



Nurturing Spirituality in Under Fives

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Claire and Gaynor spoke at the 2008 Children's Ministry Conference in Eastbourne. Here is the basis of their presentation.

They work together in a voluntary capacity with their vision for supporting and praying for parent toddler groups.

See the website for more information about how this initiative has grown - www.ptgroupstogether.org.uk

You can buy the CD recording of the 2008 presentation from Children's Ministry website www.childrensministry.co.uk (see Conference pages)



'How does an understanding of the spiritual nature of children help in our approach to welcoming, nurturing and teaching them? Practical ideas are offered for welcoming, storytelling, worship and play (with references to 'Godly Play') as we appreciate a child's capacity for profound experience and insight from an early age.'

Welcome to this session on the spiritual nature of children and how to nurture them. We are going to explore the term 'Spirituality' and then go on to the Spirit of the child that Jesus recognised and cherished.

Then we'll ask some fundamental questions raising issues for church as we consider how to help children flourish spiritually and we'll end with practical examples for ourselves as Children's workers.

Prayer

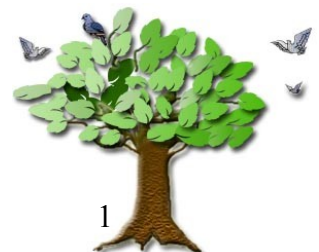
Let's start at the beginning....in Genesis 2:7...***'Lord God formed the Man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.'***

Isn't it wonderful that of all of God's creation, God chose to **breath**e life into man and man alone! We can see God's work in nature, in the rhythms and beauty of all creation **but God breathed life into the clay that formed us**. So there is something of the essence of God's spirit in all humanity and we are made in His likeness.

The term spirituality comes from a word meaning breath – 'ruach '

Human beings are spiritual because the breath of God is within us. Our spirit needs to find its spiritual resting place. It needs to find home. It needs to relate to its Creator. Humanity is rather like the birds of the air fluttering in the sky seeking rest. Through Christ we can relate to the divine and find rest in the branches of the tree of life, the Kingdom of God here, now and for eternity. God has planted or breathed this quest for home into our spiritual identity

' He as also set eternity in the hearts of men' (Ecc. 1 3:11)



So what is 'Spirituality?'

I want to reassure you that things spiritual have a substantial reality in this material world. Spirituality is not just a floaty touchy feely sort of add on that compliments the theology. The term has significance in our Christian experience because *our identity is Spirit-born...*

It seems these days that the word '*Spirituality*' has been so much linked with eastern or alternative experiences as people seek truth, integrity and meaning to life that as Christians we have become cautious of using it.

Yet our Spirituality is the essential core of what it is to be human, to have an identity in Christ and to experience and relate to God. It's who we are and how we tick. It's the way God made us to be.

Spirituality is a big piece in the jigsaw of life and if we don't see it, the picture won't make sense.



So what is the spiritual nature of the child? Should we set it apart from that of adults? Perhaps there is no differentiation needed between Children's Spirituality and Spirituality generally?

How do we perceive the spirituality of children? Is it a preliminary forming stage that leads to grow to full adult maturity, a sort of waiting room until we find our feet and can articulate in words what makes us tick? Or is it the reality of being human that means that even as we are known in the womb when God knit us together, (Psalm 139) we have that innate spiritual relationship with God from our very beginning.

Spirituality is a quality that all of us have - older, younger, bigger, and smaller. But it's also difficult to pin down, especially when we've been trained and educated into more logical ways of thinking and learning. The Holy Spirit is dynamic and cannot be harnessed. He goes where He will.

Not just God talk

Spirituality is not limited to talking about God, using special language or going to church or perhaps feeling more holy than others who don't express or worship in a certain way. It's expressed in a rich kaleidoscope of imaginings, religious experiences, and everyday chatter blending the mystery with the ordinary.

It's not just the prerogative of those who can form speech and express themselves in language. It is the experience of being human. So we need to recognize the spiritual needs and expression of the baby, the toddler and the young child before or beyond language and cognitive understanding although responding and coming into a trusting relationship with Christ and what he has done for us marks the step into Christian faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within us.

In the under fives spirituality it is about the simple things of the everyday like the sight of snow, the feel of a rabbit's fur, the smell of a warm cake, the sense of being cuddled or gazing up into the night sky, or the canopy of leaves over the roof of a home built garden den or the stillness of a dead muse found in the woods.

