

Tips for Nurturing Spirituality in Children and Teens



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Why teach children about spirituality?

Teaching our children to be spiritual beings is a great way to develop a deeper connection with them. Children want to know who they are and that they have a connection to something greater than themselves, whether that be God, the universe, nature, the force or whatever you want to call it. When I talk about spirituality, I am referring to the real essence of who we are. Developing spirituality is a lifetime journey of self-discovery. It is about opening our hearts and finding our true purpose in life. Spirituality is about our attitudes, values and our practices; about the things that motivate us at the very deepest levels of our being.

I think that I am luckier than most because although I grew up with one particular religion in my family, my parents let me experience other religions and encouraged me to learn about other cultures and beliefs. I've read the old and new testaments and the books of almost every major religion on the face of the planet. I grew up in south Florida with Native American friends and learned many wonderful things from them about nature and being connected. One tribal story teller told me of the march of the plains Indians to the Florida everglades. He said that the army believed that those who did not die along the way would soon die in the swamps because they had no experience in that environment and would be ill prepared to survive. He said that what they did not understand is that if you are connected to nature, you are connected to nature no matter where you find yourself and nature and the spirits will tell you how to survive. Those Indians integrated into the Seminole Tribes and flourished in the Everglades.

What fascinated me most when learning about other religions and beliefs was how alike they all are, how many stories they have in common such as creation stories and the flood story and many others. I discovered that underlying the basic tenants of almost every major religion on the planet are the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, the Master of Masters of ancient Egypt. The knowledge of the Law of Attraction comes from the Hermetic Principles. Learning all these new things gave me a better, deeper understanding of my own religion. And I've never lost that sense of connectedness with Everything and my wonder with the world around me.

Children are actually born spiritual. They have such a sense of fascination and awe of the world around them. You can see it on their faces when presented with something they've never seen before. Children retain that sense of awe until they start school where that aspect of their being is altered by the rules, the curriculum and the beliefs of their teachers and peers. Before school they tend to live in the present moment, they love unconditionally, and they take in everything they come in contact with.

There are many things that you can do with children and teenagers to help them remain connected to their spirituality, none of which conflict with any religious beliefs in your family. While spirituality is inherent in religion, it is not dependent upon religion. For the purpose of this discussion, I am talking about spirituality outside of religion. If your family is religious, you will be able to integrate any of the suggestions into your beliefs and practices.

Here are a few ideas:

1. **Set an intention.** First thing in the morning have everyone in your family set their intention for the day. This is an important practice in the Law of Attraction. Your intention is what guides you on your journey and as parents, it is in your own best interest to help your children have good intentions. Have them state their intention, for example, *I intend to be mindful in school today*, or *I intend to have a happy day*. At the end of the day, you can ask them if the day turned out as they intended it to. If not, ask them where it went off track and what they could have done differently.
2. **Gratitude journal.** Every day, preferably in the evening, everyone in the family should write down at least one thing they are grateful for. It can be anything from being happy for being alive, to thanking another family member for something they have done for them. Or have everyone state what they are grateful for during dinner if you eat together as a family. It's a great conversation starter and creates a closer bond between family members.
3. **Guided visualization.** Children are very visual so guided visualizations or meditations work great. Through guided visualizations you can create healthy, thought provoking images to transform negativity into positive

affirmations. Some of the benefits of guided visualizations are relief of stress and anxiety, decreasing panic attacks, boosting self esteem, learning to use introspection to find answers, and provides opportunities for children to connect with themselves on deeper levels.

It is best to use guided visualization when you can create quiet time with no interruptions. Before bed is a good time, after or instead of reading, use guided visualization to calm everyone down and put them in the space to have good dreams. Include setting an intention to remember their dreams prior to the visualization. Then ask them about their dreams in the morning.

4. **Martial Arts.** As odd as this sounds, martial arts actually emphasizes self control, respect and compassion. I especially like Tai Chi which is wonderful for teenagers. Some years ago I had a client in foster care that was very angry. I took him to a Tai Chi class in hopes of providing an outlet for that anger. Because Tai Chi is a traditional martial art based on non-aggression and teaches discipline and self control, he learned that it is a more powerful use of energy to deflect rather than attack. It was a valuable lesson that stayed with both of us to this day.

There are many good benefits with martial arts. In addition to learning self control and discipline, martial arts boosts self esteem and confidence, it provides a tool to channel anger, it is great exercise and increases a child's sense of his own physicality.

