

THE
DISCIPLESHIP
PLACE

Developing Children's Ministry



SESSION 7

The Spirituality of Children

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The Spirituality of Children

SESSION OVERVIEW

Defining Child Spirituality

The Spiritual Development of Children

Families and Churches Working Together

Application

Exam

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- understand how to help a child grow spiritually.
- understand key principles of integrating children into the life and ministry of the Church.
- cite the relationship between the Church and families in a child's spiritual formation.

INTRODUCTION

Take a minute and think about the first concept that emerges concerning "children's spirituality." One problem usually emerges—a problem shared by authors and researchers alike. This problem is the difficulty of defining the term "spirituality" as it relates to children. Defining spirituality proves difficult when incorporating all aspects involved in the child's spiritual journey without restricting individual experience. Children's spirituality involves the whole person, every area of the child, including life in the church and in the family.

DEFINING CHILD SPIRITUALITY



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Humans, by nature, are beings with a complex spirituality. Defining child spiritual development (bringing kids to church, having devotions with them, etc.) requires greater depth and discernment than considered. Rather than resorting to a legalistic map for development, discerning parents recognize their role in assisting their children to discover spiritual realities. Doctrinal beliefs or denominational commitments will not solely determine the spiritual development of children; their personal encounters with God make the difference. Of course, adults also play a role, but each child's experience of God influences growth. Parents are responsible for preparing their children for such encounters by placing them in situations in which they may encounter God, and mentoring them in the significance of these encounters. Where parents prove unable to do so, other adults must assist in this vital task.

Since children's spirituality is not an easy or clearly defined idea, we will not try to be dogmatic in describing it; however, it would be helpful to have at least a working definition to use as a guide. One definition offered by the Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence states:

Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental "engine" that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices. (Benson, Roehlkepartain, and Rude, "Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry." *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 205-213, 2003.)

This definition focuses on the innate ability (we might say "God-given ability") to see life as something greater than individual human experience. This view is more "generic" than an explicitly Christian definition; however, it includes the desire to connect and make sense of one's life, a typical religious exercise. This definition also points to the fact that religious faith is first a gift of God (independent of social structures), nurtured not just by doctrines but also by the heritage and daily practices associated with faith. For children in a Christian setting, this means spirituality resides as a part of their humanity, encourages their ongoing search for a deeper meaning to life, and can be experienced at any moment, yet needs a mature community to guide the journey.

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Another organization, Christian Children's Spirituality, gives this definition:

"Children's spirituality is the child's development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child's understanding of—and response to—that relationship."

The definition, while not final, provides at least three key components. First, it is anchored in God, particularly the full work of the Trinity in relationship (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). So, children's spirituality begins in the child's relationship to God, which occurs by God's grace. Second, the child's spirituality remains dependent on a Christian community that cares for the child. That community includes committed Christian parents, but requires the assistance of the larger congregational setting that provides a context for the child's spiritual maturity. Finally, the definition includes the active participation of the child. Children must be seen as agents in their spiritual lives, not merely passive recipients of their parents'—or the church's—desires and directions. Any approach to understanding a child's spirituality must include God, the community that supports the child, and the child's own participation in his or her journey with God.

Our understanding of children's spirituality should not rest with an abstract definition but with the voices of the children themselves. Leaders would be well served to spend time with children listening to their ideas and interpretations of God. For example, you might try asking a child the following questions:

- How old are you?
- When is your birthday?
- What is your favorite food?
- What do you do for fun?
- If you could pick any place to visit, where would you go?
- Where do dreams come from? Where do dreams go?
- Where does the moon go at night?
- How do birds learn to sing?
- Was your mom ever a baby?
- How old is God?
- Does God talk with you? When?

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- If someone pushed you down while you were playing, what would you do? Why?
- Someone gave you a candy bar. You can share it by dividing it any way you like or not share it at all. What would you do? Why?
- Do you go to church? If yes, why do you go to church? What is your favorite part about going to church?
- Do you ever sit in the worship service with adults? Do you like being there? Why?

Young children might not respond immediately. One strategy is to ask them to draw their understanding of God and examples of God's love. Children can be quite expressive through artwork or other creative means and actually more verbal when they have something to do at the same time.

Ultimately, we have to acknowledge that a single definition will not capture completely the rich spiritual lives that children experience. Nevertheless, we can acknowledge that each child possesses a type of spirituality by God's grace that serves as a gift to us as leaders and to the Church. It remains our responsibility to guide children and help them in their development.

THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN



NOTES

As with spirituality, there are a number of different perspectives on the spiritual development of children. The definitions share similarities that include both a sense of discipline (to God and authority figures) and nurturing encounters with God. The tension between the child's basic responsibility and spiritual capacity gives rise to different opinions on where the emphasis should lie.

Three Approaches

Theorists who stress moral compliance place responsibility on the child's obedience. In a later lesson, we will see that this form of training reflects one approach to spiritual formation that understands our encounter with God more through conformity. Gary A. Buzzelli and Kevin Walsh, in the *Handbook of Religious Education*, state, "Morality and spirituality are closely interconnected. Children develop spiritually as they interact morally with others. This 'social conscience' becomes the core of spiritual development." James A. Dobson, following Kohlberg's theory of moral development, lays out a value system based on six principles that he believes are foundational for a child's spiritual development:

- Devotion to God
- Love for humanity
- Respect for authority
- Obedience to divine commandments
- Self-discipline and self-control
- Humbleness of spirit

For Dobson, spiritual development occurs in an environment that is filled with a consistent balance of love and discipline that develops a proper submission to authority.

Other theories stress the child's capacity to experience God and, through those encounters, to grow. This approach follows a different view of spirituality that trusts God will be at work relationally with the child regardless of adult mandates or guidelines. Don Ratcliff and Scottie May, in the book *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*, focus on the idea that a child's spiritual development will be established through these encounters with God. These encounters elicit responses such as:

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- Responding with a sense of awe and wonder
- Knowing God's character and actions
- Knowing and being formed in the character of God's people
- Owning an identity as part of the people of God
- Involvement in service and mission

The authors note that we sometimes fall into the mistaken idea that children's encounters with God resemble that of miniature adult experiences and adult responses. However, children are born with the capacity for wonder, joy, and love, and can, within the limits of their psychological development, respond to the presence of God in their lives. While other approaches might center on an understanding of morals or values or a knowledge of God, Ratcliff and May place encounters with God as the most vital aspect of spiritual development.

A third major approach relies more on the interchange between child and community, often seen in a sharing of the spiritual journey. Catherine Stonehouse, in her book *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*, provides a strong argument and guidance into the importance of intergenerational religious and spiritual experiences for children. She also highlights the importance of congregational life and the critical role that parents play in a child's spiritual development. Stonehouse views spiritual development as emerging from a child's significant relationship interactions. Stonehouse stresses the role of the Church in modeling and shaping this development. According to Stonehouse, spiritual development is established and nurtured by parents, but the catalyst for this guidance emerges through intergenerational religious/spiritual experiences in local congregational involvement.

Challenges

Children remain vulnerable to later influences. A number of studies in North America note the proclivity of young people to leave the Church. The reasons vary, but one significant concern rests with the inability of pastors, children's ministers, and youth ministers in many Western industrial countries to effectively integrate children into the life of the church. In all fairness, integration was not seen as a critical issue in the past. Today, it is recognized that children and youth have different developmental needs and cognitive abilities, requiring age-level teaching but not age-level segregation from the larger life of the congregation. Too long, children and youth have been kept separate from adult activities in the church. This may well run in both directions as adults have not been benefitting from the gifts of children in congregational life.

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Another challenge, particularly in North America, is a consumer mentality. When children and youth are placed into specialized programs where the primary motivation is to have fun and be served by adults, it will likely extend this consumer mindset. While ministry needs to be enjoyable at times, a focus on specialized entertainment may leave children thinking that church revolves around personal desires rather than our collective pursuit of God. We need not eliminate age-level programs, but we do need to understand their strategic role in light of the total life of the congregation and the long-term goal of introducing children to God.

Responding Through Community

How should we proceed? Allowing families to worship together may be one critical component of integration for the following reasons:

- Children feel a sense of belonging to the church family.
- Children get to know church leaders and members of the congregation.
- Family members are brought together instead of separated.
- Children learn about worship by observing parents and other adults.
- Children learn to enjoy participating in meaningful worship.
- Children learn more about God.

