

SELECTED FINDINGS

With Their Own Voices

A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development

A Research Study from Search Institute's
Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

www.spiritualdevelopmentcenter.org

BACKGROUND

From 2006 through 2008, Search Institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence—together with partners in different parts of the world—has been listening to young people's own perspectives on spiritual development. In total, more than 7,000 youth have participated in this multi-methods study. These young people, between ages of 12 and 25, live in 17 countries on six continents. Through a series of exploratory focus groups (13 countries; 175 youth), interviews (6 countries; 32 youth), and surveys (8 countries; 6,853 youth), they offer fresh insight into spiritual development among today's youth. Because of its scope and diversity, this study offers one of the first snapshots of spiritual development across multiple countries and traditions.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The vast majority of youth in this study believe there is a spiritual dimension to life.

In most countries where surveys were conducted, an average of only 7% of youth said they didn't believe life has a spiritual dimension or they didn't know. Among youth who believe there is a spiritual dimension to life, they are most likely to understand it as "believing there is a purpose to life," "believing in God," or "being true to one's inner self" (Figure 1).

2. About one-third of youth surveyed see themselves as "very" or "pretty" spiritual.

One in three youth in the survey see themselves as "very" or "pretty" spiritual (Figure 2). However, this level varies considerably across countries, from a high of 52% in the United States and 50% in Thailand to a low of 23% in Australia. In Australia, almost half of the youth surveyed (47%) indicated that they are not spiritual, compared to only 12% in Thailand and about 20% in Canada, India, Ukraine, and the United States.

3. Young people are most likely to report that their spirituality has increased.

More than half of the youth surveyed (55%) indicated that, overall, their spirituality had increased over the past two or three years (Figure 3). Only 20% indicated that it had decreased. More specifically, the majority of youth surveyed reported that various aspects of their spirituality changed (Figure 4). For example, two-thirds say they have more of a sense that life has meaning or purpose, and only 5% said it has decreased. At the same time, about 46% of youth said their doubts and questions about spiritual or religious matters had increased during this time.

4. Youth see religion and spirituality as related, but different.

Like adults, many youth struggle with the relationship between religion and spirituality. As shown in Figure 5, youth in this study are most likely to indicate that they are both spiritual and religious (34%), with 23% indicating that they are spiritual, but not religious. One in five (20%) of the youth surveyed indicated that they don't know. Youth in different parts of the world approach this question differently. In the United States, 43% of youth surveyed say they are both spiritual and religious, and 27% say they are just spiritual.

5. Young people view both religion and spirituality positively.

A majority of youth in the survey thinks that both being religious and being spiritual as "usually good," with about one-fourth of respondents saying that being either is neither good nor bad (Figure 6). In focus groups, however, some young people expressed more positive perspectives about spirituality than about religion and religious institutions. For example:

"Spiritual is something one experiences in your own being. Religion is, well, your religion. Most of our religion is forced—the do's and don'ts. Being spiritual means standing on a mountain with the wind blowing through your hair, and the feeling of being free." (Female, 15, South Africa)

"'Religious' is kind of knowing the things in your head, but 'spiritual' is knowing them in your heart." (Female, 15, Australia)

6. Youth say family and friends help them spiritually, but one in five say no one does.

When asked to identify who helps them *most* in their spiritual life, young people surveyed were most likely to point toward family, with 44% of youth survey selecting this option (Figure 7). Just 14% of youth indicated that their religious institution (church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other religious or spiritual place) helps them the most. In addition, one in five youth (18%) say that no one helps them regarding their spiritual lives. The proportion of youth who say no one helps them increases to 38% in the United Kingdom and 37% in Australia. Only 4% of youth in Cameroon say no one helps them spiritually.

7. Everyday experiences and relationships seen as nourishing young people's spirit.

When asked how much various influences and experiences either made it easier or harder to be spiritual (to find meaning, peace, and joy), at least three-fourths of young people in the survey pointed to being outside or in nature, listening to music, serving others, and being alone. They also noted that the influence of family and friends make it easier (Figure 8). They are less likely to point to spiritual mentors, religious activities, school, or the Internet as making it easier. Experiencing challenges in life is seen as making it more difficult by 44% of youth. However, many in youth focus groups indicated that spirituality was a resource that helps them through the hardships of life and that they grew spiritually during difficult times.

8. Youth Most Often Nurture Spiritual Development Alone or by Helping Others

When asked how often they engage in various activities that help them grow spiritually (Figure 9), young people were most likely to say they read books (47%), pray or meditate alone (44%), help others (44%), or attend religious worship or prayer services (40%). Three of the six most common activities involved acts of compassion, service, or generosity.

