

Religious Capacities and Needs (Birth to Three Years)

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Religious formation is the fashioning of the whole person— body, mind and spirit—into the image and likeness of God. Everything we do for and with our children is part of their formation as whole persons and is thus part of their religious formation. In the first three years of life, our care for our children focuses on simple physical acts (feeding and burping, changing and bathing), on preparing a safe and stimulating environment, and on communicating with them. Of the many basic needs and capacities of very young children, we will focus here on how four—movement, language, order, and communication— help form our children.

Movement

The child in the womb is already moving and active. From birth onward, the child needs both free and focused movement for large and small-motor development and for gaining self-confidence and the ability to concentrate. We can aid our child's development in this area in many ways: by making sure the child's bed or crib allows room for movement; by placing the baby on a blanket on the floor so he or she can pivot, roll over, and otherwise move about; by providing a safe, uncluttered space for crawling; by providing sturdy, low stools or tables to hold onto as the child learns to stand and walk; by choosing toys that encourage hand movements appropriate to the child's developmental stage; and by teaching the toddler simple skills, such as feeding, washing, and dressing himself.

As toddlers begin to gain control over their own bodies and as they are given the opportunity to



participate in the daily activities of the home, they grow in self-confidence, self-trust, and a sense of self-worth—all of which are fundamental to wholeness, and therefore lay a foundation for religious formation.



As babies grow, so do the opportunities for communicating with them. There are more places to go, more things to do together and more things to talk about. But the most important ways we communicate with our children and build our relationship with

them continue to be through our presence, our daily acts of caring for them, and the small but essential ways we help them to do things themselves.

Language

One of the most wondrous capacities of children during the first three years of life is their ability to learn language. Babies begin to absorb and store sounds and words while in the womb and continue to do so as infants and toddlers. We can aid their language development in many ways: by speaking to them slowly and clearly, by naming things in their environment, by pointing out qualities of objects, by naming the actions we are doing in caring for them, and by reading to them.

Order

Very young children have a great need for order. If things are in regular places, children recognize and identify them more readily and thus feel more secure in their environment. Simple routines in daily life are also essential for young children's sense of security and internal order.

Communication

Communication with our child begins in the womb. In the early months after birth this communication is very basic. Simply responding to the newborn's cry and meeting the need that has prompted the cry—the need to be fed or changed or shifted to a new position—communicates our dependable, loving presence and builds trust, as does the gentle but firm way we hold the baby. We also communicate by talking—by calling her name, by telling him how beautiful and precious he is, and by pointing out interesting things around her. But in the early weeks and months, we communicate our love even more through our gaze and our touch.

Religious Images and Experiences

Finally, there are ways we can foster a child's religious life even more directly. We can place a simple, sacred image (such as the risen Christ or the Madonna and Child) near her bed and point it out to her. We can sing a psalm or hymn softly when we nurse or feed him. We can pray with her. And we can take him to church. Before or after Mass we can look at things together and name things for him. During Mass we can sit close to the altar so she can see what's going on. (Even if this might also mean slipping out when she has a greater need to move and make noise!)

The prophet Isaiah has shared with us one of the most important things there is to know on our lifelong journey toward wholeness: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). The earliest phase of life is a precious and unparalleled opportunity for learning to trust. Children who experience this quiet, secure place within and around them will find returning to that place far easier throughout their lives.

For Further Reading

Montanero, Silvana. *Understanding the Human Being: The Importance of the First Three Years of Life*. Nienhuis Montessori U.S.A., 1991.
Cavalletti, Sofia, et al. *The Good Shepherd and the Child: A Joyful Journey*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994.

