

TOOLKIT

Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years

A Contribution to the Protection
of Children from Violence and the
Promotion of Their Holistic Well-Being

BOOKLET I

Conceptual Framework

CONSORTIUM

on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood
for the Prevention of Violence

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for the Prevention of Violence



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Booklet I

Conceptual Framework

Booklet I outlines the key conceptual areas that provide the foundation of the Toolkit. It includes five “building blocks” intended to facilitate an understanding of the importance of nurturing children’s spiritual development in the early years of life in order to contribute to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

1. **The Dignity of the Child and Child Rights.** This section frames the understanding of the child and of children’s holistic development and well-being from an ethical perspective of care, a reverence for life, and an affirmation of the child’s inherent and sacred dignity as upheld by all major religious and spiritual traditions and supported by the legal framework of children’s rights.
2. **Holistic Child Development.** This section presents a whole-child development approach that positions spiritual development as a central part of full, sound and holistic development and engages a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school, and religious communities, to ensure children reach their full potential. It asserts that children’s holistic development needs to be supported by interventions that address children’s health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving, safety and security.
3. **Early Childhood Development — The Foundation of Lifelong Capacities.** This section describes the critical importance of the early years of life for children’s lifelong learning and well-being, and as an essential period of life where parents, caregivers and educators play a critical role in nurturing children’s holistic development. It provides reflections from different religious and spiritual traditions on the sacredness of the child in the early years.
4. **Spirituality and Children.** This section aims to assert a common understanding of spirituality as an innate and intrinsic aspect of the child — an understanding that respects the diverse approaches among and within religious traditions and non-religious people. It shows how spiritual development contributes to children’s holistic development and well-being and proposes four categories of innate spiritual capacities of the child.
5. **Violence in Early Childhood.** This section provides an overview of how both direct and structural forms of violence affect children’s holistic development, particularly in the early years, and makes the case that protecting children from violence requires prioritizing the provision of support to parents, caregivers and educators, working to change norms, and supporting development of life skills.

This booklet also presents a praxis approach and model for nurturing the spiritual development of children in early childhood and emphasizes the role of religious communities, parents, caregivers and educators as the stakeholders with the greatest impact. It concludes with an overview of the benefits that nurturing the spiritual development of children can have in protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being.

This booklet is part of a series of 7 Booklets that together form the Toolkit “Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years – A Contribution to the Protection of Children from Violence and the Promotion of Their Holistic Well-Being.”

This booklet is the foundational guide for the other booklets in this Toolkit. It is crucial in preparing to use the Learning Program for Adults proposed in Booklet II and as material accompanying the activities within the modules of the Learning Program. It can be read as a stand-alone document that provides insights into the importance of the spiritual development of children for protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being.

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The Building Blocks of the Conceptual Framework

The dignity of the child and children's rights

Respect for the human life and dignity of the child is a fundamental principle found in all major religions and spiritual traditions. The belief that all human beings, including children, deserve to be respected and treated with dignity — without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, ancestry, gender, socioeconomic status or other status — exists across traditions.

The dignity of the child is inherent, intrinsic and sacred. It is accorded to everyone by the virtue of being human. It is not contingent on the child's age, sex, mental or physical development, or any other factor. The dignity of the child has its origin in a sacred reality that is both transcendent and immanent. This calls adults to treat children with the utmost reverence and love, to express this in interactions with them and in the care, respect and nurturing provided for their sound and holistic development.

The inherent dignity of the child is also embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which recognizes children as individuals in their own right. Children have rights that cannot be overlooked, limited or negated. The CRC and its Optional Protocols recognize the human rights of children, defined as persons below the age of 18 years. The Convention establishes that States Parties must ensure that: all children — without discrimination in any form — benefit from special protection measures and assistance, including protection from all forms of violence; have access to services such as education and health care; can develop their personalities, abilities and talents to the fullest potential; grow up in an environment of happiness, love and understanding; are informed about their rights and have access to opportunities to participate actively in securing them; and are brought up in the spirit of the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations, and in particular in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.¹

One important right that is often overlooked is the child's right to a standard of living adequate for their development, inter alia, their spiritual development, as stated in Article 27 of the CRC: "Every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for their own physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development," and "parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development."² Similarly, Article 17 states that children must have access to information and material, especially from sources aimed at the promotion of their social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.

The CRC supports the holistic development of the child and the protection of all domains of life as fundamental to children's well-being. It does not compartmentalize their development but sees it holistically as a process essential for children to learn to uphold principles and ethical values that

allow them to live peacefully with others.³ It is with this purpose that Article 29 acknowledges the role of education in helping children to develop a “responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.”⁴

The CRC also recognizes children as rights-holders,⁵ entitled to participate and to express their views and be heard on issues that concern them, in accordance with their age and maturity, as an important aspect of child development. Article 12 of the CRC makes clear the right of every child to freely express their views, in all matters affecting the child, and the subsequent right for those views to be given due weight, in accordance with the child’s age and maturity.

Children’s right to be heard is fundamental during early childhood. Children are not objects upon which adults impose their views. Research shows that the child is able to form views from the youngest age, even when she or he may be unable to express them verbally.⁶ Children make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas, and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language.⁷ Consequently, full implementation of Article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication, including play, body language, facial expressions, drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences.⁸ By listening to children’s voices, creating a safe space for them to express their views, and respecting their ideas, adults show trust and respect, which in turn helps children develop their agency and ability to shape their own lives and contribute to their communities.

The CRC also stresses that the family is the natural environment for the growth and well-being of children. In the family, children learn the foundations of respect, empathy, solidarity, and trust. Children develop fully and soundly when they are raised with love and respect, and can grow up in a safe, loving environment that affirms their human dignity. These foundations help them develop appreciation and respect for others, find a sense of purpose, and build the capacity to serve others and their broader communities, contributing to positive change. Only when children are respected and treated with love and care are they empowered to believe not only in themselves but also in others.

Holistic child development

Holistic child development is an approach that values all aspects of a child’s well-being and responds integrally to their physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual needs. It engages a broad spectrum of support systems, including family, school, and community, to ensure children reach their full potential.⁹

The holistic development of the child considers:

- **Physical development.** Children’s physical growth and development of motor skills.
- **Social development.** Children’s ability to interact with others and learn to build relationships.
- **Emotional development.** Children’s ability to understand their own and others’ feelings, express and regulate their emotions and develop empathy for others.

- **Cognitive-language development:** Children’s ability to think and reason, make sense of the world, and perceive, understand and use language.
- **Spiritual development:** Children’s awareness of themselves and search for meaning and transcendence, which involves their capacity to connect with themselves, others, nature and that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality.



The model presented in this Toolkit is built on the understanding that the spiritual development of the child is a central part of full, sound and holistic development. Spiritual development is often a missing piece in current child development frameworks and programs. This may be due to several factors, including the lack of comprehensive research on what spiritual development encompasses, and the misunderstanding that spiritual development pertains only to the religious sphere — when, in fact, spiritual development is an innate process within the child, independent of their religious or other affiliation, as described in the following section.

Holistic development considers the interactions among the different developmental domains. For example, a focus on language development in the first years — through activities such as storytelling, reading and singing — paves the way for reading in early primary school by helping children understand letter sounds and introducing them to new vocabulary. In the case of language development, for instance, health and nutrition play important roles; also, early in life, children’s vocabularies increase dramatically as they begin to move around, exploring and eliciting responses from others.¹⁰ Similarly, as a child develops the capacity for compassion, prosocial behaviors and affective understanding co-emerge. The foundations of social competence that are developed in the first five years are linked to children’s emotional well-being and affect a child’s later ability to functionally adapt in school and to form successful relationships throughout life.¹¹

Research demonstrates the cumulative effects of environmental deprivation, showing that the fewer adequately addressed domains, the greater the risk a child faces and the greater the likelihood that the child will face difficulties in the future, ranging from school failure to poor

health to criminality.¹² This also results in reduced adult earning potential, and perpetuation of intergenerational poverty and/or violence.

A whole-community approach – “It takes a village to raise a child”

As mentioned before, a holistic approach to child development considers the different systems that affect the child and the context in which the child grows up. Early learning and development can be seen as a “complex ecosystem” of relationships that are affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from the immediate settings of family and school, to broad cultural values, laws, and customs.¹³ The microsystem — or immediate setting — is the most influential level in the ecological system, and therefore the one this Toolkit is mainly focused on. However, understanding the diverse systems and dynamics, including the fact that the interactions between the systems and the child are reciprocal, helps with finding ways for different actors to collaborate across the broad ecosystem, so they are able together to positively impact the child.

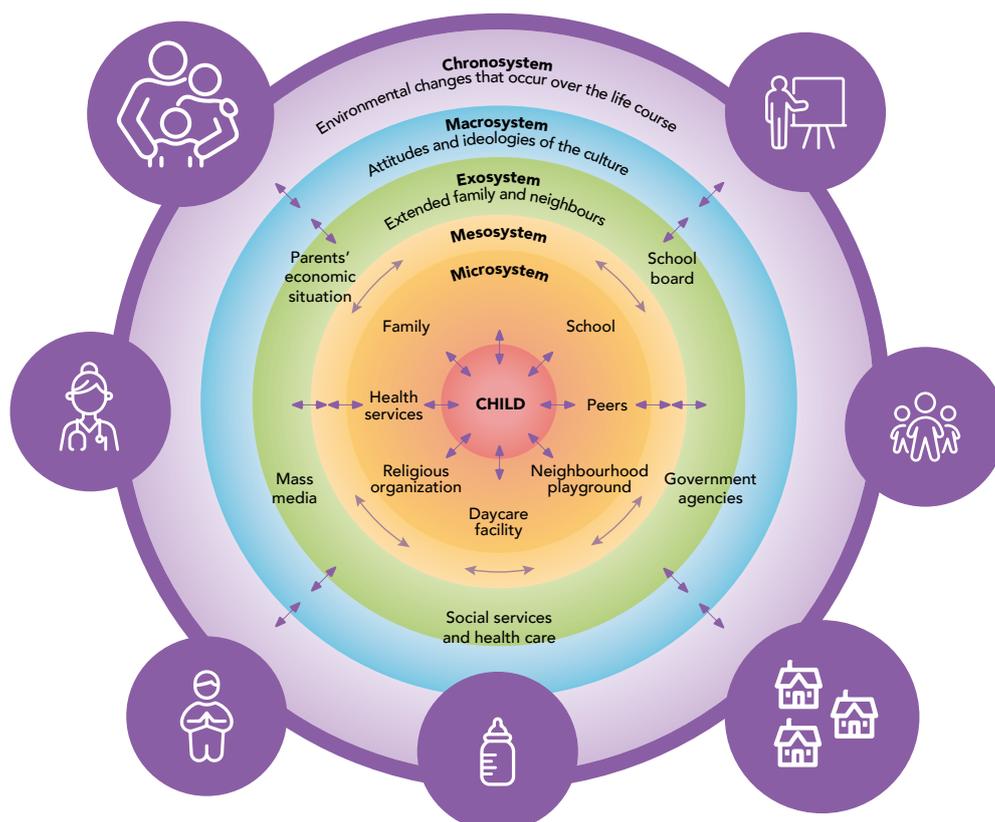
Parents, caregivers and educators exert the most influence on the child in the early years of life, firstly by genetic contribution and the experience of the child in the womb, and then through experiences within the family. As children grow, they gradually engage in more settings as they start attending daycare centers, befriend their neighbors, perhaps become involved in their religious and spiritual communities, and start expanding their circles of interaction within the broader community. With today’s increasing use of visual media in the family environment, traditional and emerging forms of media such as social media are exerting an ever-increasing and ever-earlier impact on the way the child experiences life.

