

How to help young people explore and develop their spirituality

Working towards a faith and
culturally sensitive youth sector



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Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to look at different ways in which projects can work with children and young people to encourage them to develop and grow spiritually. The guide explores some of the key ideas in working spiritually, provides case studies to illustrate good practice and offers ideas to develop your existing work so that it is holistic and includes this important dimension.

What does spirituality mean?

Spirituality is a term that has been used in many arenas and carries a range of meanings. It is difficult to define and is more often described by saying what it is not.

The phrase *body, mind and spirit*, singles out spirit as a part of being human and shows it as different to both thinking and physical which can include the emotions. Spirituality is often used to describe people's higher aims, which spring from a deep understanding of who they are.

People in some faiths see spirituality as being linked to a higher 'being' outside of ourselves, which is transcendental – for example, God, Allah or Yahweh. People in other faiths describe this spirit as existing in the cosmos and seek union with it – for example, the process of enlightenment in Buddhism – while others, such as Hindus, worship one god, aspects of which are expressed through multiple deities.

There is also the view that spirituality has nothing to do with a transcendental being but stems from within a person. Humanists have argued for a broader approach to spirituality where this aspect of being human exists in the lives of all people whether they believe in a god, have no view of God, or resist religious doctrines and practice.

As the word spirituality carries such confusion, many people have tried to come up with a new word that is infused with positive aspirations, meaning and power, without the negative dimension that causes separation and division. However, expressions such as 'well-being', 'personhood' and others are limited in different ways; so, however imperfect the word 'spirituality' may seem, it still has value in describing something special. One way to get around this is to agree on a working definition whenever the word is used.

Here is a definition used by The Studio:

Spirituality is a 'core set of beliefs and experiences about our relationship to the universe and our place within it. It is common to all of us but personal to each and as such does not lend itself readily to scientific enquiry'.

(Lea 2004)

Why is it important to take spirituality into account?

Spirituality is an important part of being human. Learning and developing our own spirituality involves developing a capacity to reflect and connect with the world. It is about making sense of our lives and understanding the story of how we fit with ourselves, others and our environment.

There is a struggle to define outcomes from spiritual journeying, but the challenge for practitioners is to find sympathetic ways of describing spiritual progress rather than abandon supporting it because it is hard to measure.

Passing on basic skills and knowledge is much easier to track and evaluate, whereas deeper values and beliefs are often acquired through more sophisticated and less obvious processes. Adults working with children and young people are often drawn into these processes by wanting to share at a deeper level but find themselves delivering programme-based work with more limited outcomes. The opportunity for children and young people to explore these bigger questions about themselves and the world can sometimes be squeezed out of their education; although our children and young people may be trained to be employable they may miss being able to locate a deep sense of worth in themselves, understand their unique roles or their connections to others.

Youth work philosophy has these broader aims at its heart and is primarily focused on values and meaning. By using experiences and reflecting on these, the youth worker is able to help the young person to have an internal dialogue and check out what is important to them. Good youth workers are able to accompany young people as they explore the deeper, more meaningful areas of their lives.

What is the difference between faith and spirituality?

Faith usually relates to the main world religions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism. There are other faiths that also have their own theologies and practices. Each religion can also have different denominations and approaches that bring a range of practices and experiences for members.

Spirituality for children and young people who are members of a religion is likely to be integrated with the beliefs of that religion. Their spirituality can be expressed within their faith and interpreted through the beliefs of their religion. For example, if a Hindu child has a belief about being kind to others, this may be expressed in terms of karma and reincarnation.

Children and young people who practice a religious faith gain skills and knowledge and adopt beliefs that enable them to take part in the faith community. There is also religious practice that helps them to develop their personal spirituality, for example, through prayer, and their collective spirituality by worshipping with others.

The insights, practice and approach of these children and young people can be profound for a project if they can be expressed in appropriate ways.

If the organisation actively welcomes these parts of the children's and young people's lives into the project then it sends them positive messages about this part of their experience and being.

For children and young people without a specific connection to a religion, it is important not to underestimate the belief systems that they may bring from their families and friends. They may well have a range of symbolic beliefs and practices that are hugely important in how they live their lives; for example, a family may live by the belief that 'what goes around comes around'.

It is important that the project and staff are also equipped to help young people manage more aggressive and negative beliefs in order to provide a safe but challenging place in which they can be explored.

What does this mean for those who work with children and young people?

This gives a unique opportunity for workers to relate to the whole of the lives of children and young people rather than only relating to them through a narrow skills and development curriculum.

