ($\alpha = .80$).

For interpersonal skills, a social interaction scale was administered to parents, and an interpersonal scale was administered to teachers. Both scales were similarly designed to measure the child's ability to interact with peers and adults. The social interaction scale presented to parents was composed of three items: ability to join in play easily, to make and keep friends, and to comfort/help others ($\alpha = .68$). The interpersonal scale administered to teachers had five items, which also rated the child's ability to interact in the social world: forming and maintaining friendships, getting along with people who are different, and showing sensitivity to the feelings of others ($\alpha = .89$).

To gauge the externalizing problem behaviors, an impulsive/overactive scale was administered to parents, and an externalizing problem behavior scale was administered to teachers. Parents rated two items that asked for the child's impulsivity and activity ($\alpha = .47$). The externalizing problem behavior scale for teachers was comprised of five items to measure the acting-out behaviors of children. These items rated the frequency with which the child argues, fights, gets angry, acts impulsively, and disturbs ongoing activities ($\alpha = .90$).

Lastly, to gauge the internalizing problem behaviors, the sadness/loneliness scale was administered to parents, and an internalizing problem behavior scale was administered to teachers. Parents rated the problems the child faced in being accepted and liked by others and difficulties with sadness, loneliness, and low self-esteem ($\alpha = .61$). The internalizing problem behaviors rated by teachers were related to the appearance of anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and sadness in four items ($\alpha = .78$).

2.3.2. Independent variables: parental warmth and family religious behavior

Parental warmth toward the child was assessed for kindergartens in the Spring 1999 wave of the ECLS-K. Parents were presented with six items designed to measure the extent to which they showed warmth to their children. They were asked to rate how often they engaged in the behaviors described by each item using a 4-point scale: 1 = *completely true*, 2 = *mostly true*, 3 = *somewhat true*, and 4 = *not at all true*. There also were options for *refused* and *not applicable*, but these were counted as missing data for the purposes of the present study. Two of the six items were converse coded to make the higher score indicate that parents showed more love and caring toward their children. The internal consistency coefficient for the scale was .584. Examples of items include “[My child] and I often have warm, close times together;” “Even when I’m in a bad mood, I show a lot of love;” and “I express affection by hugging, kissing, and praising.”

Measures for the family religious environment were from the Spring 2000 wave of ECLS-K. Parents were asked to rate how often they attended religious services as well as their spouse's frequency of religious service attendance. Response options were on a 5-point scale: 1 = *never or almost never*, 2 = *several times a year*, 3 = *several times a month*, 4 = *once a week*, and 5 = *several times a week*. However, in addition to frequency of religious service

attendance, frequency of talks about religion at home is important for creating a family religious environment. Therefore, two other questions that measured such environments were also used for the purposes of the present study to gauge religious environment at home.

The first question was “How often does someone in your family talk with your child about your family’s religious beliefs or traditions?” The response options were on a 4-point scale: 1 = *never*, 2 = *almost never*, 3 = *several times a year*, 4 = *several times a month*, and 5 = *several times a week or more*. The more the family discussed their religious traditions at home, the higher their score was on the family religious environment measure. The second question for assessing family environment was “Do you and your current partner often, sometimes, hardly ever, or never have arguments about religion?” This question was to measure how much conflict the family had regarding religion. Family arguments about religion are regarded as a critical factor when assessing a family religious environment; therefore, this item was included in the measure. The responses were on a 4-point scale: 1 = *often*, 2 = *sometimes*, 3 = *hardly ever*, and 4 = *never*. Unlike the other questions, this question had a higher score for those who did not experience such behavior because arguments about religion are contrary to a family religious environment.

To summarize, the family religious environment independent variable consisted of four items: (a) frequency of one parent’s religious service attendance, (b) frequency of the other parent’s religious service attendance, (c) frequency of the family’s religious discussions, and (d) frequency of parental conflict over religion ($\alpha = .676$). A higher score indicated that the family had a more religious environment—that is, the more often parents attended religious services and family members had discussions about their religious beliefs and the less often family members had conflicts regarding religion.

2.3.3. Control variables

In this study, several control variables were included to more accurately determine the relationship between the two independent variables and children’s social competence. Five control variables were included as baseline covariates in the initial linear regression models for each of the 4 measures: child’s gender, child’s race (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or other race/ethnicity), family type (two-parent with siblings, two-parent without siblings, one-parent with siblings, or one-parent without siblings), father’s current employment status, and mother’s current age. The control variables were included in the models in order to better investigate the unique effect of parental warmth and family religious environment on children’s social competence.