Not all churches can integrate children intergenerationally in the same way. Even the presence of children in the worship service does not mean they have an active role. One common struggle in North America rests with the fact that for true integration parents must be available, prepared, and skilled at being responsible for their children in a corporate gathering. Each church should evaluate their children, families, and lay volunteers to see how this process might work best. Anticipated difficulties may arise in the attention-span difference between adults and children. For example, adults have longer attention spans, better control over sitting still in church, and larger and more diverse vocabularies, interests, and needs. These differences will have to be bridged in order to provide a meaningful worship time for both children and adults.

There are ways churches can help integrate children into worship. First, welcome the children into church. Ushers should be careful not to overlook children while they are greeting. Train ushers to let children know how exciting it is that they are there and what their participation will do for the life and spirit of the church. Allow children to assist an usher or greeter by passing out the bulletins. If a children's sermon is given, make it child-friendly. It is not unusual for a pastor to



use illustrations adults think are cute but children don't understand. The purpose of a children's sermon is not to prove to the adults how much we love children, but to let the children know their value to God and to their family of believers. Children can help to pass the offering plate, pray for the service, sing with a worship group, or assist adults in preparing or clearing up after worship.

In conclusion, children may have separate age-level instruction in order to give them the best opportunities for peer fellowship and learning. However, this must be balanced with genuine integration into the body of the church where the congregation together can experience God, be intergenerationally connected, feel a sense of belonging to the family of God, observe the lifelong habits of faith, and learn to serve.

FAMILIES AND CHURCHES WORKING TOGETHER



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We keep circling back to the significance of parents in their children's spiritual development. Parents are the first Bible a child will ever read. They are their children's first teachers. They are the single greatest influence on children's decisions about risky behaviors. Parents have the greatest opportunity to impact their children's spiritual development. Others have influence, and children need support from others in growing up. However, both research and biblical mandates indicate parents are the most significant spiritual resource children have (grandparents come in a close second).

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 sets a pattern for those who interact with children on a daily basis in their homes—the family. This pattern is set so everywhere the children look and everything the children see will remind them of God's commandments. Parents need to look around their homes and listen to their conversations to determine if they are truly living up to the expectations in these verses. It is not unusual to hear individuals testify about important times in their lives and how a picture or a note on the refrigerator gave them courage or instruction.

Other passages reinforce the role of parents. Proverbs 1:8, advises, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." Mothers and fathers are teaching models for the children. Ephesians 6:4 speaks directly to family relationships when Paul says, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." It is difficult to read these short verses and not come away feeling the parents remain central in a child's spiritual formation. More is required than having children in church on Sunday mornings. Teaching, instructing, and impressing spiritual lessons on their children demands involved interaction throughout the children's lives. This requires an enormous commitment and great intentionality.

Where does the Church fit into such a system? If we were living in a perfect world, parents would know the commandments of God and would teach and instruct their children in godliness as they had been instructed as children. We can't depend on this. We have children in our congregations whose parents are not Christians and are not active in the church, even though their children attend church. Other parents attend church and are Christians, but they are not skilled in parenting or confident in what they believe. Other parents disagree in matters of faith. Single parents experience many challenges in balancing the everyday expectations of life. Yet, there will also be those parents who are in committed marriages, active in the church, confident in their beliefs, emotionally sound, and completely involved in helping their children establish a vital faith.

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Some children's leaders confess they have given up on including parents in the process. They focus only on the children. These leaders argue there are not enough parents who understand how to live a Christian life. Many parents say they do not have the time and interest to be involved. Some parents feel overwhelmed that the same church that asked for their children now demands they take a central role. Other parents struggle with a type of spiritual legalism so they cannot maintain their own humanity. Some parents indicate they want the church to be the spiritual leader for their children because they do not feel qualified to lead their children. Because of this struggle, getting families involved can be one of the greatest frustrations of ministry. Even if such obstacles exist, the spiritual responsibilities of parenting cannot be passed off to others. The load can be shared, but it is always the parents' load. Neglect of the spiritual task does not relieve the need any more than physical neglect makes physical needs go away.

What can the Church do to assist Christian parents in being effective in developing their children's spiritual lives? Traditional approaches have been to teach parents techniques or give them more information. Churches provide seminars, workshops, and other learning opportunities for parents to sharpen their skills and understanding. However, all indications suggest these approaches have not been effective. Parents live in an everyday, moment-by-moment experience with their children. There are patterns that have been established from their own upbringing as well as habits they have developed by repeating what tends to be the simplest or quickest result. Unfortunately, these are not always best for the child. In the heat of the moment, parents are more likely to fall back on these patterns of responses than to search for knowledge they have stored up from a seminar. Parents learn child-rearing practices in a similar fashion to the way teachers learn to teach. Teachers learn from their experiences in the classroom.