Caring for young children, and consequently the nurturing of their spiritual development, is not solely the role of parents, caregivers or educators, nor should it be thought of as solely a role for women. Children need holistic nurture from a range of adults across the continuum of their world. Community involvement in children’s upbringing, along with children’s involvement in community life, produces long-term benefits in children’s lives, helping them to develop their sense of belonging and build a strong identity.

Religious and spiritual communities, as part of the microsystem, and as an important setting for many children in the world, can contribute significantly to children’s development. These are spaces where children are exposed to religious and spiritual practices and rituals, as well as to social and cultural norms accepted by their communities, which shape their identities in relation to others. When young children are welcomed, accepted and respected in their religious and spiritual community, and known, cared for and loved by its members, they develop a sense of belonging and identity that helps them grow socially, emotionally and spiritually.

Religious and spiritual traditions foster spirituality through community life, religious practices, service to others, and other means. Communal religious and spiritual participation in rituals

and practices, reinforced by social ties and norms, helps people thrive. There is evidence that shows that participation in religious services is associated with numerous aspects of human flourishing, including happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.¹⁴ However, it cannot be denied that, within every religious and spiritual tradition, there exist interpretations of religious texts, beliefs and practices that denigrate and discriminate against certain groups in the population, condone violence against children and/or disempower them, negatively affecting their flourishing and well-being.



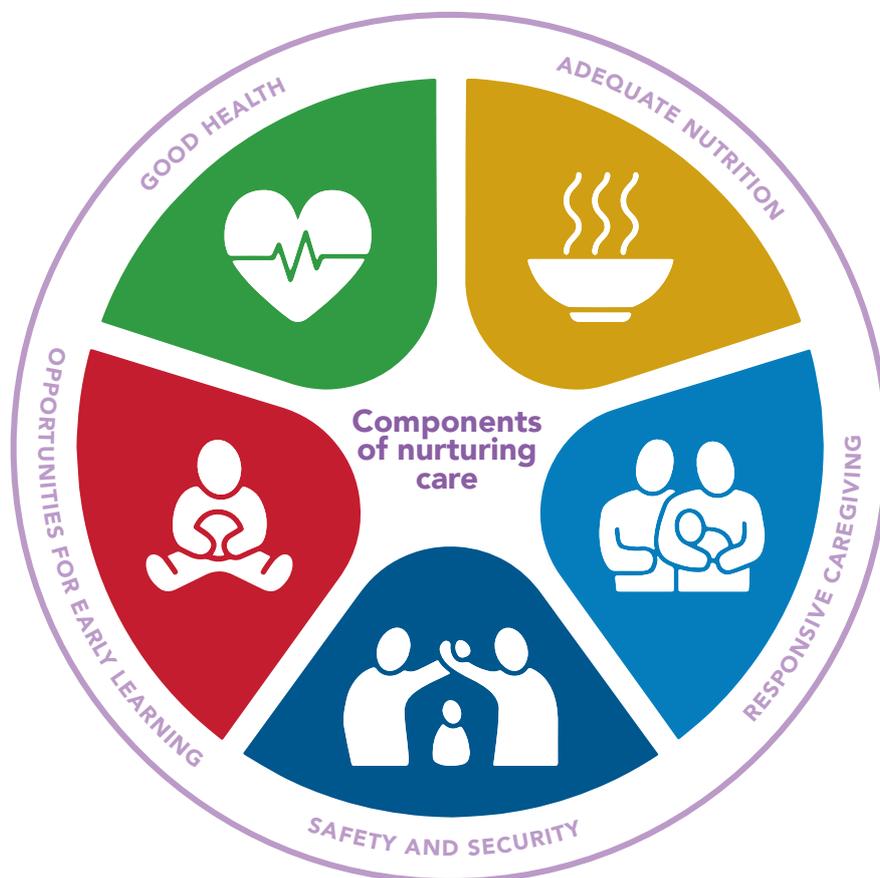
Bronfenbrenner, U. (1972). *The Ecology of the Child*.

It is important to equip families and communities to support children’s holistic well-being and be empowered to challenge cultural and social norms that violate children’s dignity, including gender-based violence, corporal punishment and sexual violence and abuse. When provided with information and tools for positive child upbringing practices, they can effectively nurture children and build on positive social norms that contribute to their well-being.

Nurturing Care as a facilitator of holistic development

A holistic development approach contributes to children reaching their full potential and helps create the foundations for life-long learning and well-being. For children to develop holistically, attention must be given to good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving and opportunities for learning. These five areas are set out in the Nurturing Care

Framework published by WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank Group and many other partners, which offers key strategies for supporting the holistic development of children from pregnancy up through age three. The framework supports the conditions for keeping children safe, healthy and well nourished, paying attention and responding to their needs and interests, and encouraging them to explore their environment and interact with caregivers and others.¹⁵



UNICEF, WHO and World Bank. *Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development*. <https://nurturing-care.org>

In the first years of life, parents, intimate family members and caregivers are the closest to the young child and thus the best providers of nurturing care. This is why secure family environments are important for young children. Appropriate policies and community services must be in place to ensure caregivers have the time and resources to provide nurturing care.

Addressing the spiritual development of children as part of their holistic development is an integral part of responsive caregiving; it is essential to creating safe environments for children, fostering secure attachment, securing opportunities for early learning, supporting sensitive, responsive stimulation, and fostering the development of a safe, mutually rewarding relationship with the child. Protection from violence, a prerequisite for healthy spiritual development, is also cross-cutting across these components of nurturing care.

This Toolkit is intended to support the adoption of a whole-child development approach in parenting and early childhood development programs — an approach that includes the spiritual development of children and the involvement of religious and spiritual communities

and actors as critical influencers in the ecological system of the child. The Toolkit recommends integration of this approach into existing ECD programs, thereby helping to address multiple developmental domains in a comprehensive manner, through integrated services.

Programs that aim to support the holistic development of children should address the different developmental domains of the child, considering spiritual development as a foundational aspect of children's well-being; ensure a whole-community approach that simultaneously works with the different systems that permeate children's lives, including the family, school, religious and spiritual communities and the wider society; and be supported by interventions that address children's health, nutrition, early learning, responsive caregiving, safety and security.

Early childhood development - The foundation of lifelong capacities

One of the most impressive gains of early childhood is brain development. The brain is one of the few organs not fully developed at birth. Although the brain starts to develop a few weeks after conception, infancy and early childhood are especially critical in determining the neurological basis for skill development and the well-being of the child.

The period of the pregnancy is especially important in the development of the fetus and the brain and forms the basis for secure bond and attachment. Even before conception, the environment influences the physical and mental health of the parents and shapes their future capacity to care for the infant during pregnancy and after birth. Nurturing care of the child begins during pregnancy, when mothers and other caregivers can start talking and singing to the fetus. By the end of the second trimester of pregnancy, the growing fetus can hear. And, from birth, the baby can recognize the mother's voice.¹⁶

In the first months after birth, more than 1 million new neural connections form every second as the baby senses the surrounding environment. After this period of rapid proliferation, connections are reduced through a process called pruning, which allows brain circuits to become more efficient.¹⁷ As the child grows, these connections slow down as pathways start consolidating.

Genes, passed on to us by biological parents, establish the broad basis for later development, but the environment where children grow up dramatically affects genetic expression and is therefore critical to their development. Together, genetic traits and environmental influences shape the quality of brain architecture and establish a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all the learning, health, and behavior that follow.¹⁸

The first years of a child's life have a significant influence on the emergence and development of physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual capacities, which are important prerequisites for success in school and later in the workplace and community. It is in this light that infants and young children need many positive and nurturing experiences at this time, when their brain is developing so rapidly. Parents, caregivers and educators have a decisive responsibility, since virtually all of this vital period is spent at home or in daycare centers and

schools. Much research highlights the importance of positive parenting and provides evidence that early stimulation, caregiving, attachment, and bonding, as well as the creation of safe contexts, can positively influence brain development and help children grow, learn and thrive.



Early childhood is understood in this Toolkit as the period from pregnancy up to the 8th birthday. The Toolkit emphasizes the vital role that parents, caregivers and educators play — before conception, during pregnancy, and after the child is born — in creating the conditions for the optimal growth and development of the child.

Studies also show that toxic stress in the early years of life, caused by extreme poverty, war trauma exposure, repeated abuse, or severe maternal depression, for example, damages the developing brain architecture, which can lead to life-long problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.¹⁹ Secure attachment and affectionate relationships with caregivers engender empathy and self-control that inhibit crime and violence later in life. Abilities with roots in early childhood not only last for a lifetime; they also affect the next generation's human development.²⁰

The quality of care that children receive during these early periods heavily influences their positive development in life. Healthy development in the early years provides the building blocks for educational achievement, economic productivity, responsible citizenship, lifelong health, strong communities, and successful parenting of the next generation.²¹

Children start forming their identity — their view of themselves and the world — and building relations with others, right from birth. Identity is a critical aspect of spiritual development. How this unfolds depends on how children are nurtured and the experiences they have. Children learn through interaction with adults, other children, and the world around them; through play and exploration; by observing what others do and say; and by encountering existing social norms, for instance, societal or gender expectations. These experiences are the first makers of identity, and they help shape the foundation of children's understanding of themselves.

