

Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children

Children have an innate, natural capacity for awareness of the sacred in life.

In church we often behave as if children are 'empty vessels' or 'blank slates' and we need to fill them with all kinds of knowledge about God. Perhaps we think that if we fill their heads, it will somehow trickle down to their hearts and their hands. The reality is that children's spiritual capacity and knowledge aren't empty, blank, or less than that of adults. They have an innate, natural capacity for awareness of the sacred in life. Children know, without being told, about a God with no name, a God with the power to call forth a towering tree or a fragrant flower from a single seed. Children may not, however, make a connection with the God they *know* and the 'church God' that we often offer.

So how can we help children connect the God they know with the church God? How can we nurture what is already within them and help it to pour out?

In her book, *Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters*, Dr. Rebecca Nye suggests six criteria for ensuring strong spiritual foundations for children. These criteria can help us assess our ministry with children – in worship, Sunday School, after school programs, on the street, and in our homes. Dr. Nye uses the anagram of SPIRIT to describe these criteria or guidelines.

SPACE is the physical environment, including seating arrangement, furnishings, supplies, and décor. If you examine the space that children encounter in your church, does it say, 'God is here'? Does it say that children are valued and respected? Emotional and auditory space matter too. Does the environment nurture a sense of closeness and security? Does the emotional space also allow for a sense of separateness, to be oneself and hold different opinions? Do you provide auditory space for children to offer their thoughts or to simply dwell in silence?

Allowing for **PROCESS** rather than emphasizing product can nurture children's spirituality as well as model that one's spiritual formation is ongoing. Spirituality isn't something that can be completed and then graded or judged. Many of our Christian practices, including prayer and worship, are spiritual processes, not ends in themselves. If everything we do with children is focused on creating a product (a craft, a banner, a song to sing in worship), then we may be stifling fresh thoughts and feelings. We may not be fully present to the child or to the Spirit if we're too product-oriented.

IMAGINATION is called for in the Christian experience. When Jesus was asked for information, he often chose an imaginative style to express the breadth and depth of spiritual matters. Humanity needs imagination if we are ever to discover how to live in peace, how to love our neighbours, how to grasp bread and experience God. The ministry we offer to children should allow their imaginations to flourish. Rather

than providing children with a 'craft in a baggie', allow them free time and a range of art supplies with which to explore and create.

Authentic **RELATIONSHIP** is at the core of Christian spirituality. A basic theological premise is that of the Trinity, a mystery of relationship. It is important that we nurture relationships between individuals and between individuals and God. Nurturing respectful relationships where varying spiritual perspectives are honoured can help to promote a non-individualistic style of spiritual life. Children can learn that faith is not just about their individual needs and desires, but about how they can be fed by and help to feed the spirituality of others.

INTIMACY may be the most difficult quality to build and protect in our relationships and ministry with children. Spirituality blossoms as we get closer, dig deeper, take risks, and chase our passions. A sense of safety is absolutely crucial to intimacy. The kind of safety that creates intimacy includes Duty of Care; it also guards against laughing at children's 'cute' answers and repeating responses they've shared in a small group to the wider congregation or with their parents at coffee hour.

TRUST is needed for spiritual development because we're not dealing with graphs, mathematics, and empirical evidence. The knowing and not knowing that is part of spirituality relies on trust. As adults we indicate our trust in God, our trust in children, and our trust in the practices of our faith as we loosen our need for control and authority.

As we take action to provide for and nurture these six criteria, the **SPIRITUALITY** of children has a greater chance of flourishing.

*(Written by Amy Crawford, United Church, with reference to Rebecca Nye's book
"Children's Spirituality: What It Is and Why It Matters")*