Stanford psychologist Robert D. Hess has some suggestions for the church and families to interact in a way that transforms them both. Hess suggests that parents stay away from strictly knowledge-based approaches or technique teaching. These approaches tend to focus on the parent's evaluating how they are doing more than evaluating the child's needs and how they are responding. Hess believes this only increases a parent's self-doubt about how well they are doing. Instead, parents grow from support and interaction with other parents.

Hess suggests emphasizing how difficult and unique the job of parenting is. If parents always perceive you are promising that if they do ABC, then their children will respond with DEF, they will have a difficult time with their child's individual responses. One-size-fits-all methods reinforce guilt and inadequacy. Hess believes the nuclear family should not be seen as being isolated and self-sufficient in developing the spiritual lives of children. Think back to the diagram in

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Lesson 4 that shows how children live inside of families, inside of direct support systems, and inside of indirect support systems. This is true for single parent, two-parent, grandparent-led, and other families.

Parents need spiritual connectedness in a faith community as much as children do. This goes far beyond church membership. It is about relationships. It demands belonging and participation where personal relationships continue to deepen. Parents sharing and supporting one another in parenting strategies and personal faith development while praying for one another, sharing in victories, and assisting one another during times of difficulty or crisis will be more effective in helping their children develop spiritually.

Whether we begin with the actual spiritual abilities within children, the role of the family or the responsibility of churches, we have to acknowledge that helping children remains a vital task for children's leaders. Our definitions may never be as rich as the spiritual stories children tell us, nor our guidance as comprehensive as suggested by those definitions. Nevertheless, children's leaders must partner with parents and other caregivers as they join children in their spiritual journeys by the very grace of God!

APPLICATION

**NOTES**

1. Discuss the spiritual lives of children with their parents. How do they define each child's spiritual journey?
2. Discuss with children's leaders different approaches to resourcing parents in the church and which ones prove most helpful.
3. Review with children's leaders where children have an opportunity to express their experiences with God.

EXAM


NOTES

1. Children's spiritual lives are easier to understand than those of adults.
 - A. True
 - B. False

2. Each child brings different spiritual experiences to the spiritual journey.
 - A. True
 - B. False

3. Definitions of child spirituality may include:
 - A. Children's participation with the triune God.
 - B. Children developing spiritually based on their giftedness and ability in direct dependence on social structures.
 - C. Children's spirituality happening at any moment but in relationship to family and church community.
 - D. A and C.
 - E. All of the above.

4. Matching: Match the correct people to the descriptions.

_____ Emphasis on the natural capacity to experience God.

_____ Emphasis on morality and spirituality.

_____ Emphasis on community.

_____ Emphasis on Kohlburg and conformity.

 - A. Dobson
 - B. Ratcliff and May
 - C. Buzzelli and Walsh
 - D. Catherine Stonehouse

5. Challenges to child spirituality in North America include:
 - A. Consumer mindset.
 - B. Lack of integration.
 - C. Lack of intergenerational interaction.
 - D. A and C.
 - E. All of the above.

**NOTES**

6. Parents do not participate because they sometimes feel overwhelmed by the demands of their churches.
 - A. True
 - B. False

7. Churches can assist parents best by focusing on providing a large range of knowledge-based approaches or techniques for parenting.
 - A. True
 - B. False

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT



NOTES

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. How do we discuss God's role in the spiritual life of children so people understand spirituality as both gift (grace) and responsibility (nurture)?
2. Does our ministry context stress obedience, experience, or community in describing child spirituality? What is the strength or weakness of this emphasis?
3. Where do children have an opportunity to express their spiritual lives in the congregation so that adults benefit from these insights?
4. Have we placed the right emphasis on supporting parents in how they guide children in their spiritual journey?

Review your answers with your mentor, then respond to the following:

How many responses focus on supporting children (particularly in areas where they are not yet fully self-reliant), and how many answers focus on empowering children?

Which of these answers support the goal of living Christlike relationships? Why?

What do we need to add to our list to make our approach more comprehensive, more faithful? Which do we need to incorporate into the role of the children's leader as one who both supports and empowers Christlike relationships with children?