

# Unitarian Universalist Principles and Parenting Small Group Ministry

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING

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## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY HOW DOES SMALL GROUP MINISTRY APPLY TO PARENTING?

Parents gathering in small groups to discuss parenting is not new. Curricula and information for parents is not new. What we are adding here is the concept of Small Group Ministry. What makes a small group a "ministry group" lies in the name itself.

- "Small" means a group with a maximum of 8-10 people. Groups of this size provide an opportunity to relate on a more intentional level.
- "Group" is a gathering of individuals, sometimes selected at random, sometimes selected for a specific interest or characteristic. What separates these groups from others is a focus on "ministry."
- "Ministry" is the process or act of caring for another. This relates to the spiritual as well as the physical and emotional well-being of the group participants.

Small Group Ministry provides a *connection with the faith community*. This connection is essential as we take our spiritual journeys with the support of a faith community.

*Service to the congregation or larger community* stem from the call to faith in action that comes from living out of our spiritual journey, and is compelled by our own increasing sense of ministry as part of a growing spiritual life.

The **purpose of the sessions** is to minister to each other as well as to provide opportunity for spiritual growth by

- paying attention/listening to each other's needs and wants, and stories.
- encouraging each other and sharing on our spiritual journeys.
- exploring and sharing the meaning of the Unitarian Universalist Principles in our lives.
- enhancing the role of parents in children's religious development.

*Time and frequency of sessions.* Small Group Ministry usually involves meeting once and preferably at least twice a month for 2 hours over a period of time. However, the program could be implemented in several longer sessions, such as a day-long program, covering several sessions.

*Size of the group.* A major consideration is the size of the group. We connect on a deeper personal level with small groups. The suggested maximum size is 5-10, including the facilitator. When the number of participants exceeds this 10, a new group needs to be started in order to preserve the relational aspect. Groups smaller than 5 can certainly use the material but there will be a decrease in diversity of backgrounds and situations, and sharing.

*Develop a covenant or "Guidelines for Being Together"* so that the participants have input and expectations are stated in the language of the group. This is a covenant, or promise on how to act when together, moving from just avoiding disruption and conflict to a way of caring. Developing a covenant should be one of the first sessions of a group. The covenant is reviewed when a new person joins the group and at least annually.

The **format** of the sessions provides a simple structure:

*Opening words/lighting candle/chalice* gathers people, and sets the time for being together as special. The opening relates to the topic. The readings may be read by more than one person or "with multiple voices." Some ways of doing this is to 1) have one person read the parts in italics, another person read the parts in regular type, or 2) read around the circle, with each person taking a section.

*Check-in* allows everyone an opportunity to speak, without interruption. (It may be helpful to set a time for this, such as 3 minutes for each person, with the option of extending the time if needed and if agreed by the group.) Check-in is usually sharing accomplishments or concerns, highlights in our lives since the last session. An exception is the first session, which includes more introductory sharing.

Passing is acceptable. Someone who passes may wish to speak after others have shared. Not all sharing is appropriate in the group. When a person needs more discussion, make plans for that to occur outside of the session time.

*Topic/Activity* provides thoughts or reflective questions for the group to start the *dialogue*. In using dialogue:

- Participants talk about the topic as it relates to them, without being disputed.
- Participants share from their own experience
- Participants can learn from the stories and sharing of others

The critical part of developing the session plans is the manner in which the questions are asked.

- To elicit or impart information is an *educational* approach.
- To engage from their spiritual base and feelings is *ministry* -- the focus of small group ministry.

The focus is on considering the topics as adults, then how we might consider the topics with children. It will be helpful to hold a specific child or children in mind during a session.

*Closing words* mark the end of the time together, but are not summaries of the session. As with the *Opening Words*, the closing words can be from various sources, and may be spoken by more than one person, or “with multiple voices.” (See suggestions above, under *Openings*.)

If a chalice or candle has been lit, it is extinguished now.

*Likes/Wishes*. Participants have a chance to comment on how the session went for them, and to make suggestions for enhancing the session or the group process. This allows time to review plans for the next session.

**Facilitators** The sessions can be lead by one or two facilitators, or an overall facilitator and rotating the facilitation per session.

Facilitators need to be able to guide the sessions along the planned focus, while still allowing flexibility to address specific needs of participants. Facilitators do not have to be experts in the topic being presented in a session.

The role of the facilitator is to

- Build community in the group, making sure that each person is included, heard, and valued
- Help participants bring their own experiences to the living tradition we share
- Ensure that the group begins and ends on time and maintains its covenant.
- Guide the group through the session outline.
- Makes sure that the tone and feeling of the session is comfortable and inclusive

The facilitator is also a participant in the dialog, but the first consideration of the facilitator is the group process. It is vital that facilitators don't 'lead' too much. They are to be present, to help

keep things on track. They may have to move discussions along, but it is the members who 'own' the group and have the primary responsibility for its success or failure.