FIGURE 1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE SPIRITUAL?

When asked to identify what it means to be spiritual, youth (ages 12 to 25) were most likely to say it means “believing there is a purpose to life,” “believing in God,” or “being true to one’s inner self.” 26% Here are the three most common responses in each country (out of nine choices), plus the percentages of youth who said they don’t think or don’t know if there is a spiritual dimension to life. (Youth could select one or two choices.)

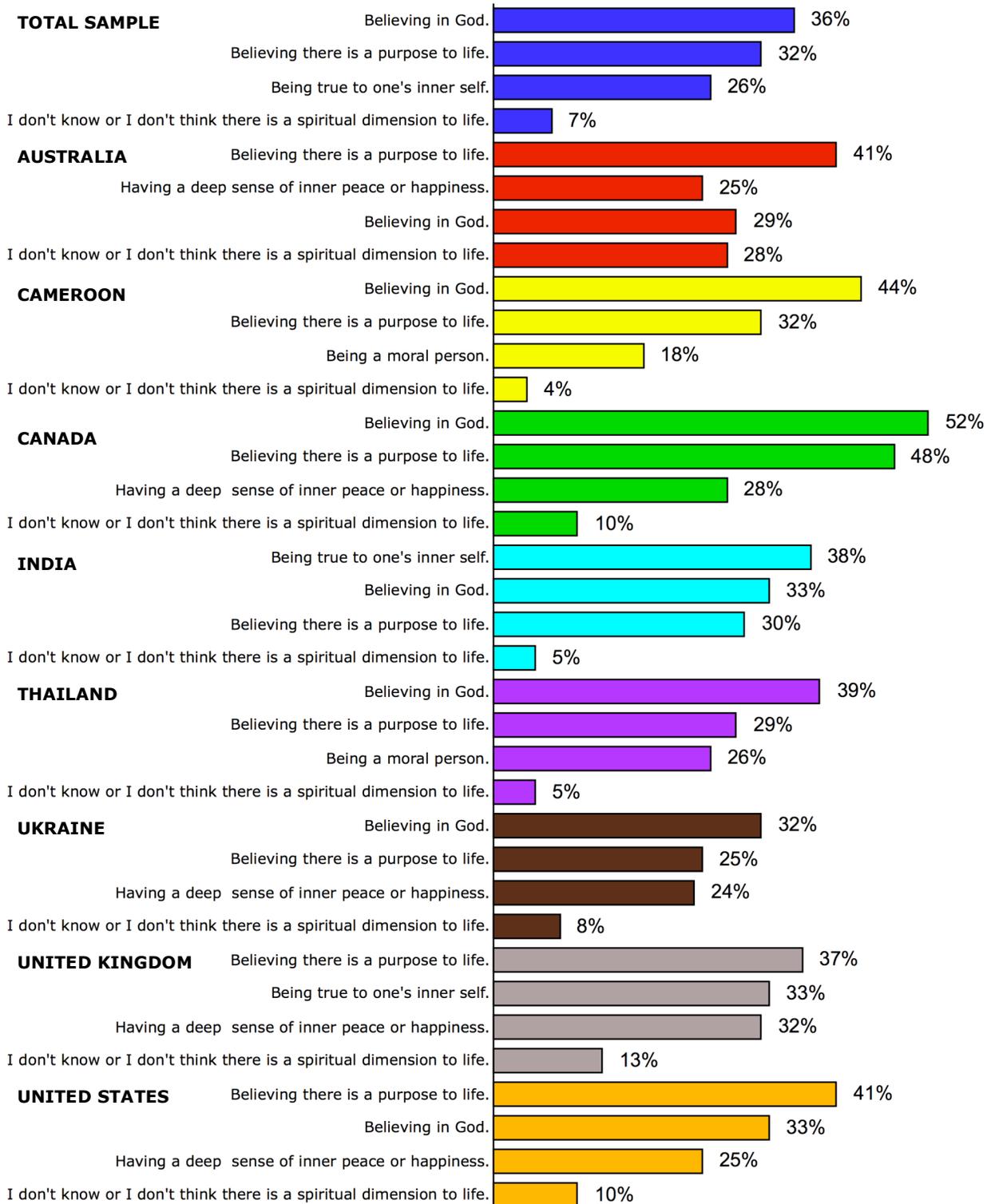


FIGURE 2 HOW SPIRITUAL OF A PERSON ARE YOU?

