

HELPING CHILDREN GROW SPIRITUALLY

Faith Is A Family Affair

We are sometimes inclined to forget that a child needs just as much time for spiritual development as for bodily and mental growth. They need to develop the spiritual along with the rest of their growth to become a whole person.

The human person is a complex being whose three essential features are composed of the physical, mental, and spiritual elements of human life. Growth is the basic need of life and every living thing seeks to complete itself. It is religion that helps us to develop spiritual growth. We are born to grow, and our natures are eager to move along lines of fulfillment and religion is life seeking completion. We expect mental growth to accompany our physical growth. As well we must develop the spiritual along with the rest of our growth to become fulfilled persons.

For the proper training of a child there are three things which it is important to remember. They are, first, that the driving forces of human life are emotional, rather than intellectual, and that, therefore, conditions which will favour a healthy emotional life must be provided.

Second, that those who train children must have clearly defined goals, particularly with regard to the fundamental character traits they wish to establish.

And third, for the transmission of these character traits, a friendly environment is essential.

It is always difficult to discern the child's needs, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. One has to observe what the child does and listen to what the child says as a growing person.

Religion has to do in particular with the spiritual aspect of life. Religion is a word with a long history and many meanings. No

one has yet formulated a definition that does justice to the whole complex of emotion, beliefs, and patterns of religious behaviour that are found in the cultures and societies of recorded human history. However, basic to religion is the repository of a moral code. In obeying these moral codes is the belief certain satisfactions ensue.

I like to define religion in terms of our ultimate concern.

Religion stands also for the belief that the universe has a purpose and that it is a purpose favourable to humankind. This belief in turn presupposes the existence of an organizing principle of some kind, which is commonly called God.

Finally, religion is associated with a kind of emotional experience

(The Domain of Religion, cont'd)

which is taken as revelatory of the true nature of the universe, as proof, in a word, of the existence of the divine in the material, of the eternal in the temporal, of the spiritual reality of life.

Such experiences may be actively sought, as in meditation and prayer, or it may occur in a seemingly unpredictable way, though often within the setting of an emotional upheaval.

The new-born baby cries forth in his or her need, mainly physical, and more of hope than of faith. But day by day the child tries to see if his or her grain of hope will grow into faith. The adult caregivers must respond to the child's cry for faith. And by learning that he or she will be heard in the regular response of the faithful caregiver, the child gains the embryo resource of a religious faith.

It is never too early to begin religious training. This involves the parents as well. The family is the first school for childhood learning. Home is the strongest influence in life. If the parents are sincerely faithful to respond to the child's spiritual needs and requirements, the religious development of the child has begun. Long before formal instruction is set up, the child is learning by suggestion, imitation, and adjustment to the attitudes of others. The religious opportunities of infancy are greater than we realize. First impressions are indelibly lasting.

It is the nature of growing life to be constantly interdependent. Thus, the family is involved in each member's spiritual growth. Though the rate of learning in humans is greatest in early childhood, we never stop learning and experiencing.

In the ages around 7 to 12 years children are particularly curious and wish to explore. This is

true for their religious growth as well. Eager to know all they can about the world, having acquired a vocabulary, children at this stage ask many questions, seeking meaningful answers. Their insatiable curiosity involves religious and spiritual matters along with all their other questions. Their religious questions need to be approached respectfully, calmly and openly considered. Because religion deals with the great mysteries of the spiritual happenings, the time-honoured method of storytelling and the use of myths is often used to explain meanings. Wise parents will think ahead and clarify their own religious concepts against that day when a leading question will open the mind of childhood. Blessed is the one who is prepared to answer well. Even better is the mutual search with the child that shares the exploring adventure.

Religious experience needs to grow intellectually. Adolescent children have a mind of their own, which they intend to use. Authority for them moves inward from external commands to self-demands. They become very independent acting. They start trying their logical wings and they seek to heighten their intellectual powers. Religion must be approached intellectually with them. Childish concepts are replaced by more adult, independent judgments.

Doubting is a way of creating thought and argument to allow for finding realistic answers to questions. Adolescents are not satisfied with superstition, wary of supernaturalism, and skeptical of everything. But, these are the years they develop their philosophy of life and decide how they are going to think through their own problems.