### **Expectations of participants**

- They are willing to participate in the dialog. *Dialog* allows participants to share from their own experiences, listen to others, and learn from others. This is different from *discussion*, where there is a desire to get a specific position across or have others agree to a point of view.
- They agree to confidentiality, so that everything that is said in the group, stays in the group. The exception is when there are issues of safety to self or others, and congregational safety policies would come into play.
- They commit to attend the sessions, and the sessions start and end at the agreed-to times. There may be other notes for 'ways to be together' that need to be added by the group.

More information on Small Group Ministry can be found on various web sites, such as Unitarian Universalist Association at <http://www.uua.org/cde/sgm/>  
Small Group Ministry Network at <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/>

You may also request more information by writing to the Helen Zidowecki via e-mail at [hzmre@hzmre.com](mailto:hzmre@hzmre.com) .

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**Parenting: 1. Introduction** (1 of 12 sessions)

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

Perhaps the greatest service the church can provide for parents is to help them become articulate about religion. For so many of us, religion is something that we think about, wonder about, and very seldom put into exact words. So, when the child comes home with endless questions, we are at a loss to know how they should be answered. We stumble, we hesitate, we postpone. The child senses that perhaps religion is something that we don't want to talk about, something different from other areas of thought, where parents are so sure and so positive. We must learn to be positive about our uncertainty.

Few experiences could be more valuable to a group of liberal parents than to sit down together and talk with one another about religious ideas; talk until the expression of those ideas comes clearly and easily; talk until they are fully aware of the wide diversity of faith, the wide variety of explanation, existing among us.

The clarity of our own religious faith, expressed in little remarks, in ordinary conversation, in the simple ideas that are constantly heard, are things that will make us teachers of religion. The actions we perform toward our neighbors, the sympathy with which we accept their differences from us, the compassion that we express when we hear of suffering and wrong, these are the things that will build our children's positive values. And these we can only develop as we become more conscious of just what it is that we do believe, what are the things we truly hold dear, what are the values that are at the heart of living.

“Ourselves and Our Children's Faith”, Dorothy Spoerl, 1960's, adapted

**Check in/Sharing:** How long have you been a Unitarian Universalist? What is your experience with children?

**Topic/Activity:**

1. Share a way that Unitarian Universalism provides a framework for your life.
2. If you were raised Unitarian Universalist, what has kept you in the Unitarian Universalist church?
3. Children learn the importance of spiritual journey and connection with a faith community from the adults that are close to them. What did you learn from your parents about spiritual practice or a spiritual journey? How does that influence your spiritual practice today?

**Checkout/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing Words:** "Living our principles" is a nice motto, but in modeling Unitarian Universalist values, do our interactions with children model reverence and respect for life, and support and enhance their self-esteem? Are we willing to admit to ourselves and to our children when our actions are not in harmony with our beliefs and values? There is no guarantee that our children will be lifelong members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, but there is a guarantee that, if we are aware of being living role models for our children, our religion will be challenging, changing, and visible. Are you ready?

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

**Parenting: 2. The Ultimate Religious Educators** (2 of 12 sessions)

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice** Suggestions: 1.) have one person read the parts in italics, another person read the parts in regular type, or 2.) read around the circle, with each person taking a section.

Children participate in a Religious Education Program for a short time once a week;

*Parents see them at all times of day and night.*

Children are greeted when they come to church;

*Parents get them there, and show the importance of attending by coming themselves.*

Children are given information and experiences to help them explore spiritual issues;

*Parents are frequently the ones present when the "religious" questions are asked, like "Do dogs go to heaven?" or "I don't believe that God is a man or a woman. Do you?"*

**Check In/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity:** Guided imagery:

Read reflectively, pausing for a few seconds between the points:

This guided imagery focuses on our religious past as a basis for building positive religious experiences with our children. It is not limited to a church or organized religious setting. You may guide where your thoughts go, and you may return to this space at any time.

- Find a comfortable position. Think of an experience from your childhood that you label as 'religious' or 'spiritual'.
- Be aware of where this happened--in a church building, by a campfire, in a youth group, in nature, in a special place.....
- Feel the surroundings--the sights, smells, light and darkness, temperature, sounds.
- Remember who was there with you--friends, family, someone special? Feel their presence. If you were physically alone, did you feel the presence of anyone or anything?
- Think of a word or phrase to describe the experience.

Stay in the experience for a few moments, savoring its memory. You can return to this place at any time. But for now, slowly return to the group, gradually become aware of the sounds and temperature in the place where we are meeting now. Open your eyes to show us that you are back from the journey.

1. How was the visualization for you?
2. Describe the spiritual journey that you are on. How do you or would you like to share that journey with children?
3. What impact does your religious identity as a Unitarian Universalist have on your spiritual journey? On how you parent? Or, put another way, what difference does your identity as a Unitarian Universalist parent have in the development of your child's spiritual journey?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing** Suggestions: 1.) have one person read the parts in italics, another person read the parts in regular type, or 2.) read around the circle, with each person taking a section.

