

## The Spiritual Child - Chapter 1

### Birthright – Built for Spirituality

Page 23 - These mothers and fathers are determined to give their children a competitive advantage in school and life. We all want our children to reach their full potential, and we watch to identify their areas of aptitude and natural strength, so that we may actively support their gifts.

Page 24 - We want them to be emotionally hardy and resilient, to know happiness and how to take setbacks in stride, to learn how to manage big feelings like anger and disappointment. When they do not get what they want, we hope that they will be able to successfully set a new course, readjust, “hit reset,” and move forward to succeed.

We envision our young children as accomplished, impassioned adults who have achieved school, sports, or stage success and used it as a pathway to opportunity, to love and be loved, to have wonderful friends, and in every way to enjoy a good life and career. We gaze at our gurgling baby or adventurous toddler with love-and a twenty-year trajectory of aspiration.

We don't just talk and dream, we also plan and act on our best intentions. And yet all of those conversations, elaborate schedules of extracurricular activities, and high aspirations often miss the single most crucial ingredient of all, the only thing that science has shown to reliably predict fulfillment, success, and thriving: a child's spiritual development. It is important to take a moment here to precisely define “spirituality” as I use it in this book, and as it exists as a crucial dimension of spirituality in science:

**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.**

Spiritual development, as I define it as a scientist and use the term in this book, is the growth and progression of our inborn spirituality as one of our many perceptual and intellectual faculties, from taste and touch to critical thinking skills. Spiritual development is the changing expression of this natural asset over time as new words, explanatory models, and ideas-whether theological, scientific, or family views-allow us to feel (or not feel) part of something larger, and experience an interactive two-way relationship with a guiding, and ultimately loving, universe.

Page 25 - This two-way spiritual dialogue may or may not include religion. The connection can occur in meditation or yoga or in something as simple as your child's relationship with family pets, backyard wildlife, or a beloved tree. A child's spirituality precedes and transcends language, culture, and religion. It comes as naturally to children as their fascination with a butterfly or a twinkling star-filled night sky.

Page 26 - Science now tells us that this spiritual faculty is inborn, fundamental to the human constitution, central in our physiology and psychology. Spirituality links brain, mind, and body.

A smile, a loving touch, the indescribable bond between child and parent that science has yet to fully explain, all of these speak deeply to them, too. Spirituality is the language of these moments, the transcendent experience of nourishing connection. Spirituality is our child's birthright. We support their development when we read with them, talk with them, sing and play with them, feed and bathe and encourage them.

Page 27 - Regardless of religious or spiritual orientations, parents instantly recognize what I would call inherently spiritual qualities in their children-their open, curious, loving ways; their immediate instinct to respond from the heart.

"When I'm exhausted from a hard day, my son will come up and smile and give me what he calls 'an energizer hug.'"

"My child can tell when our dog is scared, and he'll go sit with her and comfort her-it's so tender to see."

"My father can be so gruff and irritating-it drives me crazy. But when he's with my kids they don't seem to mind. They've even told me, 'That's just the way Grandpa is; it's okay.'"

spirituality is inborn and emerges in sync with the biological clock of childhood and adolescent growth and development. Just as with other aspects of your child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development, the spiritual faculty thrives in the light of your attention and support.

### Page 28 - **Hardwired for Spirituality: Use It or Lose It**

Spirituality is a vast untapped resource in our understanding of human development, illness, health, and healing. Specifically, research in medicine and psychology has found that people with a developed spirituality get sick less, are happier, and feel more connected and less isolated. empirical evidence shows that natural spirituality exists within us, independent of religion or culture; it is as foundational to our makeup as emotion, temperament, and physical senses; and the benefits of natural spirituality are significant and measurable.

Page 29 - The confluence of evidence is clear. So to recap: biologically, we are hardwired for a spiritual connection. Spiritual development is a biological and psychological imperative from birth. Natural spirituality, the innate spiritual attunement of young children-unlike other lines of development-appears to begin whole and fully expressed. As the child grows, natural spirituality integrates with the capacities of cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development, as well as physical change, to create a more complex set of equipment through which to experience transcendence and spirituality. Ultimately, if maintained and integrated with these other aspects of development, spirituality supports the child through the challenging developmental passage of adolescence.

