

# Gender Differences in How Catholic Latino Parents Pray with Their Children

Lluvia Arana Sanchez, Department of Psychology  
Ashley Marin, Graduate Student, Department of Psychology  
Rebekah A. Richert, Ph.D., Department of Psychology

## ABSTRACT

Latino families, one of the largest demographics in Southern California, remain underrepresented in developmental science research and are often described as culturally disadvantaged or lacking resources (Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010). However, to understand child development, researchers need a better understanding of the activities children engage in within the cultural contexts they navigate (Rogoff et al., 2018). For many, an important early childhood activity is learning how to communicate with God by participating in religious practices. The current study aims to shed light on this practice (e.g., parent-child conversations with God) among Latino-Catholic children, and to investigate how gender informs the ways parents socialize their children's prayer engagement.

Parents ( $N = 30$ ; 96.7% female, 2.3% male) between the ages of 23 and 48 years old ( $M = 31.90$ ,  $SD = 5.833$ ) were interviewed. All of the parents identified both themselves and their children as Latinos and Catholic. Their children ( $N = 30$ ; 50% female) were between the ages of 3.44 and 5.98 years old ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 0.761$ ). Parents were asked the following questions: 1) How old was your child when you first started to include them in normal practices of talking to God? and 2) In what situations do you typically talk to God with your child during a regular day? Thematic analysis was conducted by leveraging the Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) Technique (Watkins, 2017). Our analysis revealed that most parents, regardless of their child's gender, began incorporating their children into regular practices of talking to God between the ages of 1 and 3. However, socialization differed among male children, with parents more frequently engaging in routine prayer practices or a mix of routine and sporadic (on an as-needed basis), while those with female children more often engaged in sporadic prayer practices.

## FACULTY MENTOR - Dr. Rebekah A. Richert, Department of Psychology



Dr. Rebekah A. Richert earned her B.A. in Psychology from Calvin College and her Ph.D. from the University of Virginia. She completed postdoctoral fellowships at Queen's University Belfast and Harvard University. Her research explores how children's developing social cognition shapes their understanding of religion, fantasy, and media—focusing on concepts like God, prayer, and rituals, as well as how fantastical media content influences learning. Her work has been supported by the NSF, SSRC, and Templeton foundations.



**LLUVIA  
ARANA SANCHEZ**

Lluvia Arana Sanchez is a fourth-year psychology major with a medical and health humanities studies minor at the University of California, Riverside. Her research interests include people of color, autism, gender, and sexuality. After graduation, she plans to pursue a Ph.D. in clinical psychology to research autism using neuroimaging.

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## INTRODUCTION

Previous development research has often excluded the the context of children's lived experiences (Rogoff et al., 2018). Instead, prior research would typically generalize a particular child's lived experience by applying it to all contexts. Developmental research has also lacked an acknowledgment of how children participate in their culture. This study aims to address the gap by contextualizing how children experience God in relation to their Catholic-Latino culture.

This study focuses on open conversations with God, in which one speaks to God freely, rather than a structured prayer, like the Apostle's Creed or Hail Mary. The goal of this study is to better understand children's lived religious experiences within a Latino-Catholic context. Although Latino families are a significant demographic in Southern California, they are often overlooked in psychological studies (Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010), which often consider Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic population as "typical." Instead, developmental findings often reflect researchers' assumptions and are over-generalized, ignoring the context in which children's behavior unfolds. By focusing on the Latino community, this study hopes to shed light on children's real-life experiences, specifically looking at how the cultural practice of talking to God unfolds with the help of parents.

Developmental findings often dismiss children's lived experiences and instead reflect researchers' assumptions about children's experiences or ignore the context of their development. This is problematic because development occurs through everyday activities starting at an early age. To understand cognitive skill development, we must consider the context in which children navigate.

To understand children's cultural and prayer practices, it is important to first introduce some terms. A routine can be defined as a task commitment throughout the day that allows one to feel fulfilled after completing it or uncomfortable if not completed (Fiese et al., 2002). Routines can become automatic if they occur frequently. Rituals are socially prescribed sets of causally opaque actions (Legare & Nielsen, 2015). Causal opacity means the actions involved do not have a clear visible connection to the end goal of the task. Prayer can be defined as understanding or beliefs about

God's involvement in what surrounds us (Shaman et al., 2023). It is also a religious activity in which the practitioner communicates with a supernatural being (e.g., God) (Spilka & Ladd, 2013). However, prayer can also be a routine if it is done a regular time of day and becomes incorporated into an individual's everyday life (Fiese et al., 2002). Children understand prayer as something much more powerful than wishes, magic, or a way to prevent something negative from occurring (Shaman et al., 2023). Additionally, children perceive prayer as a way to communicate, a perception which is influenced by their parents' beliefs (Shaman et al., 2016).

