

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT: CLIMBING THE LADDER TO CHRIST

by Melissa K. Tsogranis

Ascend, my brothers, ascend eagerly. Let your hearts' resolve be to climb. Listen to the voice of the one who says: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of our God." (Isaiah 2:3).

— St. John Climacus,
The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Do you remember the first word your child said? How about what it felt like when he took his first step, or perhaps when she first rolled over? These moments cause your heart to swell with delight while you run for the video camera. But such occasions are more than photo opportunities; rather, they represent steps up the ladder of development children begin ascending the instant they are born.

At no other time in life does more growth occur than from birth to age three. Even when you think nothing is happening, your baby is doing all sorts of wonderful things that prepare her for all future development—yes, even putting her feet in her mouth and sticking out her tongue have prominent places on developmental charts. Hundreds of thousands of pathways in your child's brain are industriously making connections that will help her walk, talk and even have a temper tantrum. With all of these critical physical and psychological pathways being formed, it is essential that you pave the way for your child's spiritual development from the beginning. We will examine four critical stages of early childhood development. Much of this information comes from the work of developmental psychologist Stanley Greenspan. As we explore these stages, we will analyze them through a slightly different lens—one with an Orthodox Christian point of view.

Homeostasis: Taking in the World

Homeostasis is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a relatively stable state of equilibrium." For newborns, however, the world is anything but stable. Life in mother's womb was warm and secure—but now loud noises, bright lights, cold air and a barrage of other things assault their sensitive bodies daily. During this stage, infants are learning to process all of the different stimuli they experience in their environment. It would be very difficult for them to progress to other developmental milestones if they never learned how to filter sensory information.

What does this mean for your little one's spiritual development? Plainly speaking, bring your baby to church and bring the Church into your home! Infants need the magnificent sensory feast of the Church to embrace them from the beginning. Children need to smell the incense, touch the icons, hear the rich sounds and see the beauty of God around them. Most importantly, it is in church that they taste Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. Parents then need to bring the Church into their daily lives by filling their homes with prayer and godly reminders (such as icons, incense, liturgical music and the Bible). When we do this, our children will sense that our homes are an extension of the Church. St. John Chrysostom writes, "Seek the things which are of God, and those which are of man will follow readily enough... If we thus regulate our own houses, we shall be also fit for the management of the Church. For indeed a house is a little Church" (Homily 20 on Ephesians).



Attachment: Falling in Love

Attachment for a baby is the process of becoming emotionally close to his parents—falling in love with them. Research has found that babies who are securely attached to their primary caregivers grow to have healthier relationships and are more capable in dealing with life's pressures. Falling in love is anything but trivial for a baby: it is necessary for survival. Studies have shown that infants who do not have someone to connect with in this most intimate of relationships fail to thrive. As a result, their development can be delayed, they may be detached from the world and, in some extreme instances, they can even die from a lack of love.

But attachment to parents is not enough for our little ones to develop. Our children need to attach themselves to our unifying heavenly Father in order to develop into healthy Christians, capable of dealing with the challenges of life. It is not enough for us to feed, shelter and love our babies while waiting for them to grow old enough that we can "teach" them about God.

We must help our children turn to God from the very beginning of their lives so that He becomes part of their being. We attach ourselves to God, and through us our children will grow to know Him. In his book, *On the Upbringing of Children*, Bishop Irenaeus writes, "If your heart overflows with faith and love for God, you will find a thousand and two ways to pass on these feelings to your child."

Intentional Communication: Let's Talk

Once a child has acclimated to his environment and attached to a caregiver, he begins to communicate. A baby first communicates his needs through crying. Initially, it is a crude system based on raw physical and emotional needs (e.g., I'm wet, hungry, hurt). As he grows, this system is quickly refined. Within the first year of life, an infant progresses from "If I cry, Daddy comes," to holding up objects to Mommy in inquiry, "What's this?" The child is gathering information in preparation for beginning to communicate verbally—but there is much intentional communication occurring long before he says his first word.