In early childhood, children learn not only physical and cognitive skills, but also social and emotional skills such as sharing, resolving conflict without violence, and regulating their own emotions. These skills are foundational for learning, well-being and an ability to form and maintain respectful relationships with others, into adult life. Research has established that children can identify racial cues in adult faces as early as nine months of age,²² and can begin forming their own stereotypes and prejudices around the age of three to four years.²³ By this age, children have learned who to talk with, who to fear, who to trust. Children learn this by copying what they see their parents, caregivers and educators do.

The critical importance of early childhood in various religious and spiritual traditions

Childhood has a critical importance from the religious perspective, as this is when children are introduced to their families' religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, and immense care, love and attention is given to nurturing their spirituality.

In Buddhism, the concept of impermanence reminds us that children are in a continuous state of change and that to love children is also to recognize childhood as a phase of life. Children, therefore, offer adults the challenge of loving without insisting on getting the particular outcome they want from their children or making their own happiness dependent on what the child does,¹ as adults allow children to discover a path in life that enables them to develop to their full potential and achieve happiness and fulfilment. This calls parents, caregivers and educators to practice the Dharma — or Buddhist teachings — in their child-upbringing practices, by upholding and supporting children and creating a loving environment for them to thrive. In this practice of Dharma, children become teachers as well, as the Buddha's teachings are transmitted in reciprocal relationships. To take care of a child, adults need to work on themselves to transform their minds.

Judaism views childhood as a period of purity, joy, and beauty to be valued and cherished. The child is the greatest blessing of God and the purest form of being created in God's image (*b'zelem elohim*). The Talmud states, "Childhood is a garland of roses," and "The very breath of children is free of sin."²⁴ Children are blessed every Friday evening at the start of the Shabbat, the holiest day of the week for Jewish people. The need to enable every child to recognize his or her own dignity and value is expressed in this teaching: "Every individual should perceive the world as having been created for his/her own sake."²⁵ As a logical consequence of this understanding, children are entitled to be loved and cared for so that they may have the possibility of developing to their maximum potential. Children are regarded as divine trustees and guarantors of the future. Judaism recognizes that the well-being of society is determined by how we treat children.

In Christianity, Jesus teaches his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to those who are child-like. He points to children as role models for adults to emulate in humility. On one occasion, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"²⁶ Jesus replies, "Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."²⁷ Jesus also strongly urged his disciples not to discriminate against children or stop them from coming to him and promoted their rightful inclusion in the kingdom of God.²⁸

¹ This contextual paraphrase of the Buddhist concept of *upadana* — often translated as "attachment" and seen as a cause of suffering — is used here to avoid confusion in English with the different concept of "attachment" used in the science of early childhood development and throughout this Toolkit, which refers to the positive bond between child and parent or caregiver that is essential for healthy child development. Other English translations of *upadana* include "clinging," "craving," or "grasping."

In the Hindu tradition, there are 16 *samskaras*, or rites of passage, to create a lasting impression on the minds of children. Out of these 16 *samskaras*, two are performed during the mother's pregnancy and eight are performed during early childhood. The purpose is to create a positive impact on the child, and to remind adults to acknowledge that the child is a precious being to be treated with love and care. Hindus regard their children as gifts of the divine. They delight in the childhood play of divine incarnations like Krishna and Rama. Dignity does not depend on age, and children have the same dignity as adults.

In Islam, the Qur'an expresses the utmost love and value for children of all abilities, describing them in various ways: the child is a gift from God (*Hiba*),²⁹ an adornment of life (*Zeenah*),³⁰ a great blessing (*Ni'imah*),³¹ and a protector or friend who carries a legacy (*Waleeh*).³² Through these powerful descriptors, the Qur'an emphasizes what a blessing it is to have children. Children in their early years grow and develop through play and affection, as demonstrated by Prophet Mohammed (PBUH).³³ It reminds parents and other caregivers to see children as blessings and not burdens.

Sikhism teaches that the child is a constant remembrance of God and that God protects and nurtures children in the mother's womb. Many rituals during pregnancy and childbirth are practiced to nurture the spirituality of the child. Rituals include spiritual music (*kirtan*), reciting mantras, or reading words from the *Shri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* (the Sikh holy scriptures) during childbirth and immediately after. Family and extended family in the Sikh tradition are the main actors responsible for bringing up the child in the early years; it is within the family that the child learns the values and practices of the religion. From a very early age, children are encouraged to experience a connection with the Divine. Nurturing the spiritual development of young children plays a special role in Sikhism; young children fully participate in prayers and rituals such as meditation, which teaches them to connect with themselves and the Divine.

Religious Rituals and Celebrations in the Early Years

Many religious rituals and celebrations take place during this period, such as the naming ceremony, visits to places of worship for a special prayer for health and well-being, the first haircut, the first solid meal, and the first reading of the holy scripture, to name a few. During *t-tis* time, parents grow into parenthood that is rooted in their religious and cultural traditions. These religious practices can help foster children's well-being and pass onto them ethical values that can develop as the foundations for spiritual nourishing, which can serve later in life as a source of strength to stand firm when things get difficult in life's journey. These ethical foundations enable us to think and act in ways that are honest, empathetic, and responsible.

Spirituality and children

E sareera meria,

Har tum meh jyot rakhi, ta tu jag meh aaiya...

Oh my physical body,

It is because God placed the Divine Light into you that you came into this world...

Anand Sahib, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*

The dignity of the child is affirmed when attention is given to their holistic development and when whole societies work together to support children's nurturing, protection from violence and empowerment through love and care. Thus far, this booklet has presented the importance of a whole-child development approach that is inclusive of the spirituality of children, particularly in the early years of life which are foundational for children's development of lifelong capacities. This section now explores the understanding of spirituality and proposes a common approach that is respectful of diverse religious and non-religious perspectives, and that supports the development of spiritual capacities.

Towards an understanding of spirituality

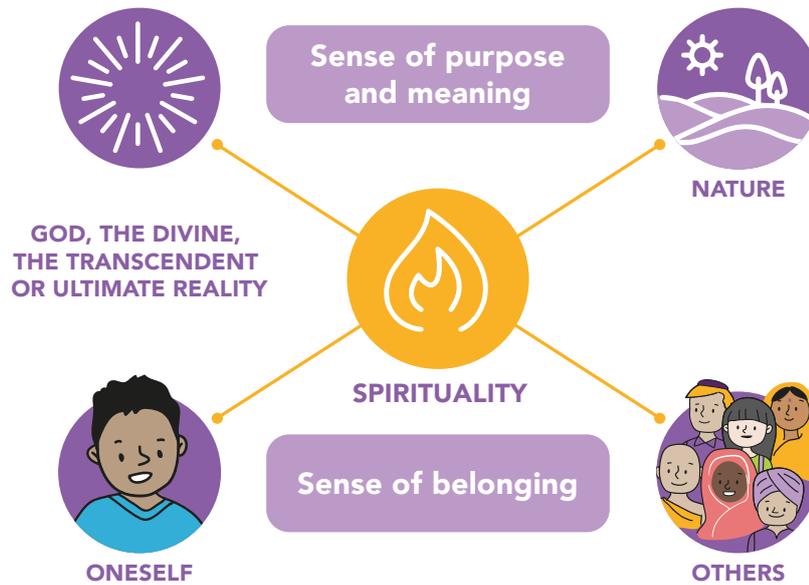
A multitude of definitions of spirituality exist, and there is no universally agreed definition. Religious and spiritual communities may each view this concept in a different light. Scholars have generated various definitions, including these:

- "The sphere of values and beliefs in regard to self, others, nature, life, and the Divine that informs the choices and actions of one's daily life."³⁴
- "The natural dimension to life that includes: thinking and feelings about transcendence; ideas about a creator or creative force in the cosmos; human values; sense of meaning and purpose in life; love and care for self and others; sense of stewardship for the earth and its flora and fauna; the aesthetic."³⁵
- "A system of children's deep connections leading first to self-awareness, and later to the nurturing of basic and complex dispositions ignited by moments of wonderment, awe, joy, and inner peace that develop into the prosocial personality traits of caring, kindness, empathy, and reverence."³⁶
- Spirituality draws on some or all of three relationships: (1) the transcendent relationship with God or a higher power; (2) spiritual relationships with other people based upon unconditional love, forgiveness, joy and compassion; and (3) the awareness and perspective of our transcendent self, or our higher self.³⁷

Spirituality is not confined only to religion or to religious people. Spirituality refers to the connection and relation with the self, with others, with nature, and with that which is referred as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality. A spirituality that connects these multidimensional relationships helps children to be grounded in their sense of self and helps them connect to their roots. It builds a sense of belonging, strengthens children's identity, ethical values, prosocial behaviors, and positive relations with others. It also lifts children up to develop a sense of purpose and meaning around who they are, what they do, where they live and what they are meant to be and want to become.

The approach to understanding spirituality in this Toolkit respects the uniqueness of spirituality in each religious and spiritual tradition. It places less emphasis on the formal institutional structures of religions, and more emphasis on the distinctive core values and principles that affirm human dignity — found in all major religions and spiritual traditions as well as in human

rights instruments — and that shape the understanding of what it is to be human and what it means to be in relationship with other people and with nature.



The understanding of spirituality in this Toolkit is informed by the following propositions.

Spirituality is innate. We are inherently, genetically spiritual. There is strong evidence that demonstrates that biologically, neurologically, and psychologically, spirituality is part of human nature and is foundational for thriving. Spirituality is integrated with our biological capacities for perception and detection — the senses, the intellect, the emotions, and consciousness itself. Natural or innate spirituality exists as a human capacity. The innate spiritual attunement of young children is biological and developmental. Children enter the world prepared to have a spiritual life, and at the same time their spirituality needs to be cultivated and sustained.³⁸

Spirituality is an intrinsic part of being human. To be human is to be spiritual; it is an intrinsic human capacity. Throughout history and across all societies, forms of spirituality have become part of human experience, and spirituality has remained a robust force in life for both individuals and societies. Spirituality is understood and manifested with great variety across cultures and religious traditions.³⁹

Spirituality is multi-dimensional. Spirituality is about interconnectedness with oneself, with others, with nature, and with that which people refer to as God, Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality. Those four aspects are all closely linked and overlap with each other, providing wholeness to people's lives.