(Determining Ones Ultimate Concern)
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The life-long purposes and destiny of life involves religion. The search for meaning, the pursuit of satisfaction, the determining of ones *ultimate concern* is essentially a religious quest. The journey starts at conception and is life-long until death.

EXCERPTS FROM THE JOURNAL OF THE AUTHOR

All of us, especially children, have a spiritual need for love. Later they will learn to love but, first they must experience love received.

Children also need to feel secure. Security is not just a comfortable feeling of safety; it is the atmosphere that allows a child to act, to think, to ask questions, and to grow.

"Let us go on loving one another, for love comes from God . . . for God is love."

"If we love one another God does actually live within us, and his love grows in us towards perfection."

I John 4:7, 12

Few Bible stories are suitable for young children, but the child will receive impressions of the Bible from the attitudes of the adults towards it, and from the copy of the Bible in the home. The child should learn the sections of the Bible dealing with love and grace. Words such as love, joy, kindness have little significance to small children unless they are applied to situations within his or her own experience.

Do not use biblical stories merely to entertain children. Their meaning becomes lost along with the

television fantasies they observe every day.

Children develop religious learning and grow spiritually through the teaching aids of prayer, music, pictures and art, conversation, worship, the Bible (above), and relationships with others.

Adolescent children learn when they are ready to learn, when they want to learn, and when they see a reason for learning. What they learn must interest them, challenge them, make them happy while learning.

Much learning at this stage is sharing knowledge and experience.

Adolescents are very much aware nowadays of scientific knowledge and the search for physical laws. They need also to learn about the spiritual laws of life and the universe. Our task is to show how these laws match.

Children at this age love to "belong." They know what belonging means - their family, their gang or community, their school, etc.). It is very meaningful to know one belongs to the community of the people of God.

Concepts of right and wrong, moral and spiritual values, codes of behaviour, are important to the learning and developing of growing children and young people.

In the senior teen years young people are characterized by independence, yet they are concerned about injustice, wrongs, social and moral problems. They wonder about life. They are often lonely and uneasy. They are unsure about themselves but, want to be accepted. They are growing up and ready to take responsibility for their lives - spiritually as well as otherwise.

Hugging is healthy. It helps the body's immune systems, it keeps you healthier, it cures depression, it reduces stress, it induces sleep, it's invigorating, it's rejuvenating, it has no unpleasant side effects, and hugging is nothing less than a miracle drug.

Hugging is all natural. It is organic, naturally sweet, no pesticides, no preservatives, no artificial ingredients and 100% wholesome. Hugging is practically perfect. There are no moveable parts, no batteries to wear out, no periodic check-ups, low energy consumption, high energy yield, inflation proof, non-fattening, no monthly payments, no insurance requirements, theft-proof, non-taxable, non-polluting and of course fully returnable.

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A popular slogan of today is, "knowledge is power." Children are frequently told to study to "get somewhere in the world," and to "get a good job."

The apostle Paul showed great insight into the meaning of the spiritual aspect of education in the following statement he made in his Letter to the Philippians, chapter 1, verses 9 and 10: *"And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."*

Love is the basic virtue of life. Link learning and love and you get a Louis Pasteur, bending his crippled body to the task of finding the "truth that makes men free" from disease.

Link learning and love and you get a political leader like Nelson Mandela who spent his life overcoming apartheid and showing the world we are all responsible for one another's welfare.

Link learning and love and you get students intent upon making themselves useful to the world.

Education begins with love for its motive. It is enriched by knowledge, and then it is blessed by insight.

What is the use of studying mathematics, science, history, philosophy, etc, without glimpsing the eternal meaning in them? Insight starts with facts and ends with meanings; it begins with "the things that are seen" and ends with eternal things "that are not seen" with the eyes.

Knowledge and love without insight are like biscuits without baking powder or bread without yeast.

It is insight that makes us sharers in the creative divinity of the world.

Unfortunately we are trying in our public education system to separate spiritual insight and education as if it is possible to have one without the other.

Nothing perhaps is more harmful, states The Interpreter's Bible, #11, than the easy good nature which is willing to tolerate everything; and this is often mistaken for the Christian frame of mind. Love must fasten itself on the things which are worth loving, and it cannot do so unless it is wisely directed.

Explanation given by a pupil for not joining in class discussion: "I learn more by listening. Anything I would say, I already know."

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