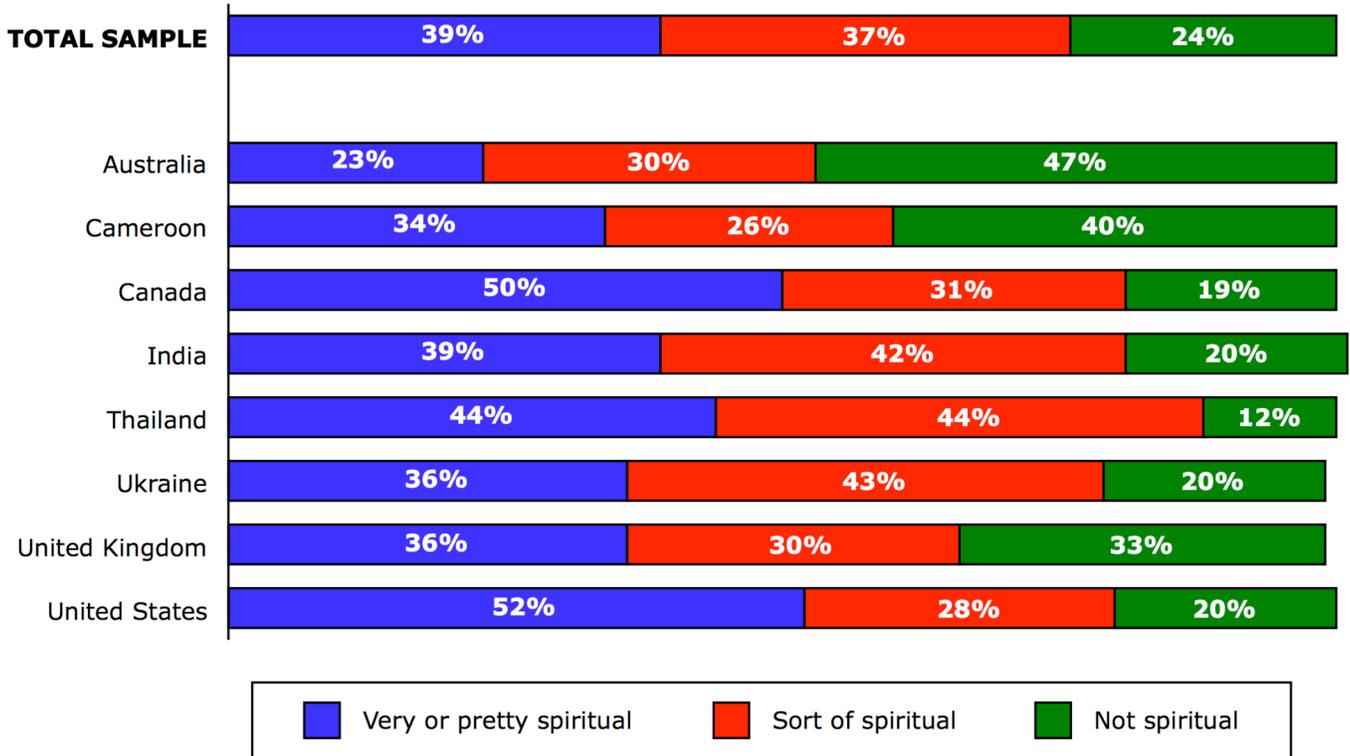


FIGURE 3 PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES IN SPIRITUALITY

Percentages of youth who say they have become more or less spiritual in the past 2-3 years.

