Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children by Understanding Our Own Spirituality

Ester R.A. Leutenberg and Deborah L. Schein, PhD
Illustrator, Amy Leutenberg Brodsky, LISW-S
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Introduction

Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children by Understanding Our Own Spirituality

The purpose of this book, *Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children by Understanding Our Own Spirituality*, is to encourage caregivers to be aware of the importance of spirituality and to realize that spiritual development can be nurtured at very young ages.

The term caregiver refers to biological, adoptive, step or foster parents; family members, child-care educators; day-care workers and nannies; and other people who are in the position of being responsible for the care of young children.

A caregiver can begin instilling spirituality even before a child is born. Singing and other sounds are felt as vibrations and possibly as sounds by a fetus in the womb. During this time frame, an infant is most vulnerable to the environment. A baby absorbs and adapts to time, place, region, and local norms and culture. The spiritual embryonic phase begins here and continues throughout one's lifetime.

This book introduces the concept of spiritual development vital for all caregivers, for it references aspects of spiritual development that are common to all people. The intent of the authors of this book is to provide opportunities to evoke and strengthen each caregiver's spiritual development, and ultimately, influence the spiritual development of the children to whom the adults are giving care.

Each chapter offers insight into how spiritual development unfolds. Within each chapter, readers will find information about various aspects of spiritual development. Space is given for reflection and journal writing. This will provide opportunities to evoke and strengthen the caregivers' spiritual development that will enhance the spiritual development of the children the adults are nurturing.
TRUE-ISMS

Young Children and Spiritual Development

- Spirituality is an innate human trait.
- This innate trait must be nurtured in order to flourish.
- All children require love and attachment at the beginning of life to awaken this innate spirituality, so that it can be nurtured and developed.
- All children need interesting and beautiful spaces in which to experience life. This space can be as big as a park, and as small as a corner of a room.
- Young children are extremely competent learners because they have absorbent minds with exceptional ability to learn culture, language, and nuances from the environment and the people in that environment.
- Spiritual development plays an important role in promoting learning and growth for all children, and is inter-related with all other domains of development.
- Children will develop spirituality far more easily when the adults in their lives are spiritually grounded.
Definitions of Terms Involved with Spiritual Development

**Acceptance** – acts of tolerance, openness, and empathy towards cultures different from one's own.

**Awe** – a feeling of respect or reverence. Awe is often inspired by something majestic, powerful, unbelievable, or even scary. Awe is also stimulated by spiritual moments that connect to and strengthen one's basic dispositions.

**Basic disposition** – internal feeling triggered by moments of wonderment, awe, joy, or inner peace.

**Caregiver** – biological, adoptive, step, or foster parents; family members; child-care educators, day-care workers, and nannies; and all other people who are in the position of being responsible for the care of young children.

**Complex disposition** – reflected in how one acts toward others by caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence.

**Disposition** – includes basic and complex dispositions referenced above.

**Gratitude** – an emotion and an attitude that emerges when one experiences positive moments and is happy and grateful about them.

**Joy** – a feeling of deep happiness and contentment capable of lighting up one's face. Joy is also stimulated by spiritual moments that connect to and strengthen one's basic dispositions.

**Meditation** – a process by which one encourages and develops a deeper ability to concentrate and focus in order to achieve clarity, positivity, and a clearer vision.

**Mindfulness** – an active state of mind when one engages in activities that are stimulating, fun, novel, and challenging. It is also experienced when a sense of spirit fills one up with joy and wonderment or deep connectedness.

**Mindsight** – an expression of interconnected emotions such as sympathy, empathy, concern, kindness, consideration, and care that reflect balance and integration of heart, body, and mind in response to everyday encounters.

**Openness** – willingness to consider any possibility.

**Presence** – ability to be attentive in the moment, in the here-and-now. At this point, all of one's senses are awakened.

**Spiritual Embryo** – an inherent force that pushes each newborn infant toward growth and development at the beginning of life.

**Spirituality** – the name of a complex system whereby love has ignited one's innate spiritual embryo so that deep connections and strong relationships have resulted in the development of a positive self of sense; where one's basic dispositions are touched by moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and/or inner peace; and where one's responses to the world include acts of caring, kindness, empathy, and/or reverence, that reflect one's inner complex dispositions. Qualities such as spiritual moments, caregiver love, mindfulness and mindsight, imagination, openness and acceptance, gratitude, and breath and presence are also important ingredients needed to nurture and sustain this system.

