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Commentary

Out of the mouths of babes ...

A spiritual child is a happy child, according to a new study

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From Friday's Globe and Mail

March 21, 2008 at 9:37 AM EDT

An Easter story in the Gospel of Matthew tells of a group of religious leaders scolding Jesus for getting children all worked up into a spiritual frenzy. Jesus, we read, levels an even older psalm at his critics, replying, "Out of the mouths of children and infants, God has ordained praise."

Yet we still wonder, in our secularized world, why kids say the darndest things about spirituality. Turns out, it's one of the best ways to make them happy.

Spirituality is a major contributor to a child's overall happiness, says a new study, from the University of British Columbia, that tested 315 children aged 9 to 12.

"If you imagine a child's happiness represented by a big pie, the slice of the pie accounted for by spirituality is about 7 per cent to 17 per cent. Money is less than 1 per cent. If you looked at the parents' marital status, it's less than 1 per cent," says Dr. Mark Holder, one of the study's authors, and an associate professor of psychology at UBC Okanagan. The quality of their relationships, and genetics, also rate high, but it's those fuzzy feelings about spirituality that most surprise Dr. Holder and researchers at the "Happy Lab."

Spirituality, it's important to note, may be shaped by religion, but it is not the same as religion. In the UBC study that analyzed what makes children happy, spirituality was defined as an inner belief system that has 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.

So strong was the spirituality ranking on a child's happiness scale that the UBC researchers have now taken their quest to India to see whether they will have similar results with children in a country that is not dominated by Christianity.

I wasn't aware such young children could verbalize what the word spirituality meant, let alone feel confident about a "sense of purpose" - but maybe all we need to do is ask them. So I did.

"It sounds sort of like reality and spirit mixed together," seven-year-old Brodie told me. "Spirituality might mean that you have a good spiritual friendship with God," said Liam. "I feel happy 'cause I know that someone's protecting me and watching what I do and letting me know if I'm doing something wrong that I can fix that if I'm making a mistake," said Paul. For Ashley, the concept meant, "I can turn to God whenever I need it." Grace was alarmed at the thought that spirituality could be ignored: "I'd feel like a big part of me is missing. I would feel alone in my life. I would feel worried, I would feel really alone." Brodie concluded that without his faith, he'd feel "just abandoned."

The children I talked to were neat and tidy in their private-school uniforms. Their parents had paid thousands of dollars to ensure that spirituality was a major part of their education. Mom and Dad's own religious views were dominant in their families. One could be forgiven for asking: Is spirituality a brainwashing ritual performed by devout parents on their vulnerable children?

Hardly. Spiritual guidance is every bit as important as any discipline a child needs instruction in. And this latest study from UBC isn't alone in challenging those who believe a child's world should be kept free of transcendence. **When parents speak of their beliefs to their children, it's not coercion - it's parenting.** After all, scores of Canadians are living proof that in spite of their parents having a view on sin and grace, they were free to say, "No thanks."

So the questions persist: Were we happier when we understood that we were part of a community of faith? When the spiritual significance of Easter, for example, was grasped and we resurrected not only the story of Jesus, but also our souls to the hope it holds? If we know we're going somewhere in the great narrative of God's care, isn't it a good thing to engage children in the mystery of it all?

I've been engaged of late by the book, *Children Matter*, written by a group of Canadian and American childhood educators who challenge us to look at our metaphors when it comes to children and spirituality. Are kids sponges? Are they wet cement, to be quickly moulded? **Are they pilgrims on a journey with you?**

I like the metaphor of a dance, where the parent places the music of God around a child. As a child gets older, it's his or her own responsibility to include God's music in their environment. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, this is where we so often tune out the spiritual melodies. Then along comes the need to answer another child's innate curiosity about God.

It's only right to give children everything they need in this quest - even if it's source material from church, school, or Scriptures - to help them hear the notes that give their souls an ability to dance.

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