2.3.4. Plan of Analysis

A series of regression models was used to examine the extent to which parental warmth and family religious environment were associated with children’s social competence. Hierarchical regression equations were used to test the hypothesized relationships. In the first step, family type, father’s employment status, mother’s age, and child’s gender and race were entered as baseline control variables. Parental warmth was entered at the second step, and family religious environment was entered at the third step. The interaction of these two variables

was added at the last step to examine whether parental warmth moderates the relationship between family religious environment and social competence. The independent variables were centered to enhance the interpretation of the main effects as well as the interactive effects (Aiken & West, 1991).

3. Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for each variable, including parental warmth, family religious environment, and children’s social competence outcomes.

Table 1. Early Childhood Longitudinal Study sample characteristics before listwise deletion

	N	percent	Mean	Std. Deviation
Parent’s report				
Self-control	15524		2.9612	.49636
Social interaction	15532		3.3886	.54552
Sadness/loneliness	15520		1.5406	.39935
Impulsive/overactive	15443		1.8605	.66632
Teacher’s report				
Self-control	14883		3.1700	.61878
International skills	14843		3.1008	.64387
Externalizing problem behaviors	14907		1.6589	.63963
Internalizing problem behaviors	14822		1.5935	.51688

Child's gender				
Male	8985	51.2		
Female	8569	48.8		
Child's race				
White	9891	56.3		
Black	2494	14.2		
Hispanic	3062	17.4		
Asian	1115	6.3		
Other	965	5.5		
Family Type				
2 parents with siblings	11005	62.7		
2 parents without siblings	1504	8.6		
1 parent with siblings	2422	13.8		
1 parent without siblings	979	5.6		
Other	316	1.8		
Parent's characteristics				
Father employed	11621	66.2		
Father unemployed	713	4.1		
Mothers age	15227		34.67	6.577

Family religious environment			
One parent's religious attendance	16171	3.88	1.221
The other parent's religious attendance	12109	2.64	1.345
Frequency of discussing religion	12367	3.65	.692
Frequency of arguing about religion	15522	2.90	1.313
Parental warmth			
Have warm, close time together	15941	3.6952	.56219
Feel that child wants to be near me	15955	3.7794	.48176
Too busy to play with the child	15950	3.4220	.71976
Even in bad mood, show a lot of love	15941	3.4297	.76770
Hard to show love in the end of long day	15934	3.6564	.68562
Express affection by hugging, kissing and holding	15951	3.8775	.42365

3.1 Correlations

Preliminary analyses showed that both parental warmth and family religious environment were associated with children's social competence outcomes in both parents' and teachers' responses. As expected, parental warmth was related to family religious environment (see Tables 2 and 3). Table 2 displays the correlations between independent and dependent variables as rated by parents. Parental warmth was significantly and positively related to stronger self-control skills and interpersonal skills and fewer externalizing/internalizing problem behaviors in children. Table 3 displays the correlation between independent and dependent variables as rated by teachers. Parental warmth was significantly related to stronger self-control skills and interpersonal skills and fewer internalizing problem behaviors; however, it was not associated with fewer internalizing problem behaviors according to the teachers' responses.

Table 2. Correlation For the Parent Response

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parental Warmth	-					
2. Family Religious Environment	.082**	-				
3. Self Control	.178**	.086**	-			
4. Social Interaction	.220**	.086**	.205**	-		
5. Impulsive/overactive (Externalizing problems)	-.091**	-.063**	-.430**	-.107**	-	
6. Sad/lonely (Internalizing problems)	.182**	-.052**	-.344**	-.252**	.313**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3. Correlation For the Teacher Response

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Parental Warmth	-					
2. Family Religious Environment	.082**	-				
3. Self Control	.030**	.039**	-			
4. Social Interaction	.040**	.048**	.807**	-		
5. Impulsive/overactive (Externalizing problems)	-.024**	-.048**	-.721**	-.635**	-	
6. Sad/lonely (Internalizing problems)	-.005	-.054**	-.310**	-.351**	.319**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.2. Linear Regression

3.2.1. Parental Warmth, Family religious Environment, and Self-Control Skills

Table 4 displays the variables and their relationship with children's self-control skills as measured by parents' and teachers' reports. Among the baseline (Step 1) control variables, all but the child's race had significant association with self-control. Based on both parents' and teachers' reports, mother's age and child's gender had positive effects on the child's self-control skills. Fathers' employment status was negatively related to self-control in both parents' and teachers' reports, and family type was related to self-control in the teachers' reports but not in the parents' reports.