**Spiritual-ness** – a feeling of becoming or being filled with spirituality. It is the feeling one has when one experiences spiritual moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace. It is also experienced when one feels love, deep connections, and strong relationships, or when one acts with care, kindness, empathy, and/or reverence. Spiritual-ness is that which fills one up spiritually so that one can be a more caring and present person.

**Spiritual Development** – A system that begins with love and is supported by spiritual moments in time, space, nature, relationships, and big questions; nurtured by caregiver love, self-awareness, mindfulness and mindsight, imagination, openness and acceptance, gratitude, breath and presence; strengthened when one's basic dispositions are matched to wonder, awe, joy, and inner peace; and resulting in acts of caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence.

**Wonderment** – a feeling of surprise or amazement filled with quiet pause and reflection. Such feelings are stimulated by spiritual moments that connect to and strengthen one's basic dispositions.
Summary of Chapters

SECTION 1 – *Spiritual Moments*

Spiritual moments hold all the ingredients needed to begin the nurturing of spiritual development for both caregivers and children. Spiritual moments exist in time, in space, in and with nature, in relationships, and in confronting big questions that take one beyond oneself.

SECTION 2 – *Caregiver Love*

Caregiver love talks about the importance of love and attachments; ways love ignites the child’s spiritual development, and how attachments lead children to feelings of connectedness, and eventually to the development of strong relationships.

SECTION 3 – *Self-Awareness*

When infants experience positive love and attachment they begin to develop a positive sense of self. In this way, young children begin a spiritual relationship with the world. Adults can also recapture a deeper sense of self-awareness by learning more about themselves and their own relationships with others and the world.

SECTION 4 – *Mindfulness and Mindsight*

Mindfulness connects to spiritual development by supporting one’s ability to pause, take note, reflect, and appreciate novelty. Mindsight helps to integrate what one thinks, with how one acts. Together, mindfulness and mindsight describe the blending of heart, body, and mind, and help each of us to make good choices.

SECTION 5 – *Disposition*

The concept of disposition reflects a deep inner essence, a set of in-born passions present at birth in each one of us. This disposition must be nurtured in order to develop and maintain one’s spirituality.

SECTION 6 – *Wonderment*

It is important to access one’s own basic dispositions through feelings of wonderment, and then learn how to provide abundant moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace for oneself and for children.

SECTION 7 – *Kindness*

Kindness is a complex disposition that includes benevolence, caring, compassion, consideration, empathy, generosity, helpfulness, and willingness to interact positively with others. This section discusses how complex dispositions guide our internal responses to external experiences.

(Continued on the next page)
Summary of Chapters (Continued)

SECTION 8 – Imagination
Imagination invites spiritual development into one's life. Humor is an important quality for tapping into one's imagination.

SECTION 9 – Openness & Acceptance
By being open and accepting of all possibilities, one is able to strengthen one's spiritual self. Spiritual development becomes a part of one's life and a comfortable topic.

SECTION 10 – Gratitude
Gratitude sweetens each moment. It heightens and guides one's spiritual moments for oneself and the children in one's life.

SECTION 11 – Breath and Presence
Caregivers can help children to bring themselves to each new situation in ways that reflect one's inner spiritual self. To do this, caregivers learn to model language and behavior that helps children be aware of their own breath and presence.

SECTION 12 – The BIG Picture: Spiritual Development
All the components of spiritual development come together to be viewed and understood as a system.

Journaling

Many of the pages of this book will give you, the readers, the opportunity to journal responses to guided questions. This offers time and place to reflect, reminisce, be silent, think, and write about anything that comes to mind. The journaling process invites moments of reflection that help to tweak the brain in ways that encourage one to move forward. These journaling pages are just for you, or to be shared with those you trust. We wish you joy and wonderment in your life exploration to strengthen your own spiritual self and the spiritual development of the children you know.
Dedication

Several years ago I went back to my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, and there was Deborah Schein! She came up to me excitedly and said “We need to write a book.” It took months and months of talking together for me to understand the full concept of her vision and how it tied into the spiritual life I was clearly living. Writing this book has opened me up to even more avenues of spirituality than I knew existed. After co-writing workbooks about life skills, this book clearly took me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to delve into my own spiritual self. Deborah’s friendship and guidance have been life-changing. Thanks Deb!

