



Nurturing Your Child's Spirituality

[Adapted from Kathy Coffey, *Baptism and Beyond: Preparing for Baptism and Nurturing Your Child's Spirituality* (Living the Good News, 2000).]

The Parent's Role

Few parents would refuse to feed a hungry child. Yet many parents are unsure how to nurture a child's spiritual hungers. Some may not even know what they are. One way to tap into these desires is by remembering your childhood.

Did you have longings you could not voice, a desire for something you could not explain even to those who were closest? Perhaps you recall a snatch of music, the sound of a certain voice, a glimpse of the night sky, a fascination with a spider web or an affection for a certain blanket or stuffed animal.

Maybe a particular smell or taste evoked an inexplicable yearning—not for any food or toy or experience that a parent could provide, but for something beyond all that, not sold at any store.

Some theologians call this “desire for I know not what” an echo of God's desire that creates us and sustains us in being. God brings us into existence and plants in our hearts a deep thirst for the All, the great mystery, the infinite love. God is the source of what we most desire and the reason for our being.

How can we get in touch with a child's spirituality if we're out of touch with our own? Just as a mother protects the fetus during pregnancy by avoiding drugs or alcohol, so too the birth of a child calls for many changes in lifestyle.

Besides giving up sleep and adjusting schedules, one vital change may be to find more quiet time for reflection. Life gets busier with children, which is all the more reason to slow down. Ask what can be eliminated from your schedule to give the child (and yourselves!) more time and peace. It isn't necessary to enroll your growing child in every imaginable activity. Quiet, empty time and reflection are essential for the health of the souls of both children and adults.

As with every other facet of child development, the parent's role changes as the child grows. Initially, the child learns all he or she needs to know about God and humanity from the parent: that mom or dad can be trusted, that an expression of need will be answered, and that someone will respond to the most basic attempts to communicate.

At a time when the child is immensely vulnerable, the parent's voice and touch reassure that she is not alone, that someone will care for him. The parent who tires of diaper changes or 2 a.m. feedings should know the importance of these seemingly mundane tasks. They are more than physical chores; they teach a child the most basic lesson of trust, without which future growth is difficult or impossible.

Encouraging the Religious Imagination

Few parents would argue with the idea that young children have vivid imaginations. Watch their eyes widen at things adults ordinarily take for granted: lightning, dew, the spiral of a cinnamon roll, the rainbow that dark oil reflects in a puddle, bugs, feathers, pebbles and fur.

Sophisticated media are also aware of the child's imagination. They appeal to it through movies, television, advertising, because the appeal can be direct and visceral. It bypasses words and ideas to approach the child in a vulnerable and easily impressionable place.

Listen to any preschooler hum the theme from the latest television show or advertising slogan. Watch as they model their favorite cartoon characters. Their T-shirts often display the face or logo of a favorite athlete or team. In later years, they fervently admire sports figures or movie stars and are firmly convinced that they too can become the stars of the playing field or screen.

This natural aptitude can be turned to the religious imagination. Parents interested in encouraging a child's spirituality can appeal to the imagination on the same grounds as the media—not necessarily with words and ideas, but with symbols and stories.



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Guiding Principles of Children's Spirituality

Research in the field of children's spirituality offers several principles helpful to parents for guiding this intimate, mysterious development in the life of their child. It is inspiring to think that our children are engaged in a process like that of the boy Jesus: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Luke 2:52).

1. The Child Has a Deep Longing for God.

Any parent knows how a child can be greedy for love—often needing more love and attention than a human parent can provide!

This points to the need for a God who is infinite love. This divine parent never gets tired or cranky like a human parent does; this is the parent the child deserves—"a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Nehemiah 9:17).

Sofia Cavalletti concluded from her studies of three and four-year-olds that the child's relationship with God manifests itself in "a joy that appears to touch the deepest part of the child." Even in children who had little or no religious upbringing, she found attractions to religious realities existing before any adult prompting.

2. The Child Asks Eternal Questions

Children have a knack of asking questions that have concerned the finest human minds since time began. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

A child's silence or art work can contain deep thoughts that his or her language is not developed enough to express. At such times, the proper stance for the parent is humility before children's "exquisitely private" moments of "awe and wonder and alarm and apprehension."