Children's self-control was significantly related to parental warmth in both parents' and teachers' reports (see Table 4, Step 2). When adding the parental warmth variable, the model predicted .035 of the variance of the outcome (parents' reports: change in R square = .035, $F(1, 10772) = 392.321, p = .000$; teachers' reports: change in R square = .001, $F(1, 9518) = 10.061, p = .002$). When family religious environment was added to the third step, the regression coefficient and the R square change were significant in parents' reports but not in teachers' reports (parents' reports: change in R square = .004, $F(1, 10771) = 46.611, p = .000$; teachers' reports: change in R square = .000, $F(1, 9517) = 3.577, p = 0.59$). Parental warmth did not moderate these relationships; that is, the interaction term (parental warmth \times family religious environment) did not increase the number of variables explained. This indicates that the religion effect was similar across all levels of parental warmth; thus, family religious environment had a positive effect on children's self-control skills regardless of parental warmth.

Table4. Regression Analysis Predicting Self-Control

Model	Parent Report			Teacher Report		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	Beta
Step 1:						
Family type	.043	.009	.047 ***	-.088	.012	-.076 ***
Father employment status	-.031	.007	-.041 ***	-.051	.010	-.054 ***

Mother age	.003	.001	.044 ***	.006	.001	.064 ***
Child gender	.047	.009	.050 ***	.207	.012	.174 ***
Child race	-.004	.003	-.013	-.002	.004	-.005
	R square =.009	p= .000***		R square =.041	p= .000 ***	
Step 2:						
Family type	.031	.009	.034 ***	-.091	.012	-.078 ***
Father employment status	-.031	.007	-.041 **	-.051	.010	-.054 ***
Mother age	.003	.001	.041 ***	.006	.001	.064 ***
Child gender	.046	.009	.049 ***	.206	.012	.174 ***
Child race	.001	.003	.003	-.001	.004	-.003
Parental warmth	.254	.013	.188 ***	.055	.017	.032 **
	Change in R square =.035	p=.000 ***		Change in R square =.001	p= .002 **	
Step 3:						
Family type	.034	.009	.037 ***	-.089	.012	-.077 ***
Father employment status	-.028	.007	-.037 ***	-.050	.010	-.053 ***
Mother age	.003	.001	.033 ***	.006	.001	.062 ***

Child gender	.044	.009	.047 **	.205	.012	.173 ***
Child race	.001	.003	.003	-.001	.004	-.003
Parental warmth	.247	.013	.182 ***	.052	.017	.030 **
Family religious environment	.009	.001	.065 ***	.003	.002	.019 +
	Change in R square =.004	p= .000 ***		Change in R square = .000	p = 0.59 +	
Step 4:						
Family type	.034	.009	.037 ***	-.089	.012	-.077 ***
Father employment status	-.028	.007	-.037 ***	-.050	.010	-.053 ***
Mother age	.003	.001	.033 ***	.006	.001	.062 ***
Child gender	.044	.009	.047 **	.205	.012	.173 ***
Child race	.001	.003	.003	-.001	.004	-.002
Parental warmth	.248	.013	.183 ***	.050	.017	.029 **
Family religious environment	.009	.001	.065 ***	.003	.002	.019 +
Warmth Religious environment *	.002	.004	.005	-.007	.005	-.015
	Change in R square =.000	p= ns		Change in R square =.000	p = ns	

+ p < .10 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

3.2.2. Parental Warmth, Family religious Environment, and Children's Interpersonal Skills

The results of hierarchical regression analyses for children's interpersonal skills are presented in Table 5. With respect to parents' reports of children's interpersonal skills (shown on the left side of the table), the child's gender and mother's age had positive relationships with interpersonal skills, although the latter relationship was not as significant. Fathers' employment status and child's race were negatively related, and they were both significant. The main effect of warmth was significant in both reports and increased the amount of variance explained in Step 2 (see Table 5, Step 2). The addition of family religious environment in Step 3 also increased the amount of variance explained, which was also significant in both parents' and teachers' reports (parents' reports: change in R square = .004, $F(1, 10771) = 42.662, p = .000$; teachers' reports: change in R square = .001, $F(1, 9494) = 7.218, p = 0.007$). There was no significant interaction effect of parental warmth and family religious environment on children's interpersonal skills. That is, religious environment was related to children's interaction skills across all levels of parental warmth. Thus, whether parents are warm or not, family religious environment is associated with the development of children's interpersonal skills.

