

# Education for Heart and Mind

## *The Science of Spirituality Informs a New Developmental Model*

BY LISA MILLER

Science is a lens, a way of understanding a very broad range of things, including, as it turns out, spirituality in human development. Just as there is a natural capacity for learning math and language, recent research has revealed that there is a natural capacity for spirituality that evolves across the first two decades of life, with clear emergent developmental markers.

In particular, the science has established that — within or outside a religious tradition — spirituality is innate and unfolds along a developmental path; that it can serve as a hub that guides other lines of development (emotional, relational, cognitive, and physical); that the spiritual faculty undergoes a surge alongside other aspects of puberty; and that, in adolescence, personal spirituality is more beneficial against depression and for overall thriving than any other source known to medical or social sciences.

What do I mean by *spirituality*? There are many definitions, but based on my decades of clinical research and interviews for my book, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, I think of spirituality as a lived relationship with the ultimate transcendent source of life. Natural spirituality is inborn, foundational. It is in our nature to seek and perceive transcendence, a connection to a larger universe. If supported, this capacity and drive work together to develop the most essential protective component of spirituality: a personal, felt relationship to a higher power (God, Spirit, the Universe, Allah, Hashem, etc.) or nature itself as a source of guidance and soulful connection.

In different ways, at every age, this personal transcendent relationship opens up into an awareness of a sacred world — one in which life's purpose is measured by more than acquisition and accomplishment and in which relationships are more than instrumental. In such a world, we are encouraged to take interest in those around us not as a measure of what they can do for us but because they are deserving of empathy, support, and encouragement.

Models of child development have been essentially silent on the matter of spirituality, largely due to a lack of scientific research. With the relatively recent wave of rigorous science reported in top peer-review journals, from brain imaging studies to gold-standard genetic and epidemiological studies, we now know

that just as we are born with an innate social sense or cognitive ability, we are born with a biologically based capacity for natural spirituality.

All told, science now offers strong evidence that biologically, neurologically, and psychologically, spirituality is part of every child's nature and is foundational to thriving. You cannot raise a healthy, integrated, whole child, and be silent on spirituality.

More to the point, the research findings represent not only a scientific breakthrough but also a breakthrough *opportunity* in education, from school leadership and curriculum design to classroom dynamics and the relationship every teacher, coach, and mentor creates with a child. The evidence is unequivocal: How schools and educators support a child's spiritual development in the classroom and the school community matters greatly.

## Spirituality as Developmental Hub

This innate natural spirituality, if supported, is a tremendous resource for health and thriving from the earliest age. The brain establishes patterns of circuitry through patterns of use during development, and numerous studies show this developmental course of natural spirituality and the need for different supports at different ages.

We can see the impact of spiritual development in each stage of the first decade quite clearly. Research also shows that, with puberty, adolescents with a strong personal spirituality are 40 percent less likely to engage in substance use or abuse and 80 percent less likely to engage in risky and unprotected sex than adolescents who are not spiritually oriented.

Foremost in normal adolescent development is spiritual individuation, which commences with or without support. Without support earlier in childhood, however, an adolescent can get stuck midstream, filled with burning questions of meaning and purpose: *What does any of this mean? What's the point of my life?* Without support, relational challenges swirl around the question of authenticity:

*Everyone is just out for himself. People are such hypocrites.* The adolescent's hunger to experience transcendence, and the gnawing wonder about life is very real. The science is clear on this point. This half-empty glass of spirituality is a stalled "developmental depression" — nearly normative in that it affects roughly 70 percent of adolescents. "Teen angst" needs to be recognized and addressed in education as a matter of spiritual development years earlier in childhood in order to build the infrastructure to support robust and resilient adolescent development.

How do we do that? By cultivating a child's sense of a sacred self.

## Cultivating the Sacred Self Versus Instrumental Self

Given the broad and pervasive protective benefits of spirituality found by science, the evidence strongly suggests that we are designed with spirituality as the central organizing principle. Full individuation in all areas of life ultimately rides on our exploration of life's big "why" questions of meaning and purpose. At every age, children ask these questions. In most cases, they are not concerned with theology. Rather, they are sharing their own experience and their efforts to grapple with spiritual ideas and feelings. As educators, we should view these questions as invitations to take a genuine interest in their perspectives and their wish to dig for meaning. We need to listen and deeply honor that natural voice of the child.

Science shows that supporting the spiritual interface enhances all other aspects of development. For example, as the frontal cortex expands the capacity for critical thinking, a corresponding deepening of the spiritual faculty brings far greater capacity for nuanced moral reasoning. A recent functional magnetic resonance imaging (brain imaging) study reveals that a teen who handles stress through spiritual engagement shows reduced blood flow to the areas of the brain associated with craving (insula and striatum) and increased blood flow in the regions associated with perception (occipital

and parietal cortex), reflecting a more optimal use of the brain.

