

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

Introduction and Rationale

CONSORTIUM

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

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- › Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children
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Acronyms

CRC: Conventions on the Rights of the Child

CRS: Catholic Relief Services

ECD: Early Childhood Development

INEB: International Network of Engaged Buddhists

IRW: Islamic Relief Worldwide

GNRC: Global Network of Religions for Children

M&E: Monitoring and Evaluation

MDV: Movimento Defesa da Vida – Projeto Família, Portugal

NGO: Non-governmental Organization

PET: Positron Emission Tomography

REDMAS: Network of Men for Gender Equality (acronym is in Spanish)

SDGs: United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

UN: United Nations

UNESCO: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

VAC: Violence Against Children

WHO: World Health Organization

WVI: World Vision International

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Foreword

Every child born glows with the wonder and sacredness of life. The miracle of new life always reminds us of the human family's ethical and moral responsibility to ensure that all children grow up in a safe and nurturing environment, with all the support they need to reach their full potential.

The first years of a child's life are critically important, a time when the foundations are laid for health, well-being, learning and productivity for a lifetime. Parents and caregivers play a critical role in shaping the environment that makes this possible. In this precious period, there is not only a necessity to protect children from all violence, but also a golden opportunity to promote their holistic well-being. Yet, in silence and secrecy, too many young children are suffering from violence in our world today. UNICEF reports that around 300 million — three in four children between the ages of 2 and 4 — are regularly subjected to violent discipline by their caregivers, and this is only one of the many forms of violence inflicted upon children in the early years. And far too often, the holistic well-being of the child is not even considered.

To support faith actors around the world to end violence against children and promote their holistic well-being, the Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence has drawn upon and integrated both scientific and religious resources to develop this Toolkit. It provides a carefully crafted roadmap — complete with evidence-based interventions, implementation resources and training guides.

For the last six years, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children has worked to promote and support the implementation of evidence-based strategies to end violence. Arigatou International and other members of the Consortium have been at the forefront of prioritizing, and advocating for, these strategies, and working collaboratively to ensure that every child grows up free of any form of violence, abuse, neglect or exploitation.

This Toolkit is designed to support parents, caregivers and educators to nurture the spiritual development of children in the early years. The approach of the Toolkit is rooted in Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. It provides critical tools and resources to better equip all those who would assist these key adults in children's lives to create safe, loving, violence-free and respectful environments, strengthen their positive relationships with children, and provide empowering experiences that allow children to develop holistically.

Nurturing spiritual development in the early years can provide important benefits for children, acting as a protective mechanism against violence, fostering resilience in children to overcome adversity, and promoting healing for those affected by violence and abuse. In recent years, there has been increasing research and evidence of the critical importance of nurturing children's spiritual development. The Toolkit cites studies that have shown that youth who have been exposed to spiritual development as younger children demonstrate less aggressive behavior, less substance use, fewer high-risk behaviors, and less risk of depression.

We hope that the approach of the Toolkit will make it easier for religious and spiritual communities to encourage and equip parents and caregivers to practice positive parenting, as well as to challenge social norms that condone violence against children. We also hope that educators will find it useful as they seek to strengthen children's life skills in the early years. These are direct paths to ending violence against children that need higher investment and prioritization by governments, organizations and communities alike.

It is our sincere hope that this Toolkit will help strengthen the movement among religious and spiritual communities, faith-based and civil society organizations, and multiple other concerned partners across sectors and geographical regions, to protect, promote and affirm the dignity of children.

Together, we can build a world where each and every child can thrive and reach their full potential.



Rev. Keishi Miyamoto
President
Arigatou International



Dr. Howard Taylor
Executive Director
Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children

Preface

Confluence of Crisis: A confluence of crisis is confronting the world today and children stand to be the most affected. This includes the continuing impact of the COVID 19 pandemic, the learning crisis that is directly impacting children, the multiple wars, the economic slowdown and the cost-of-living burden that every nation and its citizens has had to bear. Experts around the world are pointing towards the imminent threat of reversing some of the hard-won gains in child survival and development. **We, as a responsible global community, must not let this happen – we must step up our efforts and reframe our action plans for children.**

Rising evidence of how children are being directly impacted: This unprecedented situation must also challenge us to revisit the basics of holistic child development. UNICEF reports tell us that one out of seven children worldwide is affected by the mental health crisis alongside nearly 75 million additional children falling into poverty. These are not mere statistics; it points to the deep suffering our children are experiencing currently and the social cost of under investment in services that ensures the wellbeing of children. **We must do better for our children!**

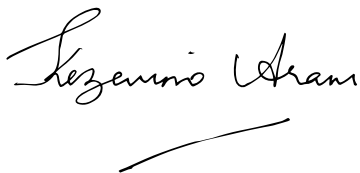
Missing gaps: The holistic wellbeing of children includes as a distinct component spiritual development. Scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that this is as critical as physical, emotional and social development and further points to its interconnectedness. Exploring this important dimension of child development needs a multi-disciplinary platform and common language which was missing thus far. And it is here that Arigatou stepped in to convene global experts and institutions with expertise in diverse sectors and committed to further the understanding of spiritual development, particularly in early childhood. The steering committee has held regular consultations and developed this plan of collaboration and action.

The Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood brought together multiple global organizations. It also addressed a vital challenge that came in the way of exploring ‘spiritual development of children’ and role of values in the past, a perception burden. This space is often seen as a problematic by the secular world, one that is dominated exclusively by the world of religions. Arigatou International built on its credentials of past work both with faith communities and with UN organizations, including WHO, to address this trust deficit. The ground needs of children and the moral compass of serving the best interests of children equally strengthened this collaboration.

The wonder of a growing child in our midst has always been a gift for humanity!

Scientific evidence from the field of neurosciences and child development demonstrates clearly that the developing brain and body of a growing child will benefit immensely if all dimensions of child development are given equal importance. Early childhood in a child's life journey is not only foundational but also critical in shaping adult life and human flourishing. We offer this Toolkit also as a resource to the global community, a contribution to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

The Toolkit is the first of many offerings: This Toolkit, developed by Arigatou International – Geneva under the leadership of Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe, and guided by strategic direction from the Consortium Steering Group members and the technical expertise of the members of the Technical Team, reflects the collaboration and contributions of the institutional members of the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, individual expert members, as well as many other partners. Deep gratitude is due to the hard work and dedication of the many contributors whose expertise was indispensable to its development.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Kezevino Aram". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the bottom of the name.

Dr. Kezevino Aram
President
Shanti Ashram
Consortium Steering Group Member

Executive Summary

Religious and spiritual traditions recognize the divine and the sacred in every child. Respect for the human life and dignity of the child is a fundamental principle found in all major religions and spiritual traditions, as well as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Science, at the same time, tells us that young children should be given special attention and care, and that they need positive relationships and nurturing interactions in the early years to fully develop and flourish. Early childhood lays the foundation for health, well-being, learning and productivity throughout a person's whole life, and it has an impact on the health and well-being of the next generation. In their own ways, both science and the world's religious and spiritual traditions point to the critical importance of early childhood. Yet, in silence and secrecy, many young children suffer from the diverse forms of violence inflicted upon them, and very often violence is justified and condoned by social and cultural norms in their communities.

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 they trust the most. It is estimated that, globally, 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.¹ Many children around the world are also victims of structural violence brought on by poverty, violent conflict, the negative impact of climate change, displacement or fragility. Both direct and structural forms of violence cause fear and toxic stress in children, negatively affect their emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual health and well-being, 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.

Violence against children negatively impacts children's physical, social and emotional health and well-being as well as their spiritual safety and development, as it breaks their connections with others and their sense of trust and respect for other human beings, which are foundational for their holistic development.

The dignity of the child, as a paramount aspect of human flourishing, is protected and affirmed when attention is given to children's holistic development and well-being — physical, cognitive, social, emotional and spiritual — and when whole societies work together to support children's health, education, nutrition, protection from violence, and nurturing and empowerment through love and care. The spiritual development of the child is a central part of full, sound and holistic development, and nurturing children's spiritual development is a critical contribution to addressing violence in early childhood. Yet, a holistic approach that includes spiritual development is often a missing piece in current child development frameworks and programs, and the most under-invested pillar of child development. This is due to several factors, including the lack of comprehensive research on what child 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.

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 that which people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, as they join the search for meaning, purpose, belonging and transcendence. This understanding of spirituality 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.

Recent research has revealed new understandings of the importance of spirituality in child upbringing, demonstrating that spirituality is not only biological but also developmental. Children have innate spiritual capacities that need to be nurtured for those to flourish and further develop. These studies have also established what religious and spiritual communities have historically affirmed, that the spiritual development of children early on benefits their holistic well-being for years to come. 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.²

Children's spiritual development cannot happen in a vacuum. This Toolkit proposes three main conditions that are considered foundational for the nurturing of children's spirituality: (1) an environment that is safe, free of violence, and respectful; (2) caring and positive relationships with parents, caregivers and educators; and (3) empowering experiences for children to practice and internalize ethical values, develop their agency, sense of community, belonging and purpose, ultimately encouraging them to safely pursue and nourish their own spiritual development. The Toolkit, therefore, seeks to equip faith actors, parents, caregivers and educators to nurture the spirituality of children in these three areas, thereby contributing to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

Nurturing children's spiritual capacities and development can provide important benefits for children, acting as a protective mechanism against violence, fostering resilience in children affected by adversity, and promoting healing for those affected by violence and abuse. Studies have shown that youth who were exposed to spiritual development as younger children demonstrated less aggressive behavior, less substance use, fewer high-risk behaviors, and less risk of depression.³ Nurturing the spiritual development of children benefits their social and emotional development, as it fosters ethical behaviors and actions that help to strengthen their relations with themselves, others and with nature. When children develop their spirituality, they are more likely to have a positive view of themselves, make use of their innate empathy and compassion to serve and help others, find and use non-violent alternatives to resolve conflicts, and self-regulate their emotions. These factors, in turn, contribute to a decreased likelihood that children will engage in criminal activities and enhance their ability to positively contribute to their communities as they grow up.⁴ All this assists children to become resilient to violence across the lifespan, reducing the chance of becoming either a victim or a perpetrator, and increasing the chance of becoming an agent of positive change; ultimately acting as an empowerment mechanism for children.