Table 5. Regression Analysis Predicting Interpersonal Skills

Model	Parent Report			Teacher Report		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	Beta
Step 1:						
Family type	-.002	.010	-.002	-.082	.013	-.067 ***
Father employment status	-.022	.008	-.026 **	-.047	.010	-.047 ***
Mother age	.002	.001	.017 +	.007	.001	.062 ***
Child gender	.094	.010	.089 ***	.255	.013	.203 ***

Child race	-.036	.003	-.115***	-.006	.004	-.016
	R square =.022	p = .000 ***		R square =.050	P = .000***	
Step 2:						
Family type	-.018	.010	-.017 +	-.086	.013	-.070 ***
Father employment status	-.021	.008	-.025 **	-.047	.010	-.047 ***
Mother age	.001	.001	.015	.007	.001	.061 ***
Child gender	.094	.010	.088 ***	.254	.013	.203 ***
Child race	-.030	.003	-.096 ***	-.004	.004	-.012
Parental warmth	.337	.014	.221 ***	.088	.018	.048 ***
	Change in R square =.048	p =.000 ***		Change in R square =.002	P =.000 ***	
Step 3:						
Family type	-.014	.010	-.014	-.084	.013	-.068 ***
Father employment status	-.018	.008	-.021*	-.046	.010	-.046 ***
Mother age	.001	.001	.007	.006	.001	.058 ***
Child gender	.092	.010	.086 ***	.253	.013	.202 ***
Child race	-.030	.003	-.096 ***	-.004	.004	-.012

Parental warmth	.329	.014	.216 ***	.084	.018	.046 ***
Family religious environment	.010	.002	.061 ***	.005	.002	.027 **
	Change in R square =.004	p = .000 ***		Change in R square =.001	P= .007 **	
Step 4:						
Family type	-.014	.010	-.014	-.084	.013	-.068 ***
Father employment status	-.018	.008	-.021 **	-.046	.010	-.045 ***
Mother age	.001	.001	.007	.006	.001	.058 ***
Child gender	.092	.010	.086 ***	.253	.013	.202 ***
Child race	-.030	.003	-.096 ***	-.004	.004	-.011
Parental warmth	.330	.014	.216 ***	.082	.018	.045 ***
Family religious environment	.010	.002	.061 ***	.005	.002	.027 **
Warmth Religious environment *	.000	.004	.000	-.005	.005	-.010
	Change in R square =.000	p = ns		Change in R square =.000	P= ns	

+ p < .10 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

3.2.2. Parental Warmth, Family religious Environment, and Children's Internalizing Problem Behaviors

In predicting children's internalizing problem behaviors, the results differed, in part, between parents' reports and teachers' reports. On the left side of Table 6, the analyses based on parents' reports of internalizing problem behaviors show that family type was the only variable that significantly predicted children's internalizing problem behaviors. In adding parental warmth in Step 2, there was an increase in the amount of variance explained, which indicated that parental warmth has an effect on children's internalizing problem behaviors (change in R square = .041, $F(1, 10770) = 457.877$, $p = .000$). When family religious environment was added to the next step, there was a slight but significant change in the R square, which explained the additional main effect of family religious environment (change in R square = .001, $F(1, 10769) = 12.639$, $p = .000$). No interaction effect was explained in Step 4; thus, it may be concluded that family religious environment was negatively related to parents' report of children's internalizing problem behavior and that this relationship was similar across all levels of parental warmth.

For teachers' reports of children's internalizing problem behaviors (right side of Table 6), family type and father's employment status were positive predictors, whereas mother's age and child's gender were negative predictors of such outcomes. Contrary to the prediction, parental warmth did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained. Thus, it indicated that parental warmth does not predict the internalizing problem behaviors of children (see Table 6, Step 2). Family religious environment, however, accounted for the amount added to the new regression model (change in R square = .002, $F(1, 9484) = 21.513$, $p = .000$), which showed that family religious environment had an effect on children's internalizing problem behavior rated by the teachers. However, teachers' reports did not show any interaction effect of parental warmth and family religious environment. Thus, it may be concluded that parental warmth is negatively related to children's internalizing problem behaviors only according to parental reports; however, religious environment was shown to be negatively related to all levels of warmth in both reports.