"When We Live. We Learn" ("Children Learn What They Live" by Dorothy Law Nolte, adapted)

When we live with criticism,  
    *We learn to condemn.*

When we live with hostility,  
    *We learn to fight.*

When we live with shame,  
    *We learn to feel guilty.*

When we live with tolerance,  
    *We learn to be patient.*

When we live with encouragement,  
    *We learn confidence.*

When we live with praise,  
    *We learn to appreciate.*

When we live with fairness,  
    *We learn justice.*

When we live with security,  
    *We learn to have faith.*

When we live with approval,  
    *We learn to like ourselves.*

When we live with acceptance and friendship,  
    *We learn to find love in the world.*

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**Parenting: 3. The Chalice of Our Spiritual Journey** (3 of 12 sessions)

For optional activity: *Singing the Living Tradition* (1993) and *Singing the Journey* (2005).

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

The Living Tradition we share draws from many sources:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;

Words and deeds of the prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

The Principles and Purposes, Bylaws of the UUA (Article II).

**Check In/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity**

The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) formed in 1961 from the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. The process for developing and changing the Principles and Purposes includes intense discussion in local congregations and at General Assembly over several years.

There are two components of the Principles: the **affirmations** and the living tradition **sources**. The affirmations, frequently call "The Principles," form the common bond among us as guidelines for living, rather than a theological statement.

The **sources** in the Opening Words show the diversity of our religious tradition. While both Unitarian and Universalists have roots in Jewish and Christian heritage, Unitarian Universalism draws on the world's religions.

1. What sources/resources do you draw on for your spiritual journey?
2. When you find yourself in a difficult situation, where do you turn for guidance (readings, sayings or memories, people)?
3. What resources would you like to have available to your children? How do we help children develop their own resources?

Optional Activity: *Singing the Living Tradition* organizes material around the sources, as noted in the Contents. *Singing the Journey* continues the diversity. Name a hymn or reading that is meaningful to you. Notice the diversity of sources represented in the selections of the group.

Imagine the Unitarian Universalist symbol, the flaming chalice. Think of the bowl of the chalice as holding the **sources**, or that the **sources** are the fuel. The **affirmations** come out of the sources and are the visible part of our faith community, or the flame.



*The  
inherent worth  
and dignity of every person;  
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;  
Acceptance of one another and encouragement  
to spiritual growth in our congregations;  
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;  
The rights of conscience and the democratic process  
within our congregations and in society at large;  
The goal of world community with peace,  
liberty and justice for all;  
Respect for the interdependent  
web of all existence of which  
we are a part.*

PRINCIPLES: AFFIRMATIONS ARISING FROM OUR LIVING TRADITIONS SOURCES

Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to renewal of the spirit and openness to forces which create/ uphold life;  
Words and deeds of the prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil;  
Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;  
Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to  
God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;  
Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed  
the guidance of reason and the results  
of science and warn us against  
idolatries of mind and spirit;  
Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate  
the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was this session for you?

**Closing Words:** *The affirmations are presented here as they appear in the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws, followed by a children's version from The Unitarian Universalist Alphabet (Zidowecki, 1999, adapted February 2002). There are various editions for children, but none are "official."*

*Suggestion:* alternate reading the parts between two readers or divide the group into two parts..  
Read the first and last statement as a total group.

Unison: We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;	<i>Everyone is important;</i>
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;	<i>We are fair and kind to others;</i>
Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;	<i>We accept how we each learn and grow at church;</i>
A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;	<i>We are always learning for ourselves and together;</i>
The rights of conscience and the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;	<i>We have a say about things that are important to us;</i>
The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;	<i>We help to make the world a better place for everyone;</i>
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.	<i>Everything and everyone is related.</i>

Unison: Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

**Parenting: 4. Inherent Worth and Dignity** (4 of 12 sessions)

Topic/Activity: Select either the story about Emerson and Thoreau, or *IALAC*, as there may not be time to do both. If *IALAC* is used, a large sign and tape will be needed.

AFFIRMATION: The inherent worth and dignity of every person. *Everyone is important.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

I'm unique and unrepeatable. I'm glad to be me.

You're unique and unrepeatable. I'm glad that you're you.

We're unique and unrepeatable. I'm glad that we're us.

From the song, "I'm Unique and Unrepeatable" found in *We Believe and Around the Church, Around the Year*. The original source is listed as unknown.

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity:**

The story is a composite of stories taken from the *Unitarian Universalist Alphabet*. These stories are found in various other curricula and writings.

**RALPH WALDO EMERSON and HENRY DAVID THOREAU**

Mr. Emerson was a Unitarian minister. Eight of his ancestors, like his father and grandfather and great-grandfather were ministers. He was expected to be one, too. But he didn't like being a minister, so changed to being a writer and speaker instead. He wrote and spoke about many of his ideas. He wanted everyone to develop their own ideas and beliefs. He wanted to spread kindness and joy, and to make people feel better and think more. He was upset that people owned other people, called slaves.