Prioritizing the spiritual development of children to help protect them from violence and promote their holistic well-being requires close collaboration with religious and spiritual leaders, who exercise moral influence in many societies. Religious and spiritual leaders are important influencers of the family and particularly of child upbringing practices and education in many parts of the world. They can: examine and address theologies or practices that condone violence and strengthen those that affirm the dignity of the child; influence policy makers to invest in early childhood and child protection mechanisms; and foster programs within their communities that promote holistic child development and create public awareness about issues concerning children. Their focus on the ethical aspects of child upbringing, including non-violent approaches to parenting and promoting the spiritual development of children, can make a crucial contribution to creating peaceful and harmonious families and communities. This helps to break the vicious cycle whereby violence is transmitted from generation to generation.

Nurturing children's innate spirituality also contributes to the development of ethical values that can benefit families and communities. When a critical mass of a 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 in order 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 the values of social cohesion and employing positive parenting practices that benefit the earliest development of the upcoming generation.

About the Toolkit



Purpose of this Toolkit

The Toolkit aims to help equip faith actors to engage actively in the protection of children from violence in early childhood and the promotion of children's holistic well-being by supporting parents, caregivers, educators and communities to nurture children's spiritual development and take an active role in addressing violence in early childhood.

Specific objectives

- Create spaces and opportunities for faith actors,¹ parents, caregivers, and educators to reflect on the importance of the spiritual development of children in the early years and identify the benefits for children's holistic development and well-being
- Encourage self-examination of religious and spiritual principles, teachings and practices that affirm the dignity of the child and challenge those that can be used to condone violence against children in child upbringing
- Provide tools for building caregiving practices and skills for nurturing spiritual development of children, as one key avenue for contributing to the protection of children from violence in the early years

What does this Toolkit address?

The Toolkit addresses the importance of the spiritual development of children for their protection from violence and holistic development and well-being. The Toolkit is developed around the following shared understandings among Consortium members.

1. Respect for the human life and dignity of the child is a fundamental principle found in all major religions and spiritual traditions, as well as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Child dignity is affirmed by addressing the holistic development of children.
2. Spiritual development is a central aspect of the holistic development and well-being of children, contributing to positive development outcomes. Spiritual development is one of the most under-researched and under-invested areas in child development.

¹ Individuals whose work is inspired by religious, spiritual, or faith-based traditions, teachings, or experiences. See Annex II – Glossary, for more details.

3. Early childhood plays a critical role in the development of children, including in the formation of values, attitudes and prosocial skills. The spiritual development of children greatly contributes to these foundational aspects.
4. Evidence demonstrates that exposure to prolonged stress, violence and conflict in early childhood, or “toxic stress”, can be detrimental to young children’s health, wellbeing, and psychological functioning, memory and learning, impairing their progress through socio-emotional developmental milestones.
5. Parents, caregivers and educators are the main influencers of children during the early years, and religious and spiritual communities have great influence with these key influencers in many communities around the world.
6. Religious and spiritual communities play an important role in promoting social norms that affirm positive attitudes, behaviors and practices in child upbringing, and in challenging those that condone violence against children.
7. Facilitating the engagement of religious and spiritual communities in child development programs requires respect and understanding of their faith, religious and spiritual principles, beliefs, traditions, and practices.
8. Multi-level, multi-stakeholder and holistic early childhood development services that include the spiritual development of children play an important and under-estimated role in fostering social cohesion and contributing to improved social and economic outcomes in communities.

A distinguishing feature of this Toolkit is the linkage it makes between spiritual development and the protection of children from violence. It makes this case by presenting research on the impact of violence against children in the early years, and by describing how nurturing children’s spiritual development acts as a means to **promote safe, respectful, violence-free environments, build positive relationships between parents, caregivers, educators and children, and equip adults in these roles to create empowering experiences for children**. These steps, in turn, work as a preventative factor against violence and as a mechanism for the protection of children. These three areas are also prerequisites for nurturing children’s spiritual development. They are interrelated and together form the basis for a sound foundation for children’s spiritual development.

The Learning Program for Adults - trainers, facilitators, parents, caregivers and educators - provided in this Toolkit is composed of three modules. It provides theoretical knowledge and practical tools, based on well-established research, for nurturing children’s spiritual development as a contribution to protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being. The Learning Program includes activities specifically designed to help adults learn how to better nurture children’s innate spiritual capacities. By equipping the adults in children’s lives to do this well, the Toolkit aims to contribute to children’s positive view of themselves, strengthen their relationships with others, with nature and with what people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality, and foster their sense of belonging, community, purpose, and interconnectedness.

Three important premises

The Learning Program for Adults and the activities it includes are built on three premises.

PREMISE 1	PREMISE 2	PREMISE 3
Each adult involved in supporting the spiritual development of children, either as a facilitator, parent, caregiver or educator, needs to be equipped to understand and internalize why spiritual development is critical for children's holistic development and well-being, and how it contributes to the protection of children from violence in child upbringing.	Nurturing care and the spiritual development of children require that adults work on their own spiritual development.	Children's spiritual capacities are fostered and flourish by promoting positive and nurturing relations with caregivers; creating safe, respectful, violence-free environments for children; and creating empowering experiences for children to develop prosocial behaviors and nurture ethical values and reflections that allow them to connect with themselves and others in empathic and respectful ways, and develop their sense of belonging, community, purpose and interconnectedness with others.

Who is this Toolkit for?

The Toolkit is tailored for organizations — faith-based organizations, religious communities, or other civil society organizations interested in the spiritual development of children — and is designed to complement holistic development approaches and to be integrated in existing parenting, education and/or ECD programs.