It is vital to study Catholic Latino parents and children, as it is one of the largest demographics in Southern California, yet they remain underrepresented in science and are often described as lacking resources (Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010). This study aims to understand children's lived experiences within a Latino-Catholic context to inform future research. Based on previous research, we expect there may be gendered differences in how children pray. Raffaelli and Ontai (2004) explain how Latino boys and girls are raised differently. For example, boys may have a later curfew than girls do or girls may be expected to do more housework than boys are. This study examines how gender works in this context and also its role in parent prayer socialization. This study considers the parents' influence on how children perceive or are influenced by prayer.

This study seeks to answer the research question: How does a child's gender influence Catholic Latino parents' socialization of their child's prayer engagement? The research question is related to empirical research that addresses the cultural contexts children navigate (Rogoff et al., 2018). The study's objectives are to highlight one salient practice (e.g., parent-child conversations with God) in which Latino-Catholic children participate and to examine how gender influences parents' socialization their children's prayer engagement.

We hypothesize that that Latino Catholic parents will report different prayer socialization practices depending on the gender of the child, as prior research suggests that Latino parents shape their cultural socialization and parenting practices based on the gender of their child. For example, Raffaelli and Ontai (2004) suggest that Latino/a parents

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raise daughters to be marked by “traditional” gender-related expectations, whereas sons experience different chores, expectations of behavior, and limits.

## METHODS

This qualitative research uses thematic analysis to examine children’s lived experiences by interviewing their parents. Thematic analysis was done by analyzing the responses parents gave during an interview about their religious beliefs and practices. This study extends the work done by the first wave of Dr. Richert’s R’God Longitudinal Study (2016-2017), which interviewed children.

The participants presented in this study were from the community near a university in Southern California. The university’s existing database of prior study participants was used. Recruitment occurred at community events for families, religious organizations’ events, and through word-of-mouth recommendations from participants. After recruitment, the participants entered a longitudinal study related to religious cognition. The analysis for the current study focused on the first wave of data collection. This thematic analysis only assessed the responses from Catholic-Latino families. Therefore, it is a purposive sampling of parents raising a child under the Catholic Latino faith. Parents ( $N = 30$ ; 96.7% female) between the ages of 23 and 48 years old ( $Mean = 31.90$ ,  $Standard Deviation = 5.833$ ) were interviewed, and all identified both themselves and their children as Latinos and Catholic. Their children ( $N = 30$ ; 50% female) were between the ages of 3.44 and 5.98 years old ( $Mean = 4.58$ ,  $Standard Deviation = 0.761$ ).

This study utilizes qualitative research in a thematic analysis format and uses a specific data management technique to analyze data. The rigorous and accelerated data reduction technique (RADaR) is an individual and team-based approach to coding and analyzing qualitative data (Watkins, 2017). It involved using Excel sheets to organize, reduce, and code the data to develop all-inclusive data tables, which are then revised multiple times in a process known as “data reduction.” In short, the RADaR technique makes long textual data, in this case, interview responses, into a more organized and simpler to navigate format.

Before beginning the coding process, potential biases were identified with positionality statements. The three coders engaged in a reflective activity of sharing their positionality statement to reflect on how their identities can be a strength or can generate biases when coding or cleaning data. The positionality statement for the researcher in this study is as follows:

*I am a first-generation Latina student who grew up in East Los Angeles. I have been raised in the Catholic church by my Mexican family. I have attended religious ceremonies in the US and Mexico, but am only familiar with the religion in Spanish. I think my personal experiences and background might influence my work since I have had a good experience with religion, and it may not be the same with others who have encountered hardship, which may reflect in their belief system. One strength my identity brings to the research is familiarity with the experience of the participants, as I share a background with them as well. I would have a deeper understanding of the experience, as I have memories that may coincide with those of participants. These aspects are important to be aware of before beginning the coding process because they acknowledge how bias can change the way one views data due to past experiences.*

The study heavily relied on interviews with parents. Specifically, the study consisted of two questions asking parents to reflect on their beliefs about God and prayer activity:

1. How old was your child when you first started to include him/her in normal practices of talking to God?
2. In what situations do you typically talk to God with your child during a regular day?