In the process of writing this book, I found a mentor. This mentor not only showed me how to write such a book, she guided and encouraged me to speak my own voice; to let go of the scholarly tone I had learned during my doctoral studies so that I might reach deep into my own experiences in order to share my own visions of spiritual development with her and with others who may read this book. I am forever indebted to Ester for this and for her patience, push, and deep concern for the readers. I now have new tools and a new venue in which to share this work. Thank you Ester!

We thank our husbands – Jay Leutenberg and Jeffrey Schein. Without their love and support, their constant and consistent care, this book would not exist. Our own spiritual development is deeply linked with theirs and we thank them with all our hearts.

We also dedicate this book to you, our readers. We wish you joy and wonderment on your quest to strengthen your own spiritual development and the spiritual development of the children you know.

Our thanks to the following professionals who make us look good!

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Section I

Spiritual Moments

Spiritual Moments Happen Every Day

I was co-writing a book about spirituality, and on the way to a restaurant with friends, I asked the husband if he was religious, spiritual, spiritual and religious, or none of them. He gave me a confused look, and said, “What is spirituality?” I told him that it is different for everyone. I said, “For me, when I look at the mountains beyond my backyard, I have a sense of wonderment, of being a small part of the universe. It swells my heart.” His response was, “I have no idea what you are talking about.” We enjoyed our dinner, saying no more about it.

Driving home, he said he had been thinking. When he was at Machu Picchu, atop the Andes Mountains in Peru, he recalled an unbelievable feeling of awe. He reflected at that time upon his wonderment of the world. In the twenty-five minutes it took us to drive home, he told a half a dozen other stories like that. His wife’s mouth was wide open. She, in fifty years of marriage, had never heard these stories. That one question opened him up to reflect and to recognize his spiritual moments and to consider his own spirituality.

~ Ester R.A. Leutenberg
Spiritual Moments in Time

Spiritual moments in time are quiet, calm moments with extended time for children to play and explore - these moments are most felt when children live their lives within a set routine and within environments that provide order. Such environments invite children to predict, know, and feel secure within a day, a week, or more.

Think about moments that have given you feelings of peace and contentment; moments when you felt as if time was simply stretched out before you and you had no need to hurry.

What are you doing in these reflective moments?

What ties these reflective moments together?
Spiritual Moments in Space

Spiritual moments in space describe young children’s play environments that are aesthetically pleasing and beautiful; space where real objects, real experiences, and rich language are intentionally provided. This type of environment is often filled with moments of wonder, awe, joy, and inner peace that can fill each child’s basic disposition.

**Draw or describe what you would consider to be a beautiful learning space.**

**What qualities would that space need?**
**Spiritual Moments in Relationships**

Most children enjoy interactive relationships that are not stagnant, but that change in ways that stimulate their senses, intellect, and inner person. Such moments can help children to strengthen their will to self-regulate, be mindful, and take on responsibilities such as caring for a plant or garden, a pet, or helping to keep a room clean and organized.

**We all have special people in our lives.**

Referring to the above paragraph, think about the special people who were important to you as a young child. What made them so important to you?

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Referring to that same paragraph, who are the special people in your life now and what makes them so important to you?

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Describe how the qualities of the important people in your life, from your childhood to now, are the same or how they have changed.

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Spiritual Moments in and with Nature

Many research studies have been conducted on nature’s impact on human development. Kindness, respect, empathy, harmony, and being welcoming to others, are just a few of the benefits children engage in as they experience the natural world. As they explore the outdoors with nature, nature is also brought indoors for close-up exploration. Spiritual life begins with a sense of wonder, and one of the first windows leading to wonder is the natural world. In general, nature is an amazing source for wonder, awe, joy, inner-peace, and relationships. It eventually provides an environment for the emergence of big questions.

Go for a walk outdoors and look for moments that touch you spiritually.
Why do you think this is happening?
Try to put words to your feelings.

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Spiritual Moments with Big Questions

Big questions are capable of taking one beyond oneself. When one engages in big questions, one is able to feel one’s own place within the universe. If one believes in transcendence, then a big question can take the person to that place. If one does not, the big question can provide feelings of humility, smallness, and a feeling of a place within the vastness of the universe.

