



Hide and Seek

What do we know about a child's spiritual life?

Children connect with God in amazing, unusual ways. Yet often, in churches, we try and train it out and 'normalise' them into our own form of spirituality. But how do children connect with the spiritual world? What do we need to pay attention to and what can we learn? Children's spirituality expert Rebecca Nye shares some of her wisdom...

When you look into the face of a child, what do you really see? Obviously, there are the physical characteristics: hair style, eye colour, skin tone, maybe even telltale traces of what they recently ate! You'll probably also be able to see what kind of mood they are in.

But, what can we know of their spirituality? Perhaps playing a game of hide and seek is a good analogy here. What we are looking for is certainly already 'there' somewhere, but it can be hidden in so many places, peeping with curiosity at our incapacity to notice it. Then, at other times, it can come looking for us, bringing aspects of our own spirituality out of hiding too. And it starts early; even as we gaze at a newborn, or at antenatal scan pictures, we are faced with a mysterious mixture of being and becoming, the hidden and the revealed, the least and the most potent. Wondering about a child's spirituality is a game you can never tire of.

I often struggle to explain my interest in children's spirituality when I meet new people. Sometimes they assume it must be about really unusual children – the exceptionally devout child or children with strange gifts, such as visions and prophecy. But although the spirituality of childhood deserves to be treated as a wondrous thing, there's every reason to see it as completely ordinary. Being human presents everyone, children and adults, with existential or spiritual issues, whether or not they are conscious, spoken or rejected. Jesus certainly takes the view that spiritual qualities are an everyday part of

childhood, urging his disciples to be more like children. In fact, it's fascinating that Jesus' advice for adults is always about the need to change, to move out of what's become their 'ordinary', whereas Jesus' treatment of children, welcoming and blessing them, is a celebration of what they are like already, just as they are.

This is a big clue for our 'game'. If you want to search for (and support) the spiritual life of children, you'll be most likely to find it in the ordinary, among the natural capacities and characteristics they already have, particularly in their most natural state of being: at play. We see this in Godly Play's approach to nurturing spirituality, an approach which provides children with the space, time and resources to play in ways that honour both the ordinariness and profundity of spiritual issues in their lives. Quite a bit of children's spirituality can be glimpsed in their attention to the storytelling and wondering in Godly Play, but far more still peeps out in their undisturbed play, creativity and fellowship that follows.

Children have their own sources of knowing God long before the information about God may become helpful to them

Where To Look

The question is, how can we train ourselves to recognise what's hiding under our noses? There are two approaches to this. First, it helps to have some sense of what to look out for – some of the hallmarks of child spirituality. And secondly, we need to know where to look: to be aware of the conditions in which children's spirituality reveals itself, and the conditions which force this to hide into the shadows.

Hidden Spirituality

A first hallmark then is this tendency for a child's spirituality to be hidden, or between the lines. Research with children confirms that they easily pick up how marginalised spirituality is in our culture. It's often about a kind of deep knowing which is not rational, visible, measurable or even explicable – the exact opposite of the education system's values that have such a shaped impact on their lives. And yet, when felt, it can be full of meaning, powerful and intensely real. Children can be unsure what to do about this: how it can be expressed and explored. They can be wary of things, such as religious language and 'answers' (doctrine), which seem to be trying to rationalise the spiritual, and make it all 'make sense'. Their instinct can be to steer a bit away from that, and access what they are wondering about, and what they know, in more undercover ways. For example, in response to many Bible stories, children will often draw or play out their favourite superhero's battle with some kind of baddie or monster, often to the dismay of the adults who assume that 'nothing has gone in today', especially compared to the child who dutifully reproduces a nice picture of the actual Bible story.

However, hidden in this hero / monster imagery may be a deep process of reflection about good and evil, order and chaos, meaning and meaningless, sacrifice and redemption. Similarly, it's interesting to look in a 'between the lines' way at what children draw or play in response to the Holy Week narrative. I often see pictures of their favourite animal in a meadow, an idealised 'house' or playing families, all things with no

surface connection to the story or its apparent theological 'point'. And yet, perhaps these are children's best ways of contemplating the gift of love? Clearing the *space* of the baggage of our educational culture so that children are free to *process* spiritual matters, rather than feel pressured to produce, or in fact merely reproduce things, can be a huge help towards finding out that spiritual life is a place of sanctuary and never-ending discovery.

