

## FAMILY'S GUIDE TO SPIRIT PLAY

### What is Spirit Play?

Spirit Play is a unique, Montessori based approach to Unitarian Universalist Religious Education. Inspired by Jerome Berryman's "Godly Play," Spirit Play classrooms are defined by the following elements:

- 1) Freedom: Children are free to move about their environment and choose their activities after the initial lesson. What they create during their work time is up to them, they are taught that they may respond to the lesson in anyway that is meaningful to them. More often than not, their creations surprise and impress us!
- 2) Spiritual Practice and Ritual: Every moment of the Spirit Play experience is highly structured and ritualized, from entering the classroom at the beginning of class to listening to the story to rolling out the rugs children work on. Class itself is a spiritual practice, an experience of sacred space and action. The rooms themselves are set up to reflect this and children will learn to appreciate the communal nature of worship, storytelling and song.
- 3) Creativity and Artistic Expression: Children are given the opportunity to explore the lesson in an artistic medium of their choice, whether it's markers, paints, or clay. Spirit Play teaches that art is a form of spiritual exploration; another attempt to understand and express the human experience.
- 4) Storytelling: Each lesson is comprised of a story, told by one of the two adults in the room. Stories are one of the most powerful spiritual experiences for children, many adults still recall stories and books they heard as children. The stories have a variety of messages and themes, usually focused on Unitarian Universalism, and afterwards, students are given a chance to reflect on the meaning and power of what they've heard.

### What are the roles of the adult facilitators?

There are two adults in every classroom, one is called the Storyteller and the other is called the Doorkeeper. The Storyteller's role is to lead

the storytelling, the wondering time and any songs or unison prayers. The Doorkeeper greets students when they enter, assists the Storyteller during the story and distributes Feast.

What happens during a Spirit Play Class?

A typical Spirit Play Class is comprised of several important segments. While small details might vary from classroom to classroom, the basic principles and format is the same.

1. **Entering the Classroom:** Students are greeted calmly by the Doorkeeper, who sits outside the door of the classroom. Students will be asked whether they are ready to enter the classroom and are asked to remove their shoes. This helps teach the student that class is a special time and that their classroom is a special place. Parents are asked not to enter the classroom, as it disrupts the environment. Once students are inside, they gather in a circle led by the Storyteller who waits with them until the lesson begins.
2. **Opening Words and Songs:** Once everyone is inside, the class will mark the beginning of the lesson by reciting a prayer, singing a song or lighting the flaming chalice, the central symbol of Unitarian Universalism. This helps students feel comfortable in the space and marks the beginning of the lesson.
3. **Storytelling:** When it's time to tell the story, the Storyteller will go to one of the shelves and pick up the story. In Spirit Play, stories are told with materials that help illustrate the story. This helps all kinds of learners understand the story and provides visual cues for the students to focus on. The story is told in a slow and calm fashion; the Storyteller does not pause for questions and appears wholly engrossed in their story. Students are asked to focus on the voice and actions of the Storyteller, who is laying out materials, which help tell the story.
4. **Wondering:** After the story is complete, the Storyteller engages in Wondering. Wondering involves asking questions, and encouraging students to respond in appropriate ways to the questions. This is a time for students to ponder the meaning of the story and provide some ideas about what they want to do for the rest of the class.

5. Work Time: Work Time is a chance for students to explore the lesson through creative expression. The classroom is full of art materials, which students are encouraged to use in any way they see fit. Almost all students will choose to work on something that relates to the lesson. It is a quiet and solitary activity; children are told that Work Time is not social but rather a meditative and thoughtful time of reflection.
  6. Feast: After Work Time is over, students participate in Feast. Feast usually involves partaking in a cracker or cookie and a cup of juice. Feast is not simply a meal or a snack, but communal sharing of food. The Feast experience is based heavily on the effects of Christian tradition of Communion, and serves a similar ritualistic purpose in Spirit Play Classrooms.
  7. Leaving the classroom: After Feast, students often participate in closing words or songs and then are invited, sometimes as a group, other times one by one, to leave the circle and join their families. Families waiting to pick up their students should not enter the classroom or knock; this will disrupt the experience of the class. We ask that you wait patiently until the class is ready to finish.
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