

To become like children

Young people spend a huge amount of time at school. How can we better support them while they're there? And what can we do to help schools?



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There is something special about the spiritual understanding children hold

Jesus said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Jesus has much to say about the spirituality of children, and this statement is one of the clearest. Whatever your understanding of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus clearly seems to be saying that there is something special about the spiritual understanding children hold. Research backs this up. Children under 11 experience the sacred more readily even than older children, and certainly more than adults, who have often been conditioned, or have conditioned themselves, to a certain ‘right way’ of considering the sacred.

Rebecca Nye, among others, has found that awareness of the spiritual is common and natural to children of all faiths and none (see *The Spirit of the Child* by David Hay with Rebecca Nye). Indeed, a child’s awareness and understanding of spirituality often impacts the adults around them, bringing something that challenges the adults’ expectations. You probably have your own experience of this. When was the last time your view of God was challenged or changed by something a child has said or done? Those of us who work regularly with children will know that they have moments of profundity that amaze us time and time again.

When did you have your most profound experience of the sacred? According to one study, around a quarter of adults reported that their most significant spiritual experience happened during childhood. This goes hand in hand with reports that the vast majority of believers today can trace this decision back to before they turned 18. Put this together with reports that suggest children who have a good spiritual understanding will be more resilient as teenagers and adults, are less likely to suffer from depression and more likely to have better emotional well-being, and we begin to build a picture of just how crucial it is that we encourage our children to develop their understanding of spirituality and their often very relational connection with the sacred.

With schools having their budgets squeezed, the devastating consequences are often the loss of subjects that can help our children build these connections and develop their spirituality: music, art and drama, among others. However, one very positive recent trend in our primary schools is the rise of ‘outdoor education’ with forest schools and the like.

Taking our children outdoors and getting their hands, knees and clothes dirty means less time at desks and on screens. It also gives them more opportunity to enjoy, recognise and revel in the sacred. It gives them a chance to notice the intricacies of a bird’s nest, the resilience of trees or to wonder at how quickly a tree grows from a seed to a 7-metre high behemoth. Just this weekend my family and I helped to plant more than 100 trees on our school field. We wrenched our two boys away from their screens and they loved the experience.

In *Spirituality as a Natural Part of Childhood*, Rebecca Nye says that children need three things to develop their spirituality, and they all apply at home, at church and at school: “Children need to be listened to, they need a safe space, with no agenda or judgement but with openness to hear what children have to say, the questions they have to ask and to join with them in their wonder.

“They need humble and respectful adults, those prepared to take part without their own agenda. Adults who are not approaching their work with children as an opportunity to inform or change a child’s point of view, but for the joy of getting a glimpse of the child’s view of the sacred and divine.

“And finally they need space: physical, emotional, auditory space. My own 9-year-old really struggles with Sunday school (and in fact school, church and other communal spaces like tennis club) because of the noise levels that often go hand in hand with groups of children in one space. Just this morning he had a short but very intense reaction to walking into the room where they hold Sunday school because of the noise. He’s an introvert with some sensitivity to noise levels and not many places in our world today cater for him. When we consider the spaces we hold for our children, we must try to ensure that these are safe spaces for all, whether they are loud and noisy or quiet and reserved.”

JENNI OSBORN

is head of further education studies at CYM.

Prayer and play



How have some schools' workers put this focus on children's spirituality into action? Here are some stories to inspire you.

Prayer spaces

Setting up a prayer space in your local school is an excellent way to help children reflect on and explore spirituality. The *prayer-spacesinschools.com* website is an excellent place to start finding out about the theory behind prayer spaces and to reflect on the benefits of these spaces for children's spirituality.

Former children's worker at Christ Church Spitalfields in East London, Alley Nichols, took a team into her local primary school to explore Christian prayer with the children and to set up a prayer space: "The school is a bright gem set just off the bustling Brick Lane within the diverse East End. This is a one-form entry school, with a significant Bengali Muslim community represented among the staff, children and families.

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Through music, art and drama, the children explored the power of God

"One summer, a group of volunteers created an engaging space for the children to come and explore what Christian prayer looks like. It was an exceptional privilege to discuss spirituality with each class while they interacted with the various creative resources in the room.

"What was remarkable was that this diverse group of people came together to engage in prayer, despite the variety of faiths expressed among its participants. It was incredible to witness how every person inquisitively explored the interactive space, asked poignant questions and reflected on what they experienced."

One of the team members commented: "The idea of a 'lone' space for children to be by themselves and pray to God seemed to really attract them. Perhaps the idea of being 'alone' is not something we have much of in our society where everyone is connected all the time, so perhaps this experience reached a deeper human need and instinct."

Godly Play

Godly Play is an approach to children's ministry and religious education developed by Jerome Berryman. Based on Montessori principles, it allows children to take the lead in their spiritual engagement and development (*godlyplay.uk*). Originally intended to be used in a church setting, many people are now using the practice in schools.

Susie Steel has been using Godly Play in a school setting for some time: "One day, when building the circle with a group of children at my school, I asked: 'Are you ready for the story?' Most children nodded or answered 'Yes', but one boy emphatically said 'No!'

"I turned to him, smiled, and waited a moment. 'Are you ready now?' I asked. He still said no. I waited a little longer, wondering what this was about. I asked again, and he replied no again. I then asked him gently why he was not ready. He looked around the room and pointed out that a boy who had been getting his medication had not yet joined the circle. So once the boy was in the circle I asked him again, and he said he was ready.

"I was fascinated by the way the circle patiently waited for him to be ready, even though most of them had not encountered Godly Play before. In the responding time this child wrote me a note covered in hearts. More and more in school situations I am noticing what I interpret as gratitude for the time and respect that is shown for children in Godly Play."

