

Week 7. DANCING THE EVOLUTIONARY EDGE: CREATIVE, JOYOUS DISCOVERY!



EXCERPT FROM ARTICLE:

An Integral Approach to Parenting in the First Three Years of a Child's Life

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In considering early childhood spirituality there are a variety of ways in which we as parents can nurture our children at their specific developmental stage (working with Spirit as immanent), and *simultaneously* nurture their deeper essential self and parent within a more conscious field (working with Spirit as transcendent) by sinking into presence and resting in our deeper self as we relate to our children. Here some suggestions which touch on various definitions of spirituality:ⁱ

- Honoring our child's sovereignty, that which is deepest in him. Treating children with dignity and respect, taking them seriously.ⁱⁱ
- Embracing parenting as a great way to do the work of love in the world.
- Growing in discernment of and alertness to the subtle levels of communication that are present in the parent-child relationship (e.g. moods, emotional qualities, energetic variations, which make up non-verbal and non-gestured communication).
- Bringing uplifting and inspired music into the parent-child space. Music that speaks to the soul, be this Bach, bluegrass, meditative chants, or whatever it may be that our child enjoys and that lifts our soul and brings us to a contemplative, festive or otherwise deeper and more alive place.
- Giving careful consideration to the use of physical strength over the child: when is it truly necessary? When could other means of persuasion be used? When should the parent let go? By distinguishing between punitive force and protective force, we can ensure that in the rare occasions when we do engage physical strength over a child it is used for the protection and health of the child and others, and never as a method of punishment.

- Providing both challenge and support: directing one's child to stretch beyond what comes easily *and* embracing what is already there.
- Being attentive and responsive: the mind engaged but not at the expense of the heart. Listening with all one's senses and beyond. . . Listening and being present to the child, listening and being present to the space between oneself and the child.
- Attentive listening requires that we as parents are also present to ourselves, paying attention to any knee-jerk reactions arising within ourselves that may not support the well-being of the child, as well as tending to an integral care for our own person so that we are able to nourish and accompany another one.
- Taking the time to listen, to witness, and be present, should one's child mention a profound experience of any sort.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Integrating and acknowledging parenting as part of our practice. Bringing creative thought to questions such as: How can I bring meditation and prayer right into the space between and amongst my child and myself? How can I be receptive to the sacred in the midst of daily life, and like an alchemist, with utmost attention and care, become a part of the transformative possibilities inherent in any life situation? Meditation and relationship. . . changing diapers and prayer. . . Respect and cheerfulness amidst chaos and lack of sleep. . . . compassionate, calm firmness in the face of our child needing guidance, direction, or reassurance.
- Creating and facilitating learning experiences where the center of growth and motive lies within the child. One natural form of self-directed learning in a young child is creative play.
- Sitting back and not disturbing or interrupting a child when she is absorbed in creative activity.^{iv}
- Following the child during interactive play: watch, wait and wonder.^v Adults often feel like they need to entertain and initiate all the time. In relaxing this habit, we make space for a child's initiative, imagination and creativity to flourish.^{vi}
- Making use of any opportunity for children to grow in independence, confidence and responsibility, be this dressing themselves, making some simple choices or joining in daily activities. Children want to take part in adult life. From a young age on, a child will often want to help sweep or do the dishes, thrilled by the empowering experience of working side by side with his parent, and the sense of belonging this brings calls forth.

- Being attentive to which boundaries/limits are necessary for the physical safety and healthy psychological orientation of the child; and allowing ample space for children to explore and discover freely. This involves providing a balance between support and challenge to our children.
- Seeking out joyful excellence: a free flow between ennobling and voluntary exploration and the unfolding of human soul. Or as Steiner suggests, attempting as far as possible the “harmonizing of the spirit and the soul with the physical body.”^{vii}
- Making use of information and encouragement instead of blame/punishment or extravagant praise. A child cannot learn and defend herself at the same time. A child wants to learn. We can point out why things went wrong, got spilled or broken without making her feel like she gets disconnected from her parent when she makes a mistake or misunderstands a direction.^{viii}
- Supporting the unfolding of the child’s inherent potential, whatever that may be, rather than a specific projected or desired-for outcome by us as parents. Accompanying the child with the question: “Who are *you* and how can I help you to become that?”
- Regardless of whether we as parents decide to introduce our children to a particular religion or not, we can find ways in which a young child can discover and express feelings that have a spiritual quality to them, e.g. gratitude or care, and this in ways that are meaningful and fun for the child. When our daughter was 22 months old we began holding hands before every meal and simply saying “thank you” for the many things that had brought joy and goodness throughout the day. Adonia joined in enthusiastically and would often initiate or remind us of this simple ritual. A mother takes her 2 and a half year-old to church with her to light candles for those in need of blessings or as a gesture of thanks. Together they name who each candle is for or what each candle is expressing thanks for. Simple rituals and symbolism work well for young children whose consciousness resides in the magical realm.
- For a child’s spiritual development it can be very helpful to encourage self-awareness in an age-appropriate manner, for example, by working with her on the discernment of where she is coming from in all her actions—is she, for example, grounded or spinning away from her center?
- Invoking light and love for our young ones through prayer.
- If as parent one is committed to and healthily enfolded in a particular religion or spiritual practice, one can facilitate a young child’s entry into such spiritual experience in ways that are *attuned to his/her developmental stage*. This could be as simple as bringing the young child along when frequenting a church, temple, or mosque and allowing the sounds, smells and atmosphere to imbue the child. It is so important to ensure that these experiences are

