



Circles of Learning

Education Health Environment Community Creativity

How to Nurture Kids' Hearts and Souls

We all know that today's chaotic, consumer driven and busy world is deeply impacting on the mental, emotional, social and spiritual health of our children, adolescents and young adults.

The research clearly shows that children are struggling more than ever before and I have worked with 5 year olds from loving families who want to die! I have also worked with hundreds of troubled teenagers and young adults who cut and stab themselves out of a desperate need to feel "something" instead of empty. While we can measure how our children are performing academically, or in sport or even the arts like music, we are unable to measure how well they are doing within.

How can we nurture our kids' hearts and souls to build emotional and spiritual strength and resilience?

The good news is that it doesn't cost money to nurture kids' hearts and souls. Anyone can do it. In the early years there is no question that positive attachment and "attunement" are the first steps to building emotional well being for life. I am a huge advocate for the simple games and songs and nursery rhymes that have been a part of childhood forever. Not only did these activities cost nothing, they involved the key aspect of being present to a child – really present. The act of being present shows a baby, or a toddler or a child or a teenager that they matter, and that they are a source of joy and delight. Without this they struggle with a hidden notion of "not mattering" and of being "unlovable" and over time can be very damaging to the core self concept and the self esteem. This is the most important way to nurture children's hearts and souls in the essential early years. It allows the brain to imprint positive perceptions and filters for interpreting themselves and the world.

Nothing beats lots of "round and round the garden" with gentle tickling – or Hickory Dickory or Twinkle twinkle with all the hand actions!

These are not just great opportunities to be present with a child, they are whole brain activities that mildly stimulate the evolving brain to develop neuro pathways for more learning and patterning. They also provide opportunities for safe touch and this is one of my biggest concerns in the early years care and education at the moment. The complete paranoia about touching children has been blown out of all context and we have lost the healing potential of positive touch. In the years up until seven,

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children need reassurance and gentleness so they can feel safe as they get stung by life's early challenges like bullying, social conflict, physical accidents and wounds. Nothing reassures more than nurturing touch and this is a sure way to learn what kindness feels like. The fear of being sued has destroyed a normal and natural part of child development and we are wearing the consequences today with more and more young adults being depressed, disconnected and struggling with despair. Maybe we need to accredit early years carers and teachers with "Safe Touch Training" so that we can move the paranoia and allow what has been used for 5 million years its rightful place back in the sphere of raising children. In Australia we are stopping teachers from touching children "in anger or comfort" to keep children safe while research shows that over 92 % of child abusers are known to the child outside of school. ("Children of the Lucky Country", (2005) Prof Fiona Stanley et al.) Kindness is absolutely essential in the healthy development of a child's emotional and spiritual competence and comfort with touch is a key part of that development.

Children's brains are wired to be curious and questioning and that is also how it has been forever. Free and unstructured play in the natural environment is still the absolute best way to ensure that that natural curiosity is not dulled or killed by the world of virtual reality. Expensive play equipment, computers for 5 year olds and fake grass dull the brain's natural tendency to explore and imagine, problem solve and simply play. Once again the shift towards structured play with specific learning outcomes is more about adults being in control of children than about ensuring that children grow using their inherent tendencies to enjoy life and have fun. These outcomes of sheer enjoyment, absorbed play and spontaneous laughter are difficult to measure against any prescribed learning curriculum, however without lots of such experiences children are less likely to find emotional and mental health later in life. They learn what its like to feel exquisite joy , happiness and "joie de vivre" and these are fundamental building blocks for authentic well being later in life. They are opportunities for children to experience "natural transcendence" a state we seek all in our lives. Without knowing this expanded state naturally many seek it through quick alternatives like pills, alcohol and other illicit drugs. These free play based opportunities strengthen hearts and souls of our children and you can see it in their shiny smiling eyes. Being around children who are full of love and life is a huge tonic for adults who can struggle with all the hassles of modern living.

Today's world has another negative tendency that is impacting on today's children and that is the one of focusing on the problems ,flaws and challenges in raising children rather than focusing on the gifts or the positives. This seems to be fed by our media and our desire to enjoy observing suffering and disaster. When working with young children it is important to resist looking for "what's wrong" and consciously seek that which is good and unique and nurture that. We are over "pathologizing" childhood and once again trying to measure all sorts of levels of achievements maybe too soon. Children are not growing in a linear fashion although that is what our health and education systems would seem to believe. They are unique and different and grow in every different way imaginable and that's healthy. This applies to our children with special needs as well. Education comes from the base Latin word educare which means "to bring out" and that is what I see we as parent's teachers are meant to be doing. Seeking out that which is hidden from view and that is a child's unique gift to the world should be our main business. When we do this we fully nurture the whole child, their special passions and interests, their

emotions, their place in the world and create a path way that may lead them to realise their full potential.

Children with shiny eyes, full of energy and spontaneous activity are a sure sign that they have a healthy heart and soul. They cannot fake this state of enjoying life. It needs to be experienced often in childhood especially in the years under 7 so that they can develop a psyche that knows and can anticipate what it feels to be happy, contented, and able to enjoy being alive. The happiest people I have ever met keep this child alive within them and that is the key to emotional, mental and spiritual well being for life – keep your child alive and well within the adult!!!

The following list provides suggestions to get you going. You'll find what works for you. Taken from *Nurturing Kids' Hearts and Souls: Building Emotional, Social and Spiritual Competency* (2005) www.maggiedent.com

- ☼ Be as real and honest as possible
- ☼ Be there – be present
- ☼ Remember their names and their birthdays
- ☼ Teach them to laugh and cry openly
- ☼ Celebrate life's special moments -create rituals
- ☼ Let music and singing be a special part of their lives
- ☼ Encourage and help them build friendships
- ☼ Be a storyteller and tell stories that teach gently
- ☼ Create family or classroom magic moments
- ☼ Demonstrate a gratitude attitude to life
- ☼ Model a positive lifestyle as often as possible
- ☼ Take your kids into nature often
- ☼ Practice random acts of kindness
- ☼ Laugh easily and often
- ☼ Have a generous heart
- ☼ Respect people of all ages
- ☼ Believe in a creative power or force
- ☼ Show your love through touch as well as words
- ☼ Smile with your eyes and your heart
- ☼ Sow a seed of hope in your children's souls
- ☼ Believe in dreams