 Developing Spirituality in Children

In the KCC children’s program, our emphasis is the development of each child’s spirituality, more than on indoctrination in a particular religion. We do teach Buddhism, and in particular the Kagyu tradition, but in keeping with the advice of the late Venerable Bokar Rinpoche, our focus is more on supporting children in their process of awakening to their potential as human beings, Buddhist or not.

What is spirituality? Spirituality can be found in many aspects of both religious and non-religious life, including worship, art, the way people live, the choices they make and the relationships they create. Spirituality by our definition, at least, necessarily also includes the exploration of questions and issues that transcend this world. As Buddhists, our spiritual exploration is focused on undermining the causes of suffering; and our religion includes the codification of the teachings and practices to do that—as do other traditions.

The spirituality of young people can be developed in many ways—for example, through the practice of religion, thinking, prayer, meditation and ritual. For some, spirituality is awakened through feelings of awe and wonder at nature and the universe. For others, it comes through creating or experiencing positive relationships. Even our apparently negative experiences such suffering mental or physical pain can contribute to the development of spirituality.

An essential factor in cultivating spirituality is reflection and learning from one’s experiences. Another aspect of spirituality for children is growth in their sense of personal identity—their unique and unbounded potential; their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and their desire and potential to achieve and benefit others. As their curiosity about themselves and their place in the world increases, they begin to answer for themselves some of life’s fundamental questions. They develop the knowledge, skills, understanding, qualities and attitudes they need to take responsibility for their own inner lives and their own well-being. This sets the stage for the possibility of benefitting others. Indeed, the spiritual development of any individual benefits us all.

What kinds of activities, for example, promote the development of a child’s spiritual potential?

- Talking about things that matter to them
- Listening to what others have to say
- Talking about some of the puzzling questions in life
- Exploring the sense of belonging to a community
- Exploring the difference between right and wrong
- Expressing themselves creatively
- Discussing feelings and emotions
- Exploring times of quiet to notice what one is experiencing or learning
- Talking about things being fair/unfair and talking about equinimity
- Responding to the wonder and beauty of the natural world
- Exploring cause and effect
And as they mature, we also can help by:

- Discussing matters of personal concern arising from their personal beliefs and commitments
- Showing care and consideration in listening and talking about the beliefs of others
- Exploring questions about the meaning and mystery of life
- Developing an understanding of what it means to belong to a community
- Discussing the differences between right and wrong and nature of individual responsibility
- Expressing ideas and innermost thoughts and feelings through art, music, drama and so on
- Exploring times of stillness in order to reflect quietly on what one is experiencing and learning
- Exploring the relationship of cause and effect, especially when the cause and effect are separated over longer periods of time
- Exploring impermanence and change
- Exploring their own role in realizing their own potential, including the generation or relief of personal suffering, and the cause or relief of suffering in others
- Exploring past and present models of spiritually developed people and general spiritual traditions and institutions as supports for spiritual development
- Exploring paradox