Young children are capable of big questions, also. You can see the question in a child’s body posture, eyes, and expression. Through exploration of the world a myriad of questions come alive for a child. It is through big questions that a child is capable of seeing that the world exists way beyond oneself.

We all have big questions about life and how we see ourselves in the ‘big picture’!

People often have big questions involving these aspects of life:

- Spiritual Moments
- Caregiver Love
- Self-Awareness
- Mindfulness and Mindsight
- Disposition
- Wonder
- Kindness
- Openness and Imagination
- Gratitude
- Breath and Presence
- The Big Picture: Spiritual Development

Although children may not be able to completely articulate their big questions, they hold curiosities and questions about how life works.

Examples might be:

- Where does the sunlight come from?
- Why does light go away at night?
- Where do my shadows come from?
- Who creates a rainbow?

An example of a big question from an adult might be:

- What happens to a person when the person dies?

A Big Question can lead you to explore spirituality from a personal perspective.

(Continued on the next page)
Spiritual Moments with Big Questions (Continued)

What is one of YOUR big questions about life in general that in some way involves one or more of the items listed on the prior page?

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Why is this big question important to you?

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The Relationship of Rituals and Spiritual Moments

A ritual is a ceremony or regular occurrence consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order and a set time. Some common rituals are saying good morning to someone when waking up, or singing a song to a child before going to bed. One’s life is filled with rituals that strengthen one’s spirituality.

What are some rituals that were shared with you as a child?

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At the time, how did you feel about those rituals?

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How did it make you feel to participate in those rituals?

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How do rituals strengthen your spirituality?

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What are some of the rituals you share with a child in your life?

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**Spiritual Moments: Thought-Provoking Quotations**

“Spiritual moments happen every day. All you need to do is to know how and when to recognize them.” ~ Ester R.A. Leutenberg

“Spiritual moments are created in relationships with others, in awareness and appreciation of self, in and with nature, and in dialogue with big questions capable of taking one beyond oneself.” ~ Deborah L. Schein

After reading the above quotations, choose one and write your thoughts, create a poem, or draw a picture to describe your insights.
Spiritual Moments

Ideas, Activities, and Moments for All Caregivers to Share with Children

Spiritual moments can sometimes happen by chance. More often, though, they need to be created by establishing nourishing connections. Here are some ways to provide spiritual moments for the children you know, and for yourself as well. Such moments can strengthen the spiritual development of everyone.

• Answer questions in a patient, thoughtful way.
• Ask the child to tell you a story. Then, ask questions about it.
• Breathe slowly with a young child, putting each of your hands on each other’s heart.
• Clean up toys together.
• Create time in the day to simply be with the child.
• Dance together.
• Discuss the importance of friendship.
• Encourage quiet time.
• Enjoy reading with a child.
• Find a caterpillar and wonder together where it came from and what it will become.
• Find a spider’s web and talk about it.
• Keep play spaces decluttered and organized, but expect them to get messed up.
• Laugh together.
• Limit saying No when you can – offer Yes or Yes, but, and don’t be afraid to say no when it is truly needed.
• Look at the brown on a banana and together, wonder why it’s there.
• Notice and discuss the wag of a dog’s tail.
• Offer children time to play alone or with other children without any interruptions. Do not interfere. Do not show the child what to do. Do not suggest to the child to do something different than what the child has chosen to do. Do not talk.
• Pay attention to the environment, make it beautiful and inviting.
• Play together.
• See a shooting star, watch the moon, clouds, sunrise, or sunset.
• Show appreciation and respect when a child repeats something over and over again.
• Sing together.
• Stop and smell the roses.
• Support a child’s right to have open time to play.
• Take time to answer children’s questions.
• Talk about things for which to be grateful.
• Together, look at the shadows cast by the sun.
• Walk together.
• Watch and discuss a worm squiggling on the ground.
• When hearing a siren, say aloud, We are wishing good thoughts to the person in the ambulance.
Notes to Myself

(Thoughts and Ideas)
Things to Do
(Actions to Take)
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ester R.A. Leutenberg has worked in the mental health field for many years as a publisher, author, and advocate for those suffering from loss. She personally experienced a devastating loss when her son Mitchell, after struggling with a mental illness for eight years, died by suicide in 1986.

