

# 10 steps to nurture your child's spirituality

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1. Read to your child every day. Stories feed the imagination, especially those such as fairy tales, which are about good and evil, courage and weakness, in an imaginary place or a mythical time. Bible stories, particularly those from the Old Testament, are great stories in themselves about what it is to be human as well as creating a knowledge base for future faith development.
2. Share times of quiet - whether it be listening to a story tape, going for a walk, lighting a candle for someone in church or simply watching the ants.
3. Keep in touch with larger communities like the family, school and church. When we kneel to receive Holy Communion together we learn that we all matter equally in the presence of God.
4. The best toys for encouraging the imagination are a large cardboard box or a blank piece of paper and a pencil.
5. Play is important for both adults and children. It helps repair the broken and worn out pieces of life. The word recreation means creating again.
6. Singing, especially with someone else, gives voice to joys and sorrows and forges relationships. This is why singing together at football matches and community sing songs bind people together.
7. Teach your child to pray. One way is to make it a part of the bedtime ritual. A story followed by a quiet cuddle can be used to reflect on something good to thank God for. A problem can also be shared with God. It may be a time to say sorry to each other for an upset during the day. Or it may be the best treat of all - a time of comfortable silence ending with a kiss goodnight.
8. Listen to your child and show that you recognise his or her feelings are important - in turn they will learn to listen to yours.
9. Show that relationships matter and everyone's dignity should be respected whatever their age and whoever they are. This is fundamental to Jesus' teaching that we should love our neighbour as ourselves.
10. When you make mistakes - and every parent does - reflect on it and admit your mistake or blunder to your child and say sorry. The very fact of recognising and owning up to our faults can be immensely healing and a valuable learning experience for all concerned. This healing is what the Bible calls redemption.

## **What is spirituality?**

All children have an inborn spirituality. However, if spirituality is not nurtured, it can wither. Spirituality is not the same as religious faith but it is the bedrock on which faith is founded.

Spirituality is like a bird - if held too tightly it will choke, but if held too loosely it will fly away. It is not easy to put spirituality into words because it is about unknowable things rather than everyday concerns.

However, a healthy spirituality can be recognised in children in three ways:

- A sense of awe and wonder;
- Care for nature and living things;
- Wanting to love and to be loved by people.

These are what help a child to be absorbed - listening, watching and just delighting.

## **Spirituality makes for vitality**

Being spiritual is not simply about being quiet. An active imagination, joy in discovering new skills and simply having lots of energy can make for a very exuberant spirituality. When this energy is channelled into creative outlets, it can revive our jaded spirits by helping to put us in touch with our inner child.

## **Faith and spirituality**

It should be the job of faith to nurture spirituality but, sadly, this is not everyone's experience. Religion has sometimes been used as an instrument of fear and as a way of controlling people rather than as a means of nurturing love for our world, each other and God.

## **Having a baby is an awesome experience**

Giving birth is a very powerful experience and, whether a pleasant or horrible experience, it can be a shock. The arrival of a baby can also mean the loss of something else - your independence perhaps, or the end of an exclusive relationship with an older child. This extraordinary combination of birth and loss touches us in the deepest parts of ourselves. This is why painful births can still be joyful and easy births can be experienced with tears. One of the great gifts of babies and young children is to put us back in touch with our spiritual selves.

## **Healthy growing up**

It is all too easy for a child's spirituality to become hidden, if not crushed. By the age of 10 children often protest they are too old for 'that sort of stuff'.

Of course children grow up and, for their own protection, they must learn to be streetwise. However, spirituality is not the same as innocence. In fact, a healthy spirituality strengthens character and enables children to tell the difference between good and evil in the world around them. The innocent child can too easily become a victim. The spiritually developed

child, on the other hand, has a healthy intuition, a strong moral sense, a keen interest in the world and a love of what is good.

### **Helping children grow strong**

Sooner or later children have to confront death, illness and the dark side of human nature in themselves and others. They may experience feelings like intense jealousy when a new brother or sister arrives, or a sense of betrayal when parents get things wrong. But if so-called bad feelings are denied, or if we pretend they do not exist or are unforgivable, then a child's understanding becomes damaged and damaging.

Nurturing spirituality is difficult in today's society because we have come to expect instant gratification. We try and avoid things that are difficult or unpleasant. We demand our rights but have neglected our responsibilities. We find it difficult to create a healthy balance between work and family, making relationships very vulnerable. Nonetheless, there are things we can do.