Spiritual Development in Children and Adolescents

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Abstract

Children's thoughts about God or other spiritual themes appear to be a natural part of human development, a search for some force in the universe that represents eternity and the absence of change. Even children who are not raised in a religious home are likely to ask spiritual questions. Kohlberg proposed 3 stages of Moral Development in children, and Elkind proposed 3 stages of Faith Development. Similarly, Thompson and Randall, and Fowler suggest 6 Stages of Faith Development, 3 of which refer to children. All children seem to have a capacity of forming moral judgements and Carl Rogers believed that children and adults are able to reach their full potential as people if the core conditions of warmth, empathy and positive regard are met. Moreover, Erik Erikson gave great attention to the potential role of religion and spirituality in development. For example, he suggested that the successful resolution of the first stage of development brings about the virtues of 'hope', 'faith', and 'trust'... (1964). Hopefulness over time is transformed into mature faith, allowing one to believe that the universe (or God) is trustworthy... With this study we try to investigate children's thoughts and expressions about God and other spiritual themes and to suggest specific ways for promoting spirituality in children/adolescents by educating the 'whole child', and not neglecting this aspect of their development.

Keywords: Spirituality, children, adolescents, development, education, curriculum development.

Introduction

"Spiritual development-and its relatives, spirituality, religion, faith and belief-is one of the awkward issues and a blind spot in children's development" (Roehlkepartain, E. P., Benson, Scales, P., Kimball, L. & Ebstyne King P., 2008). The historic marginalization of religion and spirituality in the social sciences is probably related to the academy's biases about religion. Yet, there is recently a growing recognition that spiritual development is an important, if complex, dimension of life that must be better understood and nurtured within a holistic understanding of youth development (Roehlkepartain et al, 2008, p. 5).

Traditionally, developmental theory has been largely dismissive of the idea that children have genuine spiritual experiences and capacities (e.g., Goldman, 1964; Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1929; Wilber, 1996). Children have generally been seen as developmentally immature, without sufficient intellectual growth to manifest anything that might be understood as meaningfully reflective and/or spiritual and were generally considered as deficient in ability to experience spiritual experiences and a relationship with God.

Recent Developments in Spirituality

More recent research studies and accounts, however, find that children have innate spiritual capacity and a desire to know more about the mental world and the Divine (Berryman, 1991; Cavelletti, 1992; Hardy, 1979). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence documenting spiritual experiences and capacities in childhood (Armstrong, 1985; Hart, 2003; Hay & Nye, 1998; Hoffman, 1992; Piechowski, 2001; Robinson, 1978, 1983) and research in adolescent spirituality and spiritual development has risen dramatically (Bridges & Moore, 2002; Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003; King & Benson, 2005; Lerner, 2004; Youniss, McEwan, & Yates, 1999).


Nevertheless, children, according to Hart (2003) do have a secret spiritual life. They have spiritual capacities and experiences- profound moments that shape their lives in enduring ways. From moments of wonder to finding inner wisdom, from asking big questions about meaning and life to expressing compassion and even to seeing beneath the surface of the material world, these experiences serve as touchstones for our life as spiritual beings on earth. But such spiritual awareness is often dismissed, or worse, labeled as pathology by adults with no map for understanding them. This "signal" can close down a child and become a barrier in his/her spiritual growth.

What exactly do we mean by Spirituality?

In spite its subjective, vague, personal, and difficult to articulate nature, spirituality has been defined as meaning making feelings of connectedness to others, self, and/or a higher power, as well as a processes of searching for meaning and purpose, and the openness to and search for
self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred (Goldstein, 2010, Hart, 2005).

Spirituality refers to one's engagement with what s/he considers holy, divine, or beyond the material world Miller & Thoresen, 2003) and includes reflections on the transcendental and the metaphysical. It is a sense of where we came from and where we are and where we're going to (Hart, 2005, 8).

'Spirituality' vs. 'Religiosity' Spirituality, morality, religion and ethics are closely linked. The terms "spiritual development", "faith development" and "development of religious understanding" have different meanings, but are often used interchangeably.

Religiosity and spirituality are overlapping concepts. In this sense, spirituality represents a personal inner state of being that can be found within or outside the context of religion (Goldstein, 2010, 205-206, Beck, 1986; Canda, 1997; Carroll, 1998; Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Cook et al., 2000; Hinterkopf, 1994; Hodge, Cardenas, & Montoya, 2001; Ingersoll, 1994; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002; Shafranske & Maloney, 1990; Westgate, 1996).

Faith and spirituality are NOT mutually exclusive. Perhaps the common denominator and anchor point that can bind religion and spirituality together and at the same time demarcate their differences, is the concept of the sacred.

Someone can therefore be:

*Spiritual & Religious

*Spiritual, but not religious

*Religious, but not spiritual

*Neither spiritual nor religious (Zinnbauer, 1997)

Types of Spiritual Experiences

Among others spirituality involves:

- Insight, Reflective thought and Curiosity about the world, expressed in questions such as: Who am I? Why am I here? Where do we come from? What is the meaning of and purpose of life / death? Why should I act rightly? Why is there so much wrong in the world?

- Self-transcendence in which the self is embodied in something greater than the self including the sacred;

- the search for connectedness to others and to someone greater than the self;

- A posture of contribution, generosity and gratitude

- Sensing values, ideas about good and evil or what matters;


- understanding, trusting or experiencing God

- Prayer

- feeling a profound inner peace

- having inner strength to make it through a difficult time

- feeling complete joy and ecstasy

- feeling an overwhelming sense of love and connectedness asking /having a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life

- Forgiveness

- empathy and compassion

- wondering and philosophizing / search for insight and wisdom


Conclusion

Spiritual development, though a unique stream of human development, cannot be separated from other aspects of one's being. As John Bradford puts it: "For a human being, especially a child or young person, to have a full quality of life, spirituality in all its aspects must be nurtured and affirmed" (Bradford, 1995).

Therefore, we don't aim to split the field of child psychology into intellectual and spiritual enterprises; but to try to shed light on the diverse ways in which children experience spiritual life, to help us recognize and facilitate the innate spiritual capacities they have, and view their development and their problems in a holistic way.

A thorough understanding of a normative child and adolescent development and family life is a necessary precursor to assessing and treating concerns about atypical development or other pathologies. This same premise holds true in the area of normative faith and spiritual development (Dell & Josephson, 2006).

Available research suggests that spirituality does have a powerful effect in life. Spirituality has been found to be inversely related to numerous negative outcomes and positively associated with numerous positive outcomes (Roehlkepartain et al 2006).

Competent, confident, committed, connected, caring children, who also possess character will have the moral orientation and the civic attitude to use their skills to enact in themselves - behaviorally, morally, and spiritually - to a better world beyond themselves. Such individuals will act to sustain for future generations a society marked by social justice, equity, and democracy and a world in which all people may thrive (NCFY, Lerner et al, 2006, 70-71).
References


