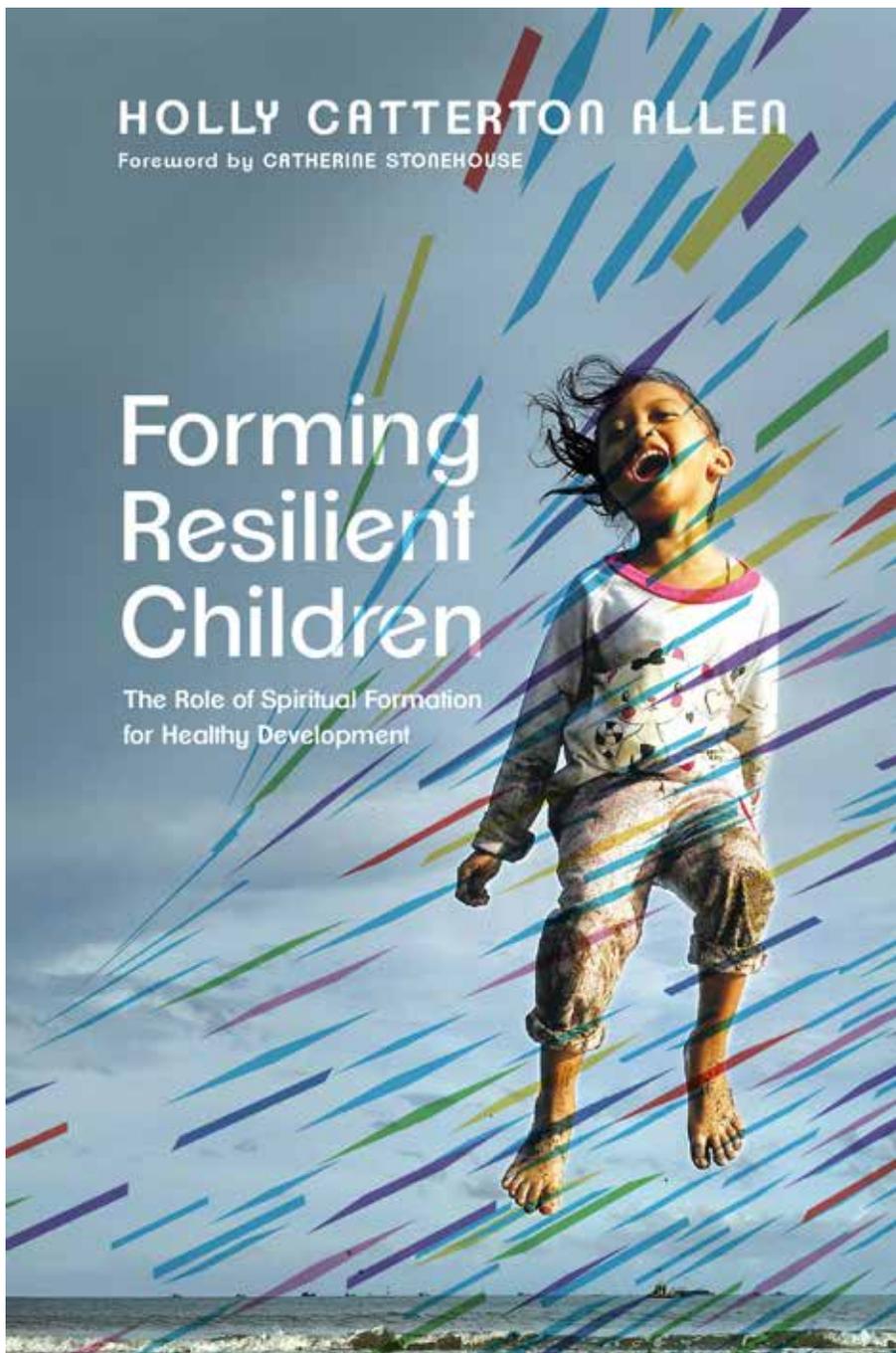


HOLLY CATTERTON ALLEN

Foreword by CATHERINE STONEHOUSE

# Forming Resilient Children

The Role of Spiritual Formation  
for Healthy Development



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## CHAPTER ONE

# What Is Children's Spirituality?

*We are not human beings having a spiritual experience, we  
are spiritual beings having a human experience.*

PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

IN THE SUMMER OF 2019, our three-month-old grandson, Roham, experienced a seizure in his sleep that caused him to vomit, then aspirate the vomitus into his lungs, prompting a critical medical crisis. After repeatedly performing interventions to address the problems that were threatening his life—a racing heart, plummeting blood pressure, low oxygen levels, precipitous carbon dioxide levels, and undulating body temperature—doctors eventually stabilized him and sedated him as they inserted the ventilator tube to help him breathe.