Page 30 - Our child's spiritual faculty likewise flourishes with support and encouragement to grow strong and to integrate with the rest of her developmental growth. This process of integration is also shaped by her internal dialogue and through interactions with parents, family, peers, and community. The practice field is everywhere, and it happens every time she has conversations with us about life's big and little questions, such as about meaning and purpose, being good people, how to treat others, what it means to be empathetic and compassionate, and why we need to take care of the earth and our environment.

As parents, we can take those ideas into the playing field of daily life and show our children how we live and express spiritual values in everyday interactions with other people, with animals, with nature, with our own inner life, and with the life of the mind and big ideas. We can take our children to explore sacred places and spaces: a house of worship, a sanctuary tucked away in a hospital, a mountain, or a river. We can encourage (and model) acts of expansive love and kindness.

Page 31 - Without support and encouragement to keep developing that part of themselves, children's spiritual development weakens under pressure from a culture that constantly has them feeling judged and pressured to perform, and that trains them to evaluate others the same way. Our culture has not necessarily been welcoming to spirituality and its questions. Our predominantly materialistic, 24/7 media-infused world is not set up for the introspective thought involved in spiritual reflection.

### **Anxiety, Ambivalence, Antipathy: A Generation of Wary Parents**

Page 32 - one-fifth of the public overall-and a third of adults under age thirty-were unaffiliated with a religion as of 2012, the lowest in the nearly three generations since researchers started tracking the numbers. At the same time, surveys also report a notable growth in the population of adults who classify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" or who describe their religion as "nothing in particular" but do believe in God or a universal spirit.

A recent Gallup poll shows that more than 90 percent of Americans pray and believe in an ultimate creator. A poll in *Parents* magazine in 2007 conducted by Beliefnet showed that a consistent 90 percent of parents “talk to children about God or higher power,” two-thirds say grace at meal times, 60 percent pray during the day, and half pray at bedtime with their child. A poll by Barna Research Group in Ventura, California, showed 85 percent of parents consider it their job to teach their own children about spirituality.

Page 34 - According to a 2010 YouGov survey, commissioned by author Naomi Schaefer Riley, 45 percent of marriages between 2000 and 2010 were between members of differing faiths and denominations. This is more than double since the 1960s, when only 20 percent of marriages were interfaith.

So the ambivalence and the tension are greater than ever, and parents are struggling. The questions I hear show deep caring for their children’s spiritual development but also their own conflict or confusion about how to handle it honestly, responsibly, and lovingly.

“He went to church with his friend and now that’s what he wants to do-he wants to keep going! But we have a very different belief system.”

“I didn’t have a good experience with organized religion when I was a kid and I don’t want that for my child. But I don’t want my child to have nothing.”

“I don’t believe in God but my son asks about it.”

Page 36 - The difference between her and her husband’s views of religion also makes Daphne particularly sensitive to the need to respect each person’s own spiritual path- especially her child’s. “How do you do that? How do you guide a child and how do you not completely overwhelm them with your own beliefs about the world?”

Parents aren’t alone with their questions or in not knowing what to do. We all want our children to be free, to follow their hearts in all areas. Parenting is hard and spirituality is a tough topic to tackle with fewer resources if you don’t have a handle on it yourself.

### **Spirituality Is Bedrock for Thriving**

We parents want deep inner peace and happiness so strongly for our children that we assume it when we envision our hopes and aspirations for their future. We assume a life of accomplishment that has a joyful and purposeful core.

Page 37 - Looking more deeply into the image of your child’s future, what is that joyful and satisfying core made up of? Deep love and support from family. Good morals. Curiosity. Being healthy and comfortable in the world, and excited to learn. Now, nearly twenty years of scientific research shows that there is something more: a close, sustained awareness of

a two-way relationship with a loving and guiding higher power that opens into a sense of a vivid spiritual world. Whether you call that higher power spirit, or the universe, or nature, or something else, it is through this relationship that children and young adults seek clarity or guidance during life's challenging passages or openings of opportunity.

