

Spirituality as a natural part of childhood



Rebecca Nye

Dr Rebecca Nye is an author, trainer-consultant on childhood spirituality, and lecturer in child psychology. Her work is rooted in her landmark research studies with school children. She introduced the Bible-focussed spiritual nurture approach 'Godly Play' to the UK in 1998, and is national co-ordinator of Godly Play UK's training and development programmes (www.godlyplay.uk).

After a few years as a developmental psychologist, I've spent almost 25 years studying the spirituality of childhood. But it can be hard to explain this when I meet anyone new. As I say the phrase 'children's spirituality' I'm aware that what I mean is probably not at all what first comes into the minds of those I'm talking to. Often people think it means that I study the childhoods of extraordinary children, such as saints – like Catherine of Sienna who is said to have had her first vision of Christ aged five seeing Jesus smile at her, bless her and leave her in ecstasy. Or people assume my expertise is about engaging children in rather extraordinary spiritual practices – speaking in tongues, prophecy, commitment, or that at least I should be an expert in getting children to pray. And, occasionally, people think being interested in children's spirituality means I'm keen to collect examples of peculiar children: they share anecdotes with me about their young niece who seems psychic, or the grandson who relays messages from their deceased wife.

However, a growing body of research demonstrates that children's spirituality is not something esoteric, nor something exclusive to precocious children. Also, it is not limited to particular religious exercises, nor something we need to turn to the early lives of saints to find out about. So this article explores my position which is that spirituality is a very natural part of everyone's childhood, and discusses what implications this reality has for supporting children at home, at church and at school.

What is spirituality?

Of course, it is hard to pin down exactly what 'spirituality' refers to and, when something is hard to grasp, adults usually try to sort out what is meant by looking for the best words to explain it – like a definition. However, for spirituality, verbal language is not necessarily the best approach, and often more can be conveyed in non-verbal, felt or intuited ways of knowing.

Experiencing spirituality does not depend on how much we understand or can explain, but it is about our capacity for being – God's ways of being with us and our ways of being with God. So, with children and young people, engaging with and nurturing their spirituality could be described as simply that: recognising and supporting *God's ways of being with them, and their ways of being with God.*

For Christians, this can help us to remember that spirituality starts with God – it is not something that adults (parents, teachers, church leaders) have to initiate. God and children have ways of being together because this is how God creates us. The difficulty comes in trying to appreciate, and support, the ambiguous and diverse forms these 'ways' can take – even though a lot of it may happen in very ordinary ways under our noses.

Childhood spiritual awareness

Most research studies have found that spirituality is common and natural for children of all faiths and none.¹ This includes children's experiences of special moments of illumination, feeling close

NOTES

1. Including my own, D Hay and R Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2006).
2. Extract from R Nye, 'Spiritual Strengths of Young Children', in C Trevarthen (ed.), *The Child's Curriculum* Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
3. J Berryman, *Godly Play: An imaginative approach to religious education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1995); S Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Press, 1993); C Walton, 'Childhood awaits every person', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 20.1 (2015), pp. 4–14.
4. J Berryman, 'Teaching as presence and the existential curriculum', *Religious Education* 65.4 (1990), p. 509.
5. R Nye, *Children's Spirituality: What it is and why it matters* (London: Church House Press, 2009).
6. Walton, 'Childhood', p. 11.

to God or their own sense of what is sacred, their inclination to spiritual questioning, and their efforts to make meaning and to piece together a spiritual worldview. Sometimes this is found in children's spontaneous talk, especially when they are able to talk freely rather than respond to questions or sense an agenda. Of course, they often won't use the same vocabulary as us, or use it in the same way. But as with spirituality at any age, authenticity matters much more than convention. Often this natural spiritual talk consists of children exploring issues at the difficult edges of their understanding; engaging with existential and unfathomable questions about death, aloneness, identity, freedom, purpose and meaning, from their point of view.

As the examples in the box below show, childhood spiritual awareness has a decidedly relational character: arising through or drawing their attention to deep-rooted relationships between themselves and people, the world, an inner-self and God. Whilst adult spiritual interests can have rather individualistic or even narcissistic tendencies, children's bias towards spirituality as 'relational consciousness' is perhaps another way in which childhood is should be recognised as highly blessed.

Child-people relational consciousness

'I believe in God's love [but not God] ... so we can love each other ... If I had three wishes I would make nasty people into good people, rich people gives some money to the poor people, and something for myself, but I'd share it with someone else.' (age 6)

Child-world relational consciousness

'Perhaps we've got to ask the clouds [about the origins and continuation of life]. The clouds have been there millions and millions of years ... and well there must be somewhere, somehow ... like when flowers are made, where did the wind come from to blow all the petals off to make them fall on the floor and make more? ... (whisper) It's puzzling.' (age 10)

Child-self relational consciousness

'when I was being rude to my mum and stuff ... [later] I felt like I was a new person..coming out of something ... like ... I don't know what is wrong with me though but I'm a new person from a flower or something. And like I've just grown ... going "I'm a new person and I'm not going to rude to my mum." Makes you feel really, really good actually.' (age 10)