positive and child-friendly. It is quite an oxymoron, for example, to hope that a young child will grow to appreciate and enjoy a form of worship and spiritual practice if s/he is told to be quiet and sit still for long periods of time, something that does not come easily to most young children and goes against their natural expression and needs. Here again, knowing one's child (developmental level, momentary state, temperament etc.) greatly facilitates knowing what the right balance between challenge and support is in any given situation. Where is a child's growing edge? For one it might be 5 minutes of sitting quietly and whispering softly, followed by 10 minutes of quietly walking around the place of worship, and then off to other adventures; for another it might mean bringing along coloring pens and paper while listening to the songs, chants, and words being uttered. We grow spiritually in freedom. Coercion does not encourage interest in spiritual matters. At the same time, by the age of 3-4 a child can understand the natural consequence that if s/he can't be quiet they need to leave the church or temple.

- As the child begins to take an increasing interest in listening to stories, one can tell stories of inspiring figures that embody qualities of the soul and the spirit.

These are a few of the many ways in which we can encourage an integral foundation in the very young child. At the core of them all is love. That simple, overarching, underlying, and penetrating force that evades definition yet is felt and known without a doubt when present, reaching into and reminding us of our true identity. As we accompany our little ones, seeking to honor and nurture their inner life, this love will take on many forms—laughter, joyfulness, excited discovery, clear guidance and structure, curious exploration, playful interactions, sincere appreciation, firm compassion, action—weaving its way into a foundation that honors and nurtures body, mind, soul, and spirit of the child as he grows into this world and begins to discover and express himself.

ⁱWilber distinguishes at least five definitions of spirituality (Wilber, 2000b & 2001): 1) The highest levels of any of the developmental lines; 2) The sum total of the highest levels of the developmental lines; 3) A separate developmental line; 4) An attitude (such as openness, love, trust, compassion) that one can have at any stage of development; 5) Peak experiences (state experiences), which are temporary and can occur at almost any age or stage.

ⁱⁱ This is symbolically reflected in India through the custom of greeting each other by placing the hands together and bowing slightly toward each other: "Namaste," or translated "I bow to the divinity in you".

ⁱⁱⁱ Tobin Hart in *The Secret Spiritual World of Children* (2003) writes sensitively and thoughtfully about how to recognize and nurture the deep connection children may experience, and how to help them integrate such experiences.

^{iv} Times when the child is self-regulated and self-directed are precious and important for its development! According to Neufeld (2004) the play that children need for healthy development is what he calls emergent play (rather than social play). Emergent play (or creative solitude), combined with a

sense of security, allows the child to venture forth into a world of imagination or creativity. Montessori emphasizes the importance of not interrupting a concentrated child. She saw such moments as “the moment of self-development.” (Lillard, 2005, p.265)

^v “Watch, Wait and Wonder” is a term borrowed from Wesner, Dowling and Johnson (1982), who used it to describe an infant-led approach that makes use of the deeper understanding of the critical elements of healthy infant socio-emotional development.

^{vi} George Downing, Professor of Clinical Psychology, enables parents to see for themselves where and how they might inhibit their child’s creative initiative through their habitual, often unconscious behavior with a method he has developed called Video-Microanalysis Therapy (VMT). This precise form of feedback opens up the door to discuss alternatives. (http://www.george-downing.com/Deutsch/VMT/V_index.htm)

^{vii} Childs, 1991, p.33

^{viii} According to Mendizza (2003) and evidenced by the research of the Institute of HeartMath (www.heartmath.org), defending one’s self splits attention and energy. In order to explore and learn about the living world, a child must feel secure, safe, accepted, and loved by that world. As the parent is the child’s first environment, or world, the acceptance and love provided by the parents encourages the child’s learning and development.