3. Wonder with Your Child

The most productive approach for a parent is probably that of wondering and speculating with a child. To hand down information simply squelches the child's natural inquisitiveness. To respect the child's questions encourages the child to ask more. Children will ask questions about things that puzzle our deepest thinkers: Why did grandma have to die? What will happen to me if I am left alone? What if we have a war?

Most parents have been driven crazy by endless variations of questions like "Why is the sky blue?" But the alternative—a child who asks no questions—is far worse because it suggests a deadened imagination, without the natural birthrights of wonder and awe.

4. The Child Expresses Religious Truths Concretely

While any relationship with God is mysterious, children try to express the mystery in concrete ways. In short, their faith is grounded in the here-and-now, sense perceptible realities of their daily experience.

The research of David Heller suggests children are less interested in formal liturgy than in belief expressed in everyday ways. They depict God as intimately involved in family life, a fact which creates an entry point for parents.

Parents are the most logical people to seize those close-at-hand moments. An attentive parent can pick up on what's happening immediately. A child's remark that may seem illogical or thoughtless to a disinterested observer may reveal to a caring parent a whole inner world. For instance, the real question underlying "Where do dogs go when they die?" may be the haunting question of "What happens to me after death?"

The concrete thinking of children is also a natural link to understanding the sacraments. Abstract concepts, like grace, salvation, and forgiveness, are learned through flowing water, lavish oils, compassionate touch, nurturing bread and wine.

To summarize, here are five Do's and Don'ts for Parents:



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Five Do's

- 1. Respect and nurture your child's privacy.** We all need a little quiet time alone to think without intrusions. As your child outgrows naps, provide quiet times in which inner resources can develop. If you have more than one child, look for opportunities to take one-on-one time with each child.
- 2. Realize that your child has a larger repertoire of knowledge than can be expressed in verbal statements.** Look beyond words to other vehicles of expression: movement, art, silence, questions. In short, "read between the lines" to discover the meaning your child is discovering.
- 3. Expect a correlation between your child's relationship with you as parent and your child's relationship with God.** If you are caring and forgiving, your child will see God the same way.
- 4. Adopt a stance of "speculating together" rather than one of having all the answers.** Few adults do, so let's be honest. We can tell our children what we believe or stories about our own lives without becoming dogmatic or forcing them to believe what we do.
- 5. Remember that children have a profound capacity for imitation.** (Consider the phenomenon of wearing the baseball cap backwards!) You can talk all you want about religion, but your actions will drown out the words. Just as most people choose a college major or a career because a person close to them influenced them in that direction, so too most people come to faith through the influence of another—often a parent.

Five Don'ts

- 1. Don't project your own spiritual state onto your child.** Simply because you are joyous, perplexed, angry or numb doesn't mean your child is.
- 2. Don't expect adult religious abstractions from children.** They may express some deep insight or profound thought through concrete, direct language or questions.
- 3. Don't underestimate your child.** More may be occurring beneath the surface than appearances reveal. Likewise, don't assume your child is always happy. He or she may be grappling with deep and difficult questions while lacking the concepts and words to describe what is going on.
- 4. Don't worry about a magical component in your child's thinking about faith or God.** Under the age of eight, magical qualities are natural because the world seems under the control of larger more powerful beings. Magic seeks to manage these powerful forces and bring them under our control. On the other hand don't play into it with too many stories of Jesus' healing or walking on water. The concept of Jesus as magician will be less central as they mature, but Jesus as compassionate seeker for the lost will endure.
- 5. Don't relegate religion to Sunday only.** Religion should be integrated with the rest of life or its effect will be minimal. Encourage spontaneous conversation with God—for instance at mealtime or when noticing something beautiful in nature. Few friendships could grow in an hour a week; so building a friendship with God flourishes when it's given plenty of time and reinforcement.

*"We do not believe in ourselves
until someone reveals
that deep inside us is something valuable,
worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch.
Once we believe in ourselves
we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight
or any experience that reveals the human spirit."*

—E.E. Cummings