Spirituality cannot be imposed. Spirituality is not something that one thrusts upon or even gives to the child. The process of nurturing the spiritual development of children cannot happen through imposition or vertical teaching, it takes place through role-modelling, positive relationships, and experiences. It is by creating safe, loving and respectful spaces for children to connect with themselves and others, nature and that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, that the child develops their own spirituality.

Spirituality is related to but not confined to religion and faith. Spirituality is not the same as religiosity, nor is it the same as religious development. The emphasis of spirituality is on one's connectedness with others and nature, and with a sense of meaning and purpose, rather than focused on the organized structure and moral rules and laws of religion, per se. Spirituality may be cultivated both within and outside traditional religious and spiritual frameworks.⁴⁰

Spirituality is embedded in relationships and community. Spirituality is closely allied with human bonding and is relational, inspired by the experience of transcendence in relationship with one another, nature, God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, and with oneself. Brain scans have shown that the part of the brain that activates when people feel spiritual is the same part that allows people to bond and see dignity and value in other people.⁴¹ Spirituality is shaped through the community, religious and spiritual narratives, beliefs and practices, as well as by the broader forces in society and culture.⁴² A relational spirituality allows people to see the sacred in the other — it fosters interconnection with other human beings beyond the categories of gender, religion, beliefs, ethnicity or culture.

Spirituality is expressed in ethical behavior. Spirituality focuses on both inner and outer life and is manifested through ethical behaviors and actions. It fosters a distinctive core of values that shape people's relations with others, helps strengthen respect for diversity, empathy and compassion for other human beings and individual and collective responsibilities toward others, community and mother earth. Spirituality, when actively and intentionally nurtured, is a life-shaping force, not only for the individual but also for the larger community.⁴³

Spirituality is transmitted intergenerationally. Studies designed to learn how children's earliest relationship with God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, develops show that a child's first and formative experience of the transcendent relationship very often is through their parent's love. The intergenerational transmission of spirituality occurs through its practice, whether in personal prayer, religious observance, or other spiritual practice: an ongoing shared awareness of spiritual presence in the world. The child sees a parent's or caregiver's experience of spirituality, and then follows suit, while being immersed in the love of the parent. A child's innate natural spirituality becomes a powerful lifelong capacity through the unconditional love of the parent-child relationship. How parents, caregivers and educators raise their children for spirituality from birth through adolescence can open this developmental pathway from them — or shut it down.⁴⁴

Spirituality supports interreligious learning and respect for other religions or beliefs. In the early years, nurturing the spiritual development of children can help them to become familiar with different religious and spiritual beliefs, to build a foundation for their growing capacity to respect others, show compassion through appreciation of diversity, and develop a spirituality that is inclusive of the other. Nurturing spiritual development strengthens the child's family religious and spiritual beliefs when nurtured in an environment of freedom and respect for the child's capacity to question and create meaning; as the child grows, this nurturing strengthens their capacity to understand other people's religions and beliefs, make their own decisions, and exercise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

A spirituality of “moving beyond” – Transcendent spirituality

An important aspect of spirituality as understood in this Toolkit is that it fosters a transcendent relationship¹¹ that opens into a sacred world with direction and connection that gives people meaning and purpose, and helps them “move beyond” what they normally experience.

The following paragraphs describe how spirituality helps adults transcend and “move beyond.”⁴⁵

From the immediate to the ultimate. A spirituality of moving beyond — transcendent spirituality — is not satisfied with the immediate but seeks to embrace the ultimate. If, for example, we look at situations when adults are resorting to violence against children, it is almost always because they are caught up in the immediate — they cannot move to the ultimate. In many cases, it is this preoccupation with the immediate that causes the adult to turn to physical, verbal, and emotional violence. Punishing children shows a concern about the immediate, a wish to quiet a child as an immediate desire without asking what this punishment will mean to this child in the long run.

Many adults live in stressful conditions due to extreme poverty, displacement, difficult family relations, food insecurity, family and public health crises, or violence in the community or in the home, which results in heightened stress that inhibits their capacity to care for and respond sensitively to the needs of their children, particularly in times when children most need protection and nurturing care. Parents, caregivers and educators in these situations require support from the community to address the multidimensional challenges they are exposed to and to strengthen their resilience and capacities to support the healthy and sound development of their children.

Not satisfied with answers. To go beyond is to question. Most people want a quick answer. The more questions people ask, the more movement toward the beyond they get. We are sometimes so sure we have the answer that we fail to ask the question. The spiritual posture cannot be satisfied with answers alone. We should allow children to enquire and ask questions. In the early years, children are always asking “Why?”; they see, they hear, they touch, they experience, and they ask, “Why?” It is this innate curiosity of children that creates the foundation for their spiritual growth. In a religious context, even if children are expected to recite and memorize holy scriptures, they can also be empowered to understand and comprehend what they are memorizing so that it has meaning and relevance and is not mere rote learning.

Not limited to boundaries. It is instead focused on possibilities. It is possible for people to live and work together for the good of the community. The call to love others is a challenge to go beyond, to try to live what seems to be a contradiction. Is it possible to love one’s enemy? In asking whether this is realistic, we open ourselves to the possibility itself. Nurturing in children

¹¹ The transcendent relationship may be perceived as a personal dialogue with God, or sense of oneness with the universe, or a sense of relationship with a universal spirit through the many living beings and natural forms around. It can be felt as a guide in ones’ relationship to other people or nature (Miller, L. 2015).

their capacity to empathize with others, to imagine possibilities and ways to go beyond the boundaries — either mental or external/structural — designed to separate people based on religion, age, culture, gender or any other construct, will help them develop their spirituality.

Spirituality is the call to move beyond where one is — from the immediate to the ultimate, from answers to questions, from boundaries to possibilities. Nurturing the innate capacity for spirituality is sure to contribute to the movement to build a world where children are protected and empowered to thrive and fully develop.

Understanding spiritual development



Spiritual development is understood in this Toolkit as a central aspect of holistic development that enables a gradual and progressive unfolding of children's innate ability to connect with themselves, others, nature, and with what people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, in the search for meaning, purpose, belonging and transcendence.

Spiritual development as a central aspect of holistic development

The spiritual development of children closely connects to other developmental domains — and all domains mutually reinforce each other. As spiritual qualities or capacities develop, these affect the physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional domains. In turn, as the other domains of development build up, this strengthens the development of the spiritual capacities of the child. For instance, the spiritual development of children is central to social and emotional development. When children become more self-aware, they are more able to connect with others — and when they understand their interconnectedness with others, they learn to develop ethical and positive relationships with other beings. Spiritual development also enhances children's self-regulation and management of emotions, and this, in turn, serves as the foundation of enriched executive function skills. In like manner, children's development of executive function skills enriches their ability to develop further spiritual capacities.

Spiritual development is also linked to better mental health in children and to choosing and maintaining healthy lifestyles, thus affecting the physical development domain.

Spiritual development is intertwined with the development of cognitive abilities. Through cognitive development, children think, explore and figure out the world. Spiritual development is one type of perception and mode of awareness that contributes to thinking about and understanding the world around them. When children develop spiritually, they do not only use intellect for problem solving and analytics; they also draw upon spiritual capacities and perceptions in forming understanding and in solving problems. Cognitively, as the child's capacity for abstract thinking and symbolic representation grows, their spiritual development capacities grow in tandem.

While children have spirituality innately, it is through nurturing that a process of development takes place. Spiritual development requires a significant other in the lives of the child, be it a parent or caregiver — for it to unfold. The next several pages describe how the innate spirituality

of the child is expressed, how spiritual development can be nurtured and what conditions are needed for this to take place.

Children's innate spiritual capacities

Children have innate spiritual capacities, qualities or assets that are foundational to their being. These lifelong foundational capacities need to be nurtured.

Emerging literature on the science of human flourishing reveals that spiritual capacities are key to holistic well-being. Human flourishing is enabled and further enriched by spiritual connection, which in turn nourishes ethical values, which are the pillars of communities and societies. This spiritual dimension of the human being presupposes that people are bearers of value whose dignity and intrinsic worth should be respected and appreciated equally regardless of ethnic, social, cultural, religious, gender, sexual, or other differences.⁴⁶



This Toolkit identifies ten innate spiritual capacities —self-awareness, wisdom, compassion, empathy, love, awe and wonder, mindfulness, curiosity, imagination, and wondering — but this is not an exhaustive list. These have been identified based on wisdom from religious and spiritual traditions, comparative literature reviews, and findings from selected research.^{III} They were selected to encompass a nuanced view of spirituality, extending across diverse understandings of what spirituality is. These ten capacities are organized into four categories found to strengthen children's relationship with the self, with others, with God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality; and with nature. Though some capacities seem to fall clearly within one category, it is notable that many overlap and may fit into others, too.

The following four categories present a different way of knowing, seeing, perceiving, and relating that is found in the spontaneous, thoughtful, and genuine ways that young children experience life from the early years. It is important to note that, while these capacities seem to be innate, they need to be nurtured for them to flourish and contribute to the development of ethical values and prosocial behaviors in children later in life.

^{III} The identification of these spiritual capacities considered reflections from consultations held with 25 religious and spiritual leaders from seven different religious and spiritual traditions as well as some written papers produced as part of the process. It also considered the research conducted by UNICEF, Learning for Wellbeing Foundation and the Fetzer Institute as presented in the report titled *What makes me? Core capacities for living and learning*. The process also considered authors who, through scientific research and comparison with religious teachings and understandings, have identified key spiritual capacities in children. Most notably it considers the five-year research project conducted by Dr. Tobin Hart that included interviews with families, a statistical survey of recalled childhood experiences, the examination of case studies and the various research of others, presented in *The Mystical Child – Glimpsing the Spiritual World of Children*; as well as the 15-year research project and work of Dr. Lisa Millar, compiled in *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving* and her numerous publications.