Child-God relational consciousness

'sometimes I feel very lonely when I am alone with God because I can't see God and I can't hear God, I just think about God, I feel really lonely, so I like being with people sometimes too.' (girl 10)²

Others have researched how this can appear in children's free play, their artistic expression or in

their physical reactions, such as being profoundly stilled or quiet, or unexpectedly focused, or joyfully exuberant.³ In my experience, children's spirituality is often revealed as an unsolicited kind of reaction – something really genuine or personal. For example, one Christmas day when my daughter was five, her response to all the joy, gifts and

children have the spiritual advantage of an acutely sensitive capacity for non-verbal communication and insight

attention from visiting relatives was to retreat for a while to her room and sit quietly drawing and cutting, using none of the new things she'd been given. Later we found she'd been making a picture of Jesus, not in the stable, but on the cross, not about 'tidings of great joy' and gifts, but somehow aware of huge sadness and sacrifice.

What is also notable here is the child's capacity to make a contribution to the adult's spirituality too, rather than assuming it is always the other way around. Indeed, this has been the focus of two of my doctoral students, Dr Steve Dixon and Revd Trudie Morris, who have studied the ways children can affect the adult spiritual journey, and how children's spirituality can enrich the celebration of the Eucharist.

It's clear that children's spirituality often operates at a non-verbal level, in art, play, movement and through the sensory. Becoming more attuned to this requires an open mind and generous intentions to imagine the potential depths of a child's often apparently ordinary experiences. But this too can help us to rediscover of powerful non-verbal insights or expressions of spirituality at any age – beyond the adult default setting of verbal language. Again, quite naturally children have the spiritual advantage of an acutely sensitive capacity for non-verbal communication and insight – and an instinctive respect for the ineffable and noetic knowing. The theologian-researcher behind *Godly Play*, Revd Dr Jerome Berryman, recalls a moment in his own childhood which illustrates this:

'Despite the passing of five decades it is still vivid. I was four or five years old and staying with my grandmother when it happened. At bedtime I crawled up into my grandfather's bed since he was out of town. My grandmother had arthritis and walked with crutches, so when she got into bed she did so with difficulty and turned out the light. I remember the warm dark and the ticking clock.

'The clean sheets sheltered me. The familiar smell of the room made me feel safe. I felt so alive that my skin tingled. Muscles moved for the sheer

pleasure of feeling their response. I stretched. Suddenly, as if a huge door opened in front of me, there was nothing there – absolute, lightless, nothing.

“Grandmother! Why do I have to die?”

‘My grandmother’s words have vanished over time, but her presence in the dark is still with me. She put me in touch with a larger presence that seems to grow to this day. This was my introduction to a kind of knowing that I did not learn at school or in church. It is an ultimate kind of knowing that puts all other kinds of knowing into perspective.’⁴

the spiritual nurture of children is a privileged opportunity to glimpse their vision of God

Importantly, a recurring theme in research has been the suggestion that the younger we are, the more naturally spirituality features in our experience. For example, in one large study, compared to adults, 11-year-olds were twice as likely to recognise moments of feeling close to God, and seven-year-olds even more so. In another study, approximately one in four adults reported that their most significant spiritual experience happened in childhood. It almost seems that as our religious and other knowledge increases, our spiritual knowing and feeling wanes.

In my research, many children describe having to be very private about their spirituality, since it is commonly dismissed or sidelined by others, not least in the course of their conventional religious nurture. So, any approach to nurture spirituality needs to ensure it fully acknowledges what is already there, already happening. Just as in spiritual direction with adults, to help children or young people on their spiritual journey means honouring and enabling them to be who they already are, rather than treating them like a project where the goal is to turn out more people ‘like us’. Perhaps as adults, when working towards spiritual maturity, we should pay more attention to maintaining or reconnecting with the features our spirituality had so naturally in our earlier years, to come closer to entering the Kingdom by becoming more like the child.

Traditionally we have become used to seeing childhood in terms of its limitations – the lack of knowledge and the restricted understanding children typically have in most areas. However, in terms of spirituality at least, childhood features special capacities, strengths and sensitivity. This calls for quite a reconsideration of our mindset and practices. In fact, the spiritual needs created by the now well-recognised features of childhood spirituality require really radical changes, in

my view. If we set out with the premise that all children know the mysterious presence of God, then Christian nurture needs to become an ongoing and deeply creative process of supporting children to be ever more aware of that presence, and to find shared language for this.

This needs to include opportunities to inhabit and explore both conventional and natural, verbal and non-verbal religious languages (including children’s own ‘native’ language of play). So, rather than Bible teaching or storytelling, pouring understanding from the teacher’s mind into the child’s, there is a need for something more open to the power and voice of both the story and the child, and reaching depths which no lesson plan could have envisaged.

These are the principles of the biblical approach known as Godly Play, in which the child and adult are invited to ‘enter’ the story together, not to be entertained or informed, but to meet and respond to God. Perhaps the radical change this represents is summarised in Sofia Cavalletti’s reminder ‘the only teacher in the room is Christ’.

