

Spirituality, Children, and Mental Health



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Abstract:

The area of spirituality and children is emerging in other professions and lagging in social work. This workshop will discuss some of the key findings found within the professions of nursing, education, psychology, and interprofessional research in children's spirituality. It will highlight relational consciousness as a unique feature of children's spirituality. Links of spirituality and mental health will be discussed in relation to children. Several experiential activities and resources will be presented.

Biography:

Heather Marie Boynton has a background in Physical and Health Education, Child and Youth Work, and Social Work. She has worked at Children's Centre Thunder Bay with children struggling with mental health concerns for 23 years. Currently she is pursuing her PhD in Social Work, and her dissertation topic is in the area of children's spirituality in counseling practice. This area of passion has come out her work with children and her own spiritual journey in life. She is also a Reiki Practitioner and enjoys exploring alternative methods of healing. She also is a Feng Shui practitioner and owns her own consulting business, Inner Harmony Feng Shui. She plays women's hockey and beach volleyball, and also pursues activities in the outdoors such as canoeing, hiking, camping, and gardening.



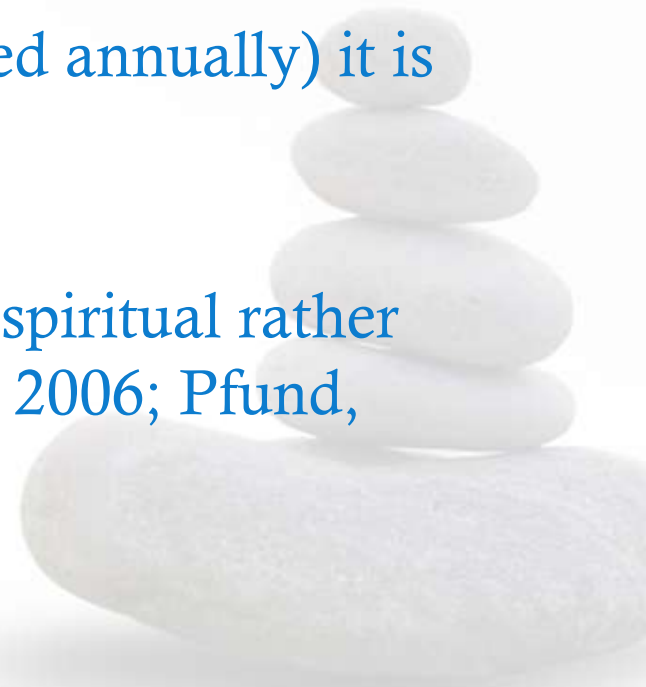
Why children's spirituality

- We are all children on our journey
- Spirituality is deemed to be universal among ethnicities and cultures
- My work with children who are experiencing spiritual struggles, children need spiritual nurturance and a voice



If mental health and spirituality are tied together why are we not addressing this with children, the statistics are staggering.

- Over 800,000 children experience mental health problems in Canada
- (1500 per year where I work are referred annually) it is the leading health issue for children
- Problem behaviours may be signals of spiritual rather than cognitive issues (Miller & Kelley, 2006; Pfund, 2000).



Literature beginnings

- Ground breaking information from
Coles
Hay & Nye
Fowler
Roehlkepartain, Ebstyne King,
Wagener, & King



Key Constructs of Children's Spirituality Literature

- Spiritual development
- Relational consciousness
- Connectedness
- Meaning Making
- Context and gender are significant
- Trauma catapulting spiritual cogitation?



Spiritual development

Spiritual development is a dimension of life experience that is as important as social, emotional, and cognitive development. These dimensions are interrelated (Eaude, 2003; Fowler, 1981; Roehlkepartain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2006). Over the course of our lifetimes our spiritual worldview continues to evolve.

Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude (2003, p 4-5) define spiritual development as:

- **"the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental "engine" that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices."**

Spiritual Development

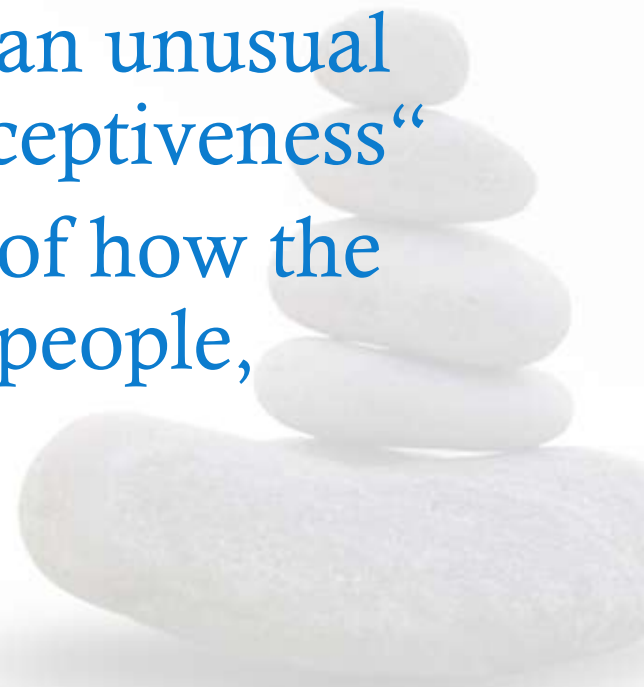
- Fowler (1981) pioneered research in the area of faith development.
- He outlined seven stages of faith. The first four relate to children and involve the development of trust, attachment, and meaning.
- His work is based the works of Piaget, Erickson, and Kohlberg



Relational Consciousness

- Relational consciousness, spiritual awareness, and a sense of self occur naturally and are biologically rooted.
- Relational consciousness is "an unusual level of consciousness or perceptiveness"
- Ability to express "a context of how the child related to things, other people, him/herself, and God"

(Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 109)

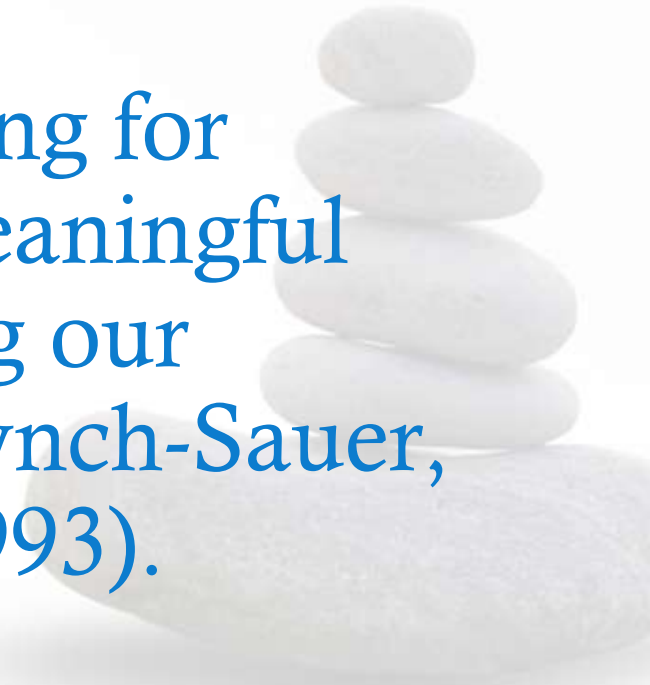


- Reimer & Furrow (2001) profess that relational consciousness is significant
- Can this be nurtured? Can it be maintained? Should it be?

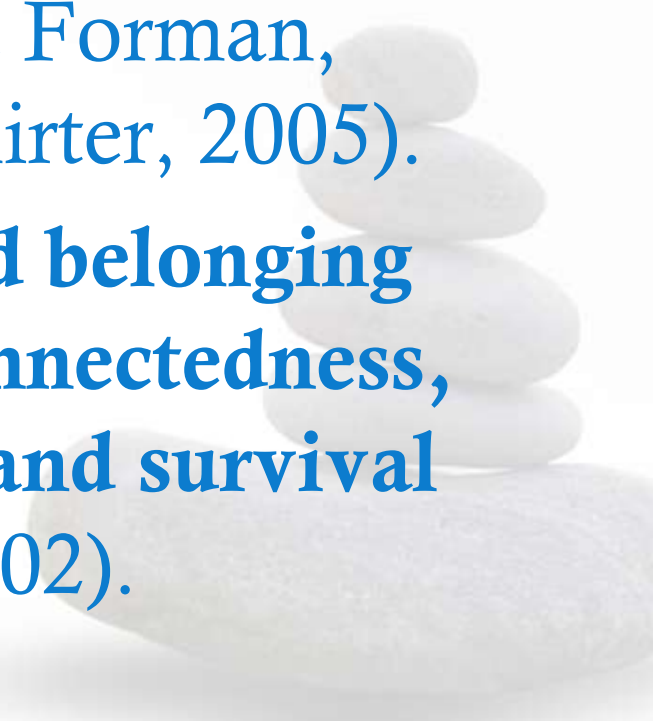


Connectedness

- We cannot exist in this world without some form of connection or relationship with others, our world, or ourselves.
- We have a natural yearning for connectedness and for meaningful relationships transcending our separateness (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky & Bouwsema, 1993).



