

Young people can develop stronger feelings of self-worth by learning about the Savior's love for them and by internalizing gospel principles.

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## Spirituality and Self-Worth: The Role of Religion in Shaping Teens' Self-Image

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Self-esteem affects a wide range of attitudes and actions of young and old alike. Whether we call this trait self-esteem, self-worth, self-respect, or self-image, it is nonetheless linked to much of what we do in our daily lives. For example, in 1986 the California legislature created The Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. The task force was challenged to devise ways to enhance the self-esteem of the state's citizens. The politicians, scholars, and other members of the task force were convinced that raising self-esteem would reduce crime, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, school dropout rates, poor academic performance, unemployment, discrimination, the number of children born to unwed mothers, divorce, family violence, and a host of other destructive behaviors. The task force's final report stated, "The past three years' work has demonstrated that self-esteem may well be the unifying concept to reframe American problem solving."<sup>cxlvii</sup>1 The task force envisioned self-esteem as a "social vaccine" that would inoculate society against a variety of personal and social problems. In addition, self-esteem's significance shows up on newsstands, where popular magazines headline articles claiming to foster self-esteem to solve all sorts of personal, family, and social problems. Self-help books and seminars abound that promise feelings of greater self-worth.

Adolescence—that period between childhood and adulthood—is difficult as young people seek independence from parents and family despite not yet knowing who they really are. Feelings of self-worth are especially important during junior and senior high-school years when adolescents make critical decisions about education, career, and marriage. Self-worth not only affects what youth think but largely what they do and how they respond to peer pressures to use drugs, experiment with sex, and so on. What, then, determines self-worth among Latter-day Saint teenagers? Stylish clothes, physical appearance, the number of friends, academic performance, and athletic accomplishments have been identified as factors associated with strong self-confidence. Undoubtedly, each of these various factors plays some role in the development of the self-image among Latter-day Saint youth.

Interestingly, religion has largely been ignored in the search for the forces behind self-esteem. Given the significance that religion plays in the lives of our teenagers, their religious beliefs, feelings, and activities should have an impact on their feelings of self-worth. The perceptions of being a child of God, insights into the purpose of life, the promise of forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, as well as involvement in a caring organization may strengthen self-worth. President Harold B. Lee, in his last general conference as President of the Church, taught the importance of self-respect and its relationship to living the gospel:

As I have prayerfully thought of the reasons why one chooses this course [of wickedness], . . . it seems to me that it all results from the failure of the individual to have self respect. . . .

When one does not have that love for himself, . . . other consequences can be expected to follow. He ceases to love life. Or if he marries, he has lost love for his wife and children—no love of home or respect for the country in which he lives, and eventually he has lost his love of God. Rebellion in the land, disorder and the lack of love in the family, children disobedient to parents, loss of contact with God, *all because that person has lost all respect for himself.*<sup>cxlviii</sup>2

The few studies that have explored the relationship between religiosity and self-esteem in adolescents have produced mixed results. Some have noted that religion facilitated high self-esteem, most found no relationship, and a few discovered that religion actually produces lower feelings of self-worth.<sup>cxlix</sup>3 A recent study among a national sample of eighth-grade students found that religious involvement was strongly related to self-esteem. The authors concluded: “The present study also points out that religious involvement appears to have the largest impact on how early adolescents evaluate themselves. Adolescents who are not involved in religious activities are less likely than those who are religiously involved to evaluate themselves in a positive way and more likely than those who are religiously involved to evaluate themselves in a negative way. This finding seems to indicate that most churches teach people to have positive images of themselves, and thus positive teaching may be able to influence early adolescents’ self-evaluations in a positive way.”<sup>cl</sup>4