The study made use of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), a software commonly used in psychological research to determine interrater reliability, which is the agreement between coders that a specific response follows the same criteria. The study relied on three coders to organize and categorize the parent responses based on the criteria. Two coders made decisions independently, and a third coder resolved disagreements between the initial coders. SPSS calculated a numerical value, specifically the Cohen’s kappa, or kappa value, which determined interrater reliability. The codes and their kappa values for Question 1 and Question 2 are in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

For Table 1, we looked at the responses before creating codes as a team to apply an inductive approach and have the

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Code	Frequency	%	Cohen's Kappa	Agreement %	Criteria	Response Examples
Prenatal	1	3.3	1.000	100	Parents started including their children in conversations involving talking to God when the child was in the womb.	"Since he was in my stomach."
Infancy	2	6.7	1.000	100	A child's engagement begins during the infant's first year of life.	"Well first time we took him to church was like when probably like what, like 5 months? Yeah."
Toddlerhood	21	70	0.918	96.55	The child's engagement began at the age of 1 to 3 years.	"Maybe she was 2 when she was able to talk, she started speaking a lot, and I would just tell her to say like 'Thank you, God for this, thank you God for that.'"
Early Childhood	4	0.198	0.839	96.55	Child's engagement began during the ages within the range of 4 to 6 years.	"Since he was 4, so just making sure we get a prayer once in at night."
Not Introduced	2	0.839	1.000	100	Responses explicitly state that the child is not included in practices involving talking to God.	"I don't really guess incorporate her in practices of talking to God, maybe talking about God."
Total	30	1.000				

**Table 1.** Codes and kappa values for Question 1.

data guide what categories would emerge. Once doing so, 5 codes emerged. In terms of interrater reliability, the two independent coders scored at least a kappa of .839 across these codes, demonstrating near-perfect agreement.

Before analyzing the data, we referenced Fiese et al.'s 2002 research on ritual theory, which suggests that rituals can become family routines. Therefore, we expected a code for "routine," which describes responses when talking to God is described as part of a scheduled daily activity. The data showed multiple parents engaging in conversations about God with their children before and after meals, upon waking, and before bed. In addition to the routine code, we identified a need for the sporadic code, as many responses indicated that talking to God with their child occurred on an as-needed basis. Lastly, for interrater reliability, the kappa was at least 0.704 across all codes, which indicates an acceptable level of agreement in most of our coding.

Our sample focused on 30 parents who identified as both

Latino and Catholic, and who participated by the first wave of Dr. Richert's R'God Longitudinal Study (2016-2017), which focused on families' understanding of prayer across different religions. Most parent interviews were conducted in a laboratory, but some took place at home or in public settings (Richert et al., 2017). Families were compensated \$20, and the children received a small toy.

All parents consented to video recordings of their interviews, which were then transcribed by undergraduate research assistants. The study analyzed responses to two questions:

1. How old was your child when you first started including them in normal practices of talking to God?
2. In what situations do you typically talk to God with your child during a regular day?

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Code	Frequency	%	Cohen's Kappa	Agreement %	Criteria	Response Examples
<b>Routine</b> (Fiese et al., 2002)	10	33.3	0.0781	82.29	Talking to God is described as part of a regular and scheduled daily activity or habitual practice.	"Um, typically after a meal and right before he goes to bed."
<b>Sporadic</b>	10	33.3	0.0920	96.43	Talking to God was described as occurring irregularly, unexpectedly, or on an as-needed basis. The response does not give sufficient information to predict when prayer happens on a regular day.	"Um, when they really want to conquer something. Or even with a goal, you know?"
<b>Both</b>	8	29.7	0.704	89.29	Talking to God was described as occurring both as part of regular, scheduled activities and spontaneously in response to events or feelings.	"Usually, if things are not going well, we'll pray, and then we do a daily prayer with all four of us, the whole family, at night."
<b>Not Introduced</b>	2	6.7	1.00	100	Responses explicitly state that the child is not included in practices involving talking to God.	"I don't. I usually do it in private or on my own."
<b>Total</b>	30	100				

**Table 2.** Codes and kappa values for Question 2. General Results of Parents' Responses

We employed the Rigorous and Accelerated Data Reduction (RADaR) technique, using Excel to organize, reduce, and code the data in phases. Both inductive and deductive approaches were applied to create our final coding schemes. Finally, SPSS was used to calculate Cohen's kappa for interrater reliability between two independent coders, and a third coder resolved any discrepancies.

