

Cultivating Spirituality in Children

What is spirituality?

Some have defined spirituality as a quest for meaning or a search for the sacred. Spirituality cultivates a sense of awe, wonder, and gratitude.

People with higher levels of spirituality are likely to have better mental health, less substance use, better marital functioning, positive moral development in their children, healthy stress management, and improved general health.

Spirituality in one form or another is important to most people. To neglect spiritual well-being is to neglect a vital part of human life and development.

Cultivating spirituality

Cultivating spirituality in children requires our best efforts. Efforts to force or demand spirituality are likely to backfire. They are likely to result in children who resent and resist spirituality. The good news is that there are sensible ways to help children become caring, grateful, and helpful people.

1. Provide children with abundant experience of enduring human love and compassion. There is nothing that cultivates goodness like goodness. Though every child will face pain and disappointments in the course of growing up, the experience of loving relationships helps children to survive and become good adults.

Urie Bronfenbrenner recommended: "Every child should spend a substantial amount of time with somebody who's crazy about him or her . . . There has to be at least one person who has an irrational involvement with that child, someone who thinks that kid is more important than other people's kids, someone who's in love with him or her, and whom he or she loves in return." A feeling of belonging is a good foundation for building spirituality.

When children need to be corrected or disciplined, the focus can be on teaching rather than punishing. It is not enough for children to be sorry; they need to become smarter and more compassionate.

Children can be more than recipients of love and appreciation. They can also be givers. They can be taught to help people who are lonely or sick. They can learn to feel compassion for those who are down on their luck. Parents may invite their children to take part with them in their efforts to help people. They might also help children find ways to help their own friends and classmates. Encouraging compassion and kindness is central to moral development.

Family traditions are valuable when they connect children to extended family and to worthy causes. An appreciation of the sacred is more likely to grow in our children if we regularly express our joy and appreciation.

2. Help children develop a vision of the noble and worthy. Goodness does not grow in a vacuum. It requires that we fill our children with visions of the people and actions that we consider commendable.

The media certainly provide children with abundant examples of dishonesty and unkindness. We should provide children with regular exposure to the noble and worthy. There are many ways of doing this.

- We can talk with our children about the commendable things we see in people around us. We might invite relatives and neighbors over to tell about the service they have given in their lives. We can take our children with us to visit people we admire.
- We can also tell them stories of historical heroes. There is no person we cannot bring to the breakfast table by telling a story of that person's life. For example, you might share with your children stories of a religious figure's life and service. Or you might tell of the courage of an ancestor. Or you might invite your favorite president to join you at the dinner table to tell stories of accomplishments—whether done by reading a story book or telling stories from your experience and study.
- We can also build an appreciation of the good by inviting our children to share their best experiences with the family. Perhaps at a leisurely dinner on the weekend, every family member can take a few minutes to share their best experiences of the day or week. There should be no competition, only appreciation. Each person can enjoy the best experiences of each family member.

We cultivate gratitude in our children when they hear our expressions of gratitude whether to them, for others, or for the sacred. Family members might be invited to think about what life would be like if they didn't have food, or couldn't breathe well, or didn't have a loving family. It is good to focus more on gratitude for what we have than on discontent for what we lack.

3. The experience of personal involvement, contribution, and responsibility helps children develop character. Children learn to make good choices by making many choices. They learn to be responsible by having opportunities to be responsible.

For example, children should have chores for which they are responsible. They may be involved in service projects. It even can be helpful when children have the chance to choose what clothes they will wear.

The kind of discipline we use also impacts children. When we reason with children and help them understand how their actions affect others, they are likely to become more mindful of other people's feelings and more responsible in their decisions. For example, when a child has been angry with a sibling, we can invite the child (when calm) to think about how his or her anger affected the sibling. We can help them think about other ways of acting.

Spirituality at its best is more than an inner feeling. It is a life filled with service and goodness. Giving children opportunities to be helpers in the family and neighborhood can cultivate the best in children.

As a colleague of mine has observed, "Families with strong spirituality celebrate life as a gift. They carry a gratitude and optimism that enjoys even the little things of life as special events."

Recommended reading:

Ginott, H. G., Ginott, A., & Goddard, H. W. (2003). *Between parent and child*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Gottman, J. (1997). *The heart of parenting: Raising an emotionally intelligent child*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

References:

Gibbs, J. C. (2003). *Moral development and reality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hoffman, M. (1983). Affective and cognitive processes in moral internalization. In E. T. Higgins, D. N. Ruble, & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *Social cognition and social development: A sociocultural perspective* (pp. 236-275). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hoffman, M. L. (2000). *Empathy and moral development: Implications for caring and justice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Pargament, K. I., & Mahoney, A. (2002). Spirituality: Discovering and conserving the sacred. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 646-662). New York: Oxford University Press.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness*. New York: Free Press.