Soon after Mitchell’s death, as a way of both healing and helping others, Ester co-founded Wellness Reproductions & Publishing with her daughter Kathy Khalsa and they developed these therapeutic products: The SEALS series for teen-agers, the Life Management Skills series for adults, and a variety of other therapeutic card, board, and bingo games, balloons, and posters.

Ester has co-written the following series of reproducible activity workbooks and card decks created for facilitators: GriefWork, Mental Health & Life Skills, Teen Mental Health & Life Skills, Mind-Body Wellness, Coping, Transitional Life Skills for Teens, Erasing the Stigma of Mental Health through Awareness, and Working with Families. Some of the individual books she has co-written include Creating a Healthy Balanced Life, Motivation, The Complete Caregiver Guide, Veterans Surviving and Thriving, Breaking Up is Hard to Do, and Life Skills to Help Teens Balance WAY TOO MUCH!

Deborah L. Schein, PhD has been an early childhood educator since 1972. She received a bachelor’s degree in psychology, a master’s degree in education with a focus on curriculum and instruction. She spent many years teaching in early childhood classrooms in urban and suburban settings, and at numerous colleges. More recently, she completed a Ph.D in early childhood education, researching a definition of spiritual development for young children. This quest began when a young child came to her excitedly holding a worm in his hand. At this moment Deb realized that a language of spiritual development did not exist in this inner city school and possibly from most early childhood programs.

Deborah currently works as an educational consultant and teaches early childhood graduate courses online. She also offers workshops across the country for national movements and participates in webinars about the connection between spiritual development and nature education for young children.

Deborah has co-authored two books, What’s Jewish about Butterflies, and The Great Outdoors, She is currently writing a book that introduces a definition of spiritual development to early childhood educators. It is Deb’s goal to help others nurture the spiritual life of children.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Amy Leutenberg Brodsky, LISW-S works assisting children and adults in psychiatric crisis. Amy combines her skills and talents as a social worker and artist, and is well known for her creative illustrations of the Emotions product line, therapeutic games, and over 80 books with Wellness Reproductions and Publishing and with Whole Person Associates … and now, Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children by Understanding Our Own Spirituality.
Whole Person Associates is the leading publisher of training resources for professionals who empower people to create and maintain healthy lifestyles. Our creative resources will help you work effectively with your clients in the areas of stress management, wellness promotion, mental health, and life skills.

Please visit us at our web site: WholePerson.com. You can check out our entire line of products, place an order, request our print catalog, and sign up for our monthly special notifications.

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REVIEWERS THOUGHTS

Nurturing Spiritual Development in Children By Understanding Our Own Spirituality should be a required part of the curriculum of every early childhood specialist and every child care provider’s training. Programs for new parents should also present this book as part of a required reading – and practicing – list. To re-awaken adults’ spirituality so often ignored in our tumultuous society, these courses and programs might even include nature walks and museum trips, and unstructured play sessions with blocks and other free-form creative toys. Pediatricians should hand a copy of this book to each new parent as a special gift.

~ Eileen Regen M.Ed., CJE
Editor, Educator, Conference Presenter, Poet

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~ Mickey Henson, MA
Retired School Counselor, Adjunct Professor, Hearing and Speech Therapist, and Fitness Instructor

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This is a fantastic book! I wish that it had been available to me as a new mom! It is definitely beneficial, and it reassured me that I did the right thing with my children. As we know, they don’t come with instruction manuals! Had this been in print when my children were born, I would have spent time journaling with it instead of checking the “what to expect” book, and always thinking something was wrong. The love you have for a child is immeasurable and cannot be defined. This year I became a grandparent and through my daughter, I saw the love that we gave her blossom into the best miracle ever! Once the book is published, I will send it to her! It is a book that will touch the future!

~ Niki Tilicki, MA Ed
Educator; Masters in Counseling with an emphasis in gifted education

The book presents a profound topic in an understandable, widely applicable way. Each section starts with a short personal story that readers can relate to. The concepts are presented in a non-denominational way, with no religious dogma, no judgmental attitude, no forcing of beliefs onto people. It helps readers to get in touch with and develop their own spiritual self, thereby helping the children they connect with to do the same.

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