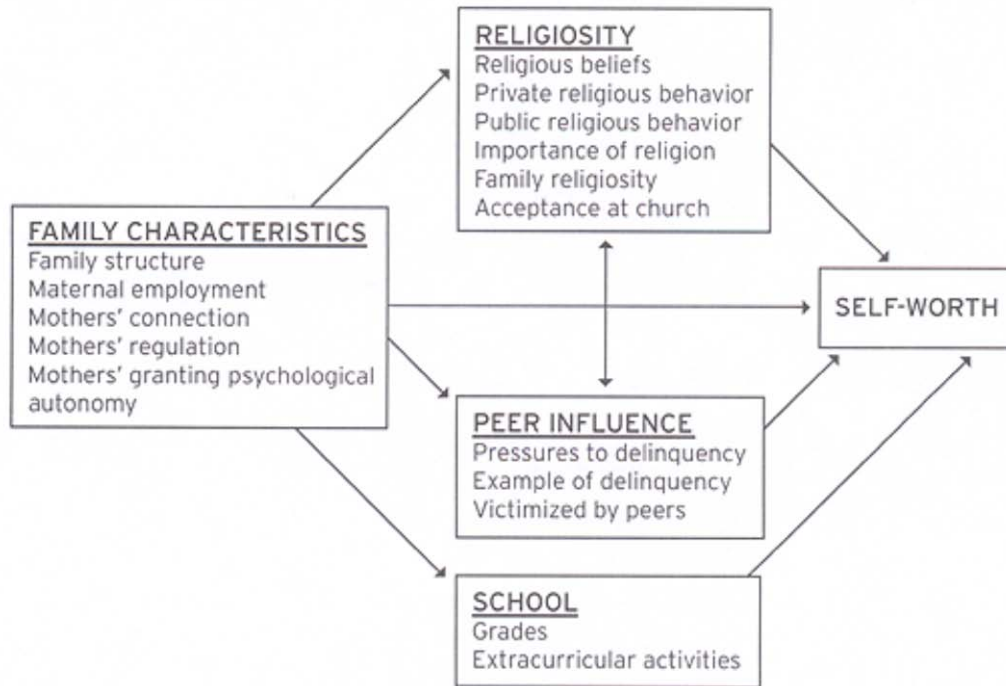
Over the past decade, we have studied nearly six thousand Latter-day Saint high-school students in the United States, Great Britain, and Mexico. We have been amazed at the influence of religion in these young people’s lives. Given the theological and theoretical ideas presented above, along with some limited research support, we hypothesized that religiosity was related to strong feelings of self-worth among these youth. Thus, we examined the relationship between various dimensions of religiosity and the self-worth of Latter-day Saint teenagers.

Self-worth emerges from many sources, and thus we studied the relationship between religiosity and self-worth in the context of peer relationship, school experiences, and family traits and

experiences. Much research has been done in recent decades on the relationship between friends and adolescent self-esteem. The results, however, have been mixed. In addition to the influence friends have on teens' self-concept, teachers have an important role in the development of self-image. The famous "Pygmalion in the Classroom" study and the hundreds of later replications reveal the powerful influence teachers have on the self-concept or self-esteem of students.<sup>cli5</sup> One very important way teachers convey their evaluation of students is through the grades teachers give to students. We anticipated that students who receive good grades would have higher self-esteem and that the reverse would also occur. In addition to speculating about educational achievement, we also speculated that participation in extracurricular activities would be associated with higher self-esteem.

Considerable research has investigated the impact the family has on the development of children's self-esteem. Three different aspects of parenting have been found particularly relevant: parental connection, parental regulation, and parental granting of psychological autonomy. *Parental connection or support* refers to the degree that parents are involved in the lives of their teenagers and express affection for them. *Parental regulation* involves setting family rules, observing compliance to the rules, and then administering appropriate discipline for disobedience. Finally, *granting psychological autonomy* occurs when parents encourage their children to have and express their own thoughts, ideas, opinions, and feelings. Teens still need to obey family rules, but parents focus on developing the mind or intellect of the youth. Several studies have found that family support or connection,<sup>clii6</sup> family regulation,<sup>cliii7</sup> and granting psychological autonomy<sup>cliv8</sup> are powerfully related to self-image. Therefore, we included connection, regulation, and the granting of psychological autonomy between mothers and fathers and their children.

The study with which this article is concerned had three research objectives. The first was to compare the self-worth of Latter-day Saint high-school seniors to a national sample of seniors. This will show any differences in how Latter-day Saint youth view their self-worth as compared to their peers across the nation. The second objective was to examine bivariate relationships between several dimensions of religiosity and self-worth. The purpose of this analysis is to identify which aspects of the religious experience have the strongest relationship to teens' developing of positive feelings about themselves. The third objective was to test a multivariate model predicting self-worth using peer, school, and family characteristics as well as measures of religiosity. The theoretical model we tested is presented in figure 1, which hypothesizes religiosity as a significant predictor of self-worth, even when competing with such real-world factors as peers, school, and family.



**Figure 1. Model Predicting Self-Worth among LDS Students**

### Research Methods

The data were collected from Latter-day Saint high-school students via a questionnaire mailed to their homes. Permission was obtained from the appropriate Church leaders, and then the list of potential seminary students was obtained. A random sample of Latter-day Saint students in grades nine through twelve was selected from this list. The potential seminary student list included all Latter-day Saint youth, both active and inactive. The student's family was mailed a packet that contained a cover letter to parents explaining the study and asking permission for their son or daughter to participate, a letter to the teen, the questionnaire, and a business reply envelope. Three follow-up mailings were sent to those who had not responded to increase the response rate. Over 60 percent of the students completed and returned the questionnaire. This return is a relatively high response rate for this kind of research survey.

*Self-worth* was measured by the LDS teens' answering ten questions concerning how they feel about themselves. Responses ranged along a five-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Five questions focused on the student's positive traits, and the other five gauged self-depreciation. Sample items are "I feel that I have a number of good qualities" and "Sometimes I feel like I am no good at all." The responses to these ten questions were combined into a measure of self-worth.

