

SPIRITUAL PREPAREDNESS– NURTURING THE INNER LIFE OF CHILDREN

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Introduction

Spirituality is an internal sense of relationship to a superior power that is loving and guiding. The terms spiritual development, faith development and development of religious understanding have diverse meanings, but are often used interchangeably. Religion is a multidimensional fact that will be defined in its broad sense, including both institutional religious expressions, such as dogma and ritual, and personal religious expressions, such as feelings of spirituality, beliefs about the sacred, and religious practices. Spirituality is “a belief system focusing on intangible elements that impart vitality and meaning to life’s events. The development of religious understanding “involves an individual’s progressive adherence to a propositional network of values, creeds, and practices of organized religion.”

To understand spirituality, an individual first understand the meaning of the term ‘Spirit’. In philosophy, the word Spirit is used to refer to the body which grants the body the ability to function; for example, to sense, to breathe and to think, thus giving the impression of being alive. However, in religion, this very Spirit is addressed as God. Spirituality, in fact, is the process of acquiring knowledge about the Spirit, and realising it.

Spiritual practices aren’t just for adults. Children come logically to many of the time-honoured ways that people use to get closer to the sacred; to family, friends, and community; and to the world around them. They can teach adults about being present, enthusiasm,

imagination, play, and wonder—to name just a few. Here are some ideas for how parents and other adults can encourage children's spirituality.

Give thanks before you eat, not just for the food, but also for everything that contributed to your having this meal--the earth, the rain, the sun, the farmer, the store, the cook, even the cooking equipment. Gratitude is an essential spiritual practice.

Understanding the spiritual needs of children

Children emerge capable of moments of strong joy, but can also experience extreme imagined dread and fear. Children's literature and stories in varied cultures enable children to confront, reject and come to terms with fear and monsters, both from within and without.

Self-awareness: Swami Vivekananda used the parable 'Hari the Lion' to make us understand that most of us are unaware of our real self. In the story, a flock of sheep adopts an orphaned lion cub, Hari. Growing up with the flock makes Hari perceive himself as a sheep. Believing himself to be a sheep, he tries his best to mimic the sheep by engaging in acts like bleating and grazing. One day, another lion passing by the forest watches Hari acting like a sheep. He catches hold of Hari and drags him to a pool, and makes him see his own reflection. The lion then explains to Hari his real identity, thus making him realise his true self and reform himself.

Differentiating between needs and want in children: Any desire arising in our mind needs us to engage in an activity to complete it. For example, while a desire for peace push an individual engages in prayer, a desire for money requires an individual to engage in work that pays. Also, our list of desires keeps getting longer and longer. As desires are infinite, children caught in a perpetual cycle of wishing, acting and receiving.

How to apply in child: Teach the child the difference between what he/she needs and what he/she wants. Parents can define needs as all that are necessary for our survival, health, and happiness; for example, food and water, security and shelter, education and relationships. Wants are all that aren't essential to either survive or feel happy. Ask the child to write down his needs and wants by making two columns on a piece of paper. Differentiating needs from wants will help the child experience happiness and fulfilment, and prevent her/him from becoming materialistic.

Holistic education: In Swami Vivekananda's words, *"Education is not the amount of information that is put into your brain and runs riot there, undigested, all your life. We must have life-building, man-making, character-making assimilation of ideas."* While there is a lot more information available to us today, most of us are interested in learning only about a particular subject. Thus, we fail to gain knowledge about other areas. For example, a chartered accountant may not know much, or next to nothing, about health or environment.

Application into Childs life : In addition to what your child learns in school, teach her about spiritual values such as compassion and peace, about her community and the surrounding environment, and about herself. Help her learn to love herself, deal with personal issues, own up her actions, and identify and achieve her goals. Holistic education can help your child establish a connection between her mind and body.

Serving humanity: Swami Vivekananda said, *"It is a freedom to serve mankind, for this is the worship of God; God is here, in all these human souls. He is the soul of man."* While economic experts say that the world has become richer, reports also suggest that the split between the haves and have-nots is steadily increasing.

Faith Developmental stages

Elkind has identified three stages of faith development:

- 1.The "global" stage.** Until age six or seven, Elkind says, most children deprive an understanding of abstract belief, and therefore can't conceptualize the differences between religious faiths. They can welcome religious symbols and rituals, but won't essentially connect them to the notion of an "invisible" God.
- 2. The "concrete" stage.** Children ages 7 to 12 are still muchstranded in the concrete, and are beginning to develop a greater sense of spiritual individuality based on personal experience and religious. Elkind says that rituals, whether lighting candles in church or doing pooja in temples, are very effective in helping children this age understand religious secrets.
- 3. The personal connection stage.** In pre-adolescence, a sensation of personal closeness to God often develops the budding of what feels like an actual relationship.

According to Elkind For some young teens, "God becomes a confidante, because they don't want to share your thoughts with anyone else who will tell your secrets."

Children's thoughts and feeling about God or other spiritual themes appear to be a natural part of human development, a search for some force in the universe that represents eternity and the absence of change. Even children who are not raised in a religious atmosphere are likely to ask questions regarding spirituality.

Fowler's Stages of Faith theory asserts that religious/spiritual development in children follows similar patterns of general cognitive development with each new development advancing in stages and building on skills mastered in previous stages.^{10,12} Children become capable of more abstract religious/spiritual thinking as they grow older

PARENTAL ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT OF SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN

As parents we can take the spiritual ideas into the playing field of daily life and show our children how we live and express spiritual values in everyday interactions with other people, with animals, with nature, with our own inner life

- Young children are factual thinkers. If a four-year-old child is told "Grandma is up in heaven now with God," he or she is likely to look up in the sky expecting to find Grandma.
- Kindness and sharing are also theoretical concepts that children can't "see," but they learn about them from seeing others act in a kind way, or by sharing toys. Similarly, children can learn about faith from seeing people pray or connect good deeds to their religious beliefs.
- Children's questions about spiritual matters need to be treated with utmost respect, whether the question is "Does God talk to you?" or "Why do we have to go to church?"
- Rather than pointing the child in "the right direction," it's best to support him or her to communicate thoughts or question religious principles without becoming judgmental. Clarifications like "What you just said about God is really interesting to me. Tell me more," will cheer children to express their own ideas. "We don't believe that" will likely have the opposite effect.
- Don't minimize the significance of rituals in the home. Research shows that home-based practices, whether prayers at bedtime, lighting Shabbat candles on Friday

nights, or setting up a creche at Christmas, have an even greater impact on a child's development of faith.

CONCLUSION

Hospitalization is a painful process and children must be taken care of their spirituality aspects in order to boost their spiritual perception. Communication training is needed for nurses and other health care professionals to respond to a child's spiritual questioning, and assisting parents when the child initiates discussion about the aftermath of life, and help parent and child understand the spiritual meaning of their ill health.

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