Categories of spiritual capacities

Heart knowing: Children from very early on display an intuitive process of knowing that allows them to sense the inherent worth in fellow human beings, events and nature.⁴⁷ This is not about information or knowledge; it is about an inner capacity children have to sense what is true and what is right, an innate *wisdom* that allows them to express their views genuinely and through the heart. Children have an innate ability to “discern patterns that help them perceive what is interconnected and recognize interdependence.”⁴⁸ While modern conceptions generally locate “knowing” in the head, some religious and cultural traditions identify the most essential knowing with the heart. For example, the Japanese word *kokoro* can include the notions of heart, mind and spirit. It signifies mind, in the emotional sense; spirit; courage; resolve; sentiment; affection; and inner meaning. Children have an innate inner guidance or wisdom, that brings together mind, heart and spirit, and that often surprises adults.

Children also have an *innate self-awareness* that allows them to listen to this inner voice or inner compass,⁴⁹ to respond to situations and to others, to find truth and meaning, and to express their moral and ethical judgment. In very young children, self-awareness is a state in which the self reacts to social and environmental cues and is expressed through the awareness of their body, their awareness of touch from others, and their consciousness of themselves. Research has shown that from the first minutes of life outside the womb, babies manifest a sense of their own bodies as differentiated entities among other entities in the environment, such as objects and people.⁵⁰ As they grow, this manifests in their innate ability to recognize themselves in relation to others. In some religious and spiritual traditions, the individual self is part of God, the Divine Self. Some believe that there is a divine spark or essence inside every person. That spark is believed to give children self-awareness and self-consciousness.

Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves – a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. Ye would find yourselves independent of all else but Me, and would perceive, with your inner and outer eye, and as manifest as the revelation of My effulgent Name, the seas of My loving-kindness and bounty moving within you.

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 326-327

Relational consciousness: Children have an innate relational capacity that is manifested through *empathy and compassion* for other beings and a sense of oneness with others.⁵¹ A young child has an innate ability through an intuitive process to pick up the feelings or bodily sensations of others. Children have a sense of caring relationship with all living beings. They can feel concern and care for a dead bird on the street, a dying tree, or the suffering of others. Children can sense the feelings of their parents, caregivers and educators — their joy, calmness, as well as their stress, anguish and sadness, and they can reciprocate the same feelings.⁵²

The Dalai Lama expresses children's innate capacity for empathy and compassion:

"In Buddhist philosophical tradition, compassion (nying je) is understood mainly in terms of empathy — our ability to enter into and, to some extent share others' suffering... because our capacity for empathy is innate, and because the ability to reason is also an innate faculty, compassion shares the characteristics of consciousness itself."⁵³

This interconnectedness can be expressed with the term "ubuntu" from the Nguni languages, which can be translated, "I am because you are." Ubuntu is an African philosophy that emphasizes that what makes us human is our interconnectedness with other people. Ubuntu places emphasis on the interconnected humanity of every person. Similar teachings about our interconnectedness are found in all major religions.

This relational consciousness is also manifested in "children's ability to listen to others and tune into the surrounding; it is expressed in their capacity to ponder, self-reflect and to explore other views."⁵⁴ Love is also a very distinctive innate capacity of young children that is expressed in their relations with others. Giving and receiving is at the heart of every young child. Young children approach us with a favorite toy, trusting that we would not take it but share it and then give it back. But we also know how early a child can learn not to trust.

The following words attributed to Nelson Mandela speak of the disposition of children to love:

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Full awareness: The child experiences transcendence through their innate capacity for full awareness of reality and a sense of timelessness. Young children are *mindful* — they are present in the here and now and are fully alert to life. A child may stay absolutely still for a long time, bent over a line of ants, absorbed by their journey. From a spiritual point of view, the child has the ability to be absorbed in the moment, which many adults spend hours seeking to relearn. Another inherent spiritual capacity of young children is *awe and wonder*, not fantasy or dreamy disconnection from reality, but an experience of the whole self. It involves the body and the senses as much as the mind. A child might want to smell the dough again and again when bread is being made, or listen to the raindrops pattering on the roof, or sit silently watching the flame of a lit candle. Awe and wonder lead to joy, preserve excitement and enthusiasm, and feed energy and hope.

The words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel remind us that wonder and awe are intrinsically related to our sense of awareness of the divine.

Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance... to feel the rush of the passing of the stillness of the eternal... The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe."⁵⁵

Transcendent knowing: Children have an innate ability to experience and learn from life through *curiosity, imagination, mystical experiences* and seeing and sensing the invisible. Children have the capacity to “seek what can expand knowledge and actions, asking and uncovering an experience with openness and curiosity.”⁵⁶ Children’s natural curiosity about the world moves them to *ask questions and to imagine alternative possibilities*. Their innate capacity for *wondering* is perhaps one of the characteristics that we most often see in children: They ask questions, they want to know more, they ask why — as they discover and create meaning.⁵⁷ Transcendent thinking and dreaming are also central forms of knowledge that children use to process and understand their reality — for children these are developed and fully realized ways of knowing. As adults, we have been socialized out of this “native” spirituality, but children rely on *imagination* to make sense of the present moment and create meaning. Children are naturally mindful, they live in the present moment without interpretation and judgment, and utilize spiritual ways of knowing to help them navigate the world.

The following verse from the Bhagavad Gita 17:3 (Chapter 17, Verse 3), speaks about faith as an expression of a person’s essential nature and extends to imagination to explain what we conceive and hold to possible.

“Human beings are made by their imagination. They become what they imagine.”

Booklet III of this Toolkit, which contains the Activities for Children, provides descriptions of how all these spiritual capacities can contribute to the development of prosocial behaviors and ethical values. It also provides ideas for parents, caregivers and educators to nurture these innate capacities through daily interactions, playful experiences and care.

Violence in Early Childhood

All violence against children is preventable, and none of it is justifiable.

Violence against children violates children’s physical and emotional well-being, with long lasting consequences for their lives, as well as for their spiritual safety and development. It breaks their connection with others and damages their sense of trust and respect for other human beings. This, in turn, can impair their ability to form positive relationships with others and restrain their innate capacity for interconnectedness.

The term “violence against children” includes all forms of violence against people under the age of 18, whether perpetrated by parents or caregivers, relatives, educators, peers, romantic partners, other people close to the child such as religious or spiritual leaders and coaches, or strangers. For younger children, the most common forms of violence are neglect, maltreatment, sexual violence, emotional or psychological violence, and bullying. The term also includes structural violence which manifests as “unequal exposure to protective and risk factors, inequitable access to the resources and services that could ameliorate risk and support positive development, and unequal service quality. Similar to direct violence, the structural variant violates the rights of children and undermines the protective capacities of those who care for them.”⁵⁸

Direct violence

Every year, children worldwide experience physical and psychological punishment from their parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults who are supposed to be there to love and care for them. Globally, it is estimated that close to 300 million children between the ages of two and four (three in four children in this age range) experience violent discipline — physical punishment and/or psychological aggression — from their caregivers on a regular basis. Around 6 in 10 one-year-olds in 30 countries with available data are subjected to violent discipline on a regular basis. Nearly a quarter of one-year-olds are physically shaken as punishment, and nearly 1 in 10 are hit or slapped on the face, head or ears.⁵⁹



250 million one year olds
(around 6 in 10) are punished by
physical means.



Close to 300 million children
(3 in 4) aged 2 to 4 worldwide
experience violent discipline by their
caregivers on a regular basis.

Reference: UNICEF. (2017). *A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*.

1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report having been sexually abused as a child.⁶⁰ Evidence also shows that approximately 1 in 4 children under the age of 5 — some 177 million — live with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence.⁶¹ Sadly, it is in the home where children experience violence the most. The main perpetrators of violence against children are those closest to them — those whom children trust the most.

Violence and abuse remain the norm for many children around the world. This causes fear and stress in children, negatively affects their emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health, and can lead them to express their fear and stress via aggressive behavior toward others, to mistrust others, or to withdraw socially. Consequently, these children will be at risk of falling behind in their academic life, social relationships, and other opportunities for learning, which can also hinder their potential to thrive later in life.

Structural violence

Many families also face difficulties in providing nurturing care for children due to the extreme conditions they live in, including poverty, political unrest, humanitarian crises, situations of food insecurity, harmful effects of toxic stress, or communities plagued by violence. These

circumstances limit the availability of and access to social services and impair the capacity of caregivers to engage positively with and be responsive to the needs of their children.

Climate change is a major factor negatively impacting young children's development. Almost every child on earth is exposed to hazards related to climate change. Natural disasters have intensified child poverty and vulnerability and are directly causing migration and displacement due to extreme weather events.⁶² The climate change crisis has been further exacerbated by the overlapping crises of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other emerging and re-emerging diseases. These events cause great damage to the most vulnerable families and communities, increasing toxic stress that can alter the development of children's brain architecture in ways that are likely to "impair memory, executive function, and decision-making in later life" thus negatively influencing academic performance, health, relationship formation, and other long-term life outcomes.⁶³

As rural communities face climate stress, families relocate to informal urban settlements, which increases children's exposure to violence, abuse, and exploitation, including child labor, extreme poverty, and reduced access to critical health, education, and psychosocial support services. Promoting safe and nurturing relationships in the early years, building strong social connections around families with young children, and educating children to become aware of the importance of caring for mother earth and connecting with nature, are important measures to address the impact of climate change on children and essential to promoting human flourishing in the climate-changed future ahead.^{iv}

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts on children. It has led to increasing domestic violence, including violence against children. The pandemic has severely affected young children's physical and mental health, social and emotional development, and safety and access to education and recreation activities, leading to an unprecedented crisis of care and learning. Childcare centers and school closures during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic kept 1.52 billion children out of school, and for many, remote learning has been out of reach.⁶⁴

Childcare centers and school closures also eliminated some early warning mechanisms for detection of violence against children including abuse and neglect. If children from systematically disadvantaged groups are disproportionately affected by early adversities, this could further increase inequality gaps among groups, as vulnerable children are left behind and develop on a negative trajectory further away from their counterparts.