Everyday experiences and concerns about us, other people and the universe can lead naturally to the awe and wonder and questioning which are doors to spiritual

expression and growth. This sort of wondering needs guidance into the Truth and relationship with a loving God through Jesus Christ.

So when're bringing up our own children or working or welcoming others, how do we perceive and nurture children and help their spiritual journey of discovery?

Do we value their spiritual identity and help it blossom? Do we try to be children and family friendly but still have residual obstacles in our understanding?

Do we through the best of intentions, try to entertain but end up patronizing little children as we invite them to 'perform' for us and forget that whilst they are sponges ready to absorb so many new experiences, they are not empty vessels that adults need to fill.

Do we try to educate it or half listen or interpret with adult thinking or do we support and nurture it?

Is there a risk of squashing or smothering it with the best of intentions? Do we see it as something that can have deeper insight than our own? How do we teach and nurture together?

Perhaps our first lesson as adults is to **listen** to children and to **value** what they show us, to play and walk with the child and share in what they feel, see, notice, encounter; observe with joy, awe and wonder, thrill and delight, sorrow and sadness the simple wondering through play, questions and emotions often beyond words.

Beyond words...

Let us not limit our expectations of a child's capacity and need for spiritual nurturing as well as the other aspects society (in the UK) is keen to develop... moral, physical, emotional, educational developmental in ALL respects.

Kathryn Copsey Director of the CURBS (Children in Urban Situations) project, sums it up when she says 'that this recognition (that children are spiritually aware) means we approach children with reverence'. It will impact the way we view and work with our children.

Listen to this from Luke 9:46-48

'An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."

Jesus brought a child into the midst of the grown up huddle. He stood the child beside him. Picture the scene. Jesus is affirming this child at the heart of the gathering.

In those days, this reference to children would have been mind-blowing to the disciples as Jesus raised the status of a child. The followers of Jesus couldn't be bothered with children! They didn't even pretend to like or to want them anywhere near Jesus! But



when Jesus saw their attitudes he was indignant and quick to point out that the qualities of a child are the key to the Kingdom of God.

Children are like a key, a door, with which to enter and a window or a lens through which to glimpse the Kingdom of God. Children aren't just a parable of the Kingdom. They are not just its future members. Jesus is clear about their place. The Kingdom belongs to them (10 v14). Again, he takes them literally and physically to the centre of his body and blesses them.

So as Children's workers and teachers, as Church, how can we walk with children in their spiritual journeying. How do we walk hand in hand with them as we wonder together?

What are the essential foundations for nurturing children?

LET'S TALK ABOUT YOU.

As a member of this team, it's important to realise just how fundamental and essential your role is in the on-going life of the Church and in the nurturing of its children. If the Church fails here it is ground that is very hard to make up.

If you can make this an enjoyable time for the children – the best hour of their week – while imparting the truths of God and do it with excellence, do you think this will go unnoticed by the parents or by the Lord. We must respect the spiritual integrity of children and remember the status Jesus gave children.

Nurturing spirituality in under 5s out of choice, needs to be done hand in hand with the Church.

It must be noticed that there is a direct correlation between 'my passion for God and my passion for the work in sharing the things of Jesus.'

A Crèche?

This rather implies a baby sitting service which it is not
You need to remind yourself – and each other – that 'I am here to pass on the faith.'
Deut.6 1-9.

What is your vision – a mission statement for your group?

E.g. 'A safe environment where children and parents/carers can make friends and be introduced to the love of Jesus.'

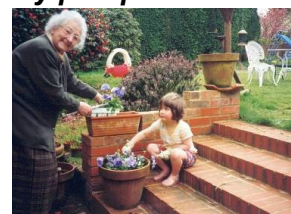
This is reflected in your decision making and when the hard time comes, as they do sometimes, this vision keeps you going.

Foundations are so important and it's wonderful to think that the Bible is there right at the introduction to Church life.

Christian Researcher George Barna says,

'The bottom line is that a person's moral foundation is either based upon Christian spirituality and God's Word, or it is based on worldly perspectives.'

Understand that Kids need Jesus; parents need Jesus, Carers, and Grandparents need Jesus. **There is a Divine imperative.**



Be encouraged, because 4 out of 5 young people want to have a closer relationship with God as a cornerstone in their lives.

Crèche and Toddler groups provide a terrific window of opportunity for two, three perhaps four years for us to share our lives and our faith with our families.