Mr. Emerson was over six feet tall. He stood very straight. He had a deep voice. When he was around, people felt good about themselves. A woman who washed clothes for people came to hear him speak. She didn't really understand what he was saying, but she loved to see him standing before the group making everyone think that they were as good as he was, just by the way he talked!

Mr. Emerson loved children. A child could always go into the room where he was writing. He kept paper, pencils and scissors for them -- and something to eat. He liked to have fun with children and enjoyed picnics. He had four children of his own.

One day he was planning a picnic with his children. They invited children of all ages -- and some adults, too. There was a huckleberrying party, when everyone went hunting for berries to make pies. This party was to be led by Henry David Thoreau, because he knew where all the berries were!

The day of the picnic was sunny. Everyone was finding lots of berries. Suddenly Edward Emerson, who was about four years old, tripped and fell. He was carrying a big basket of berries. They went all over the place and got dirty and squished. Edward started to cry. People tried to give him some of their berries, but he still cried. Mr. Thoreau came over to see why Edward was crying. He put his arm around Edward.

"Edward," Mr. Thoreau said, "if huckleberries are to continue to grow, some have to be scattered to start new plants." Mr. Thoreau said that he thought that nature needed to have little children

sometimes stumble and scatter the berries. “There will be a lot of berries here someday, and we shall owe them all to you!” Mr. Thoreau said.

Edward began to smile again.

Numerous other children’s stories address this principle, such as “traditional” stories:

“The Ugly Duckling,” by Hans Christian Andersen

“The Little Engine That Could”

“Rudolph, the Red Nose Reindeer”

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### **I AM LOVABLE AND CAPABLE (IALAC)**

Based on the theme of the story by Sidney Simon (1973).

*Have a big IALAC sign. Read the following story. When something negative occurs, have a participant tear a piece from the sign. When positive, tape a piece onto the sign.*

When I got up this morning, my son reminded me that he needed cookies for school—and the bus was due in a half hour!

Well, I got breakfast for my daughter, the same cereal that she has been requesting for the last three months, and she said I never give her any variety!

As I got ready for work, I found that I had forgotten to return a call last evening. It made me feel so inadequate about juggling things.

My boss disagreed with the presentation I had been working on for a week, but didn’t have any helpful suggestions.

I got home just as the children got home from school. These afternoon hugs are so great. But my son didn’t want to talk with me: he just wanted to play with a friend. My daughter stopped to ask me about my day, but really didn’t hear me when I said that it hadn’t been all that great.

Supper was really a pleasant time. We got into a discussion and really listened to each other.

Bedtime was a fight, as my daughter was still doing her homework and said that it was my fault because I made her do some chores and took away from homework time. Things always seem to be blamed on me.

*How does the IALAC sign look at the end of the story? Share comments on the activity.*

### **Questions**

1. What is the origin of your source of worth and dignity? Is it something that you got from others? How?
2. Does the concept of inherent worth and dignity apply to everyone? How have you modeled respect for others that can be noted by a child? Share a time when it was difficult to show respect. Why?
3. What happens to a sense of worth and dignity when there is need for confrontation? Or, how do you disagree or confront, and maintain your own dignity and that of the

other person, such as a child?

**Check out/Likes and wishes:** How was this session for you?

**Closing Words:**

Everyone is important.

Our posture may reflect how we feel about ourselves. When we feel good about ourselves, we sit or stand straight, or erect.

When we are tired or upset, our shoulders sag, as if we were trying to fold into ourselves and become invisible.

Feel what I mean. Let your shoulders sag, and slump in the chair. Try to take a deep breath. It works better if we sit or stand as if we own the world! Sit as if you are being pulled up to the ceiling. Breathe deeply, and let the breath go. What makes a difference? Knowing that we are each a being of worth and dignity, of truth and meaning, of justice and compassion, and that we are accepted for who we are.

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

**Parenting: 5. Justice = Rights and Responsibilities** (5 of 12 sessions)

AFFIRMATIONS: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and  
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.  
*We are fair and kind to others. We help to make the world a better place for everyone.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

Many Unitarian Universalist parents are involved in numerous ways with significant social justice projects and issues, yet often their children are not involved with them or even aware of their parents' participation. We need to make connections between our faith and our actions, to share with our children why we do what we do. As parents, we are key to our children's religious growth. The way we model, acting on our faith within the family, and the issues we raise are crucial to whether our children will feel that they, too, can act on their faith. (*Parents As Social Justice Educators*, 1993, p. 1)

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity:**

*It's NOT fair!!!!!!*

Share a time you said or thought those words.

When have you heard a child say those words? What was your response?

Justice has balancing parts: rights and responsibility.