This previously vibrant, active infant remained eerily still—passive, immobile, unconscious—for five days. When the danger finally receded, the doctors began to remove the tubes. As they brought him out of sedation, Roham was desperately unhappy, attempting to cry (though he had lost his voice), nurse (though his throat was too sore to swallow), and sleep (though he was too utterly wretched to do so) for a day and a half—that felt like an eternity. He did nothing but sit upright on his mother's lap for thirty-six hours straight. He sat facing forward (to accommodate the monitoring wires attached to his chest), peering out solemnly in desperation. He refused to be put down. Nor did he smile or engage in any other way.

His only comfort appeared to be gripping one of his mother's fingers in each of his tiny hands while sitting in her warm lap. Roham was

navigating not only a physical crisis, but a spiritual crisis as well—as we shall see.

## INITIAL INTEREST IN CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

Something happened in the 1990s that dramatically altered my understanding of faith development in children. With a master's degree in educational psychology from the University of Iowa, fifteen years as a professor of teacher education at two Christian universities, and a couple of decades of teaching Sunday school and leading children's church following an educational model, I was confident that I understood the basic principles of Christian education. Then something happened that radically reoriented my thinking about children and faith.

For four years in the midnineties my family was part of a church plant that met each Sunday evening in cross-generational home gatherings. Every week we participated in these small groups—eating, praying, listening, laughing, sharing, and hoping—with all ages participating together. During this time, I began to experience something I had not seen in my years teaching Sunday school and leading children's church: the children in these all-age small groups began to pray with and for their parents and other adults; they began to minister to each other and to adults as well. My understanding of Christian education for both children and adults began to change, and ultimately, my new understandings led me to embrace a career shift.

In 1999 my family and I left West Texas for California, where I pursued doctoral work with one burning question in mind: What might explain the profound effects I and my family had observed and experienced in those intergenerational small groups? My hope was to understand the impact of intergenerational Christian experiences on children (and adults); however, before I could delve into that central question, I needed to understand the nature of the change I had witnessed.

Just one year earlier, Catherine Stonehouse's *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* was published.<sup>1</sup> Her book first gave me language for

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<sup>1</sup>Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

my task: the basic construct I was exploring was “spirituality.” Thus I began a twenty-year (and ongoing) quest to define and describe—that is, to understand—children’s spirituality.

The premise of this book is that resilience in children is interconnected with spirituality. To unpack this premise, we’ll first need a rich understanding of spirituality, beginning with the idea that spirituality is an innate universal human quality. From this vantage point, I’ll establish a working definition of children’s spirituality.

### **SPIRITUALITY AS A UNIVERSAL HUMAN QUALITY**

Researchers in the past two decades have been exploring the idea that spirituality is a universal human quality.<sup>2</sup> For example, biologist Dean Hamer believes faith is hardwired into our genes, though he doesn’t mean by that statement that there is a particular gene that makes people believe in God. Rather he believes that human beings are predisposed to be spiritual, to seek a higher being.<sup>3</sup>

Before these more general studies on spirituality, Barbara Kimes Myers in the United States and David Hay in the United Kingdom conducted groundbreaking research in the area of children’s spirituality. Myers and Hay, both working from Christian worldviews, spent their long, successful careers speaking primarily into secular educational settings, along the way seeking ways for children’s spirituality to be fostered in these public education settings.

Myers’ greatest contribution has been in the area of preschool education. Myers explains spirituality as an inherent part of the condition of being human, noting that all human beings have spirit as a “life-giving force.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Justin Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children’s Religious Belief* (Free Press, 2012); R. L. Piedmont, “Cross-cultural Generalizability of the Spiritual Transcendence Scale to the Philippines: Spirituality as a Human Universal,” *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 10 (2007): 89-107; T. E. Seeman, L. F. Dubin, and M. Seeman, “Religiosity/Spirituality and Health: A Critical Review of the Evidence for Biological Pathways,” *American Psychologist* 58, no. 1 (2003): 53-63; R. L. Piedmont, “Does Spirituality Represent the Sixth Factor of Personality? Spiritual Transcendence and the Five Factor Model,” *Journal of Personality* 67 (1999): 985-1013.

