

NURTURING SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN

Simple definition of Spirituality

“Spirituality is an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding. The word we give to this higher power might be God, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. But the important point is that spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence.” —Dr. Lisa Miller

To nurture spirituality in children, parents must first of all clarify their own beliefs. You must know what you believe to foster spirituality in your child. Also, consider what kind of spiritual education you want your child to have.

Spiritual thoughts and feelings are an integral part of the emotional growth process for young children.

Spiritual growth starts in **infancy**.

Young children are especially open to spiritual truths. Their innocence, curiosity, and present-moment living often makes them more receptive to the workings of God. Young children have an incredible sense of wonder – they are innate spiritual beings. To build on this in your little ones, or to encourage your child’s spiritual life **at any stage** pay attention to the following:

1. Be Open to the “big questions” they ask.

What happens when we die? Why do we have to keep saying the same prayers if God has already heard them a million times? Why are we here? Children are often much better than adults at asking meaningful questions and pondering life’s biggest mysteries. It’s important to welcome these questions, even when they leave us stumped, because they are part of a child’s search for understanding, meaning, and identity. Where we do not have answers, we can say so. But if we welcome our children’s questions rather than brush them off or dismiss them, they’ll continue to seek and ask questions as they grow older, which is an important component of the spiritual life.

2. Spend time in Nature with them.

Throughout the ages, saints, monks, and spiritual masters have sought and found God in forests, caves, mountains, deserts, and at sea. It can be the same for all of us. Time in nature tends to quiet our minds, stir our souls, and inspires reflection. Children are drawn to the natural world, so make sure they spend time there. Point out the sights and sounds, the plants and animals.

Talk about God as the Creator of it all, and how we are connected to this incredible, majestic world.

3. Expose them to Beauty.

Beauty isn't only found in the natural world, but in great works of art around us — paintings, sculpture, architecture, music, film, novels, crafts, etc. When walking or driving around, point out interesting buildings and monuments. Play a variety of beautiful music at home and in the car. Encourage the arts in your children's education. Help your child see nature as something precious by demonstrating your own love and respect for it. When we teach our children to be attuned to beauty, we are encouraging their spiritual life.

4. Bring God into daily life.

Introduce a simple form of prayer. Let your child know that it isn't something that's saved up just for Sunday morning, or for times when he needs help with something. It's a tool for communicating with a higher power *any time*.

So, invite him to join you in saying a prayer at different times of the day – for example, when he sees something beautiful, when he does something new for the first time, when he wakes up, or at bedtime. A simple prayer of thanks before or after meals can be an easy and effective way to instill appreciation for the basics of life.

As parents do we talk about God as our Father? Do we bring Him into our daily conversations and speak of Him as a living person in our lives? Do we call upon Him when we need help or inspiration? And do we do this aloud, in front of our children, as well as quietly in our own prayer time? Children need to see that their parents have a relationship with God, that He is real in our lives, and that we make regular efforts to grow in our own spiritual lives.

5. Read the Scriptures together/Tell stories.

Share stories from the Scriptures with your children. The world's spiritual traditions are full of stories designed to explain everything from how the world was created to why people sometimes do bad things. Introduce your child to the notion that different people have different beliefs, myths, and traditions by drawing on this wealth of literature. Read stories together from an illustrated Bible, a book of Hindu mythology and scriptural texts from religions other than the child's, amending and simplifying as you see fit.

6. Institute quiet time.

It's a noisy world and children today rarely experience quiet time. Knowing how to be comfortable with silence is important to a spiritual life. One of the best ways to help with this is to institute a quiet time each day where your children must read or play quietly for a certain period of time.

7. Talk about saints and angels, gods/goddesses like friends.

Children are naturally fascinated with angels and saints and various forms of God which are helpful aids when it comes to nurturing our spiritual lives. Encourage your child to regularly call on his or her guardian angel. Help your child to identify some favourite saints / forms of God to be close friends with or whose story resonates with your child.

8. Serve others as a family.

Part of the spiritual life is being aware of our connection to other people and our call to care for each other. When children are exposed from a young age to the needs of others, they grow in empathy, charity, and gratitude. Depending on the age and sensitivities of your child, consider volunteer activities that allow you to serve others as a family.

9. Have prayer routines at home.

There are many ways to pray as a family at home. Family meals, first thing in the morning, and bedtimes are perfect times to do so. Prayer routines with your children help them to understand that we depend on God every moment of our lives. We must not forget practices like fasting and religious observances. These are all helpful ways to incorporate spiritual practices into children's lives.

10. Use **teachable moments**.

Use teachable moments to highlight spiritual truths. Big ideas don't always require big actions. You can demonstrate that spirituality is a part of everyday life by incorporating it into ordinary actions and words. When you open the windows in the morning, you can say, "Look at this glorious day Mother Nature made." At bedtime, you can sign off with, "God bless you, sweetie pie." Make use of meal time, sick time, car time, vacation time, one on one time.

11. Rituals

Rituals in the home play an important part in nurturing spirituality. Research shows that home-based practices, whether prayers at bedtime, lighting candles, daily lighting of deeya at dusk, offering *jal*, recitation of *mantras*, daily namaaz, singing or setting up a creche at Christmas, have a great impact on nurturing a child's faith.

12. Build on family traditions.

Spirituality can connect us to the divine, to each other, and to the past. If you're raising your child in the same spiritual tradition that you were raised, be sure he knows that he's carrying on family rituals that were passed along by his grandparents and even great-grandparents.

Show him pictures of grand-parents. And be sure to tell the same family stories that you listened to as a child. Family traditions can be non-religious as well. They reinforce your child's connection with the family and help him realize that the world can be a better place because he's in it. When he's old enough to understand what all this means, he'll be watching you carefully and learning from your example.

13. Stress the spiritual side of holidays/holy days

Try to balance the commercialism of the holiday season and other religious celebrations with activities that underscore their deeper meaning. Volunteer, donate food, clothing, or toys to a shelter. Involve your children in taking part by having them donate a few items they no longer play with. Participate in church /temple/mosque events centered on holiday themes/religious celebrations.

14. Consider joining a faith community or a volunteer organization.

By regularly attending services and social events at a place of worship, your child will come to see that spirituality plays a central role in the life of the community. He'll also grow up more comfortable with the rituals of your faith and come to see a house of worship as a place where he can feel comfortable and secure.

Some churches also have children's services that introduce children to the tenets of a religion in a way they can understand and enjoy.

At this age, your child is starting to understand that others have feelings, too, and he can be touched by them. By volunteering you show your child that he can help the world be a better place by his presence and through his caring spirit.

Most importantly, make it fun. Religion and spirituality should be more joyful than sombre and serious. Encourage your child to paint a picture of God, make up her own story about how the world came to be, or simply imagine what heaven looks like.

Above all, do what spiritual people have done for centuries – **sing and dance!** Remember to explore songs and chants from other cultures or traditions as well.

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