

Children's Spiritual Development

By Ross A. Thompson and Brandy Randall

Source: "Implementing the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. A Standard of Living for Development," edited by Arlene Andrews and Natalie Kaufman.

1. Definition of Spiritual Development

The terms "*spiritual development*", "*faith development*" and "*development of religious understanding*" have different meanings, but are often used interchangeably.

Thompson and Randall say that **spiritual development** "concerns the broad search for transcendental meaning that may be as simple as a young child's inquiries into how the world came into being or as complex as a theologian's metaphysical analysis." ⁱ

"Faith development" is the development of a belief in a divinity.

The **development of religious understanding** "involves an individual's progressive adherence to a propositional network of values, creeds, and practices of organized religion." ⁱⁱ

Spiritual development may be associated with or incorporated with faith development and religious understanding.

"Spiritual development invites reflections on the transcendental and the metaphysical, on values that arise from fundamental propositions concerning human character and existence, as well as on specific religious practices and symbols." ⁱⁱⁱ

There is no necessary or inevitable process of spiritual growth as is found in the maturational phases of physical, emotional, or cognitive development. ^{iv}

Spiritual growth is tied to reflective thought and concerns about questions such as:

- What is the meaning of and purpose of my life?
- Who am I? Why am I here?
- What is my future?
- What defines the differences between right and wrong? Why should I act rightly? Why is there so much wrong in the world? ^v

"Spiritual development is connected to children's efforts to understand the meaning and causes of life experience." ^{vi}

2. Stages of Faith Development

The following list of stages of faith development is quoted from Thompson's and Randall's chapter. ^{vii}

Their list is adapted from J. W. Fowler. (1981), *Stages of faith*. New York: HarperCollins; J. W. Fowler. (1991), *Stages in faith consciousness*. In F. K. Oser & W. G. Scarlett (Eds.), *Religious development in childhood and adolescence: New directions for child development* (W. Damon, Editor-in-Chief) (27-45). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stage 0: Undifferentiated (Primal) Faith (Infancy)

The earliest faith is the fund of basic trust and hope in the care of others. Undifferentiated faith experience of infancy is built upon secure attachments. A caregiver's nurturance, protection, and availability provide the basis for the earliest grasp of divine care.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith (Preschool years)

A preschooler's experience of faith is rooted in the young child's imagination, intuitive, and conceptual qualities. Faith is magical, imaginative, intuitive, and illogical, filled with fantasy and fascinated by stories of the power and omnipotence of God and the mysteries of birth and death. These stories are internalized in terms of the concerns of children of this age (e.g., protection from threat, dependability of adults, sickness and health), thus the understandings constructed by children from religious lessons may be much different from those intended by their adult tutors.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (Early school years)

Faith is captured in the stories that children hear and tell about God, and the meanings that their literal but logical interpretations of these stories provide about human relations with the divine. Participation in the symbols and observances of the religious community also fosters the initial appropriation of religious beliefs in oneself.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (Late school years, early adolescence)

Faith is encompassed in a fairly uncritical, tacit acceptance of the conventional religious values taught by others, centred on feelings of what is right and wrong, especially in interpersonal relationships.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (Late adolescence, early adult years)

Faith is forged from personal reflection and experiences (sometimes entailing critical life transitions) that may cause the adolescent or adult to question prior assumptions and to reconstruct new and different beliefs and commitments that are more personally meaningful, individualized, and depend less on the guidance of authorities.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith (Adulthood)

Faith confronts but also accepts the paradoxes and contradictions of religious life: the irrational mysteries of prayer and worship, but also the rational reflections of belief and values, for example.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith (Adulthood)

Faith is grounded in comprehensive truths – concerning justice, love, and compassion – that may cause individuals to take unusual (sometimes radical) steps to live out their faith, such as selfless devotion to the poor (as with Mother Teresa) or non-violent (as with Gandhi) or even violent (as with Dietrich Bonhoeffer) resistance to political wrong. This level of faith development is rarely found.

Conditions That Foster Spiritual Growth in Children, Adolescents, and Adults

(The following are quoted directly from Thompson & Randall's chapter 8)

1. Respect for the ways that spiritual reflection changes with age and growth in thinking, judgment, and personality. This means that the ways that children interpret religious matters are accepted as suitable for their age.
2. Opportunities to participate in religious observances that are calibrated to a child's capacities for understanding and involvement. This means that children and adolescents have roles that are meaningful to them and respected and recognized by adults within the community.
3. Opportunities for intergenerational involvement in religious activity, as well as activities that are oriented to the interests and needs of children alone.
4. The growth and maintenance of relationships – particularly within the family – that inspire trust, security, and empathic human understanding.
5. Respect for individuality in spiritual understanding and its development. This means that pathways for growth of faith are individualized based on life experience, individual personality, and how persons interpret their own spirituality.
6. Human support to individuals of all ages during periods of difficulty or crisis, personal despair, or transition during which familiar beliefs may be tested and reconsidered.
7. Acceptance of personal searching as part of the process of spiritual development. This means a willingness by others to engage constructively with the child or adolescent in questioning and exploring more deeply the fundamental beliefs that are socialized by parents and others in the majority culture, without inspiring fear of rejection, denigration, or expulsion from the family or community.

ⁱ Thompson, R. A. & Randall, B. (1999). A standard of living adequate for children's spiritual development. In A. B. Andrews & N. Kaufman, (Eds.). *Implementing the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. A standard*

ⁱⁱ Thompson & Randall, p. 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thompson & Randall, p. 91.

^{iv} Thompson & Randall, p. 89.

^v Thompson & Randall, p. 91.

^{vi} Thompson & Randall, p. 91.

^{vii} Thompson & Randall, p. 98-99.