

Nurturing children's spirituality

by Vida Tebyani

Children's spirituality is a subject which has gained increasing recognition in the child care sector in recent years. Traditionally children's spirituality has been considered to be primarily a family concern. However, to ensure that all facets of children's learning and wellbeing are catered for, educators also need to address this area of children's experience and development.

As educators consider children's physical, cognitive and emotional development, they also need to consider their spiritual development and facilitate experiences that acknowledge and validate this.

What is spirituality?

Spirituality is a difficult concept to define. It means different things to different people. For some, spirituality is about a sense of connection to the land, environment and the universe; for others it is about religious philosophy and practices, or certain cultural or family rituals or ways of being that are regarded as sacred. For some people their spirituality is simply a way of connecting with people, and involves deeply held values about what is right and wrong and how one needs to conduct themselves. All of these and many more definitions of spirituality are important and valid.

Spirituality is not something that can be captured through a set of activities or a curriculum. Nourishing children's spirituality is a two-way learning process between the child and the adult, and educators need to be careful not to impose their personal perceptions of



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 3.1-3.4, 3.6 and 3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2, 5.3 and 5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.1-1.4, 2.1, 4.2, 4.3 and 4.5

spirituality onto children. Rather, they need to support children to discover what is important to them and to help them to reach their own understandings.

Spiritual intelligence is the inner voice or internal guidance that helps us to differentiate between the constant chatter in our brain which is ego driven and preoccupied with self-interest, fear and hurt, and the voice that is open-ended and more generous in spirit. The inner-voice is a feeling of things 'falling into place', with an emphasis on simply 'being', rather than 'doing'. An example of this might be when a person adopts an attitude of forgiveness, as opposed to taking a course of action, when they feel that they have been wronged.

Why should educators nurture children's spirituality?

Finding meaning and one's sense of place in the world is essentially a spiritual journey and requires children to develop self-respect as well as respect for others whose circumstances, views and needs are often very different to their own. The *Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)*, which is underpinned by the concepts of *belonging*, *being* and *becoming*, has fundamental connections to nurturing children's spirituality.

Children's learning is dynamic, complex and holistic. Physical, social, emotional, personal, spiritual, creative, cognitive and linguistic aspects of learning are all intricately interwoven and interrelated. (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, p.9)

Findings outlined in the report *Hardwired to connect: The new scientific case for authoritative communities*, produced by the United States Commission for Children on Risk, suggest that all children have a primary and biological need for close connection with others. The report's executive summary states that:



...the human child is "hardwired to connect". We are hardwired for other people and for moral meaning and openness to the transcendent. Meeting these basic needs for connection is essential to health and to human flourishing (n.d., p.2).

The report concludes that there is an inherent link between a child's relationships with others, the development of their spiritual understanding, and their present and future health and wellbeing. Experiencing nurturing relationships positively affects a child's early brain development, as well as shaping their overall emotional and psychological development. Strong nurturing relationships can also reduce or eliminate the harmful effects associated with aggression, anxiety, depression and substance abuse.

Thomas and Lockwood have argued that children have an inner knowing and strength which educators need to tap into and cultivate as a way of supporting them to cope with the many stresses that they face living in a 'hurried, materialistic society' (2009, p.1).

Thomas and Lockwood also believe that an individual's spirituality can cultivate resilience, asserting that:

When resilient people face adversity they can draw on their strength of spirit and their awareness that they are not alone. This may mean that they draw on a belief in something bigger than themselves, or acknowledge

that, as we are all connected, we can rely on others to support and guide us (2009, p.9).

Empowering children towards their own spirituality

Educators play an important role in helping children feel connected to self, others and the world by helping them to form relationships and by valuing each child's individuality and supporting their choices and interests. To acknowledge and validate children's spirituality, educators need to be mindful of what the concept of spirituality means to each child and their family. Educators can provide opportunities for all children to make connections with what is relevant and meaningful to them within their own lives.

Educators can also support children's resilience and ability to cope with the stresses in their lives by providing them with opportunities to reflect, problem solve and practice self-discipline.

Strategies to promote children's spiritual understanding

► **Who am I?** Help children to know themselves by accepting who they are and experimenting with the world. Support children to identify themselves through 'being' rather than through 'doing'.

For example: ask a child, "If you were an animal (car, flower, famous person) what would you be and why?" Or "Draw a picture of something you like and tell me about it".

► **Be true to oneself.** Assist children to acknowledge all their emotions and feelings, even negative ones. Help them to learn to deal with emotions appropriately rather than pretending that they do not exist.

For example: ask a child, "What is happening in your body when you are angry/happy/tired/sad?" Or "It's okay to be angry. What else can you do when you feel this way?"

► **Respond to children's interests, questions and curiosities.** Take time to consider and to respond to children's specific experiences. For example: ask a child, "How did that feel for you?" Or "What did you enjoy (or dislike) about that experience?"

► **What am I here to learn?** Help children to learn through problem solving and recognise that all experiences are opportunities to learn and evaluate. The role of educators is to support

children to problem solve for themselves rather than giving them the answers or solutions.

For example: ask a child, "What did you learn from this experience?" or "Is there anything you would do differently next time?"

- ▶ **Support children to find and express their purpose.** Consider how to assist children to express and nourish natural qualities such as empathy, compassion and humour. Help them to find their inner purpose through dance, songs, plays, drawings, or simply practising a joke to make someone happy.

For example: ask a child, "You seem to enjoy laughing a lot. How do you think you can use your sense of humour in this situation?"

- ▶ **Support children to practise self-discipline.** Help children to control their impulses rather than being controlled by them. Assist them to understand that they cannot always have what they want at every moment.

For example: ask a child, "How did it feel when you had to wait for your turn?" Or "Is there anything you can do differently to get a better response?"

- ▶ **Where am I now?** Empower children to focus their attention on what is most important in any given situation and to respond appropriately. Help them to recognise that it is OK to have feelings, but that they don't have to act out the feeling.
For example: ask a child, "What does that feeling look like in your body?" or "What is the colour/ shape/texture, hardness/sound and/or movement of that feeling?"

- ▶ **Intuition – hearing the inner voice.** Assist children to learn to recognise and listen to their intuition. Intuition serves many functions and manifests itself in various ways – it can be a gut feeling, an impulse to act in a certain way, a word, a phrase providing guidance, creativity or problem solving.

For example: ask a child, "What do you think is the better choice here?" or "When you were about to do that, did you have any feelings or thoughts that were telling you to stop that you ignored?"

- ▶ **Encourage children to 'listen with their heart'.** Help them to pay attention to their feelings, but to also see other's points of view.

For example: ask a child "I know this situation seems unfair to you but how do you think Mona is feeling right now?"

Conclusion

Nurturing children's spirituality supports their sense of self and self-esteem and promotes positive relationships with others. Having a strong spiritual base will assist children to navigate their world, problem solve, make positive choices, become resilient and provide them with the tools for healthy and happy lives now and in the future ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

References and further reading

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