The Toolkit presents a Learning Program for Adults as well as Activities for Children. The Learning Program for Adults is designed for use with the following types of people:

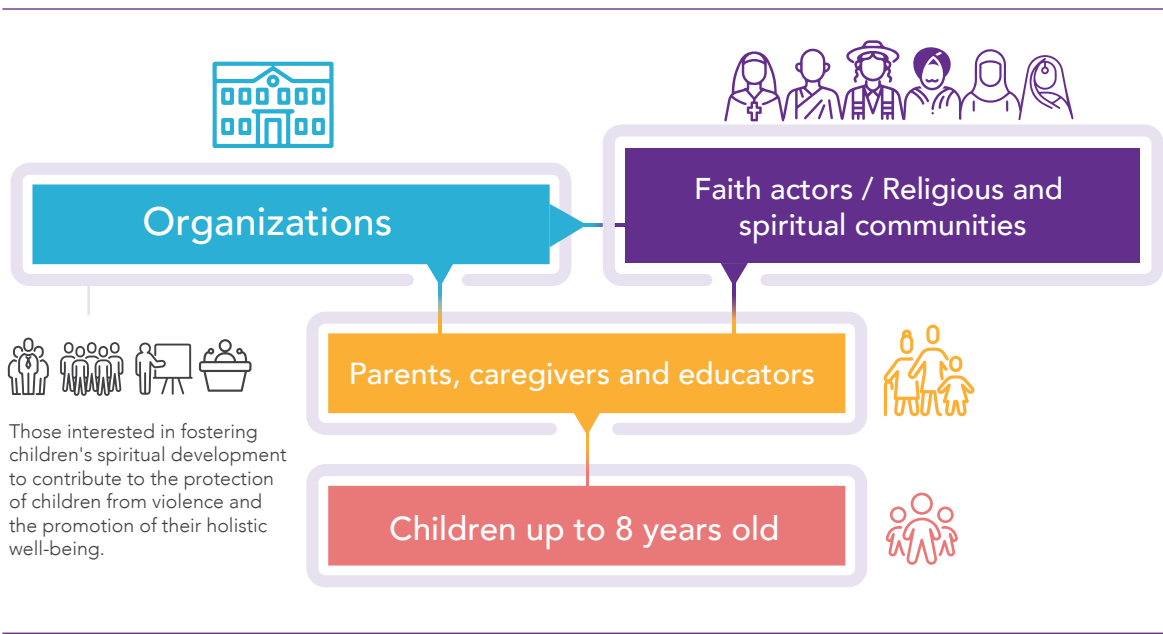
- Faith actors who work directly with families and children or in daycare centers, early learning settings, etc.;
- Parents and caregivers of children up to 8 years; and
- Educators and other community members involved in early childhood care and learning.

The Learning Program for Adults is intended primarily for used by religious and spiritual communities and the variety of faith actors who work with families and children at the community level — all those involved in the process of nurturing the spiritual development of children and the protection of children from violence in the early years. A diverse range of potential actors

fall into this category; they will differ depending on the context, the type of religious or spiritual community, and the scale of work with children and families.

The Toolkit provides a cascading model of training, in which the Learning Program for Adults is used to train trainers, who then train facilitators to work with parents, caregivers, or educators in local communities. These facilitators will primarily be faith actors who work directly with families or in early childhood care and learning centers or other similar settings. The Learning Program will equip facilitators to empower parents, caregivers and/or educators of children up to 8 years old to foster the spiritual development of the children in their care.

The Toolkit also proposes Activities for Children that parents, caregivers and educators can use in the home, in daycare centers, and other such settings. The Activities for Children provide tailored instructions specifically designed for children in three age ranges — 0-3, 3-5, and 5-8 years old — with some overlap to allow for flexibility.



Ultimately, the Toolkit aims to reach children through their parents, caregivers and educators and, in so doing, to have a positive influence on their upbringing and spiritual development.

While the Toolkit has been designed with religious and spiritual communities in mind, it is not meant to be limited for their use only. It will be helpful to anyone who wishes to incorporate a spiritual component into programming with children and families. The Toolkit will also be useful to organizations that wish to deepen their collaboration with faith actors to promote the well-being of children.

The Toolkit has been written in an accessible manner designed to provide community-level facilitators or caregivers with a strong foundation for this work, without requiring them to become experts in the content areas. Implementers are encouraged to flexibly adjust and adapt the Toolkit content to the reality of their local context and participants. The Toolkit is also designed to be flexible enough to be integrated into existing programs of organizations.

The Toolkit is applicable to and can be implemented in low-, medium- and high-income environments, as well as in fragile contexts. It is sensitive to resource availability and constraints. It seeks to build on participants' existing knowledge as well as on the richness of the knowledge and capacities religious and spiritual communities already possess.

Why faith actors?

Small pockets of innovation by faith actors are occurring in different parts of the world. However, much of this work is not documented, not systematized, and therefore not easily replicable. The efforts of religious and spiritual communities to support the holistic development of the child have not always been recognized. Faith actors have a powerful role in both challenging text interpretation, traditions and practices that condone violence against children, as well as in promoting the social norms and values embedded in their religions that affirm and protect the dignity of each and every child.

