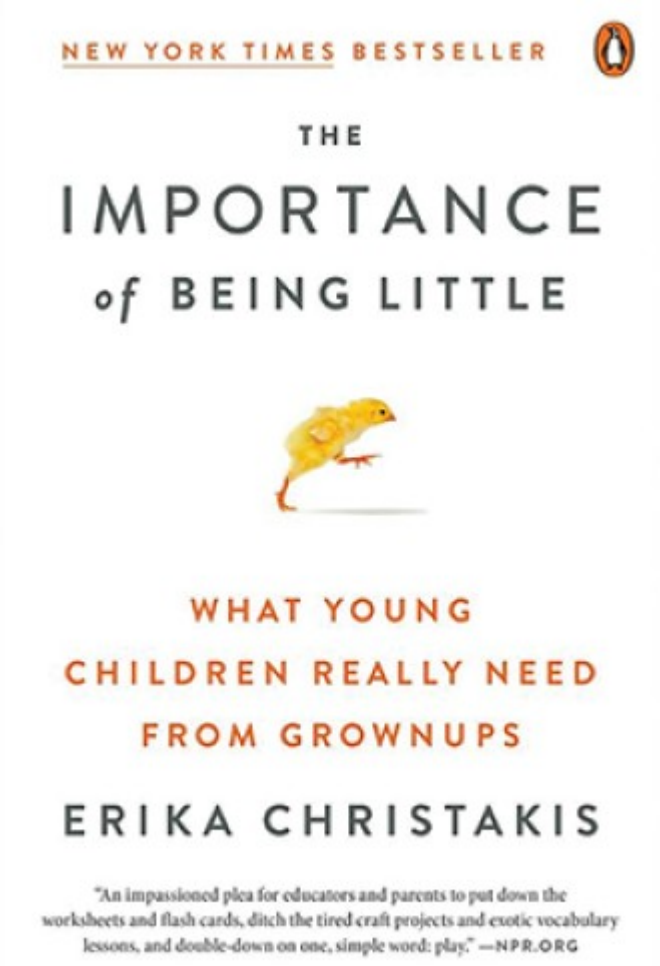
The yin and yang of being small

Children have unique needs for both freedom and protection.

by Marcia J. Bunge in the March 1, 2017 issue

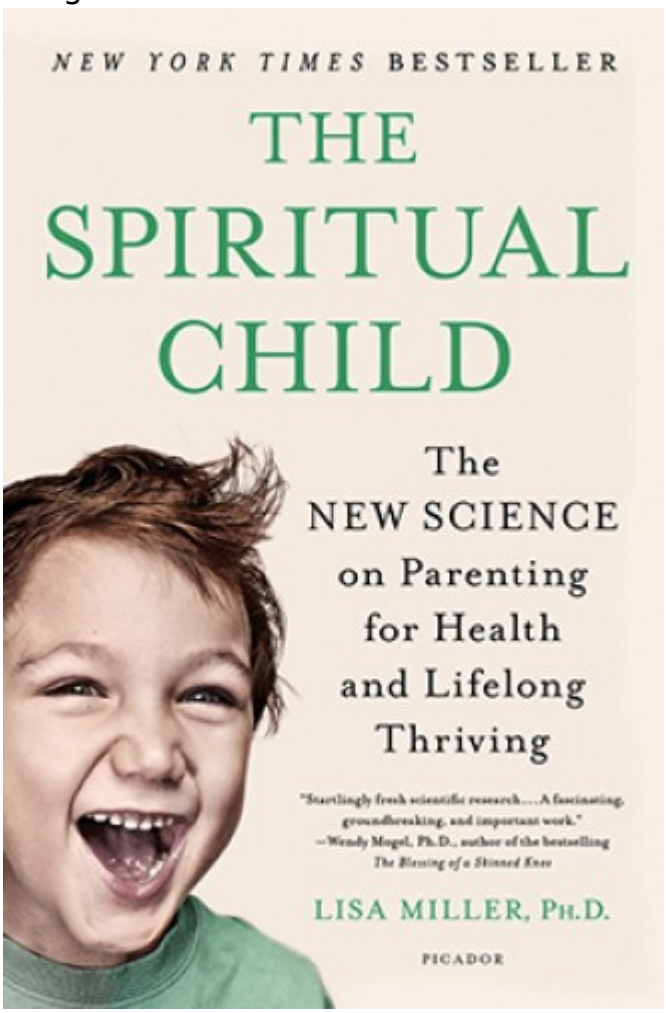
In Review



The Importance of Being Little

What Young Children Really Need from Grownups

By Erika Christakis
Penguin



The Spiritual Child

The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving

By Lisa Miller
Picador

The rapidly growing studies of childhood across disciplines demonstrate that learning about and caring for the smallest human beings is everyone’s business. Healthy child development requires the support of households, schools, faith communities, neighborhoods, and countries. Erika Christakis and Lisa Miller present multifaceted conceptions of children that honor their full humanity. And they offer insightful recommendations for helping children to thrive, challenging readers to rethink their own conceptions of childhood.