Table 6. Regression Analysis Predicting Internalizing Problem Behaviors

Model	Parent Report			Teacher Report		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	Beta
Step 1:				1.600	.036	
Family type	.033	.007	.046 ***	.052	.010	.055 ***

Father employment status	.003	.006	.006	.035	.008	.045 ***
Mother age	-.001	.001	-.017 +	-.003	.001	-.031 **
Child gender	-.002	.007	-.003	-.041	.010	-.042 ***
Child race	.004	.002	.018 +	.000	.003	-.001
	R square =.003	P = .000 ***		R square =.007	P = .000 ***	
Step 2:				1.600	.036	
Family type	.044	.007	.060 ***	.053	.010	.055 ***
Father employment status	.003	.006	.005	.035	.008	.045 ***
Mother age	-.001	.001	-.015	-.003	.001	-.031 **
Child gender	-.002	.007	-.003 +	-.041	.010	-.042 ***
Child race	.000	.002	.001	.000	.003	-.001
Parental warmth	-.221	.010	-.203 ***	-.004	.014	-.003
	Change in R square =.041	P= .000 ***		Change in R square =.000	P = ns	
Step 3:						
Family type	.043	.007	.058 ***	.050	.010	.052 ***

Father employment status	.002	.006	.003	.033	.008	.043 ***
Mother age	-.001	.001	-.010	-.002	.001	-.024 **
Child gender	-.001	.007	-.001	-.039	.010	-.041 ***
Child race	.000	.002	.001	.000	.003	-.002
Parental warmth	-.218	.010	-.200 ***	.001	.014	.001
Family religious environment	-.004	.001	-.034 ***	-.007	.002	-.048 ***
	Change in R square =.001	P= .000 ***		Change in R square =.002	P = .000 ***	
Step 4:						
Family type	.043	.007	.058 ***	.050	.010	.052 ***
Father employment status	.002	.006	.003	.033	.008	.043 ***
Mother age	-.001	.001	-.010	-.002	.001	-.024 *
Child gender	-.001	.007	-.001	-.039	.010	-.041 ***
Child race	.000	.002	.001	.000	.003	-.001
Parental warmth	-.218	.010	-.200 ***	.000	.014	.000
Family religious environment	-.004	.001	-.034 ***	-.007	.002	-.049 ***

Warmth * Religious environment	.000	.003	-.001	-.004	.004	-.010
	Change in R square =.000	P = ns		Change in R square =.000	P = ns	

+ p < .10 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

3.2.3. Parental Warmth, Family religious Environment, and Children’s Externalizing Problem Behaviors

Lastly, regression analyses for children’s externalizing problem behaviors are listed in Table 7. Both parents’ and teachers’ reports showed similar outcomes. In Step 1, family type and father’s employment status were positively related to children’s externalizing problem behavior and gender, and mother’s age was negatively related. Child’s race was only significant according to parents’ reports. Like the results for the other social competence variables, children’s externalizing problem behavior was related to parental warmth (see Table 7, Step 2) according to both parents’ and teachers’ reports. After adding the family religious environment variable, the amount of variance explained was significantly added to the previous model (parents’ reports: change in R square = .002, $F(1, 10730) = 16.835, p = .000$; teachers’ reports: change in R square = .001, $F(1, 9528) = 8.424 p = .004$). However, the interaction between parental warmth and family religious environment did not increase the amount of variance explained, which indicated that the main effect of religion was related to children’s externalizing problem behavior across all levels of warmth.

Table 7. Regression Analysis Predicting Externalizing Problem Behaviors

Model	Parent Report			Teacher Report		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	Beta
Step 1: Family type	.082	.012	.067 ***	.115	.012	.097 ***

