

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

Larry F. Forthun, Tyler Nesbit, and Angelica Shaw<sup>2</sup>

## 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), and to be protected against depression (Aggarwal, et al., 2023). 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. Credit: Used with permission under Creative Commons license CC BY 2.0

## 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, 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.

## References

- Aggarwal, S., Wright, J., Morgan, A., Patton, G., & Reavley, N. (2023). Religiosity and spirituality in the prevention and management of depression and anxiety in young people: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*, 23(1), 729.
- The Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood & Adolescence. (n.d.). *Nurturing a Child's Spirit: Tips for Parents and Caring Adults*.
- Lerner, R. M., Roeser, R. W., & Phelps E. (eds.). (2008). *Positive Youth Development and Spirituality*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Pew Research Center (2020, Sept 10). *U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals*. <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/09/10/u-s-teens-take-after-their-parents-religiously-attend-services-together-and-enjoy-family-rituals/>
- Roehlkepartain, E., King, P. E., Wagener, L. & Benson P. L. (eds.). (2006). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Smith, C., & Faris. R. (2002). *Religion and American adolescent delinquency, risk behaviors and constructive social activities. A research report of the National Study of Youth and Religion*, no. 1. Chapel Hill, N.C.: National Study of Youth and Religion. <https://hdl.handle.net/2144/10>

<sup>1</sup> This document is FCS2303, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date May 2011. Revised January 2018, November 2022, and October 2025. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

<sup>2</sup> Larry F. Forthun, professor, youth development, and department chair, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Tyler Nesbit, Ph.D. student, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; Angelica Shaw; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Andra Johnson, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.