As workers with the Under 5s, we should not stand as islands, slightly separate from the rest of Church life – be regarded as the slightly odd ones with puppets, bulging cupboards at home and paint in the hair! The sort of person who can be found in skips, rummaging!

We are the foundation builders, if we take this job as seriously as it needs.

In **1998 the Fanfare Project** set out ten practical goals for churches. They were criticized for being too simplistic, but we all need to ask ourselves are we practising these goals in our own churches for the children and their parents;

1. We will make you welcome
2. We will be family friendly
3. We will make sure you can hear clearly
4. We will be practical and relevant
5. We will help you explore answers to your questions
6. We will offer you time to stop and think
7. We will help you make sense of the Bible and who Jesus is.
8. We will make sure your visit is helpful and challenging
9. We will help you discover for yourself God's love and forgiveness
10. We will offer you the chance to make a new start

Where do you fit, in the over all strategy of your Church? This is an important question, one that you have the right to ask of your elders and expect a clear answer. Do you have an elder, deacon or member of the PCC that you relate to or who is assigned to you? Encourage them to turn up occasionally.

Let them know what is happening in your group. We often complain if something is wrong, but remember to tell them about the great things that take place within the group - the good conversation you had with a Gran or Mum - the couple that came into Church for the first time last Sunday.

Keep them informed.

Ask for a spot in the Church prayer meeting.

How about putting photographs of the Children's Workers up on display. Let's honour them.

Important Points are:-
Agreed Aims.

1. A trained and committed team. Build good team relationships. Model the Church as Jesus intended, 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you have love one for another.' slide

2. Integrated leadership crèche – Toddlers –Sunday School – Rainbows- etc. Pass families on.

3. Special events to integrate people to further nurture the family
(for ideas, see Seminar notes on 'Connecting with the Community')

4. Identify your faith sharers. DON'T put them on the coffee rota!
Identify people's giftings, place round pegs in round holes then encourage each other.

Are we using the expertise in the Church for pre-visits before dedication, thanks giving services, or Christenings? Make them count. Hospital visits, new babies or in the event of the death of a baby.

Do you meet to pray as a team, not your planning meeting, but just to bring the children and specific people and situations before the Lord.

Do you ever fast for your work?

Pray with other children's workers, we are not in competition with each other, learn from and support each other.

I would recommend you putting out a prayer letter once in a while to your 'PRAYERS' An Ephraim letter. Colossians 4:12-13.

And for the children:

Excellence in all things.

They and the mums should sense you care deeply about them and about the work.

A good Bible. Think about purchasing:

The Baby Bible. Pub. Faith Kidz ISBN 0-78140-076-7

The Toddler Bible

The Praise Bible. Pub. Waterbrook Press ISBN 1-57856-037-3

Music and Movement

Meaningful Songs - 'Must Have Music!'

1. God's Wonderful World
2. Thank you God for Snails
3. Jumping for God

All of these are by **Julia Plaut**. A lot of them are based on Scripture and all of them are wonderful!

Little Kids Praise – Spring Harvest. Several of these.

Get hold of the earlier ones if you can, they are very good. These CDs are released every year after Spring Harvest.

CDs by Ishmael.

Choose carefully, make sure the songs are not too fast, be repeated a little mouth can't form words if the songs need to be sung too quickly.

Choose songs that don't use too many words which can then be repeated

Inter active Prayer, Thank you God for.....

'101 ideas for creative prayer.' Excellent book

100 Creative ideas for prayers for children

Take home a 'grace' a 'goodnight prayer' a 'prayer for someone who is ill' a 'thank you prayer'

These are a tiny selection of what is available. You **MUST** do your homework. Spend time in your local Christian bookshops and a secular book shops to see what's around, what is new. We are very privileged to have such a choice.

Why not get together with a few Sunday Schools / crèches / Toddler groups etc. and ask your Christian book shop to stay open late one evening, take along some doughnuts and ask if they'll make the coffee!! If they know their stock, they will be able to make valid suggestions for you and then you can spend time browsing the shelves. It's a good evening!

What is your relationship with your Christian parents?

You will have to be sensitive, but part of your responsibility may be to get alongside them and encourage them to have family Quiet Times.

Fewer than 10% of parents who regularly attend Church with their kids, read the Bible together, pray together.

We can play a part in changing for the better family devotion times and who knows the repercussion this may have in the life of each child, family and the Church itself.

Godly Play (Insights from Claire Wells)

So much of what I have learned about the Spirituality of children has come through learning and experiencing 'Godly Play'.