*Religiosity* has been found in previous research to be composed of several dimensions, including beliefs, public behavior (attendance), private behavior, importance of religion (spirituality), and acceptance at church.<sup>clv9</sup> *Religious beliefs* were measured by ten statements about traditional Christian beliefs as well as beliefs unique to Latter-day Saint theology. Examples of the questions are "Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God" and "Joseph Smith actually saw God the Father and Jesus Christ." Public behavior included five questions about attendance at sacrament meeting, Sunday School, and priesthood or Relief Society meeting and participation in church activities. *Private behavior* was gauged by the frequency of personal prayer, personal scripture reading, fasting, and payment of tithing. *Importance of religion and spiritual experiences* was

determined by answers to twelve questions about the role of religion in their lives and how often they have felt the Holy Spirit. Sample questions are “My relationship with God is an important part of my life” and “I have been guided by the Spirit with some of my problems or decisions.” Finally, *Acceptance at church* was gauged by three questions about how the student felt he or she fit in at Church. “I am well liked by members of my ward” is an example. All the attitudinal questions were answered with the same five-point scale used for self-worth.

*Peer influences* included rejection and mistreatment by fellow students, friends who engaged in delinquent activities, and friends who pressured the teens to engage in such activities.

*Victimization* was measured by eight questions about how often peers at school verbally or physically attacked them. Sample questions are “How often has someone picked a fight with you?” and “How often has someone forced you to engage in sexual activities with them?” *Peer pressure* was tapped by asking whether their friends pressured them to participate in forty different delinquent activities. *Peer example* was assessed by asking the teens whether their friends participated in these same forty different delinquent activities; in these instances, their peers were involved, but pressure was not placed on the teens to participate. Offenses against other people, such as bullying and fighting, were included, along with offenses against property such as shoplifting, stealing and vandalism, and status offenses including drug and alcohol use, truancy, and premarital sex.

*Family characteristics* included both family organization and processes. *Family structure* determined with whom the teen lived and identified single-parent families. *Maternal employment* ascertained whether a youth’s mother worked part or full time outside the home. Family processes involved three aspects of the parent-teenager relationship. *Mother’s/father’s connection* was measured by ten questions about the affection, attention, and closeness the youth feels with his or her mother. *Mother’s/father’s regulation* focuses on the setting of family rules, monitoring compliance, and applying disciplining when appropriate. *Mother’s/father’s psychological autonomy* was measured by ten questions ascertaining a mother’s use of psychological control, such as withholding love to control a teen’s thoughts, opinions, and feelings. We discovered that the responses the youth gave in identifying their relationships with their mothers and fathers were so similar that it would be statistically problematic to create independent scales. Because more young people live with their mother than their father and because of the statistical strength of the mother’s results, we deleted the father’s connection, regulation, and granting of psychological autonomy from the analysis.

Two dimensions of the educational experience were included. First, we asked the students to report their cumulative high-school *grade-point average (GPA)*. We also asked them to indicate which *extracurricular activities* they participated in and the number of hours devoted each week to these activities.

## **Results**

Our first objective was to ascertain how Latter-day Saint youths’ self-worth compares to that of youth across the nation. Each year a national study is conducted with a very large sample of high school seniors. The study asks what seniors intend to do following high school graduation and also obtains considerable information about a wide variety of other topics, including drug and alcohol use. Five of the ten questions from the Rosenberg scale that we used to measure self-worth are included in this national study. The comparisons between the seniors in our samples and the seniors in the national study for these five items are presented in table 1.

Self- worth	United States National Sample		LDS Students						
	United States				Great Britain		Mexico		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
	(N=154)	(N=416)	(N=721)	(N=968)	(N=199)	(N=274)	(N=814)	(N=879)	
I take a positive attitude about myself.									
Agree	82.5%	78.3%	70.0%	60.6%	65.2%	43.6%	77.5%	66.3%	
Neutral	9.0%	7.5%	19.5%	27.1%	21.2%	37.7%	12.3%	19.0%	
Disagree	8.5%	14.2%	10.5%	12.3%	13.6%	18.7%	10.2%	14.7%	
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.									
Agree	78.3%	78.2%	69.4%	63.0%	61.4%	47.8%	73.8%	64.4%	
Neutral	11.8%	9.5%	20.6%	25.2%	28.4%	30.7%	15.1%	19.9%	
Disagree	9.9%	12.3%	10.0%	11.8%	10.2%	21.5%	11.1%	15.7%	
I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.									
Agree	88.0%	83.2%	79.0%	74.0%	72.9%	63.6%	84.0%	80.7%	
Neutral	7.6%	9.7%	14.7%	19.5%	22.4%	29.7%	8.0%	10.6%	
Disagree	4.4%	7.1%	6.3%	6.5%	4.7%	6.7%	8.0%	8.6%	
At times, I think I am no good at all.									
Agree	17.8%	29.6%	25.9%	35.8%	31.8%	29.3%	33.6%	40.3%	
Neutral	15.9%	14.5%	20.3%	24.3%	20.7%	24.2%	16.6%	16.4%	
Disagree	66.3%	55.9%	63.8%	39.9%	47.5%	46.5%	49.8%	43.3%	

