Chapter 19
Children’s Spiritual Intelligence

Mollie Painton

Abstract The purpose of this chapter is to explore the evolution of a variety of intelligences, from IQ to emotional and social intelligences, with an emphasis on the emergence of awareness of spiritual intelligence. While a definition of spiritual intelligence is offered, it is found to be close in description to children’s inner worlds. The author details the cost of oppressing spiritual intelligence in children and the aftereffects on adults. She also emphasizes the need for adults to be spiritual partners for the children in their lives. The illustrative stories of the Seven Branches of the Spiritual Tree of Life are taken from the author’s clinical study of children in play therapy over a period of approximately 20 years. Much of the content is cited from the author Mollie Painton’s book Encouraging Your Child’s Spiritual Intelligence.

In recent years we have moved our understanding of intelligence from acknowledging one kind, IQ, to recognizing multiple intelligences. According to Howard Gardner (1998), multiple intelligences include visual–spatial, bodily kinesthetic, linguistic, logical–mathematical, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. In the past 10 years, Daniel Goleman (1995) has introduced us to emotional intelligence, and more recently, social intelligence.

As stated in my article Inner Worlds in the September 2007 issue of the Rocky Mountain Parent Magazine,

I would like for us to go one step further to really honor our children by being aware of their inner worlds, or spiritual intelligence. Without this knowledge, how can we honestly say that we know “what makes our children tick?” (Painton, 2007b, pp. 18–19)

At the same time, how can we be helpful to them as they grow and develop, navigating the rough waters of their transformation?

M. Painton (✉)
The Interplay Center and the SpiritPlay Institute, 1519 Rolf Court, Fort Collins, CO 80525, USA e-mail: Pmollie@aol.com

Journey of Grief and Enlightenment

Let me begin the way I commonly introduce my work in a variety of settings by telling a story to shed light on what I am saying. In 1979 my husband Max, a clinical psychologist who started the Gestalt Institute of Phoenix, died of cancer leaving me a widow with two daughters, aged 3 and 7. As we moved through a grieving period that lasted several years, both my daughters reported seeing their dad on many occasions. The oldest was visited nightly for nearly a year after her father’s death. While I was overwhelmed by my loss and aware of my daughters’ pain, their wisdom and openness touched me.

One night my youngest daughter Sarah, who had recently turned 4, sat on my lap as I cried about her dad. She held my face in her hands and said, “Mom, at least we have life!” For about 2 years after her father’s death my oldest daughter saw what she called “colors” around friends, family, and even strangers. These events began to shape my life, the life of my children, and my work as a therapist.

Children’s Inner Worlds

Ten years later, when I was in private practice as a child psychologist and play therapist, my child clients told me similar stories that they were not comfortable sharing with many others:

A ten-year-old boy disclosed that he is nearly incapacitated by his awareness of the pain of others, while feeling rejection from his peers . . . A four-year-old boy told me that his deceased father visits him often in a variety of forms. A seven-year-old girl shared that after her grandmother died, she became the girl’s guardian angel who watches over and protects her daily (Painton, 2007b, pp. 18–19).

During the course of my practice, many children have described their guardian angels and spiritual companions. A 9-year-old girl sees fairies dancing around her room every night when she goes to sleep. Another girl had a butterfly who was her spiritual companion. One child, who was in play therapy with me, interacted with nine different “ghosts” after having a near-death experience. His journey is similar to that of other children whose experiences have been acknowledged by clergy and documented by medical personnel as well (Painton, 2007a).

As child clients have disclosed their journeys to me, I realize that they live in a world that is incomprehensible to most adults. Exploring their own developed and developing identities, they are not confined to the limitations of life as we adults know it. They describe gaining entrance to other domains in which they coexist and prosper. From their stories, it is apparent that they journey easily, both in sleep and awake, from our everyday realities to profound worlds with an endless variety of fascinating, even magnificent, beings. They often appear to have an unconstrained rapport with these visitors who help them to survive while enriching their lives. As such their inner worlds are bursting with wisdom, guidance, and enriching experiences essential for their lives, and those of their parents, relatives, and friends.