1. What *rights* do we, as adults, have related to children? What *rights* do children have? How do we treat each other so that everyone's *rights* are respected?
2. What *responsibilities* do you have with children? What *responsibilities* can you expect children to assume?
3. Reflect on how the *rights and responsibilities* of parents and of children change as children grow.
4. How are *rights and responsibilities* part of your spiritual journeys?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing Words:**

The following is inspired by "On Children" in *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.

Our children are not ours alone. They are the sons and daughters of our heritage. They come through us and live with us, but, as much as we give them, they are not ours to claim.

We give them experiences to shape their thoughts. We share from our past and our present,

But their future we cannot envision or visit. We can walk with them, but they move beyond us.

We ask them to think for themselves. We cannot stop them from thinking thoughts different from ours own.

This they will do in response to our love, respect—and space.

## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

### **Parenting: 6. Equity, Compassion, Peace, Liberty** (6 of 12 sessions)

AFFIRMATIONS: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and  
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.  
*We are fair and kind to others. We help to make the world a better place for everyone.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice** Suggestions: 1.) have one person read the parts in italics, another person read the parts in regular type, or 2) read around the circle, with each person taking a section.

Children are expected to develop their own opinions,  
*but I can share my thoughts.*

It is OK if I do not have answers.  
*I can assist in finding the resources.*

It is OK if I haven't formed an opinion.  
*I don't have to have opinions on everything.*

It is OK if a topic is not important to me.  
*I can accept the importance to the child.*

It is OK to state that things are 'right' or 'wrong', and my reasons for these positions.  
*I may disagree with others, without saying that mine is the only or best way.*

I answer from my experience at a point in time.  
*I may give different answers at different times.*

Helen Zidowecki

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

#### **Topic/Activity**

1. What questions have you been asked, or what dialogue have you had with children on spiritual or ethical issues? How did your Unitarian Universalist faith influence your responses?
2. Consider one of the following topics, or another one suggested by a participant:
  - ◆ War and peace — focusing on a current world situation
  - ◆ Homosexuality, gay rights, homophobia, transgender issues
  - ◆ Varying abilities or people with special needs, including children
  - ◆ Survival -- poverty, hunger, homelessness
  - ◆ Violence in society, from television and games to domestic violence
  - ◆ Racial and ethnic differences
3. If you were to be asked about the topic by a child today,  
What are your immediate reactions around the topic?  
Where did these reactions come from?  
What factors that you would consider in responding to a child?

**Check Out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

#### **Closing Words:**

From children we learn as we define our own thoughts and opinions.  
To children we give as we share of ourselves and our life's wisdom.  
Together we learn from each other.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCE: Dialogue With Children

Suggest giving this to participants at the end of the session. It is not intended to be used for discussion during the session.

Each of us has a different personality mix and style that influences how we receive and process information, interact, and understand. There is increasing understanding of "multiple intelligences" and "varying abilities". How we interact with others, including children, is influenced by the individuality of the people involved. How we talk with children about religious questions, models our respect for them as individuals. Making time for them demonstrates their importance to us and the importance of spiritual journeys and religious pursuits to us.

*Discussions* involve sharing ideas and information, and possibly, consciously or unconsciously, attempting to influence others. *Dialog* involves sharing ideas with the intent of also learning, so that the ideas of each person may change. Dialog encourages continuing exploration for parent and child.

Adults can show a willingness to talk about issues.

- Listen when a question is asked; acknowledge the question.
- If you do not understand the question, ask to have it repeated.
- Answer the question when it is asked, if possible. If there is not time, plan a time to discuss the topic as soon as possible, and keep this commitment.

Try to determine the context for the question and how much information is really wanted.

- Keep the answers short, simple and age-specific. Elaborate on answers, as the child continues questioning.
- Some questions will be asked repeatedly at different ages, and the answers may change depending on the situation and age of the child.

Think of many sides of an issue, some of which may become apparent as you talk. The content of the dialogue will depend on the age of the child and one's own spiritual journey. However, presenting options encourages thinking beyond the sometimes obvious factors and even beyond the immediate dialogue.

REFERENCE FOR DISCUSSIONS *Being a Unitarian Universalist Parent*. "Discussing Questions with Our Children," p. 10. See also *Religious Education At Home*, by Betsy Hill Williams, CLF, 1994, Chapter 2.

**Parenting: 7. Social Justice** (7 of 12 sessions)

AFFIRMATIONS: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and  
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.  
*We are fair and kind to others. We help to make the world a better place for everyone.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

The Flaming Chalice is a flame burning the holy oil of helpfulness and sacrifice--spreading warmth and light and hope. The chalice has been a symbol of liberal religion since the fifteenth century, dating to John Hus in Transylvania.