Self-Worth	United States National Sample		LDS Students						
	United States				Great Britain		Mexico		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
	(N=154)	(N=416)	(N=721)	(N=968)	(N=199)	(N=274)	(N=814)	(N=879)	
I feel I do not have much to be proud of.									
Agree	12.5%	15.2%	13.8%	11.4%	17.7%	17.9%	30.9%	25.1%	
Neutral	14.3%	9.9%	17.1%	20.7%	23.2%	26.0%	16.5%	17.5%	
Disagree	73.2%	74.9%	69.2%	67.9%	59.1%	56.1%	52.6%	57.4%	

**Table 1.** Self-Worth of Latter-day Saint High School Students in the United States, Great Britain, and Mexico (by Gender—all numbers with decimals represent percentages)

[Electronic Editor's Note: The graphical representation of the percentages has been omitted from this table]

A couple of interesting findings appear in the table. First, the Latter-day Saint youth report somewhat lower scores on the self-worth questions. Lower scores appeared for both positive and negative statements. A couple of alternative explanations may explain these lower self-esteem scores. One common explanation is that the gospel and the Church place high expectation and demands on its members. As a result, youth (and adults) may experience a degree of guilt and inadequacy when they feel that they are not perfect or “measuring up,” which may be expressed in lower appraisals of self-worth. An alternative explanation is that Latter-day Saints are taught to be humble and avoid pride and thus are more modest in answering questions like “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” Whatever the reasons, Latter-day Saint high-school seniors report somewhat lower self-worth than do other seniors in the United States.

Another surprise in table 1 was the high self-esteem reported among the Mexican LDS youth, especially on the positive items. On these three items, their scores nearly approximate the national ones. Interestingly, their scores indicated much lower self-worth than the national average on the two negative items. Thus, on the three positive items, the Mexican youth express rather strong self-worth; but on the two negative items, they report weaker feelings of self-worth. It should be noted that among all the samples, young men reported significantly stronger feelings of self-worth than did young women. There is growing and intriguing research that explains how young women’s feelings about themselves dramatically decline during junior and senior high school.<sup>clvi</sup>10 A discussion of the reasons for this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this article, but because of this difference, we analyzed the data from men and women separately.

The second objective of the study was to examine the bivariate correlations between the measures of peers, school, religion, family influences, and self-worth to identify the most important factors. This procedure isolates the relationship between two factors, such as public religious behavior and self-worth, from the influence of other factors like peer pressure and grades. Correlations vary between 0.0 and 1.0. Two factors that are totally unrelated will produce

a correlation of 0.0, while a perfect relationship will generate a correlation of 1.0. The bivariate correlations are presented in table 2.

	United States		Great Britain		Mexico	
	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men
	(n= 721)	(n= 968)	(n= 199)	(n= 274)	(n= 814)	(n= 879)
<b>Religion</b>						
Belief	.205 **	.303 **	.038	.158 **	.133 **	.193 **
Public	.214 **	.308 **	.070	.064	.222 **	.232 **
Private	.298 **	.380 **	.116	.189 **	.266 **	.330 **
Importance	.258 **	.414 **	.076	.227 **	.281 **	.356 **
Acceptance	.354 **	.421 **	.257 **	.363 **	.356 **	.376 **
<b>Family</b>						
Single parent	.055	.111 *	.006	.078	.037	.005
Mother's connection	.124 **	.324 **	.180 *	.365 **	.310 **	.329 **
Mother's regulation	.181 **	.255 **	.103	.261 **	.291 **	.360 **
Mother's granting psychological autonomy	.089 *	.303 **	.088 **	.174 **	.256 **	.226 **
Father's connection	.188 **	.361 **	.209 **	.338 **	.227 **	.248 **
Father's regulation	.169 **	.212 **	.074	.221 **	.201 **	.192 **
Father's granting psychological autonomy	.187 **	.324 **	.294 **	.275 **	.168 **	.193 **
<b>Peer Influence</b>						
Felt pressure to commit:						



	United States		Great Britain		Mexico	
	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men
	(n= 721)	(n= 968)	(n= 199)	(n= 274)	(n= 814)	(n= 879)
Offenses against others	-0.09 8	-.19 8**	-.06 8	-.17 2**	-.03 6	-.13 9**
Offenses against property	-0.08 2	-.24 5**	-.16 5*	-.19 2**	-.04 6	-.00 3
Victimless offense	-0.09 5	-.23 5**	-.01 3	-.27 4**	-.00 3	-.13 8**
Saw examples of:						
Offenses against others	-.14 6*	-.26 1**	-.05 6	-.12 0	-.13 7**	-.11 0**
Offenses against property	-.11 2	-.24 6**	-.18 8*	-.20 6**	-.11 8**	-.04 6
Victimless offense	-.14 1	-.22 9**	-.01 5	-.10 4	-.09 6**	-.12 0**
Victimized by peers	-.05 1	-.14 0*	-.10 8	-.19 1**	-.06 3	-.03 6
<b>Education</b>						
Grades	.264 **	.268 **	.280 **	.275 **	.282 **	.030 **
Extracurricular activities	.123 **	.134 **	.094	.085	.078 *	.116 **
* significant at .05 level      ** significant at .001 level						