An Abundance Of Spirituality

Another hallmark is childhood spirituality's very wide range and sheer abundance. I spent some time recently just sitting with small groups of children who were free to talk and play as they wished, for about half an hour in their school library. I noted down the themes which came up – it's a staggeringly broad list of spiritual issues:

- Facing fears
- Evil, dark or chaotic forces
- Sources of comfort and security and 'good' forces and power
- Being known / being lost or forgotten
- Feeling significantly connected to others
- The mystery being a child: awareness of change who I 'was' / 'am' / 'will be'
- The mystery of death and dying
- Unconventional ways of knowing – dreams, insights, premonitions, 'feeling in my bones', empathic understanding
- Explorations of what might be 'real' and 'true', and a sense of 'knowing / feeling' that is valid and powerful to them (but perhaps not to the rest of the world)
- Love and loss
- Material wealth versus 'spiritual' wealth – being happy or honest
- Making personal sacrifices
- The mystery of creation and 'before time'

It is definitely not confined to 'God talk' or what they have been taught about. Children have their own sources of knowing God and all manner of spiritual reality, long before the information *about* God and spiritual life may become helpful to them. But this abundance may be rather overwhelming for children, so it may be easier to look at this in more intimate conditions where, in many senses, there is shade rather than a spotlight, and where there is a genuine absence of anxiety or competition.

From a child's point of view, those who represent the Church and Christianity are into 'telling you stories to tell you what to believe'

Uncomfortable Spirituality

This wide range also means we need to be prepared to search and find spirituality beyond cosy examples of 'wonder and awe'. For example, with one group of three extremely lively five-year-old boys, I was made to promise, 'next time we come, *pleeeeeeeeeease* can we do death again, we really want to talk about dying and stuff'. In fact, there was a long break for the school holidays, but when we reconvened, they

remembered straight away and carried on where they'd left off! I did nothing, except provide the time and permission, showing that this was worthwhile.

As in my previous research, when I asked children who else takes an interest in their thoughts and feelings about this kinds of thing, they are stumped. From their point of view no one, least of all those who represent the Church and Christianity, is 'into' these things, or even listening. What 'those people' are into is 'telling you stories to tell you what to believe'. I think in most churches, this is no longer what adults are intending to do. What is significant though is that this is still what children perceive to be happening. We need to be even clearer in children's spiritual accompaniment about the relationships we cultivate, both with children and towards our faith, to avoid being cast as know-it-all teachers who have nothing more to learn, least of all from children. As Cavalletti observed, there should be only one teacher in the room: Christ.

Quiet Spirituality

A clear hallmark is that children's spiritual life is predominately non-verbal. Maybe this is also true for healthy spiritual life at any age, and as adults our spirituality can get hidden (that game again!) behind clever words. But in childhood this non-verbal quality is clear and can actually accentuate spiritual life, rather than limit it.

Studies have found that up to 30 per cent of adults report that their most significant, vivid spiritual experiences occurred in childhood, but that they never told anyone.

Interestingly, when adults finally speak about these varied experiences, with all the resources of an adult vocabulary and Christian knowledge, they say these tools add nothing at all to the original, non-verbal experience. I came across a stunning example of this recently, which also underlines the hallmark about how we need to search the full range of human experience, not just the nice bits of children's lives. A woman recalled how, despite having a very happy and Christian childhood, from the age of four, she had recurring moments of utter dread which could come out of nowhere. This dread was associated in her mind with spiders, which, for her, were an intense, non-verbal representation of sin. Her greatest fear was not just 'of spiders' (sin), but more specifically, that she might be buried alive under a swarm of spiders. In this non-verbal, symbolised way, this little girl was profoundly aware of the power of sin to be like a living death: a huge spiritual insight. It's easy to envisage this little girl freaking out whenever she saw a spider, with no one having a clue where her imagination was taking her with this. When children are as young as this, it is often impossible for us to know or for them to tell us very much. Their diminutive stature is no clue to the vast dimensions of their spiritual life, in which their imagination is a vital organ. It is important however, that we take seriously and trust how much spiritual work might be going on under the surface, especially in intense non-verbal reactions or through strong nonverbal images which bring the child and God closer together.

This means resisting our temptation to 'translate' this nonverbal spirituality into words, as if that clinches or improves on it. Recently, some children were invited to spend time making and decorating pots, inside and out, to explore various aspects of their personal and public spirituality. However, as the time came for these to be displayed, they were

horrified when they had to write about what these meant. As one ten-year-old child lamented, 'But my meaning is *in* the art, that's where it is, the mystery of it.'

So, what does all this mean for children and the Church? The psychologist Erik Erikson suggests, 'The most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.' Clearly this is not something we can afford to get wrong: our indifference towards or ignorance of children has grave consequences for them and us, as Jesus says, 'If anyone causes one of these little ones-those who believe in me-to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea'(Matthew 18:6).

However, the consequences of getting this right are also enormous. Janus Koczak, the children's rights champion and holocaust victim, said 'The child will have the leading role in humanity's spiritual renewal.' For this ever to be possible, we need to pay deep attention to children and their qualities. This is about more than just striving to recognise their spirituality – spotting this or supporting that; it is about being willing to learn from children, and for us to be radically transformed by them and their perspective. Children's ministry is more than work with children, it is a much wider task of helping the whole Church understand what it is about childhood that may help us all to enter the kingdom. Maybe a first step is to make space in your plans and activities to look with humility and greater attention at those children you work with this week, to seek the often hidden ways that children are closer to God than we are.

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