Father employment status	.041	.010	.040 ***	.040	.010	.041 ***
Mother age	-.010	.001	-.090 ***	-.007	.001	-.068 ***
Child gender	-.156	.012	-.124 ***	-.249	.012	-.208 ***
Child race	.012	.004	.032 **	-.006	.004	-.018 +
	R square =.028	P = .000 ***		R square =.056	P = .000 ***	
Step 2:						
Family type	.091	.012	.075 ***	.117	.012	.099 ***
Father employment status	.040	.010	.040 ***	.040	.010	.041 ***
Mother age	-.009	.001	-.089 ***	-.007	.001	-.067 ***
Child gender	-.156	.012	-.124 ***	-.249	.012	-.208 ***
Child race	.009	.004	.023 *	-.007	.004	-.020 *
Parental warmth	-.182	.017	-.100 ***	-.050	.017	-.029 **
	Change in R square =.010	P = .000 ***		Change in R square =.001	P = .004 **	
Step 3:	2.186	.043				
Family type	.088	.012	.072 ***	.115	.012	.098 ***
Father employment status	.038	.010	.038 ***	.038	.010	.040 ***
Mother age	-.009	.001	-.084 ***	-.006	.001	-.064 ***

Child gender	-.154	.012	-.122 ***	-.248	.012	-.207 ***
Child race	.009	.004	.023 *	-.007	.004	-.021 *
Parental warmth	-.176	.017	-.097 ***	-.045	.017	-.026 **
Family religious environment	-.008	.002	-.039 ***	-.005	.002	-.029 **
	Change in R square =.002	P=.000***		Change in R square =.001	P=.004 **	
Step 4:	2.186	.043				
Family type	.088	.012	.072 ***	.115	.012	.097 ***
Father employment status	.038	.010	.038 ***	.038	.010	.039 ***
Mother age	-.009	.001	-.084 ***	-.006	.001	-.064 ***
Child gender	-.154	.012	-.122 ***	-.248	.012	-.207 ***
Child race	.009	.004	.023 *	-.007	.004	-.021 *
Parental warmth	-.176	.017	-.097 ***	-.044	.017	-.026
Family religious environment	-.008	.002	-.039 ***	-.005	.002	-.029 **
Warmth Religious environment *	.000	.005	-.001	.005	.005	.009
	Change in R square =.000	P = ns		Change in R square =.000	P= ns	

+ p < .10 *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

4. Discussion

This study explored the influence of parental warmth, family religious environment, and the interaction between the two on young children, ages 5 and 6, using nationally representative data from ECLS-K. First, I looked separately at the impact of parental warmth and family religious environment on young children's social competence. Then I examined the effect of the interaction of these two factors interaction on the outcome of social competence. The results showed that parental warmth, as well as family religious environment, predicted higher levels of self-control and interpersonal skills and lower levels of externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. The interaction of parental warmth and family religious environment, however, did not predict positive social competence outcomes in children. It appears that there is no interaction between the two factors in predicting children's social competence; rather, family religious environment predicts the outcome across all levels of parental warmth.

The positive association of parental warmth with children's social competence was largely supported. This finding is in line with previous research, which showed that parental warmth is closely related to greater self-regulation and fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors (Caspi, Moffit, Morgan, Rutter, Taylor, Kim-Cohen, & Polo-Tomas, 2004; Cummings & Davies, 1996; Eisenberg, Zhou, Spinrad, Valiente, Fabes, & Liew, 2005). I found that parental warmth was positively related to all four measures of children's social competence administered to parents (self-control skills, interpersonal skills, externalizing problem behaviors, and internalizing problem behaviors). This indicates that children who experienced parental warmth showed more self-control ability, more interpersonal skills, and fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors according to the parents' report of their children's social competence.

When administered to teachers, the same measures also showed a positive relationship with parental warmth—except for internalizing problem behaviors; therefore, parental warmth was related to children's self-control, interpersonal skills, and externalizing problem behaviors as assessed via teachers' reports. Although the relationship was generally weaker in the teachers' reports compared to the parents' reports, the relationships according to both reports were shown to be significant.

This result emphasized the importance of parents' love and warmth toward children. It is important for parents to show love to their children, to express affection, and to try to have times of warmth and closeness together in order for children's social competence to develop. The results support the idea that it is important for parents to be consistent in showing love; that is, it is important to show warmth to the child, even when they are tired at the end of a long day, busy, or in a bad mood. It is clear that children whose parents are consistent in showing love and warmth, no matter the situation, are more likely to become socially competent, display fewer problem behaviors, and exhibit social skills and self-control.

Conversely, children who experience inconsistent or little parental warmth often lack the ability to control themselves, find it harder to engage in social relationships, and are more likely to exhibit externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors. Again, the findings were consistent with previous studies by Thompson & Meyer (2007), who found that children's early interactions with their parents are critical for learning socially appropriate behaviors that are important for future interactions with peers. My findings support the study by Thompson & Meyer by showing that a warm and caring parenting style is a prominent predictor of children's social competence.