5. **Yoga.** Yoga brings about inner peace and sets up the mind for stimulation. Yoga is also a good way to increase children's awareness of their own bodies, aides their sense of balance, provides relaxation and opportunities to be introspective. It also reduces stress and lowers anxiety levels.

6. **Arts and Crafts.** Any form of arts and crafts is a great way to explore spirituality because it provides children opportunities to be creative and use their imaginations. Did you know that Albert Einstein believed that one's imagination is a more important indicator of one's intelligence than their knowledge?

Art can also be used to express our deepest feelings in a way that is safer than verbal communication. Art is an excellent therapeutic tool because children can draw those emotions that they have no words for or are afraid of saying out loud. Children tell the truth through their art.

7. **Explore nature.** Teach children about transformation by learning about butterflies; teach them about interconnectedness of life by talking about ecosystems while hiking in the forest or the desert or playing on the beach; teach them about conservation by picking up trash wherever you are. You can have nighttime picnics and gaze at the stars or have daytime picnics and tell stories about what life was like in your neighborhood before civilization moved in. There are endless ways to teach children about the universe and their place in it through the exploration of nature.

8. **Music.** Music was important in my family. When I was a young girl, and I'm about to date myself here, there was a show on television called Sing Along With Mitch. We watched that show as a family and sang along to all the songs. It was silly but we had a lot of fun as a family and I have great memories of that time. Studies are being done that show that music has powerful and positive effects on several dimensions of well being.

9. **Community Service.** Volunteering for a community service project can provide children and teens with a broader understanding of how they fit in the world. It helps them develop compassion and empathy for others and find gratitude that their own circumstances are different than others. Community service allows kids to learn what it means to be in service of others and to find a sense of satisfaction that they did something for someone else with no other benefit for themselves.

10. **Study spirituality.** Read books/magazines about spirituality or watch movies about spirituality and discuss them as a family.

Keeping teenagers engaged in spiritual practices.

I was asked recently about how to keep teenagers engaged in spiritual practices. It's a good question because by the time they are teenagers, many kids have developed a sense of "duality," that is to say concepts of *right and wrong*, *either/or*, *self or nonself*, and so on. If they have been exposed to spiritual practices from when they were young, they won't lose that because they will have come to understand that everyone and everything in the universe is connected with everyone and everything else. However, even if they have never explored spirituality before it isn't that difficult to engage teenagers in spiritual exercises.



While working in a foster care residential setting, I provided my teen clients with many experiences that helped them realize their connections to something greater than themselves. I did simple, easy things. For example, we saw a television program about black holes. They seemed really interested so I arranged to take them to visit with an astronomy professor at California Institute of Technology. We spent two of the most interesting hours with him. The boys were fascinated and asked many great questions. At one point, the professor turned to me and said that for a moment he forgot that he wasn't teaching one of his classes; he was amazed at the depth of the boys' interest and the level of questions they asked. All this came from watching a television show.

In an effort to change the energy in that residential setting, I invited in an ethnomusicologist who worked with the boys to create a personal treatment plan using music they liked to help them cope with anger, moodiness, anxiety and even panic attacks. From the office I played ambient music throughout the house, mostly Bach and Beethoven. We were amazed at the overwhelming positive impact on the boys' behavior. I also purchased some inexpensive musical instruments so we could have jams and create our own music. It was fun and boys and staff alike loved those experiences.

To teach the boys about awareness of their environment, I shared something I learned growing up from one of my Seminole friends; how to expand their awareness. We sat in the backyard and focused on the sounds around us. Then we expanded our focus to sounds that were further away, and once we identified those, we searched out sounds that were even further away. Until we reached the edge of

our ability to determine the sounds. I told them that I had been taught that this is the way to know what is coming into your immediate environment from far away. It isn't a mystery how people know that someone or something is coming toward them, they simply focus on it and track its progress. The boys often spent time practicing this and it was fun to watch them have contests with each other to see who could hear sounds from the longest distance.

Why should you encourage children to develop their spirituality?

Because the emotional and physical benefits to their lives are priceless; because it can provide them with a sense of purpose, help them figure out what they are passionate about. All of these things can promote health by relieving stress and anxiety as well as help children open their hearts and develop compassion and empathy. All of these benefits lead to healthy adulthood with healthy relationships.

The ways to nurture spirituality in children is endless, limited only by your imagination!



Photo by GeoAnn

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