

Executive Summary

AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RECALLED CHILDHOOD SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND CAPACITIES

There is a growing body of evidence that children have spiritual capacities and experiences—moments and awareness, both little and large, that shape their lives in enduring ways. These are sometimes stunning, often tender, and reveal a rich and significant spiritual life that has gone largely unrecognized in the annals of human development, education and religion. These experiences may be powerfully formative for a child's worldview and life course, perhaps providing among the most fundamental source of human and spiritual motivation. The evidence of these experiences and innate capacities challenge conventional views of childhood spiritual life and therefore has significant implications for the care and nurture of young people.

While case evidence mounts, until the present study, there has been no empirical research as to whether this describes a few prodigious children or is a more widespread phenomenon. If a rare few have spiritual capacities or experiences, then this might imply significance along the lines of research on gifted education or child prodigies. However, if a large percentage of children have spiritual experiences and capacities, then this may require a fundamental revision in how we view young people.

The current study attempted to address this question of frequency (and also diversity of experience) through a statistical survey based on recalled phenomenological descriptions of a variety of spiritual experiences and capacities with 453 mostly young adults from a university environment.

Although this research is not based on a random sample and the age range is almost exclusively young adult, some interesting trends can be seen throughout the analysis that are suggestive of what might be found if a random survey were to be conducted of the broader population. Nevertheless, it is immediately apparent that there is an overall very high participation rate in the meta-categories of spiritual and non-ordinary experiencing as defined in the methodology section of this paper (90+% across all three meta-category experience groups of Non-Ordinary Guidance, Non-Ordinary Perception, and Mystical Knowing). In addition, the strong showing of first-time spiritual and non-ordinary

encounters in both pre-adolescence as well as adolescence throughout the analysis strongly suggests that children have active spiritual lives and that their experiences remain significant markers in their lifetimes. (See enclosed paper for details)

Instead of single catchall phrases, as has been typical of survey research on frequency of spiritual experience, the present study used a variety of phenomenologically derived questions help to capture the diversity of spiritual perceptions and experiences. Beyond the widespread occurrence of spiritual experience in childhood as revealed in our data, the research suggests that individuals may be prone to having diverse types of experiences and capacities, implying the existence of differing spiritual styles or temperaments.

These traditionally untrained ways of knowing and being—such as the capacity for wonder, radical questioning, deep empathy, and so forth—may be foundational for socially responsible character development and may provide the basis for constructive motivation and positive direction throughout an individual's lifespan. This research also suggests that underlying this character development there may be particular innate, temperamental characteristics—such as Trait Absorption—that provide the neuropsychological basis for spiritual and non-ordinary perception and knowing.

Overall, the results presented here suggests that children have a rich, formative, and diverse spiritual life. Developmentally, these early ways of being and knowing—this *world presence*—provides the foundation for a worldview and for an organic source of character, calling, compassion and wisdom. And sometimes this also serves as a source of confusion in a world that does not acknowledge these possibilities. Combined with previous case studies of children's spiritual experiences, this study challenges conventional views of children's spiritual development.

This study points the way for wider scale research. A random national survey modified from the present one could provide scientifically sound verification and expansion of these preliminary findings and instruct our understanding of children and youth and, therefore, inform our care and nurture of their character.