Another purpose of this study was to examine whether family religious environment was associated with children's social competence when parental warmth was not accounted for. My research showed that family religious environment has its own relatively small but significant effect on children's social competence. Contrary to the notion that the positive effect of a family religious environment might come from parental warmth, family religious environment itself is influential in the development of children's social competence. Family religious environment showed a positive relationship to all four scales, which measured children's social competence outcomes (self-control, interpersonal skills, externalizing problem behaviors, and internalizing problem behaviors), as assessed by parents while holding parental warmth constant.

Teachers' reports showed similar positive relationships: All scales but self-control scale appeared to positively predict social competence in children. Although parents' reports showed a stronger relationship across the scales than teachers', both findings were clear and robust in showing that family religious environment overall strongly predicted positive outcomes of children's social competence.

It was also important to examine family religious environment as a predictor for social competence in children, which was measured in four areas (one parent's frequency of religious service attendance, the other parent's frequency of religious service attendance, how often family members discussed religion, and how often parents argued about religion). Close examination of family religious environment measures revealed that the frequency of parents' religious service attendance is an important factor in building a family religious environment, which, in turn, delivers a positive outcome for children's social competence. The more consistently parents attended religious services, the more their children displayed higher levels of social competence. Thus, when both of the parents are harmonious in consistently attending religious services, there is a greater positive influence on children's positive social functioning compared to when only one parent or no parents consistently attend religious services.

Therefore, the amount of time invested in religious ceremony by both parents affects social development in children. One possible interpretation of this phenomenon is that the reason parents regularly attend religious service is that they have strong faith and beliefs; therefore, they are more likely to create a harmonious religious environment at home, which is helpful in shaping healthy social development for children.

In addition to parents' religiosity, an important component of a family religious environment is the extent to which family members discuss religion, which has proven to be a critical factor for predicting children's social competence. Not surprisingly, discussion about family religion among parents and children was shown in this study to be important for positive outcomes in social competence in children. When parents talk often about their faith and why religion is important to the family, children learn about their family's religious beliefs and, perhaps, learn the values and traditions that reflect the religion.

As many previous studies have pointed out, religious people, overall, have a greater ability to self-control and fewer externalizing and internalizing problem behaviors because they learn religious values and engage in religious services, which creates stronger social competence. Although children may not have established a faith for themselves, it is likely that a family religious environment could have a similar positive effect on children's constructive development of social competence.

Parental conflict is also a noteworthy factor in creating a particular family environment. The more conflict parents have about religion, the less religious the family environment is. This idea was supported by Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin. (2008), who found that shared religiosity by parents is an important factor for children's healthy development. In my study, I found that parents' religious harmony was a critical asset for children's social development. Thus, if a child has grown up in a family in which the parents frequently argue about religious belief, the child is less likely to value religious beliefs and does not have the opportunity to be influenced by a positive religious environment. Thus, the more parents share the same opinions about religion, the more likely their children will have positive outcomes in social development.

To my knowledge, this study is one of the first to explore the effect of family religion on children's social competence development when holding parental warmth constant. As previously mentioned, many studies have examined the relationship between family religious environment and children's positive outcomes without controlling for parental warmth. Therefore, it remained uncertain whether the main effects of religiosity were actually coming from parents' warmth and love, which often are prominently displayed by religious parents. Thus, by controlling for parental warmth in this study, I found that parents' frequency of church attendance, parent-child discussions, and lack of family religious conflicts also yielded positive outcomes on children's social competence.

Although I found positive relationship between parental warmth and family religious environment and social competence in children, there was no the interactive effect of parental warmth and family religious environment on children's social competence. Contrary to my prediction, parental warmth did not moderate the relationship between family religious environment and social competence in children. None of the four categories of social competence (self-control, interpersonal skills, externalizing problem behavior, and internalizing problem behaviors) was predicted by the interaction of parental warmth and family religious environment. This finding was consistent for both the teachers' and parents' reports. Therefore, it appears that although they were correlated in the preliminary results, the interaction effect did not predict social competence in children.

The exploratory result, however, illuminated the importance of family religious environment. This result indicated that family religious environment predicts children's social competence across all levels of parental warmth. Thus, family religious environment is shown to have a positive effect on children's outcomes regardless of the level of warmth children experience from their parents. Although it was surprising to find that family religious environment and parental warmth did not have any interaction effect in predicting children's social competence, it was noteworthy that the impact of family religious environment remained consistent regardless of parents' loving and caring behavior. Therefore, regardless of the extent to which children are loved or cared for, religion has a positive impact on children's social competence.