Workers need to be aware of their own spirituality and their own faith. They also need to reflect on how their own beliefs and understandings will affect how they work. If they do not have a personal faith they need to be aware of their attitudes and values and should have a good understanding of their own perceptions of faith and spirituality and what this means when they encounter these in their work.

During their training, youth workers must address situations where the behaviour of young people is at odds with their own practices and values – for example, in working with young people who have drug addictions. Here, a good technique is to get alongside the young person and offer tools that will help them reflect on their behaviour and make informed choices. This technique is also powerful when exploring both positive and negative faith positions.

Some children and young people express rigid and harsh declarations of faith that may cut across inclusive beliefs and the values of the project.

A worker who is comfortable with their own spirituality will be able to allow this exploration and expression from a firm base of respect and worth. If extreme views are shared, these can be explored within a context of open listening and calm debate.

Anyone who works in such a project needs to be secure in their own spirituality and their sense of self in order to hear a range of views and maintain a safe space where these can be explored with mutual respect.

More positively, a worker with a secure sense of their own spirituality can bring deeper understandings into their work and offer explorations to young people at a level beyond merely learning skills and changing behaviour, thus giving a more integrated, holistic approach.

Case study 1

The Studio (ADHD) Centre

This unique organisation works with children and young people who have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Aspergers Syndrome, who are frequently marginalised by society. The Studio uses a positive approach to preventative work and personal growth based on the youth work principles of personal, physical and spiritual development. The organisation has strong underlying values of positive appreciation and respect and has developed practical ways of introducing them to young people through challenging outdoor activities, group work and family involvement throughout.

Neuro-linguistic programming practitioner Nancy Williams founded the charity in 2001 and suggests that children and young people with ADHD have 'Ferrari' brains with the corresponding ability to be powerful, fast and extraordinary. By using this metaphor and other powerful techniques the Studio encourages young people to develop the skills, values and abilities to channel their energies in positive ways within education, leisure and relationships.

The Studio pilots programmes such as Reiki, Chi Gung and meditation for young people with ADHD who have difficulty relaxing and staying focused. These programmes encourage the young people to practice maintaining inner states of calm, based on the philosophy that 'life in the fast lane' needs self-control, personal care and consideration of others.

Although Nancy Williams has personal spiritual beliefs, she does not present her work as being specifically spiritual. However, the Studio programme attempts to engage young people at their deepest levels and emphasises an appreciation of each as a unique individual with great opportunities to contribute to the world.

* Neuro-linguistic programming is a series of techniques to support learning.

Why is it important to incorporate spirituality into our work with children and young people?

Spiritual values were a key motivator for pioneer work with children and young people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Organisations such as the YMCA, the Scouts Association and Girlguiding UK were founded on spiritual values and their leaders were motivated to bring these understandings into young people's lives.

Integrating spirituality into a programme and an organisation offers a holistic way of working and engaging the body, mind and spirit. Ignoring children's and young people's spiritual dimension encourages them to disassociate their actions and their thinking from their values.

With attention to spirituality children and young people are able to develop an integrated sense of self, self-respect and a robust identity. Without this opportunity, children are more likely to be easily swayed by peers and persuasive ideological approaches since they have no core beliefs and value system to act as a compass.

There has been a move toward including spirituality in the working tools of youth workers. This appears as one of the recognised standards in the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work, with a set of prescribed Outcomes, Behaviours, Knowledge and Understanding, in relation to addressing spirituality with young people. National Occupational Standards describe the knowledge and skills needed to perform a job role or work task and provide a benchmark of good practice.

Spirituality is about the deep values a person holds so working in this way gives a chance for the child or young person to access and develop the deepest levels of their understanding.

Creating a spiritually-aware and sensitive organisation

A spiritual organisation is one with an awareness of its deeper values, identity and aspirations. These are apparent in the building it occupies, in its leadership, among its staff, in its reputation in the community and among the children and young people who use its projects.

The integrated nature of these factors is a key feature of a spiritual organisation and can be seen at all levels of the organisation, from strategic management at board level to the relationships between the workers and the children or young people.

Spirituality, like other qualities, is not 'either present or absent'. The issue is more a case of to what degree it is present rather than whether it is there at all. The level of spirituality can be increased by identifying sensitive practices and building on these to improve the quality of spirituality. It can be increased by people celebrating it in small every day things as well as through large events.

When a staff team wants to seriously address increasing its sensitivity and spirituality, it is able to build attitudes, behaviour and processes into the organisation's culture.