**Table 2.** Bivariate Correlations between Self-Worth and Religiosity, Family, Peer Influences, and Education (by Country and Gender)

The number of factors that have a statistically significant relationship to self-worth is amazing. Obviously, self-worth is constructed from many sources, including parents, friends, teachers, and religious leaders, and from experiences in the home, playground, school, and church. The correlations produced by the three samples from the United States, Great Britain, and Mexico are fairly similar with the exception of the British young men. For some unknown reasons, fewer of the religious, family, friends, and school factors influenced their self-worth.

Perhaps the most important finding of this study was that for all three samples, the dimensions of religiosity produced the strongest bivariate correlations with self-worth. All five dimensions were significantly related to feelings of self-worth in the United States and Mexico for both

young men and young women. Four of the five measures were significant for the young women in Great Britain, but only one was for the British young men. More importantly, the correlations between the dimensions of religiosity and self-esteem are higher than those produced by the other factors. These results demonstrate that religious beliefs, public behavior, private behavior, the importance of religion, and acceptance at church are important in understanding high-school students' feelings of self-worth.

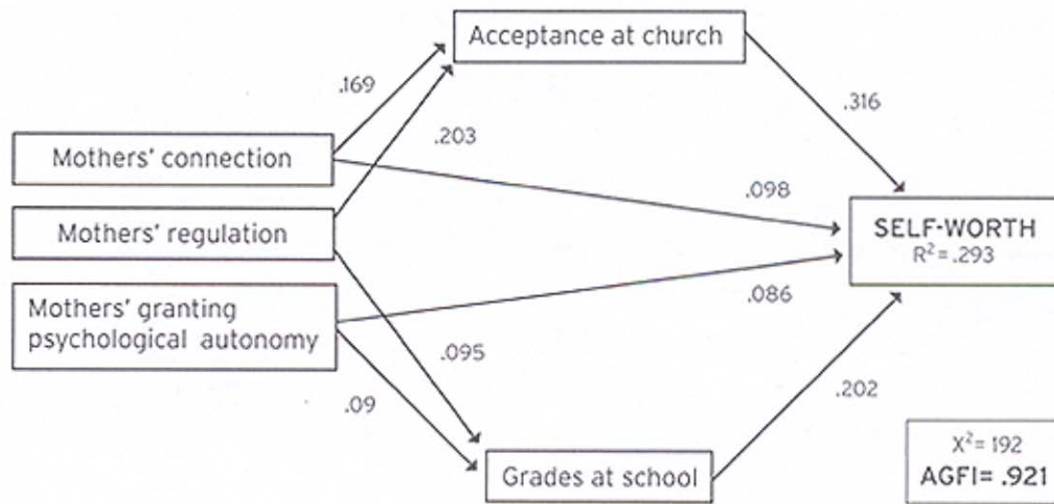
The magnitude of the correlations associated with acceptance in church was most surprising. These results reveal that for every subsample of LDS high-school students, feelings of acceptance, warmth, and belonging in church are critical to the development of strong self-worth. Church leaders, advisers, and teachers of youth can make a major contribution to young people's feelings of self-worth, as can other members of the ward, by helping youth feel welcome and valued.

*Importance of religion* not only includes the salience of religion in the young person's life but also involves spiritual experiences. This dimension also produced rather strong correlations with self-worth for all the samples except the British young men. This is not surprising, as positive feelings about one's relationship with God and spiritual experiences affirm feelings of personal worth.