## RESULTS

The study used a qualitative thematic analysis approach and descriptive data. The first interview question analyzed was, "How old was your child when you first started including them in normal practices of talking to God?" The general results demonstrated toddlerhood to be the most common stage during which parents engaged their children in prayer. However, some parents introduced this practice much earlier. Some started during the child's first year, while others did not

start until the child was 3 or older (see Figure 1).

Next, we assessed the gender of the child and found that regardless of whether the child was female or male, toddlerhood was still the most common time window in which the practice of talking to God together was introduced (see Figure 2). Regardless of the child's gender, most parents socialize their children to talk to God between the ages of 1 and 3.

The second interview question we analyzed was, "In what situations do you typically talk to God with your child during a regular day?" Figure 3 shows how the parents generally responded to the question. An equal number of parents indicated they engaged their children in routine and sporadic prayer, with 10 parents indicating their prayer occurs on a routine basis and 10 others indicating that their prayers occur more sporadically. There was also a similar number of parents (n = 8) who indicated that praying with their child

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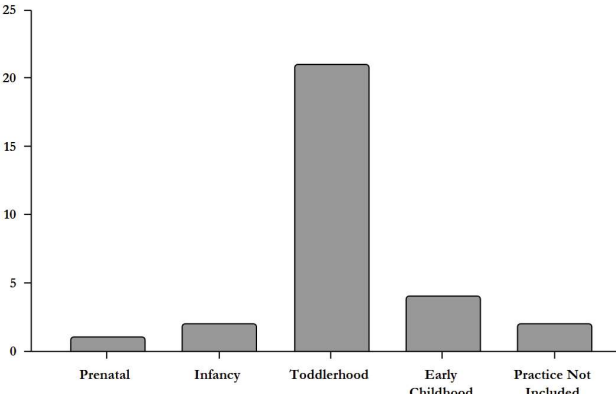