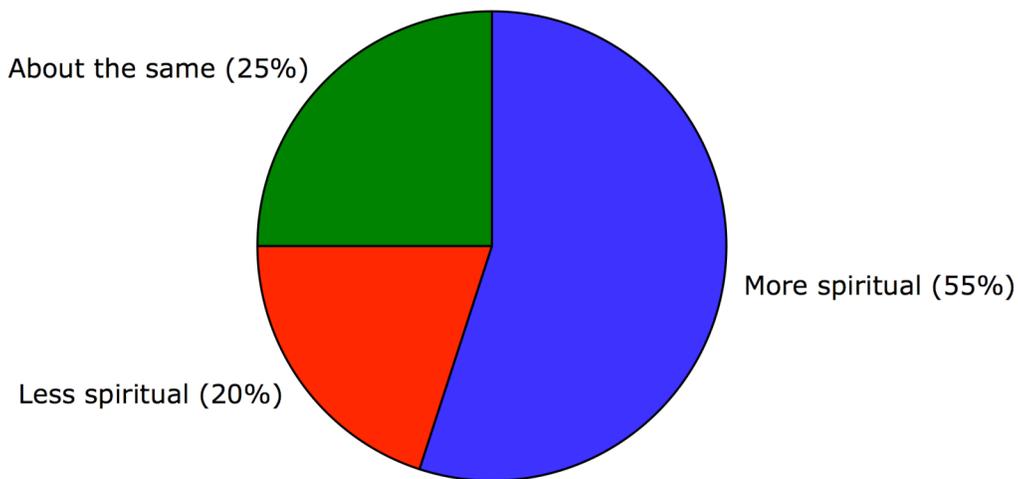


FIGURE 4 PERCEIVED CHANGES IN ASPECTS OF SPIRITUALITY (PAST 2-3 YEARS)

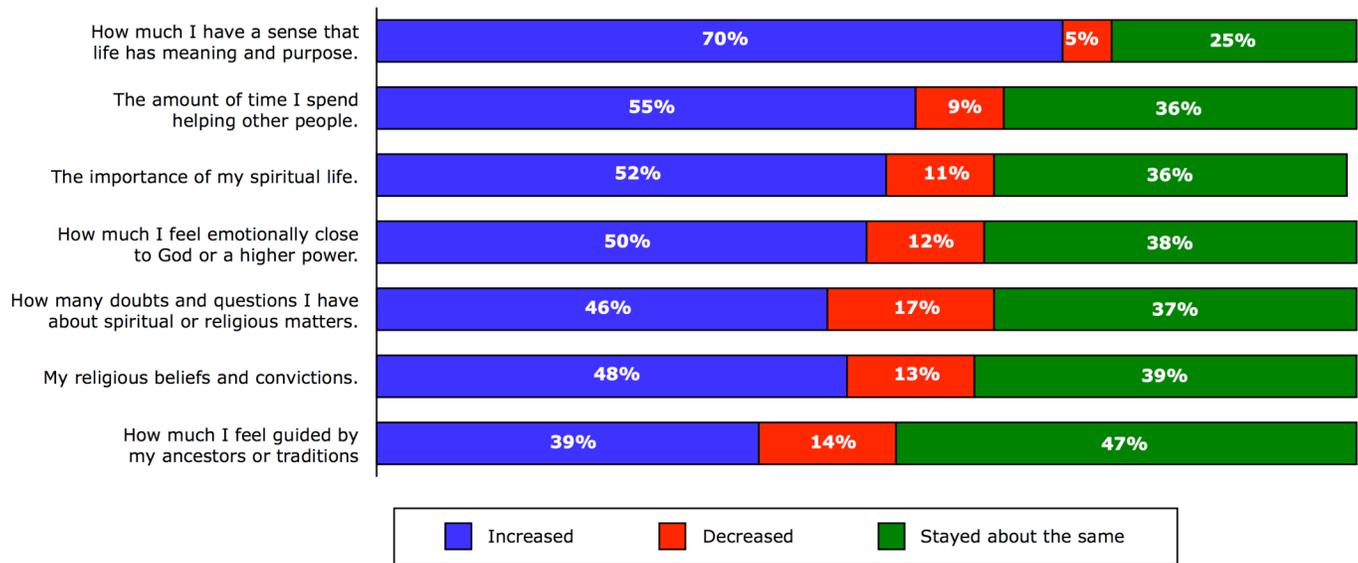


FIGURE 5 RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL, BOTH, OR NEITHER?

