

Understanding Children and their Faith Formation

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Overview

Nurturing children's spirituality and faith formation is fundamental to Christian education. Spirituality in the 21st century has a variety of meanings and is discussed in Chapter 2. For Christians, the terms *faith*, *spirituality*, and *character*, are closely related

and influenced by family, culture, traditions, beliefs, values, cognition, brain development, self-concept and worldview. Character education, values education, and moral education, are often used synonymously by educators, and are discussed in Chapter 6.

The faith development theories of Fowler, Westerhoff III, and Gillespie, have built on the developmental theories of Piaget, Erickson, and Kohlberg. As a pioneer in the area of faith development, Fowler developed a model which has dominated this field of study. Sociocultural developmental theorists (e.g., Vygotsky), have stressed the importance of the cultural and interpersonal aspect of learning along with the cognitive component. Exploring children's spirituality and faith formation is a developing international and cross-disciplinary area of research.

Theories are tools that inform and support educators, but they are not infallible. Christian educators need to carefully study and evaluate any theory, along with its underlying assumptions, before accepting it as appropriate or suitable for the Christian classroom.

Nurturing faith formation is an important aspect of the Christian school. Numerous books are available, detailing specific faith concepts to be taught at specific stages. Rather than replicating that information, this chapter presents an overview of a selection of approaches suitable to nurture faith formation from ages 0 to 12.

Faith, Spirituality, and Character Defined

Focus Discussion

- Define the terms *faith*, *spirituality*, and *character*.
- How is your worldview reflected in your answer to Question 1?
- Is moral development involved in faith formation? Explain.

Consider this scenario

Five-year old Lee, involved in the class activity of weeding the school garden, turned to her five-year old classmate working beside her, and stated in exasperation, "We can blame Eve for having to do this! And don't be deceived, that is a weed!" Her classmate just stared in amazement, totally mystified by Lee's comments and observations! This exceptional five-year old, who two months earlier had commenced school already reading and writing fluently in both Russian and English, spontaneously drew on her spiritual beliefs and faith tradition to assist in making sense of her world.

Spirituality and faith formation are symbiotic yet unique for every child, because they encompass family, culture, traditions, beliefs, values, cognition, brain development, self-concept and worldview.

Nurturing children's spirituality and faith formation is fundamental to Christian education. Hay and Nye (2006, p. 20) use the analogy of a tree to describe the relationship