A baby actively engages those around him, with or without verbal skills, and learns more every day through "talking" with others.

From a spiritual development point of view, the child is ready to intentionally communicate with God—to pray. When

we pray, we enter into a conversation with God and attach ourselves to Him in body, mind and soul. St. Dimitri of Rostov writes: Prayer is turning the mind and thoughts toward God. To pray means to stand before God with the mind, mentally to gaze unswervingly at Him, and to converse with Him in reverent fear and hope. ("The Inner Closet of the Heart," in *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology*, Faber & Faber, 1997)

For our little ones, beginning to pray on their own shouldn't be their first experience with prayer. Before this, they have been praying from their parents' loving arms in church and at home. In this way, they hear and experience what it means to communicate through prayer.

Only later do we encourage them in their own prayers before and after meals, and when they wake and sleep, and throughout the day. They can begin with a simple "Lord, have mercy" while "doing their cross" and then progress to saying their own prayer, asking God for strength and giving Him thanks and praise. We nurture in them their own prayers even as we teach them common prayers and hymns of the Church.

Exploration: Joy of Discovery

The final stage of early childhood is exploration. For a child, exploration is the action of learning more about something that interests her. This stage is why we child-proof our homes! When a child is getting into stuff, she is taking an active role in learning, which is a very good thing. Exploration is the richest kind of learning because it is intrinsically motivated. This joy of discovery contributes to a child's overall development, even if she is exploring something as simple as a sock drawer. There is much to learn in drawers: feeling the different textures, seeing the various colors and learning how long it takes before Mom and Dad find out—of course, only after every sock has been unfolded and scattered throughout the house! The child is fully invested in exploration and learning, and she takes great joy from it.

In this stage of spiritual development, our children are ready to explore their faith more independently. This is different than the learning that took place when they were younger. When they were younger, they learned from the arms of their parents, and their parents' experiences were their experiences. In this stage, children create their own experiences. For example, an 18-month-old may be taught by his grandmother to kiss the cross around her neck

when she was holding him. One day in church, he may notice that there are crosses carved on the pews. He may then proceed to walk up and down the aisle kissing each of these crosses, just as he learned in the arms of his grandmother. Our ultimate goal as parents is for our children to be so in love and connected with Christ that that want to know all about Him. In the words of St. Paul, we want Christ to "dwell in [our] hearts through faith; that [we], being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17–19).

In Conclusion

Development is exciting. Consider a child who has learned a new skill. She wants to do it all the time, be it walking, talking or simply stacking blocks. Spiritual development is no different. It is exciting—it brings us closer to Christ. Children have the eagerness, but quite often our spiritual lethargy prevents them from eagerly running to the Lord.

I have not associated specific ages with developmental stages here. Although there are definite periods in which the stages should occur, from a spiritual point of view, development is not so precise. It is ideal for a child to experience these stages at a very young age, but God is ready to enter our lives at any age. Mastery of these stages is a lifelong discipline, not a check mark on a developmental list. Consider the following stages for children of all ages:

- Have they learned to experience and enjoy to the wonderful sensory feast available through our Orthodox tradition?
- Have they fallen in love with their Heavenly Father and realized His never-ending love for them?
- Have they started intentionally communicate with God through prayer both in church and throughout their day?
- Have they become interested in exploring more about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?

But here is the most important question: have we?

Melissa Tsogranis is associate director for the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese Center for Family Care. Her background is in child development with an emphasis in Special Need Populations and Family Education. This article is adapted from a presentation given at the Clergy-Laity Congress in 2006 and from an article printed in the Fall 2008 issue of "PRAXIS" magazine.

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

For more information about the center's ministries please contact the center at:
79 Saint Basil Road
Garrison, NY 10524
Phone: (845) 424-8175
Fax: (845) 424-4172
Email: familycare@goarch.org
Website: www.family.goarch.org

Leadership 100

The Center for Family Care was established with a major grant from the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund, Inc.

We are grateful for its support.