Faith actors are vital to local efforts to effect social change. They are often trusted community leaders. They are often viewed with legitimacy in many communities and entrusted with moral authority. They are guided by the affirmation of human dignity as a key principle based on their sacred texts. They have a historic, longstanding and widespread presence in many societies, and great capacity to mobilize people for action. Faith actors can enhance their existing work to address violence in early childhood and to foster safe, loving and empowering environments for children by becoming more familiar with what scientific research has shown works well when striving to reduce violence in child development and bring about behavioral change among parents, caregivers and educators. Furthermore, the effectiveness and reach of their interventions can be enriched through efforts in inclusive, interreligious dialogue.

Why focus on parents and caregivers as main beneficiaries of this program?

One of the key factors enabling the spiritual development of children is secure parental relationships.⁵ Children thrive and grow in trusting relationships with people who love and care for them. Ideally, and for the most part, this happens within families. Sadly, it also cannot be denied that the home is the place where most abuses occur. Literature from many faith-based organizations depicts the family as a place where children could experience the love and presence of what people refer to as God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality — in a safe and nurturing environment that equips them to begin to form their own positive relationships with others. Research also suggests that families are often the primary agent in shaping and nurturing faith formation within children.

Positive family engagement and child-upbringing skills are vital to ensuring that children develop a secure emotional attachment with parents and caregivers; enhance their self-concept and self-esteem; and develop socio-emotional capacities and healthy relations with others.

The role of parents and caregivers is fundamental to the spiritual and ethical development of children and can be summarized as follows.

Develop a secure emotional attachment: Allowing children to develop a sense of trust in themselves and others, and a willingness to explore the world and learn about it themselves and from others.

Provide active teaching: This includes cultural and religious values and beliefs. Parents need to be aware of views and narratives transmitted through their cultural and religious understandings that can consciously or unconsciously create negative images of the other.

Model ethical behaviors: What parents do and how they relate to each other is a critical factor in sound child upbringing, since children pick up prejudices and discriminatory norms from what adults say and do.

As mentioned, even though the Learning Program for Adults is designed mainly for parents and caregivers, it is also meant for use by educators in early learning centers and schools.



What is this Toolkit “not”?

- It is not a *replacement* for comprehensive early childhood development programs or frameworks. It is a *complement* to existing parenting and ECD programs, designed to help include the spiritual dimension of children’s growth as part of their holistic development.

What does this Toolkit include?

Booklet I – Conceptual Framework. The Conceptual Framework of the Toolkit provides the rationale and theoretical foundations for its approach. This booklet will be useful reading for anyone who wishes to understand the overall approach of the Toolkit, including organizations who plan to incorporate it into their programming. Trainers should be familiar with it, as should the facilitators who will work directly with parents, caregivers and educators in local communities. The Conceptual Framework is organized by five principal areas: the dignity of the child and child rights; holistic child development; early childhood as the foundation for lifelong capacities; spirituality and children; and violence in early childhood. It 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 and 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.

Booklet II – Learning Program for Adults. This booklet presents the suggested Learning Program for Adults — trainers, facilitators, parents, caregivers, educators and others with an interest in fostering the spiritual development of children in the early years. It is based on the Conceptual Framework of the Toolkit and comprises three modules with a total of ten sessions, each of which

includes two to four activities. The sessions for adults can be conducted in either of two ways: by a trainer with a group of facilitators who will then work directly with parents, caregivers and educators, or by facilitators working directly with a group of parents, caregivers and educators. The activities include tips for customizing for different types of participants, as well as references to materials such as Booklet VII and the Flipbook, which are used during the sessions.

Booklet III – Activities for Children. This booklet provides Activities for Children designed for parents and caregivers to do with their children, as well as for educators working with a group of children, to nurture their innate spiritual capacities, as outlined in Booklet I. There are two types of activities: daily interactions, which are ongoing processes for parents and caregivers to integrate into their daily routine with their children; and guided activities for nurturing spiritual capacities, which provide more specific instructions that may require some extra planning and preparation. All these activities provide tips for customizing when working with groups of children, for example in education settings, for three different age groups: 0-3, 3-5 and 5-8 years old — with some overlap in age built in to allow for flexibility when using the activities.

Booklet IV - Guide for Organizations. This booklet provides information to help organizations identify entry points and concrete ways to introduce the spiritual development of young children as a thematic organizational priority and/or into already existing programs. It provides guidance on developing staff capacity to design, deliver, monitor, and evaluate training programs for facilitators who will work with parents, caregivers and educators to promote the spiritual development of children in the early years to contribute to the protection of children from violence. The guide also provides a customizable training model that can be used to scale up across various locations.

Booklet V – Guide for Trainers. This guide is for trainers who will deliver training on the Toolkit for facilitators in local communities. It provides guidance on different steps and considerations in planning, delivering, and evaluating training programs.

Booklet VI – Guide for Facilitators. This guide provides a roadmap for facilitators on how to conduct sessions to equip parents, caregivers and educators to nurture the spiritual development of children in the early years in a manner that will help protect them from violence and promote their holistic well-being. It equips facilitators with technical knowledge and skills to effectively design, deliver, monitor and evaluate programs they conduct with parents, caregivers and educators.

Booklet VII. Guide for Religious and Spiritual Leaders. This booklet provides ideas for religious and spiritual leaders to advocate for the protection of children from violence and to influence members of their communities about the importance of the spiritual development of children for their holistic well-being.