Building spirituality into all parts of the work

One of the reasons people feel uncomfortable about spirituality is that it sits outside the main part of their work and is seen as an 'add-on'. As spirituality is about integrity it defeats its object if it is separate and different to the other things that a project does. Rather than seeing spirituality as distinct, it can be integrated into all aspects of the work.

Outdoor Education has long been used as a way of helping young people to be inspired and to focus on the 'higher' or deeper aspects of themselves. The sense of achievement in conquering fear on a high ropes course or paddling a canoe through difficult waters can be powerful experiences and, with skilled instruction, can help children and young people gain a sense of worth and self-esteem.

Children and young people can learn to locate a sense of calm within themselves by providing them with opportunities to meditate, to reflect and experience quiet moments. They can learn to experience these practices or moments as opportunities to retreat and recharge so that they can engage in life in a more creative way. This is especially important for children and young people who may be distracted, distressed or displaced as they need to find a substantial anchor within themselves.

Reflecting on spirituality in the work that youth workers do

Spirituality grows and develops well through reflection. The quiet moments that youth workers have with children and young people can provide an opportunity for them to explore their own beliefs and values. The depth of such reflection is linked to the maturity of the worker's beliefs and their capacity to provide a safe, reflective space for the child or young person.

Spirituality can be woven into a range of alternative or subtle activities. In the same way that many religions teach through parables and stories, coming at an issue 'sideways' seems to be a good way of working spiritually.

Providing opportunities for children and young people to express themselves through art, poetry, music, sport, education and community events can yield more fruit than a serious talk.

Using metaphors and other approaches offers abundant ways of showing children and young people a world of possibility and achieved potential. The way in which we talk about spirituality, for example, can be key to how it is received. In some instances we can use a metaphor of health and restoration; for example, we can pay attention to the spiritual by talking about 'wholeness and recovery', or 'tapping into internal or external energy in order to help restore ourselves'.

In other instances, we may express spirituality as a key element of identity and show how our identities and aspirations are shaped through the development and discovery of our core beliefs.

Case study 2

Working with young people in Gateshead

Gateshead Youth Council is equivalent to a Council for Voluntary Youth Service (CVYS). However, together with the other roles that CVYS's undertake with voluntary organisations in Gateshead, it engages directly with young people as part of its core work.

Coordinator Terry Eccles says this direct work keeps Gateshead Youth Council up to date with where young people are.

He says: 'Our emphasis is to 'empower young people to make choices for life' and to be part of their community and we like to think that our work may have influenced the youth participation agenda.

'In our work, we wouldn't directly use the word "spirituality" but agree that these values are important. We would explore issues with young people such as: Who you are as a person; what you are contributing to society; where it comes from and what it means for you.

'In the projects, we try to conduct ourselves according to these values and create an atmosphere and environment where people can be open and share this part of themselves. There are individual opportunities for young people to share how they are getting on. We encourage young people to express themselves honestly in order to enable them to become involved in activities that are positive and with which they feel comfortable.

'We help them explore their choices and understand that they can choose not to go to the pub or hang around the street; that they can feel what matters deeply to them and can explore; and that we can then help them to do things such as start projects in their own localities or to meet up with like-minded individuals.

'Spirituality informs what I do in my work all the time, not up front but it is part of who I am as an individual. I try and value everything I do with the people I'm working with. People find out who I am as an individual but don't give a particular view. I prefer to prompt people to question everything, to expand their views and challenge them to think; I pose questions rather than answers. Why should that be the case? Why do you think that happens? Has that affected you?

'Young people in the project know that youth workers in the project trust them and don't look over their shoulders at what they are doing; that there is support here and we are all aiming in the same direction. Young people using the project seem comfortable and are open and honest, and we are flexible enough to make things happen quickly.

'On one occasion, a person who came into the project said they felt a 'warm breeze' blowing, 'a good atmosphere', which gives the project a welcoming feeling. We believe in the butterfly effect – that a small action somewhere can have massive results elsewhere. We believe that people should never underestimate the effect they have on each other. Youth workers can transmit something through a phrase, an action or a word, which can either help a young person or turn them away. We are always conscious of others.

'We see that it is the relationship with the environment that we are in which makes us grow and young people are part of that too. We use the metaphor of organic gardening, letting nature do its job without too many outside interventions. Like a gardener wanting to grow things, the ground has to be prepared for the seeds to germinate and then providing you water it and keep the weeds down and the sun's warmth comes to draw it up, you will not be disappointed.