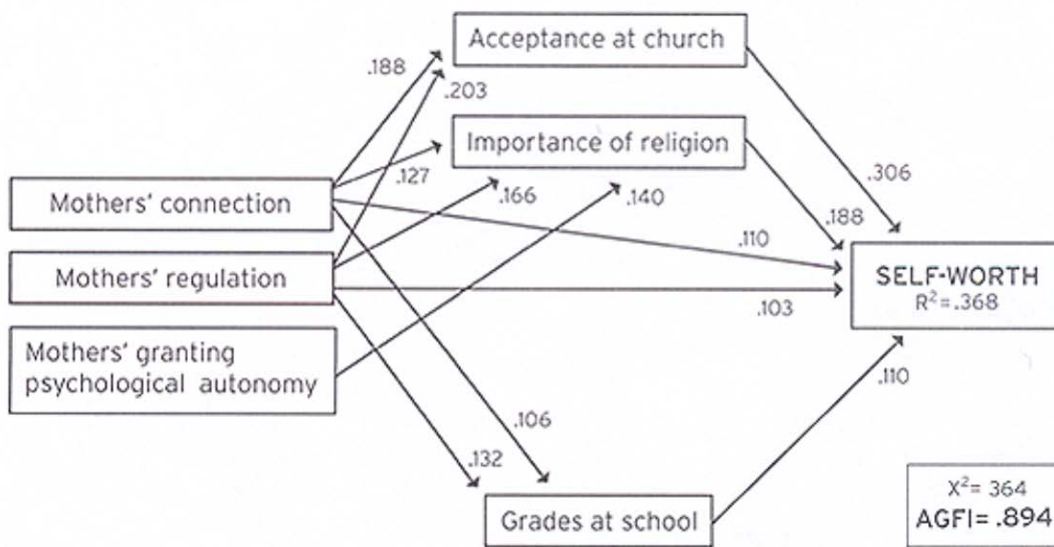
Religious beliefs produced the lowest correlations with self-worth among the religion measures. We have noted elsewhere that Latter-day Saint youth have very strong religious beliefs but seem to have difficulty translating such beliefs into their daily behavior. In sum, we are amazed at the powerful correlations between the various measures of religiosity and self-worth among LDS teenagers living in three different cultures.

The third objective of this article was to test the power of religion to predict self-esteem while competing with other factors in a multivariate model. We used structural equation modeling, which assesses multiple factors at the same time. This analysis more closely simulates real-world conditions. Another advantage of structural equation modeling is that it identifies not only *direct* effects of a factor on self-worth but also *indirect* effects. For example, the model will test not only whether a mother's connection has a direct effect on self-worth but also whether it has an indirect effect on self-worth through private religiosity. In other words, connection with mother may impact a teen's private religiosity, which in turn may affect self-worth. The conceptual model presented in figure 1 shows both direct and indirect relationships.

Findings from the structural equation model show that religiosity has a powerful direct effect on self-worth for both young men and young women in the United States, Great Britain, and Mexico. Figures 2 and 3, along with table 3, report the beta weights of the various factors predicting self-worth. Insignificant factors were dropped from the figures. Interestingly, *acceptance at church* produced by far the strongest link with self-worth for both men and women. The beta coefficients were exceptionally strong, ranging from .257 to .398. It is not surprising to find that feeling accepted is closely linked to how adolescents value themselves. What is unique for these Latter-day Saint youth is *where* and *with whom* they feel comfortable. It is within their wards and branches with leaders, teachers, and fellow members that acceptance has such a powerful relationship to feelings of self-worth. This finding demonstrates the power that church leaders and adult members have in helping youth to feel good about themselves.



**Figure 2.** Model Predicting Self-Worth among Latter-day Saint Students



**Figure 3.** Model Predicting Self-Worth among Latter-day Saint Young Women in the United States

Even though our model places acceptance at church as a predictor of self-worth, we recognize that this particular association is probably cyclical. In other words, not only does acceptance lead to stronger self-worth but, at the same time, feelings of self-worth probably contribute to feelings of acceptance at church. Theoretically, however, it seems most likely that the strongest direction of the relationship flows from acceptance to self-worth. How welcome youth feel at church with their leaders, friends, and other members is important in fostering positive self-feelings.

*Importance of religion* was also significantly related to self-worth. This measure represents how teens feel about the gospel and the level of spirituality they have experienced in their young lives. The bivariate correlations revealed that *importance of religion* and *private religious*

*behavior* were so highly related that both could not be entered in the model at the same time. Essentially, these two dimensions of religiosity were measuring the same thing. Not surprising, those who have private prayer and participate in scripture reading are also the ones who value the gospel and have had spiritual experiences. We chose to include *importance of religion* in the model, knowing that if it were significant, we would know that *private religiosity* was also related to self-worth.

Based on the bivariate correlations in table 2, *importance of religion* had a strong correlation with self-worth for all the samples of LDS teenagers, except the young men in Britain. However, when entered in the structural equation model, *importance of religion* was a significant factor only for the women in the United States and the men in Mexico. For these two groups, both *acceptance at church* and *importance of religion* make important contributions to explaining self-worth. In the other groups, *acceptance* was so strong as to diminish the relationship of *importance*. Although *acceptance* has a stronger association with feelings of self-worth, *importance* can make an important contribution, especially in the absence of feelings of *acceptance*.

This analysis focused on religion’s effect on self-worth. But it is also valuable to note the contribution that school success, as measured by grades, had on self-feelings. Grades were an important predictor of self-worth among both young men and women in all three countries. As can be seen in table 3, the beta coefficients ranged from .110 among young women in the United States to .216 for young women in Mexico. These results make it clear that approval of teachers, as well as the sense of accomplishment associated with good grades, significantly impacts the feelings of self-worth among Latter-day Saint youth.

