

Childhood

Childhood is a time for learning about the essentials—
about the heavenly world and the earthly,
about goodness, beauty, and truth.

Childhood is a time to be loved and to love,
to express fear and to learn trust,
to be serious, to be calm,
and to celebrate with laughter and joy.

Children have the right to dream,
and to grow at their own pace.
They have the right to make mistakes,
and the right to be forgiven.

Children have the right to be spared violence and hunger,
to have a home and protection.
They need support for growing up healthy,
with good habits and sound nutrition.

Children need people to respect,
adults whose example and loving authority they follow.
They need a range of experience—tenderness and kindness,
boldness and courage, even mischief and misbehavior.

Children need a loving relationship with the earth—
with animals and with nature,
with families and community.

Children need moments for reflection and space for curiosity,
protective boundaries and freedom to create,
and time to play, to work, to rest.

Children need to be introduced to a life of principles,
and given the freedom to discover their own.

The spirit of childhood calls for protection and nurture.
It is an essential part of every human being
and needs to be kept alive.

THE ESSENTIALS OF HEALTHY CHILDHOOD

The essentials of a healthy childhood start with matters literally of life and death: shelter, clothing, medical care, good nutrition, and a healthy environment. But there are other essentials whose contribution to the child's development is subtler yet still vital:

Close, loving relationships with responsive adults, at home and at school. Human warmth and care is at the heart of nurturing children from infancy on up. It is easy to see this in the case of infants and young children. But a growing body of research indicates that adolescents are more likely to thrive in schools small enough for them to be known by name.

Direct knowledge of the living world of nature. For the very young child, this means plenty of time to explore the minute miracles of the backyard or park. Elementary students can enjoy class hikes and camping with families or scout troops. Adolescents, with a bit of help from adults, can thrive on extended wilderness experiences.

Time every day for child-initiated play. Play evolves throughout life, beginning with infants and toddlers who play physically with fingers and toes and the objects around them. Make-believe play starts at age two or three when children begin to try on all the aspects of life, getting to know themselves and the world around them. In grade school, imaginative play advances to acting out original dramas and building forts and clubhouses. At this age, play also matures into rule-based games. In middle and high school, the imaginative spirit of play can grow into more mature forms of intellectual and artistic creativity.

Music, drama, puppetry, dance, painting, and the other arts. These should be offered as cultural experiences and also as classes throughout childhood. They should be blended into academic subjects as a kind of yeast to the child's growing imagination. A well-developed imagination enhances all forms of thinking, from philosophy and history to science and mathematics.

Hands-on lessons, handcrafts, and other physically engaging activities. Such activities literally embody the most effective first lessons for young children in the sciences, mathematics, and technology. What is learned through the hands stimulates a large part of the brain and enters deeply into the life of the child.

Rich face-to-face language experiences, including conversation, poetry, storytelling, and books. Reading books aloud with favorite adults is especially crucial for young children but is enjoyable at all ages. And the living relationship between the teller and the hearer of stories makes oral storytelling a compelling experience for adolescents and adults as well as children.

Time and space for children to reflect, create meaning, and experience a sense of the sacred. Children have an innate sense of wonder and reverence for beauty and goodness. They experience gratitude for the sun, moon, and stars, for earth, water, fresh air, and the universe of living things. They hunger for beauty in color and form, both natural and fashioned by human hands, and this too nourishes a sense of the sacred.