Figure 1. Age Windows

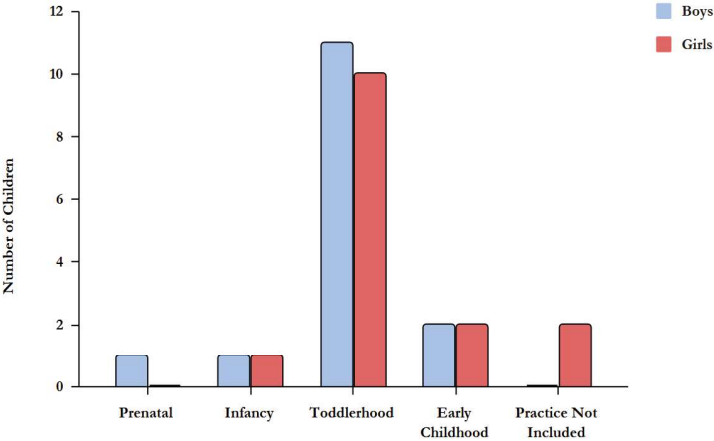


Figure 2. Children’s Gender Differences Across Age Windows

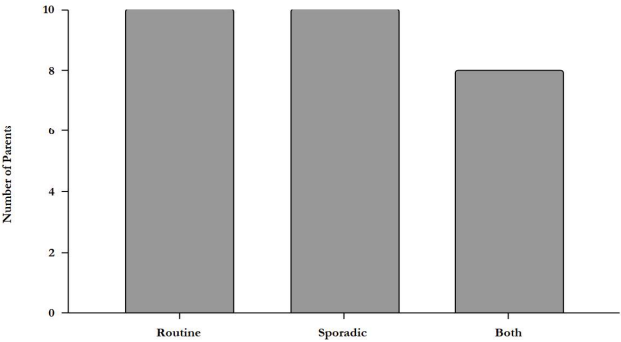


Figure 3. Situations of Prayer

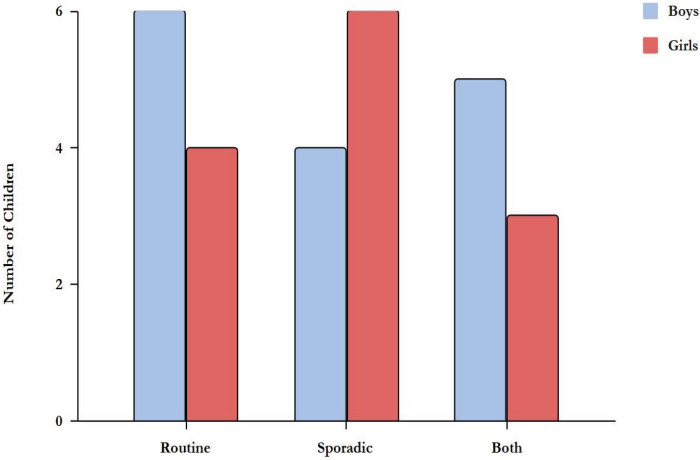


Figure 4. Children’s Gender Differences in Situations of Prayer

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occurred in both formats. In general, some parents have a settled routine, others are sporadic, and still others use a mixture of both.

We then analyzed if parents' responses about how they pray with their child differed by the gender of the child. Figure 4 visually suggests that parents indicated they engage boys more in prayer as a routine rather than on a sporadic, or as-needed basis. This was different for girls, as parents shared that they engaged girls more on an as-needed basis. In the "both" category, the data shows boys also engage in praying with their parents more routinely and sporadically, whereas only three girls engaged in both. However, a Chi-Square analysis indicated this difference was not statistically significant,  $\chi^2(df = 5, N = 28) = 1.477, p = 0.916$ .

## DISCUSSION

There are many reasons for why toddlerhood may be the typical stage to introduce Catholic Latino children to prayer. While the exact cause is unclear, many responses suggest parents waited for developmental milestones like speaking and understanding before starting this practice. Motor actions and prayer are likely associated because children are able to begin to understand that there are certain movements they have to execute to pray. With this development of understanding, children may feel inclined to correctly perform these actions while praying (Shaman et al., 2016).

Collectively, the data suggest that there are no significant gender differences in whether parents pray with their male or female children in routine or more sporadic situations. However, there may be other gender differences in how and when parents pray with their children. For example, an interesting future direction for study would be to examine if girls are socialized to regulate emotion with prayer. Catholic Latinos expressed this association during the interviews, indicating they pray for help when dealing with distress or other emotions (Shaman et al., 2023). Since prayer is utilized for emotion regulation, it would be interesting to see if girls may be socialized to pray when they have an emotional need, since Latino boys and girls are raised differently (Raffaelli and Ontai, 2004).

Future research could also examine the differences between children and parents praying independently. Specifically,

if the parent and child pray more together or more independently. Another question may be if children pray with their grandparents or siblings more often than with their parents. Since prayer is a ritual, the relationship between grandparents and children might be interesting to study as they share their practice from one generation to the next.

Based on this study's findings, parents who would like prayer to be a method of emotional regulation may want to engage their children in praying more often. If parents want to embrace prayer as a tradition or cultural practice, praying as a routine might be more suitable, based on this study's findings.

One limitation is that the questions were for all common religions, and it did not focus on the Catholic Latino perspective. The original interview questions were asked to more than 200 families of different religions and backgrounds to generally understand how families prayed. Therefore, the interviews were not designed for this specific context.

Another limitation of this study is that the interviewer changed the wording of the questions in the script. This can change the participant's understanding of the question and lead to different results in the responses (Schwarz, 1999). Parents might be inconsistent in their answers or feel pressured to answer depending on the question. For example, they may want to conform to society's standards. It is important to note that answering interview questions can be cognitively demanding. This study also does not take into consideration mothers with multiple children, so they may not accurately remember with which child they practiced religion. The number of children parents have can shape how parents socialize prayer practices with their children.

There was a strong representation of mothers in the current sample. Additionally, almost all participants in the interview were mothers. Mothers have different standards for their children compared to fathers. In addition, the study was done in 2016, so the interviews were conducted pre-pandemic. We are unsure if these results may look different today or how the pandemic influenced religious practices at home.

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## CONCLUSION

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The two aims of this study were to examine how Catholic Latino parents socialize their children's prayer engagement and if gender influences the parents' prayer engagement. We found that prayer was a salient practice to Catholic Latino parents. Toddlerhood was the most common age window for parents to introduce prayer to their children. Prayer engagement can lead to developmental skills as it is introduced in the timeframe when children gain language and comprehension skills. We did not find that gender influenced the age window in which children were introduced to prayer. However, gender differences may be reflected in future studies when examining how parents socialize prayer with their children. Both boys and girls prayed in situations that were routine as well as more sporadic. Society can leverage prayer engagement skills and consider the situations in which people may prefer to pray, either as part of a routine or sporadically.

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