Godly Play is a method of telling Bible stories, or presenting parables or lessons about religious traditions.

It invites listeners into the stories and encourages them to connect the stories with personal experience.

Godly Play is a non-coercive way to encourage children to move into larger dimensions of belief and faith, through wondering questions and open-ended response time and a sort of circle time dynamic that mirrors elements of worship and rhythm, symbolism..

It is a way of preparing children to join in the worship and life of their congregations as they develop a deeper understanding of stories, symbols and rites.

Godly Play is one of several variations of the Montessori tradition of religious education and has been developed in the United States by Dr Jerome Berryman

It uses beautifully made objects inviting play and creating that sense of awe and reverence as children see and hear a story unfold, then wonder about it and respond in their own way.

Website references will help you to find out more about Godly Play and I would recommend the courses offered around the country. The UK website is a good place to start. The book ***'The Spirit of the Child' by David Hay and Rebecca Nye*** is highly recommended if you want to go deeper into the issues for children and I would recommend that if you hear of a presentation by Dr Rebecca Nye on her conversations with children as part of her research into the spirituality of children, (The Children's Spirituality project 1994-1997, UK) do try and go..

Godly Play has helped me to walk with a child to wonder about God at their pace and to be at ease with questions I can't always answer and which we can wonder about together. It doesn't 'cross all the t's and dot all the i's'. It may not be everyone's way



but I have seen it in action in nurturing spirituality and creating safe space for exploring truth. It offers a special safe and sacred space to explore.

I wonder...

Let's wonder together

I've wondered about that too...

Listening love

Time to listen and share.....

Be prepared to learn from a child!!

More details about Godly Play from the websites listed at the end.

Wondering cube

First you need to make your cube. There is a template for making a cube on our website.

- Draw out the template shape onto some card. (I sponge painted some blue card to create a cloudy sky effect.)
- Cut the template out and fold where necessary to form a cube. Do not assemble yet)
- Work out which face is the top and which are the sides.
- Add the words 'I wonder' to the top face and a star to show that this is the starter face'
- Then add the other words to other faces deciding which way up they should go on the side faces for easy reading.(I used 'pen-stitch' style font using black felt tipped pen)
- Cover the template with a layer of sticky backed plastic to protect it.
- Then assemble the cube adding more sticky backed plastic strips to secure the cube if you do not want it to be opened..

I wonder ... How ...? Why ...? If ...? Which ...?What



Other ideas for nurturing spirituality and experience:

Drawing and painting – free expression

Using our bodies as expression

Pictures, Play and role play/pretend

Imagination

Multi sensory experiences

Quietness, noisiness!

Puppets (in play and role play)

Pets

Exploring different materials sand, water, mud, earth, bubbles, goo

Small world play

Natural elements

Church festivals and cycles

Listening to children

Life and death (do we avoid difficult questions? because we don't have all the answers?)

Lateral thinking and feeling
 A developing sense of justice
 Questions and searching
 Children's Corner
 Worship or prayer boxes
 Treasure boxes
 Memory boxes
 Mini services
 Let's explore the church
 What is this for?
 Let's play church!
 Colours I see in Church
 Praying in colour
 Music and movement
 Songs and actions
 Eye level
 Names are so important
 Get down at their level (exploring the church/buildings from a child's height!)



Some References:

- 'The Spirit of the Child' (Revised Edition) David Hay with Rebecca Nye (pub. Harper Collins)
- 'From the Ground Up' Kathryn Copsey (Pub Brf)
- 'Understanding Children Understanding God' Ronni Lamont Pub SPCK
- 'Pretty Much Everything You Need To Know About Working with The Under Fives' Judith Wigley, (Pub SU)
- 'Learning Styles' Marlene LeFever (Kingsway)
- 'Godly Play' An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education' Jerome K. Berryman (Pub Augsburg)
- 'The Complete Guide to Godly Play' Volumes 1-6 (series of volumes) Jerome K. Berryman
- 'Leading Children' Penny Frank (pub. Children's Ministry)
- 'Their God is So Big Teaching Sunday School to Young Children' Stephanie Carmichael (Pub. Matthias Media)
- Mothers Union Series on Children leaflets (Prayer & Spirituality Unit)
- The Culham Institute
- The Stapleford Centre & The Re Site
- www.godlyplay.org.uk and www.godlyplay.com

- Music by Julia Plaut, Ischmael, Susie Poole, Spring Harvest Little Kids' Praise – shop around!