Hans Deutsch was an Austrian refugee who lived in Paris until France was invaded in 1940. He had worked in many European countries as a musician, drafter, and portrait artist. Having contributed many cartoons with unflattering content (about Nazism) to several newspapers in Vienna, he fled Paris and finally settled in Portugal where he joined the staff of the Unitarian Service Committee for six months as secretary and assistant to Dr. Charles E. Joy, executive director of the USC.

Dr. Joy felt that this new, unknown organization needed a visual image to represent Unitarianism to the world, especially when dealing with government agencies abroad. He asked his new assistant to work in his spare time on designing a symbol for the Committee to use. The result was the Flaming Chalice that grew out of social action and was adopted by the Unitarian Service Committee in 1941.

From <http://www.uua.org/aboutuu/chalice.html>

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity:**

We tend to think of social action only in terms of social service projects, but I suggest that we think about four different types of social action.

**Social education**, or helping people to understand social issues. Social education can include both learning about a particular social issue and teaching others about an issue.

**Social witness**, or publicly expressing your personal convictions about a particular issue. Social witness can range from letters to the editor, to participating in rallies and marches, to getting arrested as a public statement of your views.

**Social service**, or providing direct services to those who are in need. It is this type of social action in which we most often ask kids to get involved: we ask kids to work in a soup kitchen, or to raise money for a good cause.

**Direct action**, where you attempt to affect the decision-making process. Examples of this type of social action might include writing letters for Amnesty International, contacting elected representatives, and even engaging in civil disobedience.

Dan Harper, REsources for Living, July/August 2003, Church of the Larger Fellowship.  
Also see <http://www.uua.org/clf/re/listings.html>, Ethics/Social Action

1. Within Unitarian Universalism, social action is being called "Faith in Action."  
How does involvement in social action enhance your spiritual journey? How have or how could you involve children in social action that is important to you?
2. There are numerous 'causes' that come to our attention.  
What criteria do you use in determining which ones to support with your



resources? How do the Unitarian Universalist principles or affirmations apply in making choices?

3. When you have talked with children, what social issues are important to them and why?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing Words:**

Adults and children need (and want) projects they can understand, and projects where they can see an end result. They want to contribute to a long-term effort, or is it just another "band-aid" project. With this in mind, consider this closing story.

It is Thanksgiving and an eight-year-old had not cleaned her plate. I heard my son say, "Laura, clean your plate. Think of all the starving children in the world." Laura steadily asserted that there were no longer starving children in the world. Everyone "jumped down her throat," as we say. She adamantly replied, "You don't understand! My class sent them a care package last week." Dorothy Spoerl

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**Parenting: 8. Spiritual Development** (8 of 12 sessions)

**AFFIRMATION:** Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. *Church is a place where we grow together.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

Pets and children often sense whether we are calm and approachable, or irritated and unapproachable, even without our speaking. This relates to our sense of spiritual well-being and places the responsibility on us to be attentive to our own spiritual needs. The degree to which these needs are addressed will have an impact on those around us. Helen Zidowecki

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity**

Just as adults and children are at different developmental stages for cognitive, physical and social development, adults and children are at differing levels in faith development. Spiritual development is a lifelong process – lifespan faith development.

1. Select a ‘sacred topic’ -- like god. Complete the statements:  
“When I was a child, I believed that God .....” and “Now my concept of God is.....”
2. Share a talk that you had with a child about a ‘sacred topic’ – like god, prayer, death, beginnings. How much information about your own beliefs do you include in talking with children?
3. Spiritual practices enhance spiritual growth. What are your spiritual practices? Are children aware of your spiritual practices? How do you include children in your practices? Have your children developed spiritual practices of their own?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing:** “How Can We Know What God Is?” Author unknown, *From We Believe*, p.73

Suggestion: Use multiple voices: 1.) have one person read the parts in italics, another person read the parts in regular type, or 2) read around the circle, with each person taking a section.

I have seen a rainbow arching against a stormy sky	<i>so I know what promise is</i>
I have held a newborn baby	<i>so I know what a miracle is</i>
I have seen a sunrise over the desert	<i>so I know what glory is</i>
I have heard the ocean waves crash on a rocky shore	<i>so I know what power is</i>
I have suffered the death of loved ones	<i>so I know what mystery is</i>
I have seen a flame-colored autumn hillside	<i>so I know what beauty is</i>
My children have brought me breakfast in bed	<i>so I know what love is</i>
I have looked out into the starry night sky	<i>so I know what infinity is</i>
I have broken a promise and been forgiven	<i>so I know what compassion is</i>
I have felt my heart flooded with peace, when anger has drained away	<i>so I know what grace is</i>
I have known all these things	<i>so I think I know what God is.</i>

## UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

### **Parenting: 9. Search for Truth and Meaning** (9 of 12 sessions)

AFFIRMATION: Free and responsible search for truth and meaning.  
*We are always learning for ourselves.*

#### **Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

Opening and closing words are from “It's Not Always Easy to be a UU Kid!” UUA REACH, Fall 2000, adapted, Rev. Anne Orfald, with permission.

