

# Meditation and the Spiritual Life of Children

**Deepak Chopra, Special to SFGATE**

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By Deepak Chopra, MD

When they become parents, many people wonder how to impart spiritual values to their children. The traditional model of sending them to Sunday school is one alternative; another is to draw the entire family into the personal spirituality of the parents, as more people turn away from organized religion to carve their own path. Children grow up to reflect how they are raised, which makes this an important issue.

To begin with, a child's spiritual life should be age appropriate. A very young child's brain hasn't matured enough to absorb adult beliefs, and the overall development of every child is unique. Before age ten or so, I feel that spiritual parenting will have the most lasting effect if it builds a foundation in the self rather than focusing on principles. As a practical matter, every young child should feel that

- They are loved and lovable.
- They are worthwhile in their parents' eyes.
- Being a good person comes from within.
- Happiness and fulfillment are natural.

At this stage, the role of caretaker is all-important. Young children have their own predispositions that show up early on. A child starts to show personality traits very soon in life. Yet no matter how different they are, children need to feel worthy and loved.

The next phase of spiritual parenting is about values. Child psychology studies have shown that babies as early as six months old want to help their mothers, and even infants react positively when they see good behavior and shy away from bad behavior in others. So there is reason to feel that children have a moral nature.

With that in mind, parents should develop a child's inner values all the time while keeping in mind that grasping these values mentally, in terms of abstract ideas, isn't going to happen early on. Instead, children internalize what they see and how they are treated. Saying "Be nice to your little brother" makes an impression the first time, with decreasing meaning as it gets repeated. But seeing parents who are fair and kind literally trains a child's brain in that direction.

Lifelong values are not instilled through negative lessons and punishment. What a child takes away from these experiences is guilt, shame, and resentment. The same is true if parents instill fear and doubt by telling children such things as "Life is unfair," "If you don't look out for number one, no one else will," and "If you want anything in this world, you have to fight for it." Remember, what we all grow up remembering most vividly from our childhood is the emotional tone of family life. Children raised in a tense, stressful, or difficult home environment will adapt to it, because it's in their nature to adapt, but that doesn't mean that they will emerge undamaged.

And now to the question of meditation and the inner life. Meditation can add to a sense of a child's self-worth and even a sense of power, because it's an activity that belongs just to them. The childhood brain is a factor here. Where it has been shown that introducing meditation in the schools leads to behavioral improvements in older ages (middle school and later), younger ages benefit, I feel, when meditation fulfills the following criteria:

- It feels like fun.
- The child expresses enjoyment.
- Nothing is forced or turned into a chore.

- The whole family participates.

Looking back, many adults feel turned off by the religious lessons their parents tried to impart because of an air of strict morality or pressure to be good. The beauty of meditation is that everything comes from within, but “within” means different things at different ages.

Starting at age six or seven—each parent will have to play this by ear—the parents can sit down to meditate with a child, using a simple technique: Sit quietly with eyes closed and follow the breath. Don’t ask the child to meditate for more than 5 to 10 minutes. Make it clear that if they stop enjoying it, they are free to get up and go play. But the parents should continue their own meditation for the usual time.

By being invited in and yet given the freedom to choose, a child will associate meditation with something they have control over. The worst lesson is to feel that meditation is a way for them to be controlled, forced to settle down and “be good.” In other words, don’t make meditation the equivalent of sitting in the corner or taking time out. A child who is running around or acting out needs a nap, a talking to, or some other corrective. Meditation isn’t one of them.

The greatest benefit of meditation comes when a child is able to notice actual changes themselves. They feel calmer, more centered, less troubled, less tempted to act out. A parent can coax these realizations, but gently, by pointing out a positive change. But be careful not to intrude. Everyone’s inner life is private, no matter how young they are. Taking note of inner changes probably won’t happen consistently until age twelve or later, and the attraction of major changes probably won’t happen until mid to late adolescence, at a time when discovering who they are comes naturally to teenagers.

I hope these points are useful, but the most important one became the theme of a book I wrote, *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Parenting*, which is this: If you want your child to lead a fulfilled and successful life, the best route is through spiritual parenting. The child learns the value of their own inner world, and as the years pass, this value increases

until the realization dawns that all of existence originates “in here,” at the level of the soul.

*DEEPAK CHOPRA MD, FACP, founder of **The Chopra Foundation** and co-founder of The Chopra Center for Wellbeing, is a world-renowned pioneer in integrative medicine and personal transformation, and is Board Certified in Internal Medicine, Endocrinology and Metabolism. He is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians and a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists. Chopra is the author of more than 80 books translated into over 43 languages, including numerous New York Times bestsellers. [www.deepakchopra.com](http://www.deepakchopra.com)*

Check out **Let My Light Shine Bright**, a new mix-and-match meditation app for kids, ages 8-12

<http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/chopra/article/Meditation-and-the-Spiritual-Life-of-Children-6461990.php?>