Monitoring and Evaluation. This booklet, available online only, provides tools for monitoring and evaluating training programs for trainers and facilitators, as well as sessions with parents, caregivers, and/or educators. It includes tools for monitoring impacts and benefits in children. For further information, refer to <https://childspiritualdevelopment.org>.

Flipbook. The Flipbook is a support tool used during the Learning Program for Adults described in Booklet II. It is designed for facilitators to use while conducting sessions with parents, caregivers and educators and helps to present the Conceptual Framework of the Toolkit described in Booklet I.

How can this Toolkit be used?

Each of the aforementioned booklets can be used independently, depending on the priorities of each organization or implementer. The Toolkit also contains several annexes and references, as well as resources to support training programs and activities.

It is highly recommended that you become familiar with the Conceptual Framework in Booklet I as it is the foundation for use of the Toolkit. It contains important information that will strengthen understanding of key topics and provide more substance for the customization of activities.

While the Learning Program for Adults may be used independently, it is recommended that they be integrated as part of an existing program — whether for trainers, facilitators or parents, caregivers or educators participating in session on parenting or ECD. Please refer to the respective booklets when developing your own programs.

We wish you success in the implementation process and invite you to share with us the experiences you have and the things you learn, to help us improve the material, create new resources and stay connected with you, as we expand the network of organizations and individuals interested in the holistic well-being of children.

For further information, questions or to share experiences, please write to:

geneva@arigatouinternational.org

How this Toolkit was developed and what happens next

The Consortium

In June 2018, Arigatou International convened individual experts and organizations working on early childhood development, child protection, education, and peacebuilding, representing faith-based organizations, civil society, international organizations, religious and spiritual communities, and academia, to form an international consortium to address the spiritual development of children in early childhood for the protection of children from violence.

Guided by the commitments made in 2017 at the Fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) by religious and spiritual leaders and organizations working for children, the Consortium was created to strengthen the role of local religious and spiritual communities in offering education in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy, become more resilient, and grow spiritually; as well as to identify and challenge patriarchal structures and practices that perpetuate violence against children, including sexual exploitation, especially of girls.

During its first meeting in Geneva, Switzerland in June 2018, the 20 founding members of the Consortium agreed to work together to contribute to the creation of safe, healthy and loving

environments that affirm the dignity of the child, particularly in the early years. They set a vision that has guided our collective work and deliberations during the last four years.

We envision a world where the human dignity of young children is affirmed. Where children live free of violence and they are nurtured by families, caregivers and educators in safe, healthy, respectful and loving environments; where children can develop their innate spirituality and build positive relations with themselves, others and nature, thrive and reach their fullest potential.

A challenging task

The Consortium embarked on the challenging task of developing understanding of the often under-researched and under-invested area of child spirituality, and particularly its important role in the holistic development of children. Going further, the Consortium members envisioned the development of a practical model and approach for addressing the relation between spiritual development, the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being. The members looked at the wisdom and guiding principles found in the major religious and spiritual traditions as well as the scientific evidence on child development and child protection, employing a dialogical approach to address this task.

The diverse nature of the Consortium membership represented a deliberate effort to learn from different disciplines and understandings, foster dialogue between faith and science and constructively challenge one another to find a common language for the work. It is this interdisciplinary approach as well as the cross-pollination of knowledge and experiences from grassroots and international organizations from the global north and south, representing diverse religious communities and secular backgrounds, that constitutes a value-added, highly unique contribution of this work.

In the development of this Toolkit and its theoretical underpinnings, the Consortium has borrowed from disciplines such as cultural studies and sociology, religious studies, and education and psychology, to develop a deeper understanding of the significance of the spiritual aspect of child development for holistic well-being, and to further reflect on the importance of spirituality for so many people and families around the globe.

This consultative and integrated learning process led to the definition of the building blocks that form the Conceptual Framework of this Toolkit: child dignity and child rights; holistic child development; early childhood as the foundation for lifelong capacities; spirituality in children; and violence in early childhood. The Toolkit begins with the understanding that societies have a common task to affirm the dignity of each and every child, and that this happens when children's holistic development and well-being is addressed, including their spiritual development, which constitutes a central part of child development and holistic well-being. It affirms the importance of integrated approaches to holistic child development and the engagement of a broad spectrum of support systems. It focuses on the critical importance of early childhood for

building lifelong health and learning capacities, and as a critical time for nurturing children's innate spiritual capacities, which can help ethical values and prosocial behaviors to flourish. It addresses the violation of child dignity that occurs with violence, abuse, conflict and adverse childhood experiences, and the negative impacts of these factors on child development, particularly in the early years. It proposes nurturing children's spirituality through the creation of safe, respectful and loving environments, the development of positive relationships between parents, caregivers, educators and children, and the creation of empowering experiences for children, thereby contributing to protect children's from violence by means of prevention, safeguarding, healing and empowerment.

Unique collaborative development process

From 2018 through 2022, members of the Consortium engaged in a collaborative learning process involving numerous activities to foster reflection and advance knowledge on what the spiritual development of children means and requires. In this process, the Consortium benefited from literature reviews, practical work and expertise from its member organizations, scientific evidence on the impact of violence against children, and emerging research on the importance of nurturing children's spiritual well-being and ethical values for their holistic development.

