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ALEX TAYLOR / 13 MAY 2016

## Children's spirituality



*Here's a guest blog from children's spirituality expert, Ruth Wills, who works in the north-west of England, teaching and running spirituality days in primary schools. Ruth is studying for a PhD in the area of children's spirituality.*

When teaching the Children's Spirituality course at theological college, I always begin with the question: 'What is spirituality?' Each student will give me a different answer. Spirituality has a specific meaning to each based on their own life experience or world view. 'Spirituality' then is difficult to define. However, as an understanding of the importance of the spiritual dimension of children's lives features now in the arenas of anthropology, social science and education, its significance for us as teachers, parents, carers and children's work leaders is also great.

Spirituality is described as 'an awareness that there is something other, something greater than the course of everyday events' (Elaine McCreery). It is also often referred to as 'relational consciousness', which as an unusual dimension of experience, includes the relationship of the individual with self, others, the world and God. Therefore while relating to the transcendent dimension of life it also concerns the personal in relation to the transcendent. It is thus experiential and holistic. It is also at the foundation of our Christian faith.

In [Genesis 1:26-27](#) it is noted that God created humans to be like himself. Therefore, made in the image of a loving, generous and forgiving creator God, we likewise have the capacity for love, generosity, forgiveness and creativity. [Ephesians 2:10](#) reinforces that we are 'God's handiwork' and [Psalm 139:13-16](#) represents a meditation on God's purpose and design of human life. These examples illustrate how the central element of human nature is the innate ability to relate to God who made us as spiritual beings in the way that he himself is spiritual.

In the light of this, it is our task to acknowledge children as individuals at the centre of learning experiences, in order to encourage them to make sense of this relationship with God. Children are not 'empty vessels' to be taught and 'filled' but unique individuals already full of wonder, knowledge and experience of Godly things. Nurturing spirituality allows us to 'draw out' these aspects, allowing for response, growth, questioning and reflection. Thus, when engaging in such work we start from the ground up.

I am sure that in our experiences with children, they have surprised us with their insight, depth of response or perception of a spiritual matter. It is important then that we as adults journey with children in their spiritual development. This might re-evaluate the relation of the adult and child in learning, potentially posing a risk to traditional methods of teaching. However, as Jesus challenges his followers to 'become like a child' in [Mark 10:13-14](#), this invites both teacher and learner to enter the world of the child and discover the things of God together.

How to do this in practice is not easy. Rebecca Nye proposes a recipe for spiritual development using the acronym SPIRIT. She suggests that Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy and Trust all contribute to the provision of meaningful spiritual learning experiences. To nurture spirituality we can:

- Provide **space** for stillness, wondering, reflecting, questioning and listening. Encourage a sense of mystery through the use of contemplative prayer, symbols and silence and allow children to simply 'be'.
- Consider the **process** of learning as well as the end result. Provide opportunities for children to express their learning creatively through drama, dance, poetry or rap. Embrace difficult questions and as they try to make sense of the world, provide a safe framework within which they can argue, question and explore.
- Encourage the use of **imagination** to facilitate a sense of empathy and emotion and to allow children to reflect and make meaning for themselves.
- Build a **relationship** as people journeying together and discovering God, rather than as child/teacher.
- Foster **intimacy** through sung worship and creative prayer, or through listening to music and making bodily or personal responses (e.g. use of flags, dance, silent prayer).
- Provide a context of **trust** in which children and adults learn together, listen to each other and exercise mutual respect.

If this is a new idea, take a moment to consider how an understanding of spirituality might inform your work with children. This might sometimes mean going 'off curriculum' or adapting how activities are delivered. However, learning that is authentic to children's identity as humans made in the image of God can provide the opportunity for the encouragement of a daily and ongoing relationship with him. This is both exciting and transformative and highly recommended!

### Further reading

- [www.childrenspirituality.org](http://www.childrenspirituality.org)
- *From the Ground Up*, Kathryn Copsey (BRF)
- *Children's Spirituality - what it is and why it matters*, Rebecca Nye (Church House Publishing)
- *Understanding Children Understanding God*, Ronni Lamont (SPCK)

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### About Alex Taylor

Alex Taylor is part of the children's and youth team at the Diocese of London. He is an experienced children's and youth worker and writer.

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