Do you or your children feel isolated as Unitarian Universalists because there are few UUs around you? Do people expect you to believe something different than you do? Are you put down or condemned for your beliefs?

It doesn't always feel so lucky to be a UU kid. Sometimes it is very hard. My schoolmates and playmates were kids who grew up as Catholics and Lutherans and Methodists and Jews. I was the only one in my school, except for my brother and sister, who was Universalist. It can be pretty lonely. Of course, we didn't talk about religion that much, but when we did sometimes my friends would tell me I was going to hell, because I didn't believe the right things.

My church taught me that Jesus was a good man and a good teacher, but he was not God. And my church taught me that there was no place called hell, where God sent those who were bad, to burn forever and ever. No such place as hell. And my church taught me that God was not a person -- not a Father like so many believed, but that God was a spirit of Love, which is deep inside of us, like a bright light. Maybe sometimes that light is a bit dim, but it is in each of us, no matter what our religion. My church also taught me that we don't have all the answers -- not about God or the universe, or about life and death. I was taught that there are things we don't know for sure.

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

#### **Topic/Activity:**

The search for truth and meaning carries tensions that provide a balance in the search: individuality and community, change and commitment, authority and questioning.

*1. Individuality and Community.* How do we honor the individuality of each person while realizing that we exist as part of a community? We learn individually, but the faith traditions come as part of a community.

What have you gained from being part of a church community?

How do children feel part of the community?

How do children see you contributing to the church community? (Parts in services, things we do around church, church attendance.) How can they contribute?

*2. Change and Commitment.* How do we balance the need to change and the desire for stability over time? We believe and act in the present. We may give children different answers over a period of time. The commitment is to the process of the spiritual journey.

How comfortable are you about not having specific answers? How do you feel when confronted by others – sometimes including children – who have defined beliefs that may differ from yours?

What can we do to enhance their ongoing spiritual journey as they grow into adulthood?

3. *Authority and questioning.* Many faith traditions attribute authority to a religious figure, deity or sacred scripture, Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration from various sources.

If we consider authority as an accepted source of information or expertise, what do you use as the authority or resources for your spiritual development?

Has the source of authority changed over time?

What influence do you have over the spiritual development of your children?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing Words:**

Well, when that's the kind of teaching you get, that we don't have all the answers and that there are some things we aren't certain about, when you are up against someone who says they do have the answers and they are absolutely certain that you are wrong in your religion, it's not easy! It doesn't always feel lucky to be a UU kid. Have some of you had experiences like that? How does it feel for you? Even for adults, it isn't always easy. What can we say when we are pushed to believe as others do?

Maybe we can say, "In my religion we believe it is wrong to try to make other people believe what we do. We believe that the one thing that matters more than anything else is how we treat each other. If we are kind to each other and don't hurt each other, that's what matters, no matter what our religion is. We believe that we have to help each other and try to work together to make the world a better place. If we all agree on how to treat each other, we don't all have to agree on our beliefs; we don't all have to be the same religion. So don't tell me I am bad or wrong because I don't believe what you do. That hurts me."

It's not always easy to be a UU kid. If it gets hard sometimes, let's talk about it and figure out together how to make it easier. Talk about it...that is why we have communities of faith.

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES/PARENTING: SMALL GROUP MINISTRY  
**Parenting: 10. Right of Conscience and the Use of the Democratic Process** (10  
of 12 sessions)

**AFFIRMATION:** The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

*We have a say about things that are important to us.*

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

The democratic process is more than voting. It is involvement, commitment of energy and time to learn what the issues are, to form and express opinions, and to participate in the decision-making. It is the obligation to speak up on issues affecting us or on behalf of others.

The democratic process is communicating so that people understand what is being discussed and have an opportunity to express their opinions. It is listening to a diversity of thought and feeling in order to more broadly understand the implications of the decisions.

The democratic process is knowing how, when and by whom decisions will be made. It is understanding that there may be challenges and changes, even when decisions seem 'final'. This is the fluidity and ambiguity of a democratic society.

The right of conscience and the democratic process are interwoven. The right of conscience that compels involvement is the ember that become the flame of democracy. Both are embedded within our Unitarian Universalist heritage. *Let us keep the heritage alive.*

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things for you today?

**Topic/Activity**

You are invited to explore various methods of decision-making.

Situation: The group is deciding where to go to for dinner: "all American" menu, Chinese, Italian, Mexican, fast food, etc. Use each of the following methods to make the choice.

- *Voting.* Each person will have one vote and the majority will be the deciding factor. Take a vote without discussion. Repeat the choices, giving time for discussion before the vote is taken.
- *Consensus.* Repeat the choices of restaurants. Allow discussion until a decision is made. If done well, this does not require a compromise that is uncomfortable for a participant.
- *Random.* Write the choices on pieces of paper, and draw a paper to make the selection.

