

# Helping Your Teenager Discover Spirituality<sup>1</sup>

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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.

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.<sup>1</sup> Studies have found that participation in religious activities makes teens less likely to engage in risky behaviors like alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, relationships with parents and family members tend to be stronger when teens are spiritual or religious.<sup>3</sup> Other benefits to teens (and their parents) include the following:<sup>4</sup> greater sense that life is meaningful and purposeful; lower anxiety and stress; more positive social interactions with friends;

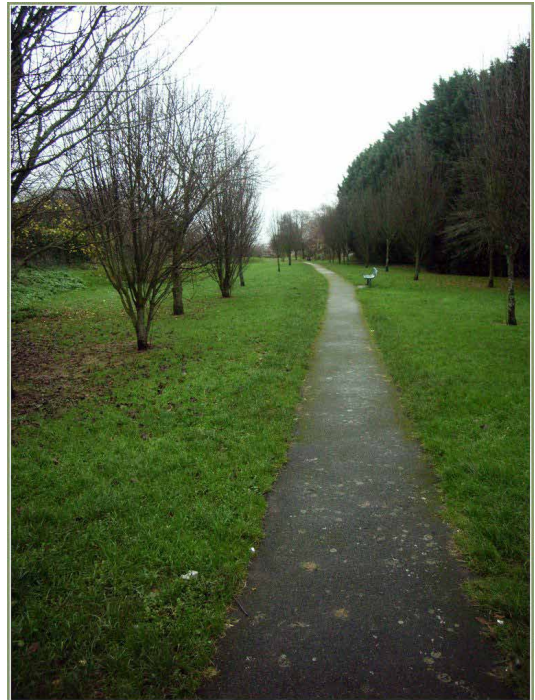


Figure 1. Path along the old line by Graham Richardson (Used with permission under Creative Commons license CC BY 2.0)

more friends who are positive influences; and greater success in future stages of life.

How can parents and other adults promote spirituality in teens? 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

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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:<sup>4</sup>

- 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

Spirituality is beneficial for everyone, but 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.

## For additional information:

The Center for Spiritual Development: <http://www.search-institute.org/spiritual-development>

Youth Spirituality: <http://youthspirituality.com/>

National Study of Youth and Religion: <http://www.youthandreligion.org/>

You can also visit your religious organization's website.

## References

1. Richard Lerner, Robert W. Roeser, and Erin Phelps (eds.), *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality*, (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008).
2. Christian Smith and Robert Faris, *Religion and American Adolescent Delinquency, Risk Behaviors, and Constructive Social Activities: A Research Report of the National Study of Youth and Religion, Number 1*. Accessed May 9, 2011. <http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/RiskReport1.pdf>.
3. Eugene Roehlkepartain, Pamela Ebstyn King, Linda Wagener, and Peter L. Benson (eds.), *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).
4. "How your child may be developing spirituality: Ages 10-14," *The Search Institute*, Accessed May 9, 2011. <http://www.search-institute.org/csd/articles/nurturing/10-14>.