Christakis, who has taught at Yale, explores early childhood learning through social-scientific research and her experiences as a preschool director and mother of three children. She aims to reveal the special but often unnoticed powers of children between the ages of three and six, to offer a “road map for recognizing signs of powerful learning,” and to provide “concrete recommendations for nurturing young children’s learning impulses wherever we find them.”

Her writing is both accessible and creative. She enhances a masterful discussion of the process of learning to read, for example, by helping adults imagine a child’s experience. She includes a paragraph in which 90 percent of the words are accurately written and a mere 10 percent are gibberish. It’s frustrating to read—just as a paragraph might be for a young reader who recognizes all but 10 percent of the words.

Weaving together recent research with real-life anecdotes and analogies, Christakis honors the complexity of young children and helps readers better appreciate children’s vulnerabilities and strengths, particularly “the yin and yang of being a small person” who desires both protection and freedom. She encourages readers to listen more closely to the children in their lives and to value their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Such relationships are vital because “the most essential engine of child development is not gadgetry or testing, but deep human connection.”

Christakis critiques learning models that view children in a monochromatic way and are either too directive or too permissive. They fail to find the peak “learning zone,” Christakis explains, “where we offer enough assistance to be helpful but not so much or so little that we end up completing the task for the child or leaving him to struggle to the point of giving up.” When caregivers attend nimbly and compassionately to children’s sweet spot for learning, they create a space that balances assistance and freedom, talking and listening, guidance and curiosity. Such an approach to learning, in whatever context, creates real connection and human flourishing.

Although Christakis richly points out the significance of parents, schools, and public policy in children’s development, she doesn’t address the powerful role that faith communities and spiritual life can play—a topic taken up by Lisa Miller.

Miller, who teaches psychology and education at Columbia University’s Teaching College, argues that children’s spiritual development is closely tied to their

intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development. “Biologically, we are hardwired for spiritual connection.”

Her work builds on recent scientific studies in the field of positive psychology that focus on mental health, genuine happiness, and human flourishing in all stages of life. Children with a robust spiritual life, she reports, are less likely to abuse alcohol or drugs and to engage in risky sexual behaviors. They develop a more resilient way of coping with setbacks, failures, and negative events. They are also less likely to suffer from depression as adults.

Miller is not primarily addressing religious educators or youth leaders, and she doesn’t outline a program or curriculum. Rather, she speaks broadly to parents and mentors of any faith or no faith, including those who self-identify as “non-spiritual.” She defines spirituality loosely as “an inner sense of living relationship to a higher power.” At the same time, she draws on her experiences as a Jew to exemplify the powerful role that religious communities can play in children’s spiritual development and their ability to flourish.

In the final chapter, Miller offers several concrete suggestions for parents who seek to cultivate a child’s spiritual development. She encourages parents to speak openly and authentically about their own spiritual struggles and experiences, carry out spiritual practices in the home, serve others, and delight in the natural. She also suggests talking more intentionally about spiritual dimensions of daily life, providing children with a robust spiritual vocabulary that gives meaning and helps direct a moral compass.

The book’s incorporation of a vast number of varied sources—from scientific research to popular books on spirituality—is both a gift and a limitation. Miller speeds over the studies so quickly that it is sometimes hard to find the evidence behind them without consulting the sources themselves. Furthermore, her attempt to speak to a broad audience at times flattens the distinctiveness of deep religious traditions into generic words of advice. As the texture of the spiritual life she seeks to foster gets lost, so does the depth and complexity of children’s own lives. However, Miller herself seems to sense this limitation. Each time her prose borders on the sugar-coated, she adds a significant insight that draws readers more deeply into engagement with the complex spiritual needs of children.

With their rich, multilayered portrayals of children, Christakis and Miller help Christians recall the Bible's own remarkable language about children's complexity and dignity. Children are fully human and made in God's image, yet they're also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance. They're gifts of God and sources of joyful relationship, yet they're also capable of selfish and sinful actions. They're strong models of faith, endowed with gifts and insights for loving and serving others, yet they are uniquely vulnerable and in need of protection from adults.

Serious attention to such biblical wisdom as well as the insights of Christakis and Miller leads to haunting questions for Christians. Why do so many religious education programs miss the mark? Why are parents not carrying out meaningful rituals at home or otherwise engaging with the spiritual formation of their children? Why do young people who grew up in the church know so little about their faith and struggle to speak about their core values?

Although some churches have created outstanding faith formation programs, many others reveal the kind of one-dimensional views of children and relational trappings that Christakis and Miller reject. We often offer preschoolers canned curricula and vapid intergenerational events, and at the end of it all families take home a pile of worksheets and throwaway crafts. We often march little children in and out of worship services to sing a song or hear a children's sermon, setting up their participation as an entertaining sideshow rather than helping them contribute to the service as full members of the body of Christ. We often provide our youth with plenty of pizza but few opportunities to discuss challenging texts or to speak openly with adults about faith, doubts, anxieties, and the relationship between religion and their academic interests.

The good news is that children and youth want to connect meaningfully and authentically with adults, and they appreciate opportunities to discuss their questions, concerns, and commitments. Christakis and Miller affirm this reality and reveal its potential. Their insights are a gift to all those in the church who seek more effectively and consistently to honor the full humanity of children.

A version of this article appears in the March 1 print edition under the title "Honoring children."