- **Connectedness is multidimensional and involves being in harmony with oneself, others, or a higher power, and a larger meaning and purpose in life (Bellingham et al., 1989; Dyson, Cobb, & Forman, 1997; Townsend and McWhirter, 2005).**
- **Maslow positioned love and belonging needs, aspects related to connectedness, after physiological, safety, and survival needs (Prince & Howard, 2002).**



- Newberg & Newberg (2006) discuss that children will reach towards a higher power or force for attachment needs such as love and closeness
- Andrews & Marotta (2005) conducted interviews with grieving children and found the children maintained a relationship with the deceased, and spiritual connections were significant for them



Children who come in for mental health treatment are often lacking connectedness
Studies of grief in children demonstrate that they connections and often talk with
deceased or see spirits

- Children who can initiate, facilitate, and maintain relationships and engage in caring connection have improved social adjustment, sense of self, stronger prosocial orientations, engage in less risk behaviours, have hope and can envision a better future
- This is related to identity formation and meaning making



Meaning Making

During times of distress and loss, spiritual needs and worldview are important for meaning making in children. As children experience traumatic events they rely on spiritual beliefs in order to understand, make sense of, and cope with crises (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Hufton, 2006).

Spiritual meaning making, where life has significant value, is central to survival and is a primary motivation in life (Ai, Cascio, Santangelo, & Evans-Campbell, 2005; Frankl, 1985).

- Meaning making is an important cognitive and emotional function in life.
- It involves an impetus to find our place in the world, allows us to discover significance and what we value as important, and it assists us in understanding our existence in the universe (Drouin, 2002; O'Connor, 2002-2003).



Two types of meaning

- Situational meaning-appraisal of the event
- Global meaning-new understandings of identity, new life goals and priorities, and spiritual concerns



- Spiritual rumination and reflection are aspects of meaning making
- Stories are constructed, co-constructed and re-constructed over time
- Meaning making occurs even at preverbal stages (Oppenheim (2006))
- During times of distress spiritual needs and worldview are integral to meaning making

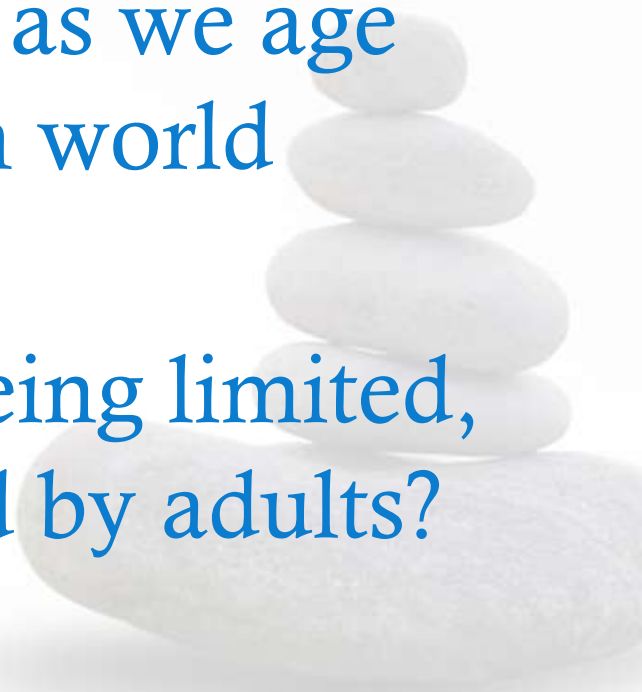


Spirituality and context

- Spiritual growth, meaning construction and worldview are shaped by and grounded in relationships with self, others, and the world
- Socialization and gender differences