Today we have evidence-based research and imaging technology that show the effects of spiritual engagement on the brain, mind, and body. In scans and data we can now see the difference in brain structure and function in people for whom spirituality is the lead foot in life versus those for whom spirituality is not a strong presence.

Page 38 - From the perspective of mental health and wellness, spirituality is associated with significantly lower rates of depression, substance use and abuse, and risk taking. This includes sexual risk taking in young adults and exposure to STDs, along with thrill seeking, driving fast, and physical endangerment, especially in boys.

Related research from the field of positive psychology shows that spiritual development is associated with positive emotions and qualities of thriving that include a sense of belonging, optimism, elevation, and a connection to "something larger" that gives purpose and meaning to life.

### **Science Charts the Course Across Two Decades**

Science from many labs and researchers demonstrates that spirituality is innate, that it is a faculty that grows with attention and can be stunted by neglect, and that there is no substitute for it. Reading about riding a bicycle is no substitute for riding one. No level of skill on the soccer field will help your child pass a math test. There is no substitute for spiritual development, but there are many different ways to support and encourage it. And without it a child's robust developmental potential is diminished.

Page 39 - We'll explore these stages fully in the chapters ahead, but in brief, we see that the formative first decade of life is a period of natural spiritual awareness when a spiritual road map begins to develop-neurologically, psychologically, and embodied in everyday life.

Adolescence represents a crescendo, a developmental "surge" period for spiritual development, just as puberty creates a surge in every other aspect of your teen's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.

In broad strokes, we see a journey from innate and foundational spiritual knowing (the first decade) through a journey of engagement outward into the world of others in family, community, and culture (the second decade).

Page 40 - Among the most common ways we turn off our children's spiritual development are what I call the "seven avoidances." We turn our kids off when we:

1. Ignore their spiritual awakening, questions, and experiences. Your voice makes an experience real for your child; if a child doesn't hear a parent discussing a topic, then the child assumes that topic is not important.
2. Disavow their spiritual reality. A definitive, negative statement by you about your child's spiritual experience can shut down your child's exploration because it signals to your child that her spiritual experiences aren't part of the parent-child connection.
3. Discourage spiritual discovery. A negative response to your child's spiritual exploration is a lost opportunity, a moment when you could have, but didn't, support your child's tender, vulnerable, and emerging spirituality. You don't have to agree with your child-you simply need to be interested, curious, and open to his exploration.
4. Quash questions. A child's questioning propels growth. Responding with an "I don't know," or "I don't know and nobody else does, either," often ends the discussion. Your child hears that spirituality isn't worthy of pursuit, nor is it central to daily life.
5. Base affection or discipline on performance-based values that don't align with spiritual values of unconditional, noncontingent love, acceptance, and loving guidance.
6. Overlook the need for a spiritually supportive community in which children can discover their own identity and be accepted and appreciated for their spiritual selves.
7. Ignore signs that a community has punitive or other outdated values of conformity that twist spiritual values to serve dogma.

Page 41 - Shutting down spiritual development creates a developmental gap, much as we might see in a child who is three grade levels above his age peers in math and science but woefully behind the curve in basic social and emotional skills.

We tend to see a child's struggles or missteps as flaws or errors to be fixed, whereas if we looked at them as challenges of a spiritual nature, our responses would be completely different and perhaps much more effective. Let me share two examples:

#### Drugs and Alcohol: Shortcuts to Transcendence Are Dead Ends

When a child reaches adolescence there is important work of individuation to be done, deciding what is "me or not me" in a way that provides a deep sense of self that is whole, is meaningful, and gives the teen direction. Erik Erikson, the grandfather within psychology of the notion of adolescent individuation, emphasized that a teen seeks to find an internal sense of consistency that drives purpose.

he habits we start in adolescence often persist into adulthood-this goes for habits of exercise, drug and alcohol use, and spirituality. In this brief window of development our inner blueprint, our core spiritual map of and approach to the world, takes shape.

Page 42 - Drug and alcohol use can bring fleeting exposure to a counterfeit of the same kind of experiences that teens are working for in their biologically primed spiritual individuation: clarity, a sense of calm, a feeling of bonding with fellow teens, and love for the bigger world.