In fact, for every major development task from early childhood through adolescence, spirituality brings a positive structure to development (see chart on page XX). Too often, we focus exclusively on the "instrumental self" — on building skills for school and careers. But all of us run deeper than this. When we focus on "the sacred self" instead, we move from a focus on talent development and personal gain to a focus on our personal calling and societal contribution. We move from aiming to please others and meeting our own needs to expressing love and supporting growth. We begin to see ourselves not as isolated individuals but as people deeply connected to the world.

## The Optimal School Environment

Independent schools are uniquely positioned to engage a developmental model that puts spirituality at the hub, given that the intentions, interest, and human infrastructure already exist in many schools. Among those foundational elements: the emphasis on teacher-student relationships, advisor circles, school-wide cultural values, nature as experiential classroom and teacher, and the focus on the natural "teleology" of each student to emerge as his or her fullest self.

So much of the independent school's child-centered educational mission, philosophy, curricula, and sense of community create a foundation for more explicit attention to spiritual development. For example, the strong commitment to cultivating a child's respect for nature through experiential learning and discussion fosters a child's deep relationship with nature and all living beings as something more than instrumental or practical. It's not just that you feed a dog so it will like you; there is ample evidence that people and animals form loving relationships that, in children, deepen their experience of mutual empathy and compassion. These relationships are real. In the class discussions with

young children about literature, we can also acknowledge this shared commonality with other living beings, these feelings of empathy for animals or insects or flowers, as real and deeply human: a facet of our spiritual selves. This isn't a "childlike" quality, but an enlightened human quality that we can nurture lifelong.

Friendship offers another arena in which we can explicitly talk about and practice spiritual values of compassion, acceptance, and right action — talking things out, working through difficulties — shifting from a stance of judgment to a stance of encouragement. Through advisement circles or dorm meetings, we can engage students' higher relational and spiritual values. Through the same quality of experiential learning that has us take young children on nature walks, we can support their forays into interpersonal relationships — not as a matter of "tolerating" the kid who is different, or short-tempered, or even annoying, but of developing the capacity to accept and appreciate differences in others, to encourage and get behind one other and work these things out.

For educators and parents alike, an understanding of spiritual developmental through childhood and adolescence can transform how we see and respond to children's questions and inevitable challenges. We can hear their big questions and consider their observations as windows into their own deep process of spiritual awakening, struggle, and growth. When kids of any age wonder about meaning and purpose, they are engaging in the most important work — the formation of their inner life — and that merits discussion in courses on literature, history, and the arts, and in sports and advisory sessions.

Like all human faculties, the spiritual faculty plays at different volumes for different people, but we all have it and it is central to our nature. Nevertheless, spiritual perception and integration into daily life is fundamental for all children — and crucial in helping them set their bearings for life.

## Spiritual Multilingualism

Science normalizes the discussion of spirituality, broadening the foundation beyond religion yet also holding room and valuing multiple faith traditions — a *spiritual multilingualism* essential for children to thrive in the pluralistic, diverse, global community. Spiritual multilingualism broadens children's access to a world of sacred experience and inspiration. There are numerous ways that a school can reflect upon its spiritual life and offer spiritual support within its own culture and language, consistent with its mission statement. Language, right action, and reflection are simple places to start.

Ideas become real to a child if there is language to talk about them and if we express interest. The spiritual underpinnings of current events, history, and literature are no different. They are an essential part of the larger human story from which a child draws insight and inspiration to craft a personal spirituality. A child can attune to spiritual commonalities at a young age if we speak of them and provide the opportunities to experience them. We let things go by saying that "this group of people celebrate this holiday" or "that groups holds this view of the sacred world, and others see it and practice differently"; rather, we should aim to help children identify in their own hearts a personal experience that might connect through these traditions. So many holidays and observances share a common thematic thread that is spiritual by nature: the sacredness of family; the celebration of birth; rites of passage; rituals of death and mourning; and concepts of forgiveness, redemption, and spiritual renewal.

In one study, a team of Harvard University psychologists found that by age six children already have developed a sense of "in-group versus out-group" — *my God is better than your God* — perceptions around the names of the higher power. In controlled experiments, children as young as age six rated "God" as named by their faith as more omniscient than "God" as named by another geographically

remote unfamiliar faith. The early mental packaging of a child's natural spirituality means that if we genuinely want them to have respect and appreciation for natural spirituality in other people and cultures, we must cultivate from an early age spirituality that is both multilingual and multicultural. This "many faces, many names" perspective is the opposite of religious intolerance and all other destructive "isms." Well before kindergarten, but certainly by elementary school, kids are primed to want to learn about spiritual expression, and they are hungry to learn. In our classrooms and school communities we can offer children a window into the spiritual expressions of other families, peoples, and cultures.