Violence and its impact on child development and well-being

The experience of violence in childhood often has effects that linger throughout an individual's lifetime. Some studies show that children who suffer violence in childhood are more prone to mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression.⁶⁵

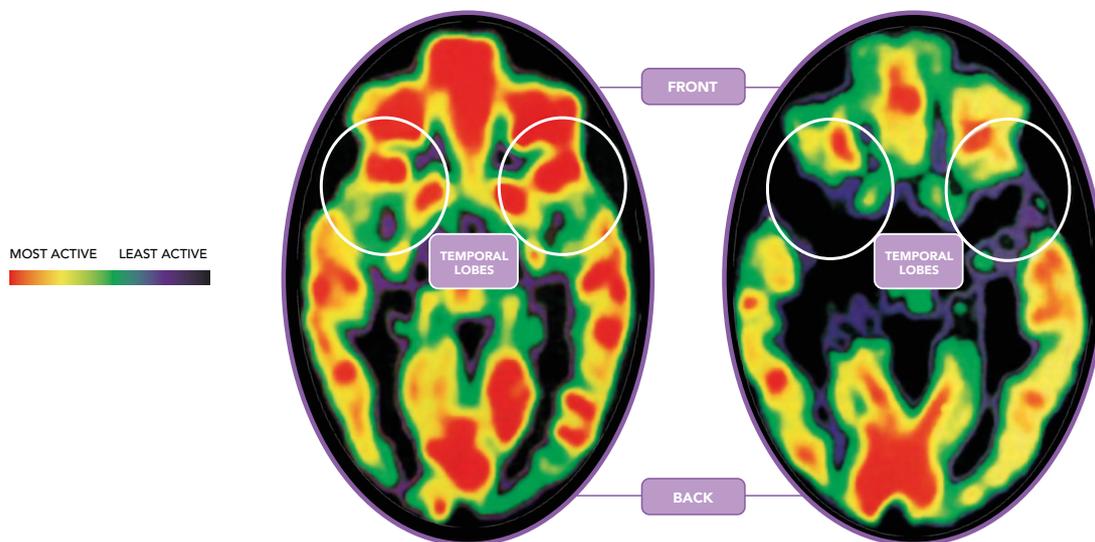
^{iv} These efforts should be accompanied by programs to foster community and systems-level resilience as well as policies and actions to slow global warming.

Neuroscientific evidence demonstrates that exposure to prolonged stress, violence and conflict in early childhood, or “toxic stress,” is linked with the chronic activation of the body’s stress response system, which can be detrimental to young children’s health, well-being, and psychological functioning, memory and learning, impairing their progress through socio-emotional developmental milestones. Later in life, this can decrease economic productivity and ability to earn, perpetuate violence in interpersonal relationships, and exacerbate distrust. It can also lead to higher unemployment and public expenditure, intergenerational poverty, and perpetuation of inequity, thereby intensifying social and economic risks for societies.⁶⁶

Experiencing early childhood adversities has been associated with increased involvement in crime later and intergenerational cycles of violence. Research has found that children who experienced maltreatment or witnessed domestic violence in childhood were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, commit violent crimes, or abuse their future family members in adulthood, when compared to children who did not experience early family violence. Children and families who experience marginalization, inequalities or social exclusion may develop a sense of devaluation and a pessimistic outlook that can lead to low expectations about their future, negative attitudes about self and others, and even antisocial or self-destructive behavior.⁶⁷

When early trauma occurs, children are less likely to have a positive view of themselves and others and will often expect rejection and maltreatment from those around them. As a result, the individual’s ability to connect and interact positively with those in their environment can be compromised.⁶⁸

Figure 1. PET scans of a healthy brain and an abused brain ¹⁰¹



Healthy brain

This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.

An abused brain

This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian Orphan, who was institutionalized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from these senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.

The severe effects of a lack of nurturing care are evident in brain scan images (Figure 1). Studies show that PET scans of a healthy child’s brain, compared to the brain of a deprived child’s brain,

show more activity in the temporal lobes, an area where emotions are regulated that develops and grows based on early childhood experiences. When children experience neglect, violence or fear, their brain recognizes and reacts to these as threats to their well-being.⁶⁹ Another study shows that if children are continuously exposed to violence and fear, their biochemical/hormonal system is kept on high alert.⁷⁰

Violence can alter the developing brain's structure and function: it can affect language acquisition and cognitive functioning, resulting in social and emotional competency deficits and generating fear, anxiety, depression, and the risk of self-harm and aggressive behavior. Alterations to the brain resulting from childhood violence can also shape later adult behavior. Longitudinal studies show that children exposed to violence are more likely to be victims of violence later in life and to become perpetrators, using violence as adults against domestic partners and their own children, and to be at increased risk of engaging in criminal behavior.⁷¹

Arguably, one of the most important contributors to moral development is a person's life experiences, and more specifically adverse life experiences. Children who have experienced different forms of maltreatment and abuse are more likely to have delayed or irregular brain development. The brain is where morals and decision-making are processed, and many parts of the brain must work together for the best outcome.^v Adverse experiences alter the body's ability to regulate stress responses such as "fight or flight" and can impair the decision-making process and understanding of morals and values.⁷²

Research has shown that childhood abuse can also result in "spiritual injury" such as feelings of guilt, anger, grief, despair, doubt, fear of death, and belief that God is unfair.⁷³ Abuse and other traumatic events can breach attachment, shatter the self, undermine belief systems, and violate faith in God or others, which can have an effect on one's spiritual life.⁷⁴ Breaking this vicious cycle for the child, the adult, and for the whole society requires that every child lives free from all forms of violence from the very start.

The ethical demand to address violence against children

Religious and spiritual traditions recognize the Divine, the sacred, in every child. In many religious stories and passages, children are viewed as a blessing. The birth of a child is seen as a blessing that brings the family closer to the experience of that which is referred to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality. In religious and spiritual traditions, children are often described as a whole person, a very important member of society, and as a gift. Science, at the same time, also shows that young children should be given special attention and care, and that they need positive relationships and nurturing interactions to fully develop and flourish. In their own ways, both science and religious and spiritual traditions point to the importance of early childhood. Yet, in silence and secrecy, many young children suffer from the diverse forms of violence inflicted upon them.

^v When a child is abused, their brain is physically altered; the amygdala and prefrontal cortex can have reduced volume, and stress regulators such as the amygdala can begin to overreact, causing cortisol levels to rise.

A major obstacle to ending violence against children is the perception of early childhood as being merely a period of transition, with lesser status than adulthood. It is often assumed that, only when reaching adulthood, is a person a full-fledged person with inherent human rights. This perception must be challenged; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes all children as rights-holders who must be respected and protected, rather than being treated as passive recipients of services or “not-yet persons.”⁷⁵

Religious and spiritual communities are called to care for and nurture children, not just because it is their responsibility but because they have an ethical obligation to affirm children’s dignity. In doing so, they must reconsider the way violence and authority are used in raising children. To nurture is to love. It is to care for the development of another human being, to provide the conditions for the best relationship with the child. It is antithetical to imposing anything, with or without violence, which may lead to obedience and homogeneity, but only as long as fear lasts. With nurturing, we nurture love and exemplify this deeply in ourselves, and with children, gently, joyfully, playfully, and respectfully of their dignity and sanctity. The nurturing of children is a divine priority that is entrusted to us with a very special responsibility.⁷⁶

Addressing violence against children in early childhood is a moral imperative and an ethical demand. Religious and spiritual communities can play a critical role in strengthening protective factors for child development, as well as in preventing violence against children, by challenging — through theological reflection — beliefs, social and cultural norms, and practices that condone violence against children. They can also develop child-centered and violence-free religious and spiritual communities and provide counseling, support and guidance to caregivers to contribute to nurturing the spiritual development of children.

A Praxis Approach to Nurturing Children’s Spiritual Development in the Early Years

Children’s spirituality needs to be nurtured for it to flourish and develop. Children’s spiritual development cannot happen in a vacuum; it requires **safe, respectful, violence-free environments, positive relationships with parents, caregivers and educators, and empowering experiences for children to safely pursue and nourish their own spiritual development.** While the potential for expression of spiritual capacities already lies within the child, it is the primary role of the family — and particularly, parents, caregivers and educators — to nurture them through their relationships, experiences and stimulation from the environment.

The three areas shown below function as the necessary conditions for nurturing the spiritual development of children. They are interrelated and together form the sound foundation for children’s spiritual development. It is vital that parents, caregivers and educators understand how these areas support the development of children’s innate spirituality and how they can prioritize them and activate them.



The role of the family

In this process of nurturing children's spiritual development, the family plays an important role as the sustainer of the child and the first sacred place where children should experience love, connection and sense of belonging. It is within the family that the child starts developing their innate spiritual capacities, but also it is sadly within the family, as mentioned before, that often children experience violence for the first time, and for many, this happens in recurrent ways.

The family has a central role in nurturing the spiritual development of children. The family's culture, belief system and child-upbringing practices influence who the child is and who they become. Families affect the way children see the world, interact and connect with others, and respond to and learn from difficulties and contradictions. They also support children by correcting their mistakes, upholding responsibilities and helping them reconcile their differences with others. The family context is also the first place where children learn to trust people around them as they receive love and care, which helps them to feel safe, secure and valued. This builds their self-esteem, their sense of identity, and their belief not only in themselves but also in others.⁷⁷

The family is a spiritual place. It carries the child through memories, connections, rituals and experiences that shape their identity and sense of meaning and belonging. Young children are interested in learning about their ancestors; they are curious to know how they are related to others; they feel connected to all relatives, living or deceased. The natural sense of family bond with relatives who are no longer alive is culturally supported in most countries around the globe, often as some form of ancestor honoring, prayer, offering or appreciation. In Mexican culture, this bond is celebrated on the Day of the Dead. Ancestor shrines and offerings are common in

China and other parts of Asia. In Jewish tradition, the mourner's kaddish prayer is recited each Sabbath to remember departed loved ones and in the same moment celebrate life.⁷⁸

Families do not exist in isolation, they are part of communities and bigger support systems that bring the child into a web of relationships, which starts expanding as the child grows older. The community plays a critical role in the spiritual development of children and is a critical supporter of families.