1. How do you relate to these various types of decision-making? How does the way that we make decisions affect our sense of self?
2. Share an issue of conscience that you have shared with a child.

**Check out/Likes and wishes:** How was this session for you?

**Closing words:** How often structures of our society place people in positions of power *over* and *under* rather than power *alongside* (or with)! Even in our Unitarian Universalist families and congregations, how much genuine power-sharing occurs? We need to practice democracy as a way of truly proclaiming it. This means promoting diversity, not favoritism; persuasion, not coercion; inclusive language, not alienating jargon; a sense of humility, not arrogance.

**Parenting: 11. The Interdependent Web of all Existence** (11 of 12 sessions)

AFFIRMATION: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.  
*We help take care of our world.*

**Opening words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

It's all about connections. Once upon a time, scientists visited a village in Borneo. They used a powerful spray to get rid of the flies and mosquitoes. It also killed the wasps that ate the caterpillars that lived in the grass roofs. With the wasps gone, the caterpillars just ate and ate and ate. They ate so much grass that the roofs became weak and fell down.

Remember the flies that the DDT killed? They were eaten by geckos, little lizards that lived in the huts. The geckos ate and ate, and soon they had lots of DDT in them. They got sick, but before they died, the cats ate them. The cats died, and the rats moved in. How did the scientists solve this problem? Would you believe that they brought airplanes full of cats and used parachutes to drop those cats over the village! Soon the cats were catching the rats again, and the people were safe from disease. Of course, they still had problems with their roofs.

(Variations of this story are found in *We Believe* from the Church of the Larger Fellowship, and *The Kids' Book of Awesome Stuff* by Charlene Brotman, 2004)

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things with you today?

**Topic/Activity**

This may be one of our most dynamic affirmations -- the understanding of connections and the complexity of existence. The Opening Words describe environmental connections. The web of existence addresses the complex of the issues and of parenting itself.

*Guided imagery:* read reflectively, pausing for a few seconds between the points:

Find a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you wish.

Visualize a situation or discussion that you have had recently, preferably with a child.

Recall the issue and try to relate it to one of the affirmations.

What was the dialogue around the issue?

What action was occurring in the situation?

What factors came into the situation or dialogue? As the situation or dialogue progressed, did it become clearer or more complex?

Move toward the ending of the situation or dialogue.

What was your feeling at the end about the situation or dialogue itself, and about how it ended?

Leave the situation and gradually return to this space and time. Show that you have returned by opening your eyes or changing position.

You are invited to share your situations and complexities.

*The interdependent web and parenting.*

How do you balance the needs of children and your own needs? Where does this become complex? How do you deal with the complexities?

How do you balance the activities of the family at home, outside activities of all family members, other obligations and spiritual well-being?

Do you find any of the affirmations to be helpful in the complexity of life?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** Comment on the session, including content and group process. What went well and what would you like to have changed?

**Closing Words:**

Which would you prefer, a black and white photo and a colored photo of a sunset?

Which would you prefer, having the photo or experiencing the sunset?

We go for the experience, for the color, for the complexity. True, there are times when black and white photos are preferred for clarity, but our worlds are mixtures of grays and colors. So why should we want 'black and white ' spirituality? And why should we offer our children 'black and white' spirituality? When we fully engage the 'interdependent web of all existence,' every aspect of our lives is enriched. Let us encourage our children to engage the complexities and let us walk with them through these complexities.

Helen Zidowecki

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**Parenting: 12. The Child Factor** (12 of 12 sessions)

**Opening Words/Lighting a candle/chalice**

"Living our principles" is a nice motto, but in modeling Unitarian Universalist values, do our interactions with children model reverence and respect for life, and support and enhance their self-esteem?

Do children hear or see us modeling our values?

When our actions are not in harmony with our beliefs and values, are we willing to admit that to ourselves and children?

There is no guarantee that our children will be lifelong Unitarian Universalists, but there is a guarantee that, if we are aware of being living role models for our children, our religion will be challenging, changing, and visible.

**Check in/Sharing:** How are things going for you today?

**Topic/Activity**

1. What is the most spiritual part of your interactions with children?
2. What difference does being a Unitarian Universalist make in how you interact with children?
3. What would you want your children to learn from you?

**Check out/Likes and Wishes:** How was the session for you?

**Closing Words**

When I saw an adult speak harshly to a child and pull the child along with determined force, I did nothing. ....It was none of my business;

When we had Guest at Our Table, I was very casual about urging contributions, or putting in anything myself. ....Others would contribute from the church..

When we saw a street person collecting cans, I didn't stop the disparaging remarks about "wasted" people....After all, I wasn't one of them.

When someone asked about being forgiven by God, I changed the subject.... .My belief was different from theirs.....

When I attended the discussion last night, I was sure to have my say!....MY ideas are important....

When I wasted natural resources without a thought, I realized that my actions were not in harmony with my beliefs.....

And I vowed to change my actions ...children are watching.