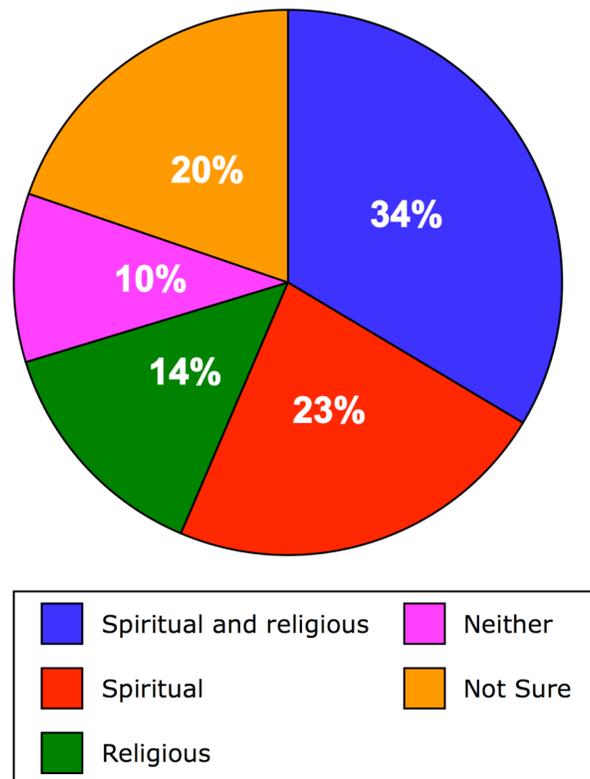


FIGURE 6 THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

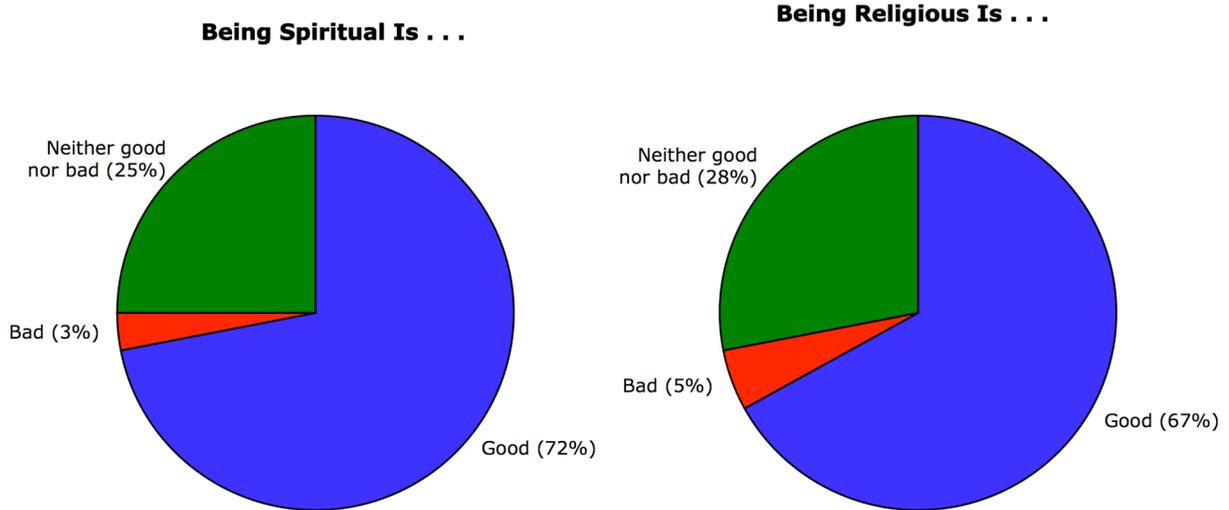


FIGURE 7 WHO HELPS YOU MOST IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE?

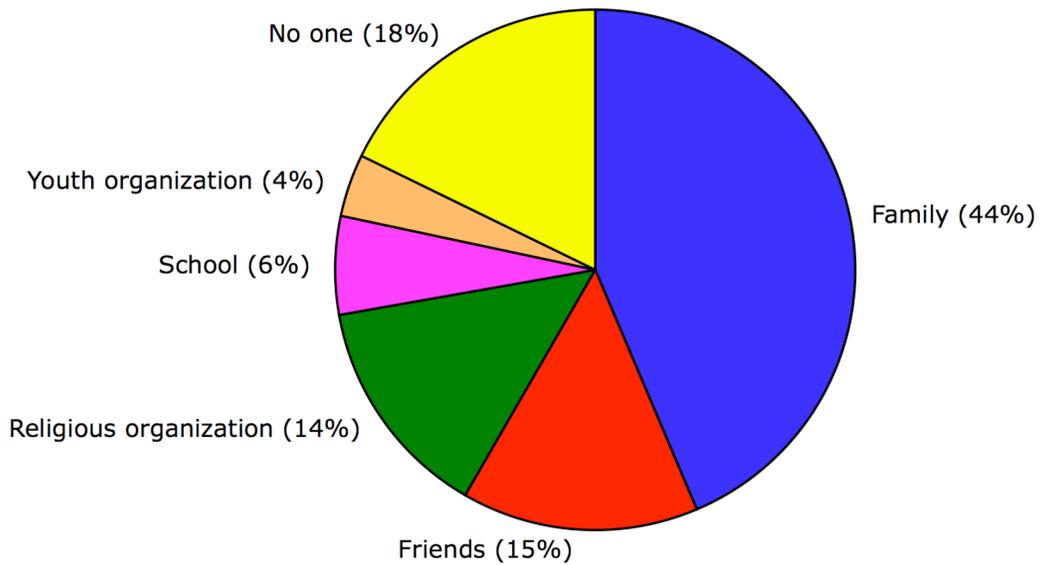


FIGURE 8 WHAT MAKES SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT EASIER OR HARDER?