Although not the primary focus of this article, the influence of parent-teenager relations on self-worth should also be noted. As mentioned earlier, because the feelings of connection, regulation, and psychological autonomy reported by the youth about their mothers and fathers were so similar, we could include only one parent’s data in the model. *Mothers’ connection*, the emotional ties the youth felt to their mothers, had a direct relationship with self-worth for all three of the samples of young women and one sample of young men (see table 2). *Mothers’ regulation*—the setting of rules, monitoring compliance, and administering discipline—was significantly related to self-worth for both young men and women in the United States and Mexico. For some reason, parents had little importance in explaining self-worth among the British youth. *Mothers’ granting psychological autonomy* made a significant contribution to explaining self-worth only for young men in the United States and Mexico. These findings are interesting because most research finds a fairly modest relationship between parents’ behavior and teenagers’ self-worth. Parents’ emotional connections with teens and parents’ regulation of teen behavior were both meaningful factors in understanding their teens’ feelings of self-worth.

	United States		Great Britain		Mexico	
	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men	Men	Wo men
<b>Model Characteristics</b>						
N	632	867	153	224	530	571
X <sup>2</sup>	192	364	108	156	117	140
AGFI	0.92	0.89	0.85	0.84	0.94	0.94
	1	4	4	7	7	1

<b>Religiosity</b>							
Acceptance	0.31	0.30	0.39	0.32	0.25	0.26	
	6	6	8	6	7	2	
Importance	NS	0.18	NS	NS	0.10	NS	
		8			1		
<b>School</b>							
Grades	0.20	0.11	0.14	0.14	0.12	0.21	
	2		8	6	2	6	
<b>Peers</b>							
Victimized	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	0.10	
						8	
<b>Family</b>							
Mother's connection	NS	0.11	NS	0.29	0.14	0.11	
				7	5	2	
Mother's regulation	0.09	0.10	NS	NS	0.14	0.22	
	8	3			4	1	
Mother's granting psychological autonomy	0.08	NS	NS	NS	0.17	NS	
	6				7		
R <sup>2</sup>	0.293	0.368	0.179	0.37	0.322	0.352	

**Table 3.** Summary of Structural Equation Models Predicting Self-Worth of Latter-day Saint High School Students

The structural equation model also identified the *indirect* effects of the three parenting behaviors on the youths' self-worth. The results are presented in table 4, which reveals that *mothers' regulation* makes an especially significant indirect impact on their teens' self-worth. As can be seen, *regulation* has an effect through *acceptance at church* both for young men and women in all three countries. This same *regulation* makes an indirect effect through the grades the students reported both for young men and young women in the United States and Mexico. Mothers and fathers who sit down with their teenage children and discuss important family rules such as responsibility for helping around the home, a curfew for when to come home at night, completion of homework, and so on score high on regulation. These mothers are also involved enough in their teens' lives to notice when the teens fail to obey the family rules. When rules are violated, these mothers administer the agreed-upon discipline, usually some type of grounding, loss of privilege, or extra chores. Mothers who provide this type of structure in the lives of their children help them realize the consequences of their behavior and also promote higher self-worth. Mothers who express love and acceptance and then encourage their teens to freely express their opinions and feelings indirectly contributed to self-esteem among some of the samples of young men and women in the three countries. But, as noted in table 4, connection and psychological autonomy were not significant as often as parental regulation.

Indirect Effects	United States		Great Britain		Mexico	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Mothers' Connection through:</b>						
Acceptance at church	.169	.188	NS	NS	NS	NS
Importance of Religion	NS	.127	NS	NS	.109	NS
Grades	NS	NS	NS	NS	.113	NS
<b>Regulation through:</b>						
Acceptance at church	.203	.166	.274	.198	.227	.233
Importance of religion	NS	.203	NS	NS	.306	NS
Grades	.095	.106	NS	NS	.110	.181
<b>Psychological Autonomy:</b>						
Acceptance at church	NS	NS	.209	NS	.088	NS
Importance of religion	NS	.140	NS	NS	NS	NS
Grades	.090	.132	NS	NS	.119	NS

**Table 4.** Indirect Effects of the Mother's Connection, Regulation, and Psychological Autonomy on Self-Esteem of LDS Youth in the U.S., Great Britain, and Mexico (by Gender)

### Implications for Religious Educators

So what does all this mean to religious educators, youth leaders, and advisers? First and foremost, we learn that what we do can really matter in the lives of the young people we serve. We must understand that we are not just teaching lessons or helping the youth understand gospel teachings. It is not just about increasing their informational database. One of our critical goals is to make sure young people feel a spirit of love, acceptance, and warmth in the community of Saints. Feeling welcome in seminary, institute classes, religion classes, priesthood quorums, Scout troops, Young Women's classes, Sunday School, sacrament meetings, and other Church-sponsored activities is all-important in helping young people develop positive feelings about themselves. President Gordon B. Hinckley has reminded us that new converts need three things to stay strong in the Church: a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing by the good word of God.<sup>clvii</sup> It is apparent from this research that youth likewise need friends and feelings of acceptance from their church leaders, advisers, teachers, and peers if they are to be successfully nurtured in the good word of God.