Overall, I found that family religious environment and parental warmth were separately associated with a number of measures of children's social competence. This implies that parental warmth has an impact on promoting children's social competence, and family religious environment also has an impact on social competence. The latter finding, that family religious environment predicted social competence regardless of parental warmth, indicates that religion, as well as parental warmth, has a significant positive impact on young children, albeit with a small effect size. This suggests that when religion is harnessed in a behavioral manner through parents attending religious services or discussing religion, it serves as a helpful behavioral intervention that has a positive effect on children's social developmental outcomes, even when the children themselves do not have a religious faith.

Although the findings were quite consistent and comprehensive, there were some limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the participants in this study came from different religious backgrounds (e.g., Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, Mormonism, Islam, etc.). Because the ECLS-K research team did not provide response options for types of religion, I was not able to distinguish participants by religious background. Although most religions emphasize love and harmony, they vary in their faith, traditions, and values; therefore, the results could be different when focused on a particular religion. Thus, it is important for future studies to investigate how children's social competence may vary by religious traditions and values.

Second, the questions for measuring family religious environment were somewhat limited in making in-depth analyses of religion. The questions administered to parents were relatively objective, such as asking the number of times they spent in religious services or religious discussions. Although ECLS-K includes a set of questions about religion, subjective questions about religion in family were limited. Therefore, this raises questions about how "adequately religion is operationalized" (Marks, 2006) in the current study. It is possible that more subjective questions, such as how religious do you see yourself? or how important are religious traditions and values to you and your family? would allow more accurate family religious environment assessment.

Measures of parental warmth also had similar limitations. Although a set of measures used in the ECLS-K study assessed the level of parents' warmth toward children, the measures were reported by parents only. It is possible that they were more inclined to interpret their warmth toward the child in positive ways, perhaps because they were less objective and saw

themselves as better parents than others did, or perhaps because they would like to reflect themselves as warmer than they were. Therefore, additional research that incorporates children's reports of their parent's warmth would be helpful to future studies on children's social development. It is important to examine how children perceive their parents' warmth and how this relates to development of social competence in children.

One promising avenue for future research would be to examine how children from different ethnicities have different outcomes in social development, as explained through parental warmth and family religious environment. Some studies have shown that religion plays a more important role in certain ethnic groups: One study by Abar (2009) found that religion was a more prominent predictor of behavioral socialization in African Americans adolescents than those of other ethnic backgrounds. It is possible that some ethnic groups are more prone to be influenced by religious environments; therefore, it would be interesting to explore which particular ethnicity displays the strongest relationship between family religious environment and social competence. Because most studies on ethnicity and religion have mainly focused on adolescents (Abar, Carter, & Winsler, 2009; French, Eisenberg, Vaughan, Purwono, & Suryanti, 2008; Rubin, Desai, Graham-Pole, Dodd, & Pollock, 2009), research on different ethnicities and the developmental trajectories of children would be a promising area for further exploration.

This study is in line with one of the oldest hypotheses in the scientific study of religion, namely that religion controls people's behavior (Malinowski, 1935). In the present study, I have extended this line of thinking by evaluating the role of religious environment in family, not an individual's own spirituality or faith. Unlike studies that focused on the effect of spirituality of children on their social development (Marks, 2006; Rubin, Desai, Graham-Pole, Dodd, & Pollock, 2009), this study successfully contributed to the examination of the impact of family religious environment on children's social competence. More broadly, this research lays a foundation on which other studies might explore the family factors that predict the development of social competence in children.

The findings from the study are important, reliable, and have implications to further studies. The magnitude of data that was used in this study, which came from a large set of national samples, made this research relevant and reliable. Not only was the amount of data helpful, but the extensive measures of the ECLS-K data allowed me to thoroughly examine the relationship between family religious environment and children's social competence. By assessing how often family members shared thoughts and values about religion, I was able to explore an ongoing family process in a more accurate way. This represents a step beyond previous studies, which mainly focused on the frequency of attending religious services in examining family religious environment.

Once again, the main take-home message of this study is that parents' warmth and a family religious environment have a positive impact on promoting social competence in children. I hope that this study will help stimulate a new wave of research on the relationship between family religious environment, as well as parenting style, on the development of children's social competence.

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