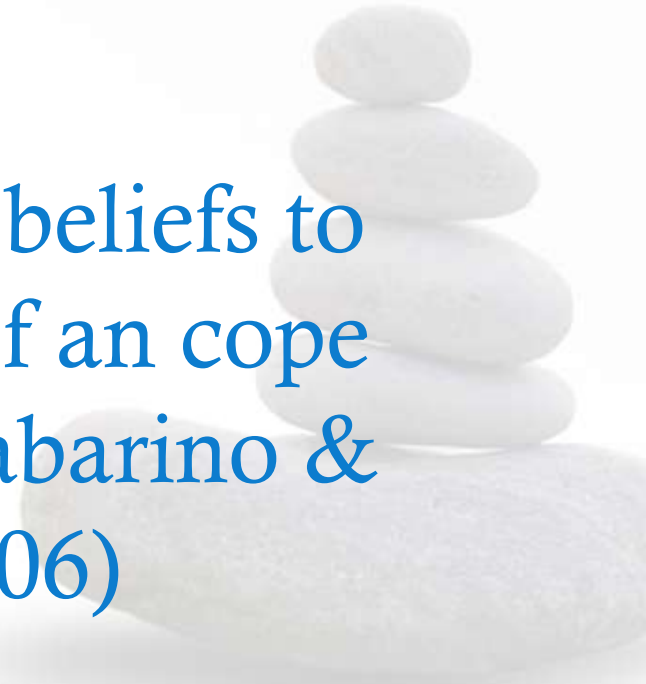


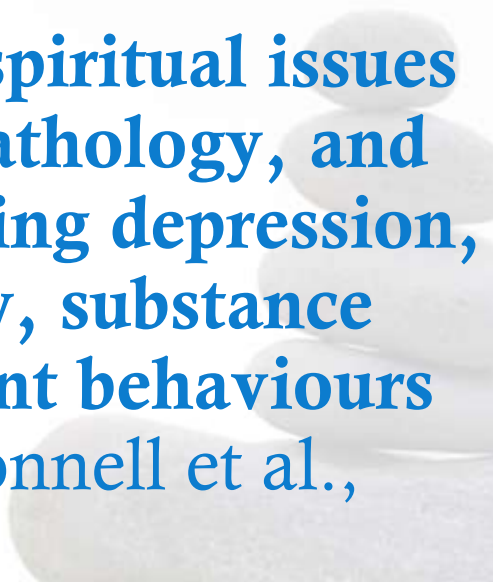
- Spirituality is evident within all contexts (Scott & Magnuson, 2006)
- Hay (2000) discusses that as we age spirituality in the Western world becomes personal
- Is children's spirituality being limited, ignored and unrecognized by adults?



Crisis and trauma create spiritual struggles, and spiritual needs can increase for children

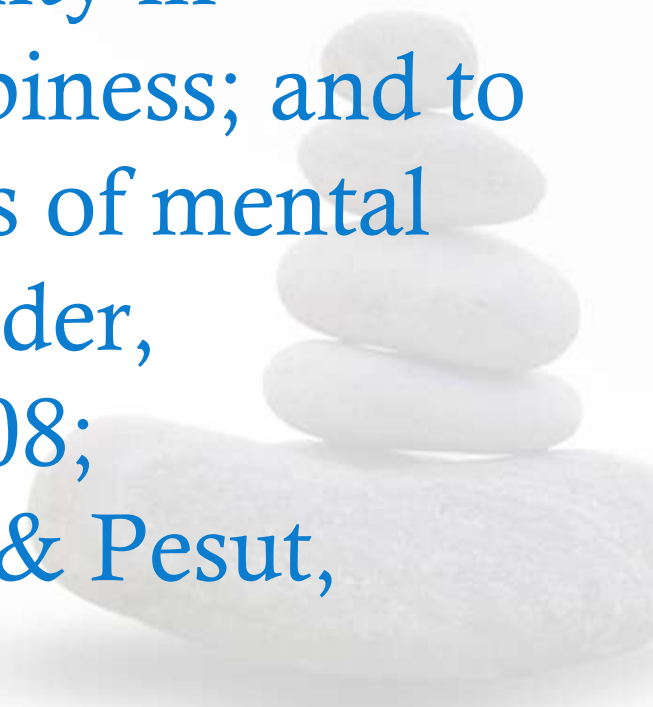
- Scott (2004) revealed that children and youth have spiritual experiences in the midst of crisis
- Children rely on spiritual beliefs to understand, make sense of and cope with traumatic events (Gabarino & Bedard, 1996; Hufton, 2006)



