

Research Space

Online educational resource

Faith in the Nexus: children's conversations about faith and spirituality (school and church)

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FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Children's Conversations about Faith and Spirituality (School and Church)

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Where do we find opportunities for children to talk about faith and spirituality?

The Faith in the Nexus research project.

In the Faith in the Nexus research project the term nexus refers to the connections between home, church school and the local church community.

The Faith in the Nexus project investigated the ways church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitated opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home. The project involved 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools. Focus group interviews were held with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) and an online survey was completed by 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults.

Key questions raised by the research:

How do we encourage adults to recognise children's questions about faith as opportunities to listen to and engage with children's concerns?

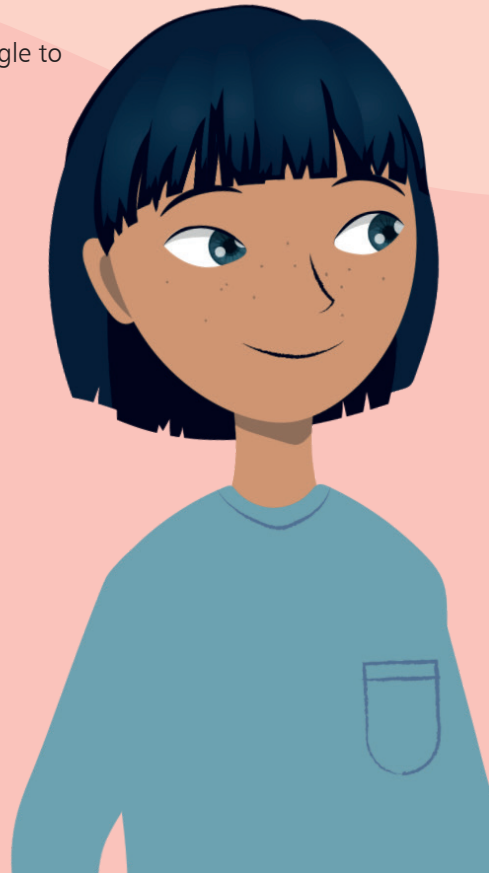
What resources can we offer to families who struggle to know how to respond?

Key findings from the research:

Children value opportunities to ask open-ended questions, and for others to listen to their opinions.

Church primary schools can provide safe spaces to talk about faith and spiritual matters or ask challenging questions. Pupils identified RE lessons as such a space.

Some adults struggled with how to respond; others avoided or closed such conversations down, but the role of grandparents or the older generation in engaging in these conversations and supporting parents cannot be underestimated.



Children seek to explore faith and the big existential issues by asking questions. They may be seeking to confirm or to challenge ideas encountered in school. While adults were often looking to provide a definitive answer or solution, children may be rather just seeking to explore these issues with parents, teachers, and others.

How can we respond?

When children initiate a special conversation at home, such as through a 'big question' on a matter of ultimate concern. These are precious moments of opportunity.

Home can provide a safe and exploratory space for faith-talk. When a child asks a question about ultimate things, this is an important opportunity to enter their world of spiritual enquiry. The aim should be to keep the channels of curiosity and discovery open as this invites a developing space for faith-talk. Our research shows that some parents feel they don't have answers in response to big questions, and this concern is understandable, but allowing the space for questions and exploration is far more important than providing answers.

It is good to include grandparents or elders in these conversations and where possible, opportunities for such interaction should be encouraged.



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

What do children say?

[RE] makes it fun, and it encourages people, and I know my class is ambitious about asking questions, they like questioning about God.

People say that we don't ask questions, but in this school they make us think... when they make us ask questions. We always have a big question for each lesson which we have to answer and have to think really deep about.

It just makes it a bit more exciting when you re-think [because] it's about God, and I really like thinking about God.



What do parents say?

I don't want her being closed off to faith. In society sometimes they're not allowed to talk about it... we like the discussion [in school], she often brings it up.

I don't want to influence that because she'll then just repeat what I say... It's about helping them to understand that we're all allowed to believe, to make your mind up, and that is fine, that it isn't black and white.