<sup>3</sup>Dean Hamer, *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005); Dean Hamer, “The Brain Chemistry of the Buddha,” BeliefNet, 2004, [www.beliefnet.com/news/science-religion/2004/10/the-brain-chemistry-of-the-buddha.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/news/science-religion/2004/10/the-brain-chemistry-of-the-buddha.aspx).

<sup>4</sup>Barbara Kimes Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 109.

David Hay is well known for his now-classic book (with Rebecca Nye) *The Spirit of the Child*.<sup>5</sup> Hay and Nye conducted exploratory research with children ages six to eleven in the British public school system in order to address two issues that trouble the study of children's spirituality: (1) a lack of consensus on what spirituality is, and (2) a scarcity of specific details regarding the spiritual life of children.<sup>6</sup> The foundational premise of their book is that every person possesses spiritual awareness.<sup>7</sup>

And Lisa Miller, who has spent much of her career as a psychologist and clinician researching spiritual psychology, agrees that children are born with a natural spirituality. She says it is foundational to who we are as human beings.<sup>8</sup>

Hamer, Myers, Hay, Nye, Miller, and many others argue that human beings, even before receiving any formal religious training, possess a spiritual awareness that can be cultivated—or hindered.

## A WORKING DEFINITION OF CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY

Building directly on this idea that children are spiritual beings from birth, my desire is to construct a definition of children's spirituality that will be suitable and beneficial to anyone who picks up this book. Those who live or work with children in Christian settings may desire a definition that encompasses an explicitly Christian perspective.<sup>9</sup> However, for many believers working with children in government and other secular settings, a Christ-focused definition of children's spirituality would be problematic. Nevertheless, these workers are aware that children, especially those navigating hard places, need every physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and *spiritual* resource available to help them survive and thrive. Nevertheless, these concerned teachers, social workers, and counselors therefore need a broad definition of children's spirituality that will help children access those spiritual resources.

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<sup>5</sup>David Hay with Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006). Original edition published in 1998.

<sup>6</sup>Hay, *Spirit of the Child*, 9.

<sup>7</sup>Hay, *Spirit of the Child*.

<sup>8</sup>Miller, *The Spiritual Child*, 54.

<sup>9</sup>I offer an explicitly Christian definition later in this chapter.

Definitions of spirituality abound. They sometimes refer ambiguously to some inner quality or to participation in a project greater than oneself.<sup>10</sup> Other definitions include references to making meaning, being aware of mystery or wonder, or existential realities. Many definitions refer to the importance of relationality, in particular, relationships with self, with others, with the world, and with God (or a transcendent being).

A few definitions focus specifically on children, and these definitions tend to emphasize relationality. For example, Myers defines children's spirituality as a web of meaning "connecting self, others, world, and cosmos."<sup>11</sup> And Hay and Nye define children's spirituality as *relational consciousness*, which they describe as children's understanding of how they relate to other people, to self, to things, and to God.<sup>12</sup> Lisa Miller's definition of spirituality initially focuses on the child-God relationship, but then she broadens it saying spirituality is experienced with *one another*, with a *higher power*, and *within ourselves*,<sup>13</sup> thus aligning fairly closely with the relational definitions of Hay and Myers.

Three relationships, the person's relationship with self, others, and God (or higher being), appear frequently in definitions of children's spirituality<sup>14</sup> as well as definitions of spirituality in general. For example, John Swinton, an expert on spirituality and mental health challenges, frames his definition of spirituality using the terms *interpersonal*,

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<sup>10</sup>Kenneth J. Collins, ed., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 10.

<sup>11</sup>Myers, *Young Children*, 101.

<sup>12</sup>Hay, *Spirit of the Child*, 109. Early in their research, Hay and Nye had hoped their research would yield a definition of children's spirituality that did not refer to God per se, a definition that could more readily be embraced by atheists and agnostics (Hay, *Spirit of the Child*, 21). The children in their research, however, almost unanimously referred to the idea of a transcendent or supernatural being as God—even though over half of the research participants identified as having no religion. Of the thirty-eight children in the Hay and Nye study, twenty-eight were not affiliated with a religion. Four of the thirty-eight children were from the Church of England, four were Muslim, and two were Catholic. All attended public schools in either Nottingham or Birmingham (UK) (Hay, *Spirit of the Child*, 87).