This finding about the importance of feeling accepted adds to an earlier study by the Church that showed young men who felt close to their priesthood leaders were more likely to serve a mission and to marry in the temple. Church leaders and their relationships with the youth in their ward seem to influence a number of important feelings and actions, including personal prayer, the development of a testimony, moral worthiness, fulfilling a faithful full-time mission, and temple marriage. The feelings of acceptance by adult leaders and youth peers help create a fertile seed bed for nurturing faith. Both are needed and go hand in hand.<sup>clviii</sup>12

As religious educators, we have the responsibility to inspire, as well as instruct, about the Savior so that our students come to know Him for themselves. The more we can lead them on a personal journey of gospel internalization, the more confident they will feel, the greater their spiritual competency, and the better they will feel about themselves. We must inspire them to seek spiritual guidance in their lives and become familiar with their Heavenly Father through personal prayer and scripture study. The gospel we teach must not merely enter their heads but must enter their hearts powerfully. Ultimately, all that we say and do, whether in our classrooms or as we counsel with youth, should be to help them gain their own personal testimony of who they really are, what the gospel can mean to them right here and now, and that they are loved by the Savior with a perfect love. Our students not only need to feel love and acceptance from us and their peers in the Church but also need to be “nurtured in the good word of God” so they can come to know the Lord and feel loved and accepted by Him. As we accomplish these religious educational objectives, we will in turn be strengthening their self-worth. This is not the way to enhanced self-esteem as embraced by the world and pop psychologists, but it is the Lord’s way. Following the Lord’s way will give Latter-day Saint teens the type of self-worth that will give them the confidence and strength of character to resist temptations and stand strong against the many negative pressures they encounter.

In reality, our study validates what prophets and apostles have long taught. Our study merely demonstrates with empirical evidence what President Harold B. Lee taught at the memorable general conference in October 1973. True spirituality, the kind of spirituality that comes from internalization of gospel principles forged with personal testimony, is self-respect. It is that kind of self-worth that evokes spiritual power. It works with youth, as well as with adults.

What a difference it would make if we really sensed our divine relationship to God, our Heavenly Father, our relationship to Jesus Christ, our Savior and elder brother, and our relationship to each other. . . .

I trust that I might have given to you and others who have not yet listened to such counsel, something to stimulate some sober thinking as to who you are and from whence you came; and, in so doing, that I may have stirred up within your soul the determination to begin now to show an increased self-respect and reverence for the temple of God, your human body, wherein dwells a heavenly spirit. I would charge you to say again and again to yourselves. . . ‘I am a [son or a daughter] of God’ and by so doing, begin today to live closer to those ideals which will make your life happier and more fruitful because of an awakened realization of who you are.<sup>clix</sup>13

## Notes

1. *Toward a State of Esteem*, California Department of Education (Sacramento, California: Bureau of Publications, 1990), vii.
2. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1973, 4.

3. See Peter L. Benson, Michael J. Donahue, and Joseph Erickson, "Adolescence and Religion: A Review of the Literature from 1970 to 1986," in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion* (Greenwich, Connecticut: JAI Press, 1989), 1:153-81; Carol A. Markstrom, "Religious Involvement and Adolescent Psychological Development," *Journal of Adolescence* 22 (1999): 205-11.
4. Yong Dai, Rebecca F. Nolan, and Qing Zeng, "Self-Esteem of Early Adolescents: A National Survey of Eighth graders," paper presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, August 2001, 6.
5. See Robert Rosenthal and Lorena Jacobson, *Pygmalion in the Classroom: Teacher Expectations and Pupils' Intellectual Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967).
6. See David H. Demo, "Self-Esteem of Children and Adolescents," in *Extending Self-Esteem Theory and Research: Sociological and Psychological Currents*, ed. Timothy J. Owens, Sheldon Stryker, and Norman Goodman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
7. See David M. Nielsen and Arlene Metha, "Parental Behavior and Adolescent Self-Esteem in Clinical and Nonclinical Samples," *Adolescence* 29 (fall 1994): 525-42.
8. See Brian K. Barber, ed., *Intrusive Parenting: How Psychological Control Affects Children and Adolescents* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2002).
9. See Brent L. Top and Bruce A. Chadwick, "Helping Teens Stay Strong," *Ensign*, March 1999, 26-34; also *Rearing Righteous Youth of Zion* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998).
10. See Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).
11. See Gordon B. Hinckley, "Converts and Young Men," *Ensign*, May 1997, 47.
12. "Key to Strong Young Men: Gospel Commitment in the Home," *Ensign*, December 1984, 66-68.
13. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1973, 9-10.