Page 43 - In a study of spiritual individuation published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, we found that a developed personal relationship with God (expressed in comments such as, "I turn to God for guidance in times of difficulty," or "When I have a decision to make, I ask God what I should do") was highly protective against slipping from experimenting with to addiction to alcohol and drugs.

Our published findings showed that an adolescent with a strong personal relationship with the higher power, compared to an adolescent without this inner source of spirituality, is 70 to 80 percent less likely to engage in heavy substance use or substance abuse.

The illusory jolt from drugs does not last; it only jump-starts the physiology. There is nothing sustaining in it. Authentic spirituality requires reflection and the development of a road back to transcendence through the cultivation of our inner life, through prayer, meditation, or perhaps good works, intertwined with our general capacities of cognition, morality, and emotion.

Page 44 - Girls: Impressive Development for Emotional Depth and Discernment, Not Drama  
Adolescents, particularly girls, are often described as being "helplessly emotional" or "histrionic." One exasperated mother described her adolescent daughter as "totally emotionally wrought, way over the top, gushing with emotion.

However, research on spiritual development shows that with the burgeoning of fertility in girls, specifically getting their period, comes the start-up of an augmented spiritual capacity.

Along with other forms of physical maturation, such as body curves and mature breasts, we found that the onset of menstruation was associated with an increased sense of a personal relationship with God, and the two together showed an increasingly significant degree of protection against depression.

This coinciding surge of spirituality and fertility comes from within the girl and is associated with physical and emotional puberty. Research shows this increased reaching for spiritual connection goes hand in hand with an augmented openness to experience, sensitivity, and

perceptiveness. This means that with the arrival of menstruation, the full range of emotions appear bright and strong, and tears are part of this arrival.

Page 45 - If, as French Jesuit priest and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote, “the difficulty lies not in solving problems but expressing them,” then children are our born leaders in the spiritual realm.

Page 46 - **“Let’s Go In!”: Children Summon Us for a Sacred Journey**

Our children’s innate spiritual faculty is ever-present, accessible, and inviting us into the conversation of the most ordinary of everyday trials and triumphs. They will ask, “May I be in the choir?” or “May I sing with the rabbi?” They may ask to light a candle in the cathedral, to make Shabbat challah, or to visit a sacred site. The young child may ask if Grandma’s spirit will come back in a different person or if she is here now.”

Page 47 - The older child or adolescent may question, “Before the big bang, what was there?” Or, “How can we justify war-ever?” The questions evolve with age, and as with every other developmental passage with our children, we adapt our responses to meet them where they are. Whatever they may ask, they are not looking to us for specific answers; they are looking to be met for the journey of inquiry and discovery. No matter how well or poorly prepared we may feel, we have exactly what we need to meet our child on their journey.

Page 48 - “We just didn’t talk about God in our household,” Fran said of Maya’s first four years.

Maya’s development-and all she had to do to support her daughter was to pay attention, welcome Maya’s spontaneous expressions of wonder or curiosity, respect her observations and questions, and share in exploring the ideas. There was no need to have “right” answers or detailed how-to instructions. All she had to do was join her child in the moment, let her child be her guide, welcome conversation, and leave the conversation open, rather than avoid it or shut it down.

Page 49 - Parents often hear spiritual questions as requests for answers or knowledge that they aren’t prepared to provide. But that’s a misunderstanding, or perhaps a reflection of our own natural anxiety to do everything right.

But the precious opportunity before you is that your child is giving you an opening and saying, *Hey, come with me*. You don’t need to know where you’re going or how you’re going to get there-you are simply being asked to go with her. Our children look to us, but not really for the answers. We’re being asked to show up. We need to show up, but we don’t need to have all the answers.



The moment we are “born” into parenthood, our child’s spiritual development-that cultivation of a warm heart, a clear mind, and the capacity for transcendence-becomes part of our shared journey and our birthright as parents. Following your child’s spiritual journey may transform your entire family.

You have the opportunity to hop aboard this journey with your child, and through your child’s journey, to travel on your own journey, as well. Say yes and see where you go.