Understanding the necessary conditions for nurturing children's spiritual development

Positive relationships

Relationships are one of the first ecosystems in which children's growing spirituality blossoms. Spiritual development in children grows, among other channels, through caring relationships, love, and interactions of "serve and return," whereby parents and other adults who care for young children relate to the child in responsive ways, using back-and-forth interactions.

Children need responsive parents, caregivers and educators who provide nurturing care and build respectful, protective, and empowering relations with them that will allow them to develop soundly and thrive. When caregivers see the child as a spiritual being, recognize their agency, and model practices that are respectful, they are contributing to the development of the child's self-concept, self-awareness, and capacity to form positive relations with others.

In the relational interdependence of positive and secure relations with parents, caregivers and educators, children learn to value their relationship with themselves, with others, with nature, and with that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality. This, in turn, helps them to make sense of the world and develop their identities. Relational interdependence is also understood in the sense that the community and adults form the development ecosystem of the child: schools, religious and spiritual communities, governments and families are interrelated through common values that can affirm the dignity and life of children and be passed on to the child as they develop.⁷⁹

The way parents, caregivers and educators nurture ethical values in children creates a foundation for their spiritual development. Fostering ethical values like respect, empathy, responsibility, and compassion can be done in both explicit and implicit ways. Most adults understand how to teach about values explicitly, but they are often unaware of or underestimate the implicit ways they shape their children's ethical development, values and identity formation. A lot of what children learn is implicit, coming via accepted social norms and practices which, at times, can be discriminatory or violent. For instance, if they are treated with harsh attitudes and violence, this shapes their perception of themselves. If they are exposed to unequal gender relations, or other forms of lack of appreciation and respect for others, this can influence the way they behave toward others. While there is mixed evidence about precisely how children learn prejudice, we do know that it can be learned during the early years.

Adults nurture ethical values through the way they demonstrate and model for children how they deal with disagreements, their relationships with others, and the way they interact with their own children.

For adults to support children's spiritual development, they themselves must nurture their own spirituality. Annex I provides an overview of the importance of adults' nurturing their own spirituality in several religious and spiritual traditions.

Siblings play an especially important role in the development of young children. Like parents, older brothers and sisters act as role models and teachers, helping their younger siblings learn about the world. This positive influence is thought to extend to younger siblings' capacity to feel care and sympathy for those in need: children whose older siblings are kind, warm, and supportive are more empathic than children whose siblings lack these characteristics. A longitudinal study looked at whether younger siblings also contribute to their older sisters' and brothers' empathy in early childhood, when empathic tendencies begin to develop. The research found that beyond the influence of parents, both older and younger siblings positively influence each other's empathic concern over time.⁸⁰

The development of positive relations in the family, including among siblings, acting as modeling figures, can impact children's formation of relationships with others around them.

Safe, respectful, violence-free environments

Fostering ethical values and nurturing the innate spirituality of children can only be done in an environment free of violence, and only by using and modelling non-violent practices. Children need an environment that is free of violence and respectful of their rights to develop their sense of agency and become productive members of society who can contribute to the common good. They need to be free from physical or emotional harm, and to have their views considered and respected. They need a stable and nurturing environment created by parents caregivers and educators that ensures good health and nutrition, protects them from threats, and provides opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are emotionally supportive and responsive.⁸¹

A safe, respectful, violence-free and loving environment is created when caregivers listen and respond to the physical and emotional needs of children, create ample time to develop positive interactions through play and dialogue, and protect children from abuse, violence, neglect, and maltreatment. Children learn to trust those around them when they feel safe, loved, secure and valued, which in turn strengthens their spiritual development and capacity to relate to others and regulate their emotions, and builds the foundation for them to create and find meaning and purpose in their lives and sustain intrapersonal cohesion.

While adults have the responsibility to protect children, and usually have a strong desire to do so, they must also try to equip children to cope with difficulties and uncertainty when adults are not present.⁸² An environment of trust, close relationships and mutual respect contributes to children feeling true to themselves and helps to develop a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Such an environment allows children to fully express themselves and learn to discuss and voice their opinions about topics that matter to them.⁸³

The support of the community is paramount to the creation of safe, respectful and violence-free environments, particularly in settings of existing violence and poverty, where children's safety is negatively affected. Religious and spiritual communities play a key role in challenging social and cultural norms that condone violence against children, and in affirming norms that promote care, respect, and protection of children. It is important that they also provide support to vulnerable families, assisting them to strengthen their resilience and capacity to care for their children.

Empowering experiences

Children must be provided with opportunities to explore, appreciate nature, learn about diversity and their own and others' religious and spiritual traditions, make their own choices and decisions, and interact and contribute to their communities, according to their evolving capacities. These experiences allow them to practice and internalize ethical values, develop their agency, sense of community, belonging and purpose. Children's innate curiosity and playful spirit is nurtured by experiences that allow them to explore the world around them, ask questions, discover meaning through interactions with others, and reflect on the experiences they go through.

A critical aspect of children's spiritual development is their participation in their own spiritual growth as they exercise freedom of expression, freedom of choice, and freedom to explore, as well as to speak up on issues that affect them. Child participation is seen as a significant protective factor against forms of violence, and as enabling the young child to develop their own sense of their being, belonging, and becoming dimensions in an age-appropriate way. From early ages, spaces need to be created in the family environment and in the community for children to form a basis for their relations with themselves and others, a sense of belonging to a local and global community, and a disposition to participate in the transformation of the problems that affect their communities. Opportunities for children to be empowered starting in the early years can be created by offering play-related activities whereby children can learn prosocial behaviors, put into practice values of sharing, empathy, respect, and reconciliation, and learn to express themselves and regulate their emotions.

Spiritual development is both an inward and outward journey of discovery, where children grow in their sense of meaning and purpose in life; connect, empathize with and are influenced by others; begin to explore their understanding of that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality; and live out their spiritual beliefs and commitments in daily life.

The much-quoted verse, *Children Learn What They Live*, encapsulates the importance of spiritually nurturing children and the role of parents, caregivers and educators in creating the foundations for spiritual flourishing of the child.

*If children live with criticism
They learn to condemn;
If children live with hostility
They learn to fight;*

*If children live with ridicule
They learn to be shy;
If children live with shame
They learn to feel guilty;*

[But]

*If children live with tolerance
They learn to be patient;
If they live with encouragement
They learn confidence;
If children live with praise
They learn to appreciate;
If children live with fairness
They learn justice;
If children live with security
They learn to have faith;
If children live with approval
They learn to like themselves;
If children live with acceptance and friendship
They learn to find love in the world.⁸⁴*

Being human is itself spiritual, and the spiritual aspects of our experiences constitute part of holistic human development and well-being. Stressing the importance of cultivating spirituality in early childhood brings this awareness into sharper focus and can inspire caregivers to support the child's flourishing. Without this awareness, it can be difficult for caregivers to develop sensitivity to the child's inner being and inner experience, and hard for them to intentionally nurture the related capacities in the child.

The importance of play for children's spiritual development and holistic well-being

The Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) with some of his students were invited to a dinner. On the way they ran into his grandson, Hussein, who was a very young child. He was playing with some other children. When they saw the kids, Prophet Mohammed went forward and opened his arms wide in order to embrace them, and the children started to run around in play. Then Prophet Mohammed ran after Hussein to make him laugh until he caught him. When he caught Hussein, he put one hand under his chin and one hand at the back of his neck and kissed him. (Taberani, 1984)⁸⁵

Play is one of the main tools for the blossoming of spirituality in the early years through interaction and relationship with others. Play supports children's developmental processes by building cognitive skills, content knowledge and creative thinking, including problem-solving

skills. It fosters social development by enhancing children’s capacity to share, negotiate, reach compromises and resolve conflicts. It helps them develop empathy through listening and taking another person’s perspective. Another important aspect of play is that it supports the development of self-regulation as children learn to follow norms and pay attention while experiencing feelings such as anticipation or frustration.

Play is the essence of childhood and is part of children’s nature. Children have an innate playful spirit that allows them to go to unimagined places, give life to ideas and dreams, and engage without conditions, while connecting them with their innermost capacity to enjoy the simplicity of life. Playfulness is perhaps one of the highest expressions of the human spirit, whereby joy, hope, appreciation of the present moment, freedom to wonder, and giving of oneself come together, at times unconsciously, in a delight in life and sense of wholeness.

The development of a playful spirit is also key to building resilience — the capacity to bounce back in the face of adversity — which helps to cope with stress, experiences of failure or disappointment, and moments when the child feels disconnected from others.

The right to play is also stipulated in Article 31 of the CRC, which recognizes the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. General Comment No. 17 of the CRC expresses the critical contribution of play to children’s spiritual well-being as well as to the protection of the earth. “Children come to understand, appreciate and care for the natural world through exposure, self-directed play and exploration with adults who communicate its wonder and significance. Memories of childhood play and leisure in nature strengthen resources with which to cope with stress, inspire a sense of spiritual wonder and encourage stewardship for the earth. Play in natural settings also contributes towards agility, balance, creativity, social cooperation and concentration.”⁸⁶

Play is critical for children’s physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual development. Through play — freely invented or guided — in a safe environment, children can deeply immerse themselves in a joyful set of experiences: exploring their senses, making sense of the world, expressing and coping with emotions, and engaging with others. However, when play is guided, it should not take away the nature of children’s playful spirit and their genuine capacity to enjoy. On the contrary, spaces should be created for children to express their innate playfulness, since that in itself offers the spark for children to create spaces that foster their spiritual growth.⁸⁷

Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years and Its Contribution to Protecting Them from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being

This Toolkit argues that by nurturing the spiritual development of children in the early years, critical contributions can be made to the protection of children from violence and promoting their holistic well-being.

First, nurturing the spiritual development of children requires three main conditions, as presented above, that support the emergence and flourishing of innate spiritual capacities. These conditions require that parents, caregivers and educators use non-violent forms of upbringing that affirm the dignity of the child, create spaces and environments for children that are safe, respectful and violence-free; and expose children to experiences that are empowering, support the development of their agency, and allow them to develop interconnectedness with others, practice ethical values and develop a sense of community. As parents, caregivers and educators become familiar with ways to support these three conditions, they engage in a conscious process of nurturing their own spiritual development, which helps them do the same for their children.

