

Helping Your Teenager Discover Spirituality¹

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What is spirituality?

Spirituality can be defined as a sacred connection between oneself and a higher power. Most people think of spirituality as primarily associated with religious beliefs and practices; however, one can be spiritual but not very religious. Most scholars agree that there is overlap between spirituality and religion, but there are differences, too. Religion focuses on beliefs and practices associated with a religious organization or creed; spirituality focuses on inspiration, self-reflection, and personal connection to the sacred. Researchers are beginning to discover the importance of being a spiritual person (whether you are religious or not), especially for teens.

Benefits of Spirituality for Teens

Many life transitions and transformations occur during the teen years (ages 11–19). Bodies mature, thinking ability improves, and teens learn to manage many new emotions. Teens are striving to “find themselves” and to answer the question, “Who am I?” The answers to such questions often include a spiritual search for meaning and purpose in life.

According to research, spiritual and religious teens are more likely to have a positive self-image and feel a sense of belonging (Lerner, et al., 2008). Studies have found that participation in religious activities makes teens less likely to engage in risky behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse (Smith & Faris 2002). Likewise, relationships with parents and family members tend to be stronger when teens are

spiritual or religious (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Other benefits to teens (and their parents) include:

- greater sense that life is meaningful and purposeful
- lower anxiety and stress
- more positive social interactions with friends
- more friends who are positive influences
- greater success in future stages of life (The Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, n.d.)



Figure 1. Path along the old line by Graham Richardson. Credits: Used with permission under Creative Commons license CC BY 2.0

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How can parents promote spirituality in teens?

A recent national study found that nearly half (48%) of U.S. teens report that they have “all the same” religious beliefs as their parents (Pew Research Center, 2020). This finding emphasizes both that parents maintain a significant influence in the spiritual lives of their adolescent children, and that children in the teenage years will begin to form their own spiritual and religious identities, at least in small ways. This presents a unique responsibility and challenge for parents and adult mentors of teens. Here are some suggestions to help guide and support teens in their spiritual development. For teens affiliated with a religious organization, parents and others can encourage them to pray or meditate, read sacred books, and participate in religious activities like youth groups, religious-based sororities and fraternities, or religious conferences and camps. Participation in religious activities helps teens learn more about their religious beliefs; provides an opportunity to ask questions; and promotes healthy relationships with others who can be mentors for spiritual development.

Many churches, synagogues, temples, or mosques sponsor religious activities for teens. Participation in these activities will allow teens to develop important social connections with peers who share similar values and who can provide support for teens, especially those who are part of a religious minority. The parents of teens not affiliated with a religion or religious organization can also promote healthy spiritual development. Here are tips for fostering teen spirituality:

- Do not be afraid to discuss spiritual questions, even if you don't have all the answers
- Listen to and respect what your teen has to say, even if you do not completely agree
- Be a good role model of your own spiritual beliefs, practices, and commitments
- Nurture your children's gifts and talents by allowing them to express their spirituality through journals, music, art, etc.
- Help your teen connect with spiritual leaders and mentors, other than yourself
- Encourage your teens to surround themselves with positive friends who strengthen their spiritual growth (The Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, n.d.)

Spirituality is beneficial for everyone, and especially for teens. The transition from childhood to adulthood can be challenging as teens find out who they are and who they want to be. Whether or not teens are involved in a religious organization, parents and adults can promote healthy spiritual development. By following the recommendations above, caring adults can encourage spiritual exploration in teens that will improve relationships with family and friends and lead to healthier choices.

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