Spiritual needs

1. Children need to be listened to

The features of childhood spirituality suggest three spiritual needs which probably apply equally in home, church and school contexts. The first is children’s need to be listened to. The one-to-one, child-led conversations used in research seem highly desirable, and rare, for many children. Significantly, having enjoyed chatting about their spirituality in research studies, children are often unable to think of anyone else in their lives with whom to have a similar conversation, without fear of ridicule or being told ‘there’s no time’ for that sort of thing. Probably some adults are anxious about taking opportunities for this too, fearing what to say when children raise ‘big questions’ or touch on topics like death, evil or the sacred, suggesting the child should talk to someone more expert. In fact, adults with less spiritual content knowledge may be better suited to listening, being less inclined to talk, direct or interrupt a child’s seemingly halting articulation or unconventional insights.

What really matters in child-led spiritual listening is a creating safety and intimacy, especially in a group setting. This requires careful avoidance of judgement or agenda, and openness to children’s use of humour, evasion, silence and, sometimes, subversion to examine and express honestly what makes them wonder.

2. Humble and respectful adults

The second spiritual need children have is for a particular kind of adult presence and respect. This means adults becoming increasingly aware of what kind of presence they are, and whose presence they are in. It is too easy for adult power to taint our encounters with children. Often our presence can

be controlling and demanding, or signalling our need to be liked ('I'm such fun') or to be pleased ('your lovely drawing makes me like you more'). In support of spiritual nurture, children will thrive when adults are more careful about the use of power and expertise, when there is a more level spiritual playing field. Montessorri argued that we will be better able to see the true nature of a child, his or her spirituality, when we place ourselves in a spirit of humility and respect in relation to them. Actually, Jesus seems to say this, too. Rather than approach spiritual nurture as primarily a task of informing or changing a child, we might see it more as a privileged opportunity to glimpse their vision of God since 'in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 18.10, NRSV).

3. Good quality space

Good quality space is the third basic need arising from children's significant spirituality. This can be 'space' around the child in many senses: physical and visual space, emotional space and auditory space.⁵ Some children make or find their own spaces for spiritual work: dens, trees, hiding places, retreats, a swing, a collection of special things, can all become 'holy ground'. Adults should be sensitive, not intrusive or analytical, about visiting such spaces, but also might consider how to ensure that the domestic, church or educational space for children is the best it can be.

There may be a direct relationship between the child's experience of external, physical space and things in it and their sense of inner space, a place of sanctuary and deep concentration. A chaotic, over-stimulating, restlessly changing or overcrowded space is unlikely to help a child to cultivate their inner space, nor validate

the existence of that part of the child. Emotional space links to cultivating an appropriate kind of adult presence, namely, one in which the child's autonomy and agency to be with God in her own ways is respected. This often requires the gift of standing back, to give the child space and time to process things in her own way at the expense of achieving a particular outcome or product.

Finally, making time for silence, auditory space, can also contribute to meeting children's spiritual needs. Positive experiences of silence are in short supply in most homes, education settings and even in church nurture this treasure of the Christian tradition is underused, although it has been suggested that 'children are more adept, more ready, than adults to discover the secret that is only heard in silence.'⁶ Offering a less crowded space to children can be achieved in the first instance simply by adults being intentional about speaking less, and with more pauses for reflection. Holding a moment of silence can also be a mark of respect and presence, to mark the special quality of something the child has said or done. Teaching the use of silence in a more formal way can also contribute to acknowledgement of 'being' over doing and helps children to revel in the richness of non-verbal knowing.

Conclusion

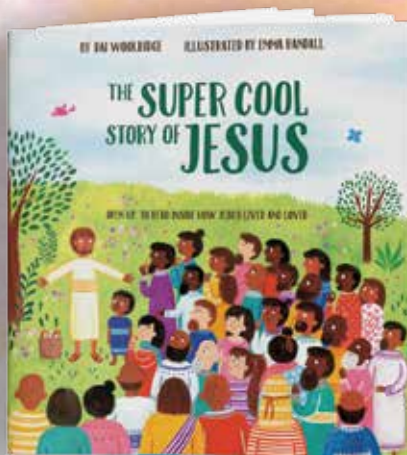
Recognising children's spirituality strengths and meeting their needs is challenging, and without Berryman's carefully researched 'Godly Play' approach (www.godlyplay.uk), I would be much less certain how to ensure this informed my practice as parent or teacher. Nevertheless, it is an area that gives me great hope: both through its potential to support children's spiritual journey in ways which few of us ever experienced and also as a way to renew aspects of the adult spiritual life.

Bring the story of Jesus to life for children

To receive your FREE copy call 01793 418300

Free accompanying resources including an Easter trail, video and colouring pictures are available online

biblesociety.org.uk/easter



*He wasn't in a boat!
And he wasn't wearing skis
He was walking on the water;
(and doing it with ease!)*

It's Jesus!

