Spirituality is being recognised increasingly as important to children’s development, yet there are often concerns about what it means, how we can include it in curriculum and how to be inclusive in embracing it.

Spirituality has been shown to impact on people’s lives in many positive ways. It is related to less depression and less drug abuse. It is a protective factor in resilience, and associated with enhanced wellbeing and a role in healing (Grotberg, 1995; Miller, 2015; University of Maryland Medical Centre, 2015). “The spiritual dimension of children’s development is part of a holistic understanding of the needs and rights of children, young people, families and communities” (Sedan, 2005, p. 4).

Spirituality involves a sense of connection with the world and its creatures, a search for/awareness of the meaning of life and a belief in a higher presence. For some people this higher presence can be nature, peace, the universe or altruistic love of humankind. Generally, spirituality is linked with a sense of awe and wonder, with compassion, creativity and with positive values, encompassing a personal relationship, not just an activity or particular rituals.

Often spirituality involves a religious faith. Where faiths are supportive, they provide a community of belief and care for members which also provides other qualities needed for spiritual development (although some religious groups and practices include aspects such as fear and guilt which are detrimental to both spirituality and resilience).

Children’s spirituality develops in a family, a community, a culture and sometimes a faith group or similarly supportive group. Spirituality begins in the earliest months of life where infants are learning to develop relationships with and trust in those who care for them. For the infant, these people are all knowing and all powerful. It is from these earliest relationships that an understanding of a loving, caring and guiding presence in their lives develops.

Toddlers are meeting not only a wider natural world, but also the world of connections with others. They are experiencing new feelings such as shame, pride, jealousy and guilt. As they experience adults reacting to their feelings and the feelings of others, toddlers are discovering who they are and what they believe, not from what we tell them, but from who we are and how we relate to them.

Older toddlers with language skills and pre-schoolers are also looking to make meaning of their world and themselves and where they fit in, by talking about what they see and feel and asking ‘why’?

Early childhood educators can support children by respecting and being interested in their feelings and beliefs. Hart (2006), quoted in Grajczonek (n.d.), says that the ‘foremost concern regarding enhancing children’s spiritual life is to respect each child’s innate spiritual capacities’.

There is limited research into spirituality in young children’s education. One research project developed by educators at Tufts University studied kindergarteners’ beliefs (Mardell & Abo-Zena, 2010). The project involved children expressing and sharing their beliefs in different ways. They found that, from this, the children learned tolerance and the educators learned that young children can engage in authentic and civil discussions about beliefs.

Supporting children’s spirituality in public education is a complex undertaking and, in a pluralistic society, should not support one system of spiritual beliefs and practices over another. An inclusive approach embraces features of different faiths and their expression as well as other expressions of spirituality which give joy and meaning to children’s lives. Young children have a natural sense of wonder, awe and curiosity about nature and the world, religions and beliefs and often talk about or ask questions about life and death. As they learn to make meaning of all this, they are learning new values such as fairness and kindness. As educators provide ‘safe spaces’ to explore spirituality and the ways it is expressed, we support children in exploring and developing their own spiritual beliefs and in understanding and respecting others (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010, p. 93).
There are many ways in which early childhood educators can support young children's spirituality. Educators can:

- provide a community of care where young children make connections, have a sense of belonging and learn about understanding and empathy, giving and gratitude, faith and hope
- respond to and explore children's awe and wonder at tangible things, such as nature and music; and intangible things, such as beauty and love
- support families’ expression of their spirituality through talking with them and their children and giving opportunities for families to share their different rituals and special occasions
- help children enjoy the history of beliefs in the world and what they mean, through stories and myths; and in Australia especially through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture
- have rituals that support concepts such as joy, beauty, gratitude and empathy, for example make a card for a child who is unwell or a welcome back ritual for a child who has been away, a special place to put objects of awe or beauty, be thankful for a lovely day, have quiet times for meditation
- provide opportunities to contribute to others' lives and to the world
- be with children as they recover from fear or failure or disappointment
- listen to children's questions and thoughts about big ideas like life and death and what it all means to them—make space for their voice
- remember always that children learn their spiritual values from who we are and what we say and do, and we need to be intentional in this regard.

By their questions and their interests, their beliefs and their wonder, children give us opportunities to support this important part of their being and becoming. Spirituality is about listening more than telling, wondering rather than knowing, walking with more than leading, respecting others, connecting with others and with the world. It involves being, belonging and believing in something good.

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References
Mardell, B., & Abo-Zena, M. (2010). The fun thing about studying different beliefs is that they are different. Young Children, July, 12–17.

‘AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH EMBRACES FEATURES OF DIFFERENT FAITHS AND THEIR EXPRESSION AS WELL AS OTHER EXPRESSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY WHICH GIVE JOY AND MEANING TO CHILDREN’S LIVES.’

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