These areas contribute to ending violence against children by means of empowering parents, caregivers and educators and supporting them to reduce harsh-parenting practices and creating positive parent-child relationships; challenging and changing social and cultural norms that condone the use of violence; strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender-equitable relationships for all children; and strengthening life skills by prioritizing social, emotional learning and the development of prosocial behaviors. All these proved to be strategies that work to end violence against children, according to *INSPIRE - Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*.^{vi} This process of nurturing spiritual development, together with other positive inputs, such as responsive caregiving, health, education, nutrition, child protection, and a focus on holistic well-being, can be a protective factor, an aid to coping, and a means for violence prevention. Nurturing spiritual development is thus a powerful transformative agent that, together with these other factors, can significantly reduce the child's experience of violence. This, in turn, can reduce the child's likelihood of later engaging in violence themselves — potentially also against children — as an adult.

Second, nurturing children's spiritual development early on benefits their holistic well-being for years to come, acting as a preventive mechanism. Several studies have demonstrated the critical importance of nurturing spiritual development in children and young people. Research has shown that older children whose parents have nurtured their spirituality have higher levels

^{vi} In 2016, ten global agencies launched INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children, an evidence-based resource package of seven strategies to end violence against children. https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/

of predicted happiness.⁸⁸ Literature reviews across various disciplines identify the significant notion of children's spirituality, arguing that it is a key component in shaping children's health and well-being. As research progresses, it is becoming clear that spirituality is not only vital to human development, but also an essential component of various aspects of human life, health, and education.⁸⁹

Spiritual development also contributes to improved social-emotional well-being for children, as it strengthens interconnectedness with oneself and others. Undeniably, positive social relationships are a key contributor to well-being, as these relationships greatly influence children's mental and physical health.⁹⁰ Family and peer relationships play a critical role in children's identity formation and self-perception. Often, children with poor peer and familial connections experience higher rates of depression, loneliness, low self-esteem, and poor well-being.⁹¹ Cost-benefit analyses show that there is a return of eleven dollars for every dollar invested in social-emotional learning interventions with sustained impact on academics, behavioral conduct, and emotional distress lasting up to 18 years.⁹²

Youth who, as younger children, were exposed to spiritual development demonstrated less aggressive behavior, less substance use, fewer high-risk behaviors, and less risk of depression.⁹³ Children who had two generations of caregivers who emphasized their spiritual development (for instance, a grandparent and a parent) showed 80% less depression as youth, than children who did not. On the other hand, externalizing behaviors^{vii} such as aggression, hostility, conduct disorder and delinquency, as well as internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety, have also been shown to transmit intergenerationally across three generations of parents and children.⁹⁴

In a six-year longitudinal study, conducted in 2018, examining the connection between moral competency and spirituality in predicting adolescent risky and problem behavior, the researchers found that both morality and spirituality played a critical role in reducing negative and risky behaviors and were predictive of later behavioral concerns. Spirituality enhanced moral development and provided essential protective factors that decreased the likelihood of problem behavior by providing children with an essential moral foundation and sense of purpose.⁹⁵

Spiritual development has also been found to be foundational in the development of resilience, particularly in children who have experienced adversity, by helping them to find meaning in life, reframe narratives of loss, and connect to the community. Research in adults has found that experiences of awe can have beneficial psychological and physical implications, and that prayer and meditation have proven beneficial for healing.⁹⁶ For many people, religious and spiritual practices and beliefs are a key to processing, recovering, and healing from trauma, and spiritual communities may be one place to seek support and guidance.

^{vii} The APA Dictionary of Psychology from the American Psychological Association defines these as follows: "Externalizing behaviours and disorders are characterized primarily by actions in the external world, such as acting out, antisocial behaviour, hostility, and aggression. Internalizing behaviours and disorders are characterized primarily by processes within the self, such as anxiety, somatization [psychological disturbance in physical body symptoms], and depression."

Finally, nurturing children’s innate spirituality contributes to the development of ethical values and prosocial behaviors that can benefit families and communities. When a critical mass of the population espouses values such as respect, empathy, compassion, solidarity, and capacity to reconcile differences, this has the power to become a tipping point for a societal transformation toward social cohesion — a state in which people learn to live together respectfully, value diversity and pluralism, and cooperate with one another to develop and prosper individually and collectively. This process can then be sustained when children who grew up in this environment raise the next generation of children, transferring values of social cohesion and employing positive parenting practices that benefit the earliest development of the upcoming generation.

Annex I. The Importance of Adults Nurturing Their Own Spirituality in Various Religious and Spiritual Traditions

As parents, caregivers, educators, and community members — anyone who is part of the upbringing of a child — it is vital that we nurture and keep in touch with our own spirituality and capacity to deal with contradictions in our lives. By nurturing our own spirituality as a parent, caregiver, or educator, we are preparing ourselves to provide nurturing care to children, to respond in a more positive manner to their needs, and to help create safe, respectful spaces for them to explore their interconnectedness with others. Educational institutions also play a key role here by serving as places where children, caregivers, educators, and others in the community nurture one another’s well-being and co-create a good life. Education that fosters attitudes and values conducive to living together peacefully and respectfully contributes to the spiritual development of children.

Our religious and spiritual traditions remind us of values and notions that strengthen our understanding of each other. Practicing religion and nurturing our own spirituality mean that we are developing relationships, not only with ourselves or vertically with that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, but also horizontally with peers within and outside of our immediate community. These horizontal relationships are also intergenerational. By interacting with peers and elders, children learn how to be active participants and critical thinkers. This feeling of interconnectedness enables us to have a sense of belonging; to understand universal values that are common to all religious and humanistic traditions, such as respect and empathy; to have a sense of self-control and the patience needed to find peaceful solutions to challenges; and to embrace a sense of social responsibility that encourages us to address problems that affect others.

Adults, too, learn from these intergenerational interactions. As mentioned previously, the Christian Bible quotes Jesus, “Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”⁹⁷ This passage reminds adults to recognize that

children already have a spirituality and that adults can learn from them. Sadly, children's spiritual development is too often hindered by violence inflicted upon them by adults.

Jesus also taught that the two greatest commandments are: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."⁹⁸ Loving oneself is perhaps a prerequisite to loving others. With these words Jesus shows a path towards unity and solidarity with others — a solidarity that requires an ethical care for the "neighbor" as if one is caring for oneself. The interconnectedness of life, compassion for one another and solidarity with the stranger are ethical demands in life that are transmitted to children not merely with words but primarily through practical actions and day-to-day positive examples.

In Buddhism, violence is explained by the teaching of conditional genesis (or dependent origination), which looks at cause and effect — how a chain of causes leads to an outcome. This teaching explains the nature of reality by illuminating how consciousness, developed through experiences, creates the mental formations and thoughts that result in action. It is important to understand that experiences of violence in early childhood — in its many different forms — will have effects not only in the short term, but also in the long term, on an individual. Violence experienced in early childhood becomes a part of the consciousness and, consequently, shapes how children look at and engage with the world around them. Therefore, by engaging in mindful reflection on those experiences, and on oneself as part of the chain of causes that leads to violence, one learns to manage violent reactions, and see oneself and others — even perpetrators of the worst violence — as suffering human beings in need of healing.

From the Hindu perspective, the purpose of nurturing spirituality is to cultivate right values as guiding principles, to grow in joy, and to avoid bringing suffering and sorrow on oneself and those around. In Hinduism, divine values such as non-violence, truth, freedom, purity, love, generosity, humility, and service are understood as strengthening harmony and welfare. In contrast, values such as hatred, indifference, greed, anger, violence, and arrogance are seen to cause suffering and violence and are destructive of self and others. Hindu practices aim to strengthen the divine values. Hinduism teaches *ahimsa* ("non-injury" or "non-violence"), *satyam* ("truth"), and *brahmacharya* ("self-control"). All of these are to be practiced across thought, word and action. Hindus regard children as blessings and gifts of the divine; caring for them is a privilege and an opportunity for parents to grow spiritually. Religious teachings and stories guide adults to be peaceful, just and in harmony in their relationship with all beings, including their children.

The five pillars of Islam are meant to enhance the inner spirituality of believers, including children, while connecting them with the outer community as well as with God. Creating opportunities to observe, learn, contemplate, practice, and share each pillar of Islam and its meaning promotes a sense of ethics in relations with others, vocation, and social responsibility with others and the community. This, in turn, produces a rich spiritual life.⁹⁹

Judaism understands the spiritual life of children as expressed through the study of Torah,^{viii} participation in the ritual and prayer life of the community (*avoda*), and righteous deeds and

^{viii} In Judaism, in the broadest sense, "Torah" signifies the substance of divine revelation to Israel, the Jewish people: God's revealed teaching or guidance for humankind. "Torah" is also used in a more limited sense to refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Britannica, 2022).

acts of loving-kindness (*gemilut hasadim*). Nurturing one's own spirituality requires not only nurturing oneself but also one's relations with others and practicing the fundamental principles meant to guide one's life.

In our global society today, interactions among people are very often mediated by technologies such as social media. To nurture our spirituality, it is important to find actual, physical spaces to reconnect with ourselves and with our children, where we seek to understand their needs, aspirations, and dreams by creating moments of dialogue, listening to them, and giving them space.

Nurturing spirituality is not only about private beliefs and self-awareness, but also means reflecting on the ways we decide to take responsibility in our communities. It is also about understanding the injustices around us and committing to transforming them. By fostering our own "conscientization"¹⁰⁰ — developing a critical awareness of our own social reality through reflection and action — we are nurturing our spiritual capacity to care for one another and to respond to the ethical demand to affirm the dignity of everyone.

Development of a pro-child spirituality among the adults that surround the child should be just as important as the spiritual development of the child. Young children learn about the world and that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality not in abstract ways, but by observing the people who surround them and experiencing how they treat and talk to them and others.

Nurturing the spirituality of the adults who care for and protect children is therefore seen as vital to their ability to model spirituality and nurture it in young children, who learn through what they experience and see. As parents, caregivers and educators develop greater understanding and awareness of spiritual development, this will translate into greater capacity to interact with their children in ways that strengthen their innate spirituality.

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About the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

The Consortium, convened by Arigatou International, brings together civil society and faith-based organizations, religious communities, multilateral organizations, academia and individual experts to foster collaboration, share good practises and develop evidence-based and innovative approaches to integrate values-based education and spirituality in early childhood for the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

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