Spiritual sessions

Ruth Wills, a specialist in children's spirituality (see page 50), led a series of spirituality mornings with 33 children from Year 3 at a school in the north-west of England. The population of the school is multicultural and mainly represents children from a Muslim background: "The aim of these mornings was for the children to explore global issues and personal responses to them through music, art and drama sessions. The overall theme of the six mornings was 'water', and many aspects of spirituality were touched through the activities.

"Through music, art and drama, the children explored the power of God and heard the story of a child living in Africa who has to walk to collect water for the family. They also were given space to respond to the different stimuli they were engaging with.

"These responses included: 'God is everywhere, no matter if you are split up from others. I am important, no matter what religion you are or what you believe' and 'God made a planet for us to live on. God cares for people who have no water or money. Manchester has more clean water than Africa.' One child drew two pictures of the world, one with the words 'Africa doesn't have clean water' written on the shape of the continent."

Read more about Ruth's spirituality mornings at youthandchildrens.work/links.

What experiences have you had in creating spiritual spaces in schools, either using one of these practices or another method? Let us know on Facebook or Twitter @ycwmag.

Help children explore their spirituality

How can we put this into practice? Emma Hughes, a children's worker at St Richard's Church in Hanworth, shares some of the ideas they used when she and her team set up a prayer space in the local primary school, and describes how children engaged with them.

Starting out

It's important to calm the children down and get them ready to be still and reflect. This kind of spiritual practice might be alien to many children, so you will need to brief them about what they're going to take part in, and about the need to be quiet and respect others around them who are also engaging with the space. Tell them there will be a volunteer at each activity if they need any help, but they can move through the activities at their own pace.

Using a plasma ball

Set up a plasma ball (these are available fairly cheaply online) and provide lots of pencils and paper for the children to write or draw their thoughts. Ask them to think about how the plasma ball reminds them of God. In our space, one child drew a heart, while another depicted a world with arms around it and a third child drew a flower and wrote 'thank you' next to it.

Watching a bubble tube

Place a bubble tube at the centre of the space, together with Post-it notes and pens. (Like the plasma balls, you can get these fairly cheaply online, or you might be able to borrow one from someone in your church community, or from the school itself.) Encourage the children to write their prayers on the Post-its and stick them on the tube as they watch the bubbles rise up like their prayers.

As they spent time in our space, the children prayed for a variety of things, from needing help with school work and SATs to desiring a good job in the future; from giving thanks for family and pets to asking for forgiveness and healing. Some children prayed for world peace and for those who were sick or poor. One child wrote: "Dear God, thank you for making and loving us." Another wrote: "Please God help us to be kind and friendly." Another Post-it note read: "I would like my mum and dad to be happy." Another bore the prayer: "I wish I had more friends." The children also spent time thinking about what the bubbles meant. One wrote: "The bubbles spin around like mixed feelings." Another wrote: "Bubbles always get to the top. You will eventually reach the top [heaven]."

Using stones to reflect on sadness or anger

Place a large bowl of water on a table and arrange small stones around the bowl. Ask the children to think of a time someone made them feel sad or angry, and to project that hurt into a stone.

When they're ready, they should drop their stone into the bowl of water. If your bowl is transparent they can watch their stone (representing their sadness or anger) sink to the bottom.

I asked the children taking part in our space how they felt after they had done this, and lots of them said they felt happier afterwards. One child said there was a feeling of release. While still holding the stone in his hand, another said it was like God holding the world in his hands.

Living in a cardboard home

Provide lots of large cardboard boxes and some felt-tip pens. (You could get these from your local supermarket. Alternatively, if you have a shop that sells white goods nearby they may have large boxes available that once contained domestic appliances. People in your church community who have recently moved house might also be a good source for large boxes!) Encourage the children to climb into a box (if they are happy to do so; not every child will want to) and think about those who are homeless and live on the streets. The children can write their prayers for homeless people on the boxes with the felt-tip pens. One child wrote: "Dear God, keep them warm and safe. Amen."

Sitting in a prayer tent

Set up a small gazebo or tent somewhere in your space and fill it with spiritual stimuli, such as holding crosses or battery-operated candles. You don't need to have a volunteer in the tent, as this area is completely self-guided, allowing children the freedom to explore their thoughts in their own way. Tell them they can sit in the tent on their own and use anything in there to help them pray and reflect. I noticed one child who knelt by this space with a lit candle in front of him, his hands together and eyes closed, praying. I asked the school if they knew whether this child had a faith background, and they were not aware of any.

There is a wealth of ideas and guidance on setting up a prayer space on the Prayer Spaces in Schools website: prayerspacesinschools.com.

EMMA HUGHES

is children and families worker at St Richard's Church in Hanworth, Middlesex. This is adapted from an article written by Emma for the Diocese of London website.

Creating spaces

As we consider how best to create space, listen to and be open to a child's view of the sacred, the first question is: how will we plan our schools' work around this? The second is: what do the children I work with have to teach or show me about God? If our approach is always about us teaching, moulding and informing children we will miss out. We will miss the chance to become more childlike in our own spiritual understanding, and in doing so will lose an important opportunity to reconnect with the God we follow. If we consider the words of Jesus we read at the start, we may even miss the opportunity to enter the kingdom of heaven, and why would any of us want that?

- Look critically at your current practice. Are there times when we have squashed a child or young person's spiritual response? We may have done so by defining too narrowly any possible responses or promoting a 'right' answer over all other possibilities.

- How can we foster children's or young people's spirituality in our work?

- Where (physically, and through our sessions) can we provide space for children and young people to explore their spirituality?

- Can we provide this same space and freedom for staff to explore their responses?