As part of this process, in 2019 the Consortium developed a series of national roundtable discussions under the project: *INSPIREd Faith Communities: Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence*. These took place in Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Sri Lanka. As a result, a set of five country-specific advocacy booklets were developed to raise awareness about the importance of nurturing children's spirituality for the protection of violence during the early years. The booklets connect theological reflections with neuroscience to support parents, caregivers, educators, and their communities in providing nurturing care and safe environments for children, aiming to prevent all forms of violence.

More than 600 religious and spiritual leaders, representatives from governments as well as faith-based and civil society organizations, experts on children's issues, academics, pediatricians and educators took part in these roundtable discussions. Focusing on the importance of early childhood and the harmful impact of violence on children's development, the discussions served as venues for understanding and gathering valuable local knowledge on how to nurture values and spirituality in the family, schools, religious communities and society at large, and to reflect together on ways to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood.

INSPIREd Faith Communities was made possible by the INSPIRE Fund. This project was a contribution to *INSPIRE – Seven Strategies to End Violence Against Children*, an evidence-based technical package initiated by the World Health Organization to support countries in their efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children.

→ The booklets can be found at:
<https://childspiritualdevelopment.org>

The learning gained via the *INSPIREd Faith Communities* project, as well as a report commissioned by the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities, entitled *Spirituality & Early Childhood: Resources for Prevention of Violence against Children—Selected Lessons from Practice*, were instrumental in the development of the Toolkit.

In 2020, a Technical Team composed of representatives from the Consortium's member organizations was formed to develop the Conceptual Framework and approach of the Toolkit. A consultant was hired to draft the Toolkit based on what was learned from the initial projects, the resources and experiences of the member organizations, the latest scientific evidence on spirituality and child spiritual development, as well as the deliberations and recommendations of the Technical Team. The first draft received substantive feedback gathered in multiple consultations with individual members as well as collective focus groups. As a result, in 2021 a new draft was developed and then validated by member organizations through a series of feasibility workshops that brought together a total of 267 participants, including staff members from several thematic departments, religious and spiritual leaders, as well as parents, caregivers, educators, and children. The feasibility workshops were held in several locations around the world, and the recommendations that emerged from that process were then integrated into the next draft of the Toolkit. Parallel to this process, two online consultations were held with 25 senior religious leaders from seven religious and spiritual traditions, who provided important guidance and reflections which were incorporated when producing the final version.

The Toolkit was launched on November 18, 2022 in Rome, Italy during a celebration of the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children.

The way forward

The launch of the Toolkit marked the beginning of a new journey for the Consortium and its members. Four years of development have created a firm foundation for addressing the importance of children's spiritual development in holistic child development programs in the early years and the critical role that religious communities play in this task. For the years to come, the Consortium members have pledged institutional commitment to systematically pilot the Toolkit in their existing programs and to collect data and information about its benefits and impact. A Monitoring and Evaluation Framework will be made available to support the systematic implementation of the Toolkit in several locations around the world for a two-year period, which will help the Consortium to learn from this process and continue validating the Toolkit.

Today, more than ever, the spiritual needs of children cannot remain an unaddressed aspect of child development. The current education and mental health crises due to the impact of COVID-19 on children's lives and the lives of their parents, caregivers and educators, is yet another reminder that nurturing the spiritual development of children is a *sine qua non*^{II} for their well-being. We have an ethical demand to work together as people of faith, in whatever manifestation that might be, to affirm the dignity of children. A movement is being sown through this Consortium, with strong bonds and collaborations across several sectors, as

^{II} *Sine qua non* (Latin): without which it could not be; something that is absolutely essential.

well as friendships, interfaith collaborations, and new understandings, which is an example of solidarity and what can happen when people join hands for the greater good of the world's children, for their present and for their future.

This Toolkit is an invitation for those who will be using and implementing it to be part of this movement and to continue taking action together to further invest in the spiritual development of children and to address violence against children in all its forms.

Annex I. Glossary

Caregiver: “A person who is very closely attached to the child and responsible for their daily care and support. Primary caregivers include parents, families, and other people who are directly responsible for the child at home. They also include carers outside the home, such as people working in organized daycare.”⁶

Child Agency: “Being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one’s world.”⁷

Child Protection: “The prevention of, and response to, exploitation, abuse, neglect, harmful practices and violence against children.”⁸

Dignity: “It means being valued and respected for what you are, what you believe in, and how you live your life. Treating other people with dignity means treating them the way we’d like to be treated ourselves.”⁹

Domains: “The domains of development are defined as different aspects of a child’s personality development.”¹⁰

Early Brain Development: “In the first years of a child’s life, their brain development will create the foundations for all learning and development later in life. While genetics provide the initial ‘map’ for development, it is everyday experiences and relationships that shape a child’s brain. A baby’s brain begins developing before birth and, in the early years, significant ‘wiring’ occurs within the brain, effectively programming the child’s development.”¹¹

Early Childhood: “The early childhood period encompasses several quite distinct phases: from ‘conception to birth’ and from ‘birth to 3 years’, with emphasis on the first 1,000 days (from conception to 24 months), followed by the ‘preschool and pre-primary years (3 years to 5 or 6 years, or the age of school entry)... the definition also includes 6 to 8 years of age.”¹²

Early Childhood Development: “Children’s cognitive, physical, language, motor, and social and emotional development, between conception and age 8.”¹³

Ethics: “A major branch of philosophy. It is the study of the values and customs of a person or group and covers the analysis and employment of concepts such as right and wrong, good and evil, and responsibility. Ethics are beliefs, ideas, theories, and the fundamental reflection on essential questions, which facilitate the setting of standards.”¹⁴

Faith Actor: Individuals whose work is inspired by religious, spiritual, or faith-based traditions, teachings, or experiences. This can include religious leaders, members of religious communities, volunteers from those communities, people from faith-inspired organizations, people who identify as spiritual, faith-inspired but may not be associated with a single tradition or community, and others.