How much does each of the following make it easier or harder for you to find meaning, peace, and joy?

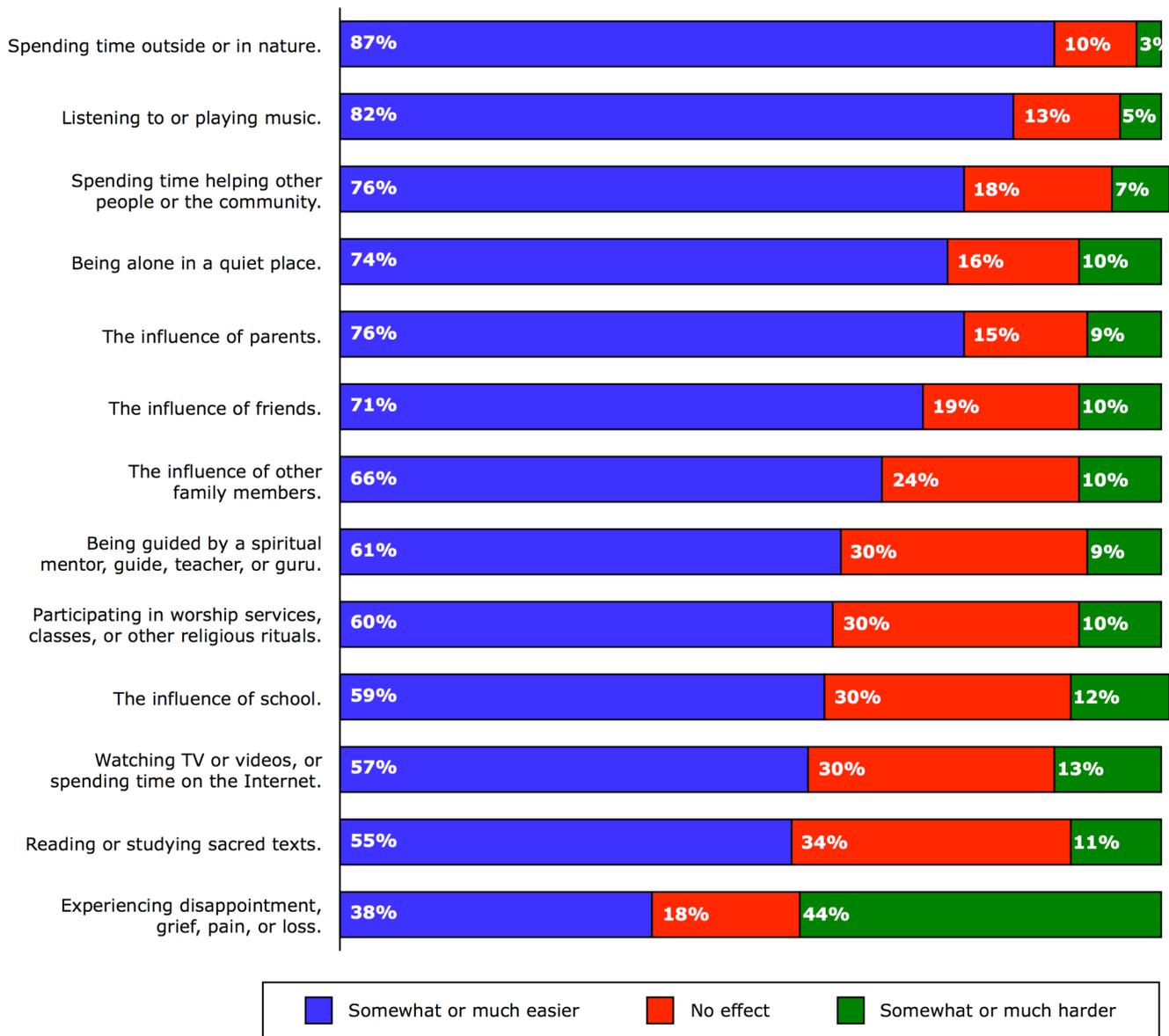


FIGURE 9 WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE DO TO NURTURE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

(Youth who say they have done each of these things “often” or “very often” in the past 12 months to support their spiritual development.)