- **There is an inverse relationship with spiritual well-being and psychopathology (Longo & Peterson, 2002; McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, Flannelly, 2006)**
 - **Youth who are struggling with spiritual issues exhibit higher levels of psychopathology, and mental health difficulties including depression, suicide, increased sexual activity, substance use, and antisocial and delinquent behaviours (Mabe & Josephson, 2004; McConnell et al., 2006; Poyser, 2006).**
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Canada finds similarities to other parts of the world

- Two recent Canadian studies demonstrate that spirituality in children is related to happiness; and to quality of life, perceptions of mental health and thriving. (Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2008; Sawatzky, Gadermann, & Pesut, 2009)

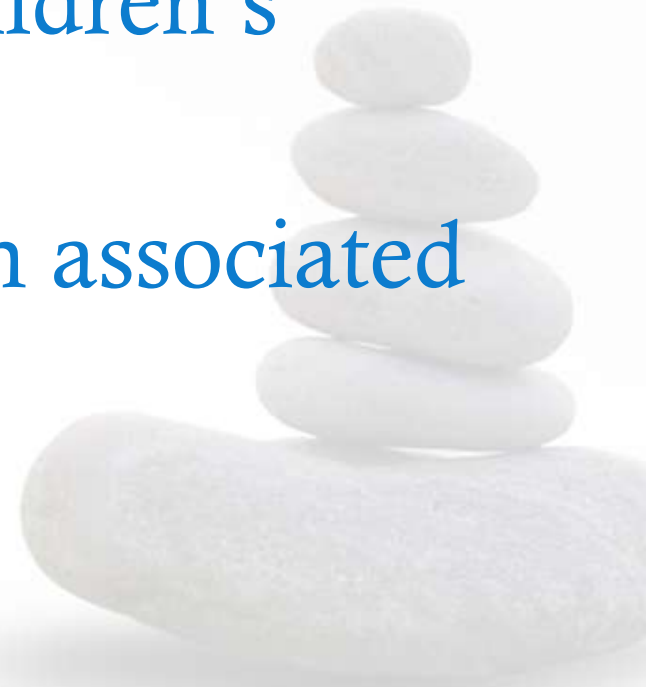


- Bosacki & Ota (2000) investigated spirituality and sense of self in 9-11yr olds in the UK and Canada
- They found these constructs prominent in youth narratives

