

Children's Spirituality and Happiness

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In case your attention was elsewhere on Good Friday, March 21, 2008, the national edition of the Globe and Mail had an interesting [Commentary by Lorna Dueck](#) which was based on an earlier, February 7, [UBC Report, "What Makes Kids Happy?"](#)

Turns out a significant factor in kid's happiness is spirituality.

Gender, money, private or public schooling had little to do with whether kids were happy or not; but spirituality played a noticeable role.

The authors of the UBC Report were careful to make an all too common distinction between "religion" and "spirituality." I'm assuming this may have been motivated because of their interest in how public schools might use their findings, and therefore they need to stay away from "religion."

Naturally, I am a little skeptical that a child's in-born spirituality would have much chance of developing apart from being nurtured by participating in healthy, explicitly religious, relationships within their family and religious community of synagogue, mosque, temple, church, etc.

However, I congratulate the researchers for even including "spirituality" in their exploration of children's happiness. Among other things they explored as factors that contribute to children's happiness, the researchers asked the children, ages 9 to 12, about "their inner belief system that has at least these four parts:

- personal meaning in one's life;
- relationships and love for others;
- transcendental belief in a higher power; and,
- a sense of beauty and awe with nature."

The researchers were surprised at their findings because they thought the children's spirituality would be too immature to be a factor in their happiness. Instead, their findings suggest that spirituality:

- produces a sense of meaning;
- it stimulates hope;
- reinforces positive social norms; and,
- can provide a social support network.

The researchers then also suggest ways that schools and families could strengthen children's spirituality and happiness by:

- activities and conversation that look for beauty and awe in the world;
- conversations about things that happened today that they are thankful for (in place of a list of "what did you do today");
- conversations and activities about contributing to the community; and
- affirmation for attitudes and actions that made a positive difference to home, school, team, community, etc.

These are all great findings and suggestions, but none of this is news for those of us in the church who care about and relate to children.

Which leads me to point out what is so blatantly missing in the researchers' above suggestions for supporting a child's spirituality. Namely,

- participating in a healthy, supportive community that has "a transcendental belief in a higher power."

Our Sunday School is intelligently, intentionally, and sensitively dedicated to nurturing children's spirituality - and thereby also increasing their happiness and positive place in society. With great care, each Sunday is planned to provide children with:

- a basic grounding in knowledge about Biblical stories;
(which provide context and perspective for personal meaning and hope)
- meeting Jesus, first as a trustworthy caring friend, and also as a wise mentor who shows us the depth and strength of God's love;
(which provide context and perspective for basic trust, forgiveness, healing, reconciliation - i.e. how to recover when they, or the world, have gone wrong)
- learning religious practices such as prayer, generosity, singing, thanksgiving, etc.
(which translate ideas into actions and experiences)
- developing friendships which include spirituality.
(which provide the all-important relationships to ask those basic questions of faith)

It would be a great service to the children in our community to connect them to places where their spirituality would be supported and strengthened. Those of us who are already part of such communities need to constantly provide invitations and hospitality to those who are wondering where to find it. Our children's - and our society's - happiness depend on it.

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