'It's the same working with young people. We have to create the right environment and conditions to help them flourish by being on hand in order to prevent other things starting to tower over them and impede their development. We have to gain a positive experience to keep getting the best from our environment.

'For example, B was a young person who was caring for a parent. They were invited along to join in one of our events, which they enjoyed. Their confidence grew and they realised that they could help with the next event. They had found something within themselves that they had not realised before – feeling good within and letting others draw it out. They have now moved on to the next stage of their life, their relationships and confidence have matured and now they are also doing youth work in order to help other young people believe in themselves.'

A ten step guide to building spirituality into your organisation

Step 1: Understand and be aware of what you already have and what you already do

Many organisations have been founded on the vision and belief of people who are committed to great outcomes for young people. Sometimes, however, beliefs and values that are embedded in the project get lost in the business of activities. Take time to connect with early visions of the project and check out the way that these are part of the day-to-day life of the project.

Step 2: Understand and be aware of the spiritual background of the children and young people you work with

The children and young people in your area are not at 'point zero' in their spiritual lives. There will be some who already have a rich experience of faith and religion, there will some who may have no formal experience but have a deep understanding of their own humanity. Every child or young person who is involved in the project has the capacity to bring something of their spirituality to their own lives and to the life of the community. Good awareness of these spiritual assets means that you will be able to bring these into the life of the project.

Step 3: Understand and be aware of your own spirituality

In youth work, people say that the greatest resource is the youth worker. This is especially true when working at a spiritual level. A worker who is spiritually aware will be familiar with deeper values and will be more able to support children and young people in their exploration.

If they have their own faith and religious allegiance, the worker also needs to be aware of how this may affect the children and young people they work with. The youth work offer is not about evangelism, but more about the opportunity to explore a range of different approaches and provide choices.

Step 4: Do a spiritual audit of your building and resources

Young people and children will sum up your project as they enter your space. They are looking for what is available, what sorts of things happen there and whether they can engage with them. A building that supports and encourages spirituality will have attractive spaces for reflection, evidence on the walls of people being creative, and an ambience that is full of possibilities, both active and harmonious. There are also resources available to allow children and young people to be creative and to be reflective.

Step 5: Build spirituality into the programme

There will be parts of the work that your project is doing already where children and young people will already be engaged at a deep level. The first step is to notice where these are, the second is to build more opportunities into all parts of the programme which allow young people to explore values and meaning, where they have the space and the resources to reflect on the story of their own lives and the possibilities ahead of them. Build in opportunities for them to have a mentor or someone who can encourage them to work to their potential.

Step 6: Support the staff to develop reflection and meaning for young people

It is much easier and 'safer' for staff to run an activity programme than to work with values, belief and meaning. However, when working spiritually, they see children and young people blossom and transform their lives at a very deep level. This way of accompanying young people on their development journeys is very powerful. Staff in a project need to encourage each other, to share experiences and good practice and use resources such as outdoor education and the arts to help young people explore and develop their spiritual qualities. If workers are spiritually aware and have reflective skills, they are able to share these with children and young people.

Step 7: Celebrate religious occasions in the wider community

It is helpful when a project develops an openness to religious occasions that are celebrated in the wider community. When a project joins with different faiths in their celebrations, it not only endorses the faith experience of individual children and young people but adds life to the project. It is also helpful when individual children and young people feel able to bring special occasions from their own faiths into the project and talk about them – for example, Bar Mitzvah.

Step 8: Build opportunities to develop reflective skills

Children and young people can lead crowded and busy lives with no opportunity to experience calm. When children and young people have reflective skills, they have the capacity to find an inner strength and anchor that can fuel their sense of worth. It can also act as a springboard that allows them to take the risks that help to develop their full potential. These skills can in fact be taught to children and young people if they wish to learn them. There are also practices taught by religions that can be openly shared within the project.

Step 9: Develop spiritual awareness in all work that develops deeper dimensions in younger people

When the staff share a common vision and when they respect children and young people, a project exudes spiritual appropriateness. The connection between this and the sensitivity needed to ensure that the work of the project is aligned with these aims brings about a sense of deep integrity. This is not achieved in a rush; less is more. The project needs to build in reflection at every level and rather than masses of activity, there needs to be meaningful work that enables children and young people to transform their lives.