## Leadership in the School Community and Classroom

Independent schools have long been recognized for their commitment to the whole child, with mission statements that emphasize core values and relationships that respect the natural development of both the mind and heart. In ongoing discussions with faculty and parents, school heads can include consideration for spiritual development as an acknowledged component of mission, program, instruction, and school community.

Perhaps the finest hallmark of independent schools' child-centered mission is the level of faculty reflection and collaboration regarding innovation for the betterment of the students. In turning to spiritual development: faculty meetings can include guided discussions around where spirituality already is alive and well in the program and community. Faculty can discuss the implications of acknowledging the role of spiritual development and offer further ways to support students to be more fulfilled, given to meaning and purpose and calling based upon a personal spiritual hub. Like so many other rich student-faculty interactions, spiritual engagement can be a child-centered exploration. Faculty can collaborate innovatively regarding when and how a faculty member responds in

a child-centered discussion initiated by the child’s own questions, hunger, or struggle that is spiritually based.

Science has revealed a vivid picture of inborn, natural spirituality in children, with clear implications for how we can support the development of that spirituality. My aim in writing *The Spiritual Child* is to lay plain those scientific findings so educators and parents can understand this great resource in children *and* learn how to encourage and support it. Now that we know there is nothing more profoundly beneficial to children than to foster their innate spirituality, we can begin to incorporate this important information more purposefully into education, from mission statements to classroom instruction and school culture.

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**Pull Quote**

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**Spirituality as Developmental Hub**

A Spiritual Core Shapes Overall Development for Meaning, Purpose, Calling, and Connection

Developmental Task	With Spiritual Core	Without Spiritual Core
Self Is	Inherent Worth	Abilities Based
Identity	Meaning and Purpose	Acquiring Success
Work	Calling & Contribution	Talents & Gains
Relationships	Sacred, Share Love, and Grow	Pleasing, Meet Needs
Path	Buoyed Up and Guided	Unsure, Instrumental
Place in World	Always Connected	Ultimately Alone
Existential Reality	Purposeful World	Random World
Nature of Reality	Love, Life-giving	Unknown
Good Events	Blessings	Deserved, Luck
Bad Events	Opportunities, Learning	Random, Failure

# Five Ways to Welcome a Child's Spiritual Self to the School Experience

## The To-Be List

One of the first things we introduce first-graders to is the “day planner.” We always talk about the “to-do list.” What if we said that in addition to everything we’re going to do today we are going to take equal time to talk about what we are going to *be* today. Each day we make a “to-do” list and a “to-be” list, and the “to-be” list gets as much attention, authority, and legitimacy as the “to-do” list.

## Put Mindfulness into Practice

Mindfulness practices have become commonplace in many schools as a tool for emotion regulation or strengthening attentional skills. Instead of focusing narrowly on practicing mindfulness for skill building, it’s time we put mindfulness into practice throughout the day: in a child’s sense of self, sense of others, the space we cocreate and their sense of themselves in relation to the ultimate goodness of life, and, in religious schools, God — in whatever language refers to the life force that sustains us. Used this way, mindfulness is a gateway to spiritual relationship and a spiritual life.

## Higher-Self Visualization

A child can learn to be in touch with her or his “higher self,” to call upon the higher self to make choices and see the situation from the “mountain-top.” This can be taught. Moments of quiet, often with mindfulness, can set a stage for a visualization around the higher self. Once the student has the sense of her or his higher self, a teacher might issue the invitation, “Ask your higher self what you feel called to do, what moves you most

deeply?” Or “Ask your higher self for a view of this conflict and how you might best respond?”

## I-to-I: Interpersonal Mindfulness

In small groups or as a class, have students identify qualities they appreciate, respect, or admire in another student. Beginning with “I appreciate...” or “I respect...” or any other words of affirmation or encouragement, have each student say or write an encouragement to be shared with the classmate. This opens students to a dialog with their own higher self and the power to bring that self into relationship with others.

## Drawing the Road of Life

A child can be supported to identify a felt sense of greater guidance or bigger purpose to life in hard times. A child can see all of life as valuable, both the wanted and unwanted, as part of their precious life. Ask the child to draw an episode along the “road of life,” when “because one door closed shut (perhaps quite unexpectedly and out of control), another door could open (perhaps equally outside one’s control).” Then invite the child to consider if she or he were supported or guided in this moment, perhaps through other people who showed up. Did something unexpected happen? “Did you feel helped, or a sense of guidance, and if so, where did it come from? Draw that into your picture. Was there a gift in this experience — a new relationship, a new understanding, a new feeling about yourself or others? Adapting this child-centered view may open the opportunity for very deep views of life.