Holistic Child Development: 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.¹⁵

Morals: "Applies to human behavior; it refers to what is good and what is bad, the application, the concrete, the action. Morals are expressed in rules for conduct, and the expressions of good morals are called 'virtues'. There is a personal or individual aspect implied in the concept of morals. Morals have a practical aspect, instructing one what to do and what not to do."¹⁶

Nurturing Care: "An environment created by caregivers. It ensures children's good health and nutrition, protects them from threats, and gives them opportunities for early learning, through interactions that are emotionally supportive and responsive."¹⁷

Parenting: "Interactions, behaviours, emotions, knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and practices associated with the provision of nurturing care."¹⁸

Positive Parenting: "Positive parenting refers to parental behaviour that respects children's best interests and their rights, as set forth in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child — a convention which also takes into account parents' needs and resources. The positive parent nurtures, empowers, guides and recognises children as individuals in their own right. Positive parenting is not permissive parenting: it sets the boundaries that children need to help them develop their potential to the fullest. Positive parenting respects children's rights and raises children in a nonviolent environment."¹⁹

Prosocial Behavior: "Refers to 'voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals' (Eisenberg and Mussen, 1989, 3). This definition refers to consequences of a doer's actions rather than the motivations behind those actions. These behaviors include a broad range of activities: sharing, comforting, rescuing, and helping. Though prosocial behavior can be confused with altruism, they are, in fact, two distinct concepts. Prosocial behavior refers to a pattern of activity, whereas, altruism is the motivation to help others out of pure regard for their needs rather than how the action will benefit oneself."²⁰

Protection of children from violence: It includes the prevention and response to violence, exploitation and abuse of children in all contexts.

Religious Community: A group of people who share a particular set of religious or spiritual beliefs. Also known as "faith community."

Religious Leader: A person who leads a religious or spiritual community at the grassroots level. For example, clerics, guru, imam, lama, monk, mulla, nun, pastor, preacher, priest, rabbi, shamans, sheikh, sukia, swami, traditional indigenous spiritual guides, local spiritual assembly elected member, lay/unordered leader, or another community-level leader.

Spiritual Development in Children: Spiritual development is understood 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.

Spirituality: There are many definitions of spirituality, and this Toolkit does not prescribe one definition. Through consultations with religious and spiritual leaders, literature reviews and inputs from the members of the Consortium, spirituality is referred to here as the connection and relation with the self, with others, with nature, and with that which people refer to 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 taken 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 religious and spiritual traditions and 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.

Values: "Ideals accepted by an individual or a group (personal and cultural); the principles, standards or quality that guide human actions."²¹

Violence: "Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation."²²

Violence Against Children: Violence against children encompasses "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse."²³

Well-being: A state in which "an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community."²⁴

Whole-of-society approach: "All relevant stakeholders working to support national efforts. These stakeholders include individuals, families, communities, intergovernmental organizations, religious institutions, civil society, academia, the media, voluntary associations and — when appropriate — the private sector and industry. This approach aims to strengthen coordination among these stakeholders, in order to make their efforts more effective."²⁵

Annex II. Participants of Consultations with Religious and Spiritual Leaders

- › Dr. Reham Abdulla, Egypt – Islam
- › Swami Atmapriyananda, India – Hinduism
- › Rabbi Pablo Berman, Brazil – Judaism
- › Sister Agatha O. Chikelue Sr., DMMM, Nigeria – Christianity
- › Rev. Duleep De Chickera, Sri Lanka – Christianity
- › Rev. Diana García, United States – Christianity
- › Rev. John Hamilton, Uruguay – Christianity
- › Ms. Loreto Jara, Chile – Bahá'í Faith
- › Mercedes Jimenez, Dominican Republic – Bahá'í Faith
- › Rabbi Dr Naomi Kalish, United States – Judaism
- › Dr. Kiranjou Kaur, India – Sikh Faith
- › Dr. Gopinder Kaur, United Kingdom – Sikh Faith
- › Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik, Panama – Judaism
- › Mr. Marco Lagutasi, Ecuador – Christianity
- › Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, Kenya – Islam
- › Archbishop Felix Machado, India – Christianity
- › Mr. Larry José Madrigal, El Salvador – Christianity
- › Mr. Marcelo Neira, Chile – Christianity
- › Rev. Fred Nyabera, Kenya – Christianity
- › Dr. Imam Rashied Omar, South Africa – Islam
- › Moraima Pereira, Uruguay – Brahma Kumaris
- › Sister Esperanza Principio, Peru – Christianity
- › Prof. Anantanand Rambachan, United States/Trinidad & Tobago – Hinduism
- › Mr. Jimmy Reyna, Guatemala – Buddhism
- › Ms. Olga Lucia Sierra, Colombia – Buddhism

Endnotes

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<https://childspiritualdevelopment.org>

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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