<sup>13</sup>Miller, *The Spiritual Child*, 52.

<sup>14</sup>Some definitions also include the person-world (or person-universe) relationship as an aspect of spirituality. Though it is not a focal point in this book, I acknowledge that the child-world relationship can indeed play a vital role in children's spirituality and I discuss this relationship in chapter nine on wonder.

*intrapersonal*, and *transpersonal* which reflect precisely the three dimensions we are discussing.<sup>15</sup>

Our broad definition of children's spirituality will focus principally on these three relationships—the child-self, child-others, and child-God relationships—not only because of their frequent appearance in definitions but also because these three relationships reflect the first and second commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27 ESV).

Therefore, I offer the following as our working definition of children's spirituality: *children's spirituality is a quality present in every child from birth by which children seek to establish relationship with self, others, and God (as they understand God).*

This definition works for all settings: homes, churches, counseling sessions, social work settings, public schools—everywhere. In addition, it offers a basic foundation for nurturing the inborn human quality of spirituality that aids resilience.

## **CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY AS SPIRITUAL FORMATION FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Those who work in Christian settings such as churches, schools, seminaries, and faith-based nonprofits may desire an explicitly Christian definition of children's spirituality. That definition needs to begin with our working definition shared earlier: the child's inborn capability for relationship with self, others, and God.

This basic definition offers correctives to two misconceptions that have characterized some approaches to Christian education. First, some have asserted that a child's spiritual life begins only when the child is baptized (as an infant or older) or invites Jesus into his or her heart. Viewing spirituality (in this case, the child's relationship with God) as beginning at this time leaves children in an ambiguous place for the first several

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<sup>15</sup>John Swinton, *Spirituality and Mental Health Care: Rediscovering a “Forgotten” Dimension* (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001).

weeks, months, or years of life. If the child-God relationship begins only at this point, how can parents or teachers nurture it before it exists?

Another misconception is that Christ-followers sometimes view a child's spiritual life as pertaining only to the child-God relationship, not recognizing that the child's relationships with self and others are also integral parts of the spiritual life. As we have seen, children's spirituality is a holistic quality interconnected with all aspects of the child's life, and so this forms the first foundational piece of our definition of children's spirituality from a Christian perspective: the child's relationship with God, self, others.

***Christian spirituality.*** To begin to construct a comprehensive usable definition of spirituality from an explicitly Christian perspective, we will first consult several strong definitions. For my dissertation I combed dozens of sources and considered over a hundred definitions. Three definitions have stood the test of time for me. One comes from Jesuit Sandra Schneiders. Her beautiful and succinct definition of Christian spirituality is “the substantial gift of the Holy Spirit establishing a life-giving relationship with God in Christ within the believing community.”<sup>16</sup> Another comes from British theologian Philip Sheldrake who states that Christian spirituality is “a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the indwelling of the Spirit and in the context of community of believers.”<sup>17</sup>

These two definitions capture three key concepts often found in definitions of Christian spirituality: (1) they have a trinitarian focus (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit), (2) they emphasize relationality (already present in our first broad definition), and (3) they both acknowledge the important role of a believing community.

The third definition comes from Thomas Groome, a well-known Catholic religious educator. His definition highlights the crucial idea that

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<sup>16</sup>Sandra Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, and Partners,” *Horizon* 13 (1986): 266.

<sup>17</sup>Philip Sheldrake, “What Is Spirituality?” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 40.

Christian spirituality is not solely an interior quality; that is, it will ultimately show in a person's life:

Spirituality is our conscious attending to God's loving initiative and presence in our lives and to the movement of God's spirit to commit ourselves to wholeness for ourselves and for all humankind *by living in right relationship with God, ourselves, and others in every dimension and activity of our lives.*<sup>18</sup>

Some would call this evidence spiritual fruit.

Therefore, to our original aspects (child's relationship with self, others, and God), we add several more aspects: God as trinitarian, the significant role of a community of believers, and spiritual fruit.

***Christian spiritual formation.*** Another line of investigation from which to draw is spiritual formation. The term "spiritual formation" began to be increasingly and broadly used in Protestant Christian circles in the 1990s to describe the believer's journey of growth and sanctification, though the phrase is deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition.

Professor and author Robert Mulholland's description is one of the most frequently cited definitions: "Spiritual formation is a process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others."<sup>19</sup> Key words and phrases like "process," "formed," "image of Christ," and "for the sake of others" from Mulholland's statement are central to our understanding of our definition of Christian spirituality.