Step 10: Become a project with meaning and integrity

If the people involved in a youth project have a sense of purpose and inner confidence this can provide a fantastic base for their work. If workers are able to bring this dimension into activities and the building and resources reflect this too, the opportunities for children and young people can be extraordinary. Many projects operate in harsh environments; yet, for spiritual development to take place an environment doesn't have to be perfect. Working at this level is aspirational and requires being open to possibilities, rather than aiming to get everything right all the time. Spirituality is about being fully human and if the project reflects this, it will do well.

Case study 3

Frontier Youth Trust: youth work in a hospital

Undertaking youth work in a hospital might seem a strange thing to do, but for the young people who find themselves hospitalised on a long-term basis, attending a weekly youth club can be a real fun oasis.

I have recently begun volunteering in such a youth club, working alongside some of the young people who have mental health illnesses. The club takes place in the hospital and a variety of traditional youth work activities occur: arts and crafts, games, conversations and interaction.

Speaking is difficult for some of the young people and often it is a case of seeing and hearing the spiritual rather than just talking about it. A real effort is made to promote the well-being of the young people and to focus on the things that interest them. We work together and seek to raise the consciousness and awareness of the young people in fun and stimulating ways.

Recently, a game of basketball proved exhilarating and highly amusing for one young person with severe autism. The things many of us consider mundane can promote a real spark and zest for life in others – a true essence of being spiritual!

Such work is very challenging and it only takes place for an hour each week. The hospital carers are there 24 hours a day and so this type of work must be put into that context. However, together with the work of others in the hospital this type of holistic approach helps the young people to flourish in a different way and is highly enjoyable.

Creating the space and opportunities for spirituality to develop

People working with a spiritual ethos proceed with an underlying belief that everyone has spirituality. What is needed is encouragement and opportunities to enable this to emerge and flourish.

If a project has this belief it will not prescribe what space and opportunities should be available. It will give children and young people permission to explore and will encourage them to find creative ways of making meaning.

The role of the staff and project is to keep activities safe and to be aware of the importance of faith for some of the people.

Think big, start small and expand rapidly

Ideas for activities

- Build a space of calm with children and young people.
- ‘Who and what is spirituality?’: give children and young people a chance to draw or write their thoughts on a big sheet of paper on the wall.
- Building up individual stories: in one-to-one work with children and young people, invite them to reflect on their deeper aims and motivations and their higher aspirations.
- Share stories about faith and no faith.
- Bring beauty into the project: natural things, beautiful material, paintings and music.
- Cooking food with attention: treat the process of choosing ingredients and growing food with care.
- Hold a discussion on making choices: how spiritual beliefs and sense can inform choices – for example, using or abusing your body and valuing yourself so that you do not get drunk and ‘wasted’. Discuss how this is not just a medical issue; it relates to a deep understanding of oneself.
- Using resources to give children and young people different experiences such as ‘Glimpses’ (see resource list).
- Use art, poetry, music and other creative approaches to express deep values and meaning.

Building links with families and the community

It is important to see spirituality as not just an individual or personal issue but something that is held in community. As well as bringing different religious festivals into the project, it is possible to share some of the project’s understandings, aims and vision with others. You could encourage children and young people to invite people into a reflective space or encourage them to share food that is prepared on special occasions in a faith calendar or to beautify an area.

Intergenerational work can also be spiritual. It can be illuminating for young people to invite older people in to talk about their lives and about what has meaning for them.

Conclusion

The word ‘spirituality’ carries many connotations and also encompasses deeper, more meaningful ways to work alongside young people. People who work with young people and children can identify with the more sensitive and profound ways of working and have stories about seeing young lives transformed.

It doesn’t matter how spirituality is labelled; what matters is that spirituality work is encouraged, shared and promoted. Making your project encompass spirituality will mean that young people and children have opportunities to learn about themselves at the deepest level, acquire skills to locate calm and energy within themselves, and in doing so will discover their unique contribution to those around them and to wider society.

Find out more

Factor in Faith campaign: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=550>

Interfaith Network for the UK: www.interfaith.org.uk

Multifaith Centre: www.multifaithcentre.org

Three Faiths Forum: www.threefaithsforum.org.uk

Gateshead Youth Council: www.gbyoc.org.uk

Frontier Youth Trust: www.fyt.org.uk

Runnymede Trust and UKREN's Toolkit: www.runnymedetrust.org

Young Muslim Citizens: www.youngmuslimcitizens.org

Forward Thinking: www.forwardthinking.org

Muslim Youth Skills: www.muslimyouthskills.co.uk

Wrekin Trust: www.wrekinforum.org

Diversity and Dialogue Project: www.diversityanddialogue.org.uk

National Occupational Standards in Youth Work: <http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/nos>

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