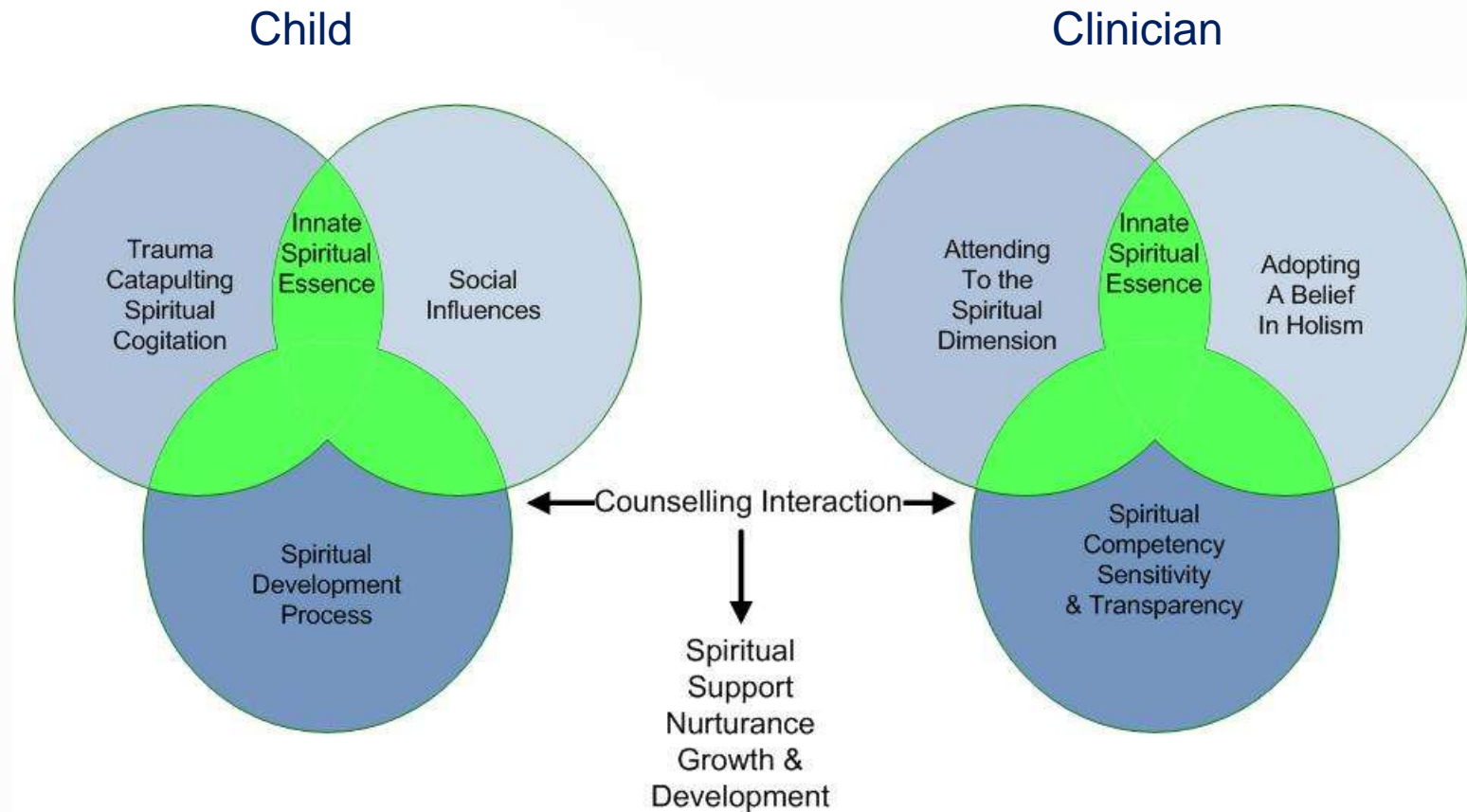


Preliminary findings from interviews of 2 clinicians

- Grounded theory approach
- Two clinicians with over 15 years of experience working in children's mental health
- Four main categories with associated subcategories emerged



Model of Spiritual Counselling



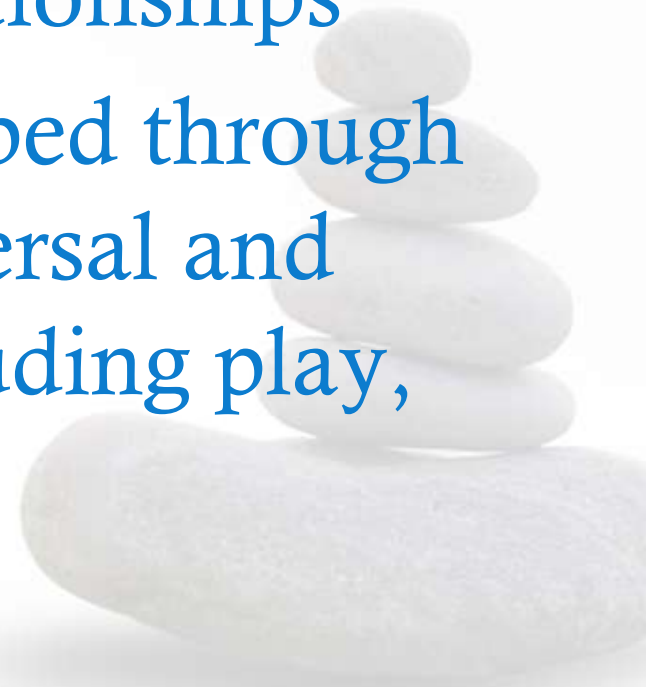
Trauma can catapult children into spiritual cogitation that appears to be beyond expected levels of development

- Embracing a stance of epistemological humility or “humble knower” is important in the listening process
- Be responsive and attend to meanings, symbols and subordinate storylines



Ideas for Interventions

- focus on the core constructs of meaning making, connectedness, and internal and external relationships
- spirituality can be developed through experientially based universal and naturalistic methods including play, drama, art, nature, music



Wonderful Resources

- Coles, Fowler, Hay & Nye, Hyde, Rhoelkauptain (theoretical foundations)
- Peggy Jenkins Nurturing Children's spirituality
- Diana Coholic's new book



Let's begin to practice holistically

The journey is unfolding