Moreover, James Wilhoit, professor of Christian formation and spirituality at Wheaton College for decades, adds to our developing definition by describing Christian spiritual formation as "the intentional communal process of growing in our relationship with God and becoming conformed to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup> Beyond reflecting Mulholland's notions of "process" and "being formed," two unique words from Wilhoit's definition emerge as important: "intentional" and "communal."

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<sup>18</sup>Thomas Groome, "The Spirituality of the Religious Educator," *Religious Education* 83 (1988): 10, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup>M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, exp. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 16.

<sup>20</sup>James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ Through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 23.

## A WORKING DEFINITION OF CHILDREN'S SPIRITUALITY FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

For years, I have attempted to create a comprehensive working definition that incorporates the eleven key phrases in the preceding discussion of children's spirituality, Christian spirituality, and spiritual formation: *relationship with self, others, and God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); process; role of believing community (communal); spiritual fruit; intentionality; and transformation (into Christ's image).*

During these same years I have been teaching university courses and speaking in churches, academic guilds, and church-based conferences on children's ministry, intergenerational ministry, and children's spirituality. In each of these settings I have invited students and conference participants to construct a working definition that incorporates all eleven terms and concepts outlined above. In reviewing dozens of good attempts over the years, two stood out as excellent. I have integrated these two, tweaking and altering a few words, and here, for the first time in print, is the definition I now share wherever I speak:

Spiritual formation is a lifelong, intentional, communal process of growing more aware of God's presence and becoming more like Christ, through the Spirit, in order to live in restored relationship with God, ourselves, and others, in every dimension of life.<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, this definition is not unique to children; it is a good definition of spiritual formation from a Christian perspective for anyone.

## CONCLUSION

The spiritual nature of children has been a neglected topic in both secular and Christian settings—for different reasons of course. Public institutions in the United States including schools,<sup>22</sup> have typically avoided language that refers to the spiritual lives of children because doing so could be construed as promoting a particular religion. This chapter therefore

<sup>21</sup>This definition builds on the previous discussion and blends and modifies definitions from Ryan Porche (small groups minister at Southwest Church of Christ in Amarillo, Texas) and Doug Williams and the spiritual life committee at Lipscomb Academy in Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>22</sup>Joan Montgomery Halford, "Longing for the Sacred in Schools: A Conversation with Nel Nodding," *The Spirit of Education* 56, no. 4 (December 1998/January 1999): 28-32.

offers a definition of children's spirituality that can be used in any setting—a *quality present in every child from birth out of which children seek to establish relationship with self, others, and God (as they understand God)*. This definition provides common ground for cross-disciplinary, as well as cross-denominational and interfaith, dialogue to flourish.

And the definition of children's spirituality from an overtly Christian perspective incorporates the essence of our working definition—those three relationships—while providing a robust, layered version of children's spirituality that will expand and amplify the understanding of ministry with children in specifically Christian settings.

Throughout the remainder of this book, I will focus primarily on these three relationships—the child-self, child-others, and child-God relationships. Additionally, I will outline and describe dozens of ways teachers, caregivers, parents, counselors, social workers, grandparents, psychologists, and medical professionals can nurture this ineffable quality of spirituality (these three relationships) in the children in their care—with a special emphasis on how it contributes to that other mysterious quality of resilience.

## BACK TO ROHAM'S STORY

In those hours of recovery as Roham slowly emerged from his necessary dependence on fentanyl, his main comfort appeared to be holding onto his mother's fingers. Humans are clearly made for relationship; this tiny little one held onto life and hope by holding onto his mother.

And then . . . after thirty-six hours, Roham smiled and began to come back to us.

Being physically present is one way to nurture a child spiritually, one way to foster resilience. In this physical connection, children come to know that they are not alone, that someone is with them, supporting, comforting, accompanying.<sup>23</sup> This physical connection fosters the child-self and child-others parts of children's spirituality, which sets a good foundation for nurturing the ineffable child-God relationship.

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<sup>23</sup>Ruth Feldman, Zehava Rosenthal, and Arthur I. Eidelman, "Maternal-Preterm Skin-to-Skin Contact Enhances Child Physiologic Organization and Cognitive Control Across the First 10 Years of Life," *Biological Psychiatry* 75, no. 1 (2014): 56-64.

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