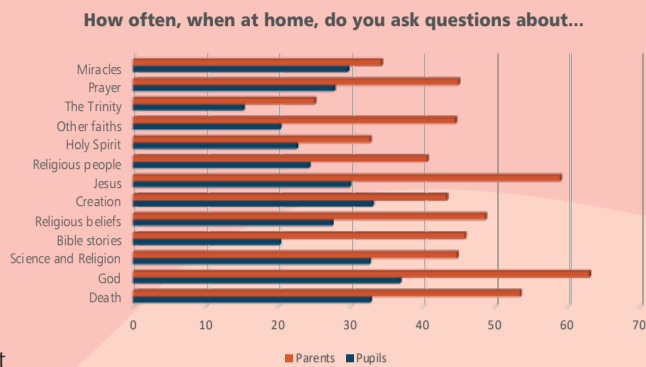
FAITH TALK

CHILDREN'S CONVERSATIONS AND QUESTIONS ABOUT FAITH AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE HOME

What is meant by faith-talk in the home?

The Faith in the Nexus report employs the term 'faith-talk' to capture the sense of children's talk about faith or spiritual matters in the home. Common themes that became apparent throughout the research were:

- Children initiate faith-talk in the home.
- Children ask questions about things they are curious about.
- Grandparents play an important role in faith-talk.
- Common topics include God, Creation, Death, Religion & Science.



What challenges did parents say they face?

In the focus group interviews, parents drew attention to the number of questions children ask. The main challenges they found in responding were:

- Providing answers.
- Not having the correct language.
- Lack of knowledge.
- Not sharing the same Christian beliefs as the school.



How do you answer the question when they say why does everybody have to die?

- Parent

(He) comes home and asks what was there before God. How do you answer that, you know what I mean?

- Parent



There is a need to empower adults to talk and stimulate thought with the child, rather than avoid talking about faith for fear of giving the wrong answer.

It makes me wonder if God is actually real or if someone just made the whole thing up.

CHILD QUOTE FROM RESEARCH

What happens in school to stimulate questions in home?

There are all these questions in RE. We've got to think more.

Our research highlighted that church primary schools are spaces where people and places of faith are encountered daily. Faith-talk and expression permeates the daily routine and is encountered through:

- Religious Education
- Collective Worship
- Bible Stories
- Reflection Time
- School displays

RE makes a significant contribution to stimulating questions in the home.

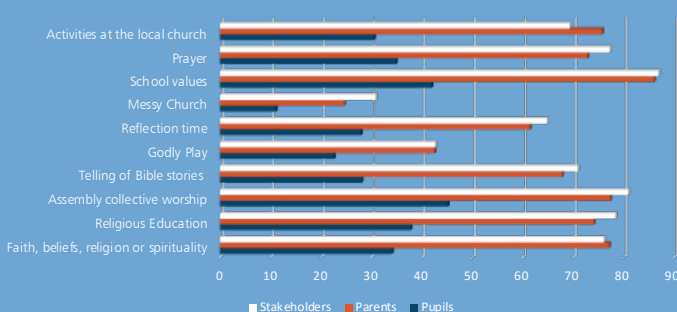
However, many parents, clergy and other stakeholders were not aware of the depth of study and the level of discussions that pupils engage in.

Some schools share what happens in RE with parents and this helps to foster meaningful conversations in the home.

Conversations about 'what happens in school'

Church schools in England seek to live out the values that underpin their school mission. Each school selects a number of values that inform their Christian ethos.

How often, when at home, do you ask questions about...



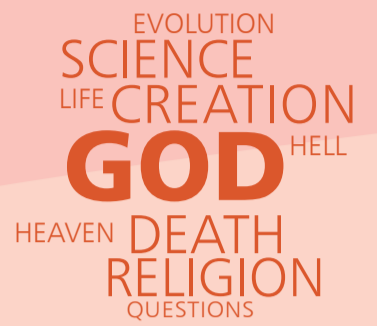
- The most talked about topic at home is 'school values.'
- Parents report more conversations about values than children do.
- Values-talk is embedded in the school and permeates through to the home.
- Parents are more confident talking about the school values with their children than explicit talk about faith.

What questions do children ask?

ABOUT GOD | ABOUT CREATION | ABOUT DEATH

Children are by nature inquisitive, and they ask questions about things they do not know, they do not understand and therefore want to know more about from their parents. Our report reveals that the most common questions about faith that children raised were:

- Is there a real God?
- Why are people dying in Africa?
- Did God know they, [Adam & Eve] were going to do something wrong?
- Are Gran and Grandad ... going to die because they are quite old?
- Daddy, why don't you believe in God? Because I'm very much science-based.



What if there is an absence of faith-talk in the home?

The research revealed that for some children and parents talking about faith only happened in school because,

- Children may initiate faith-talk, but adults do not engage.
- There was no time or space at home to talk about faith.

The Children talk, rather than we talk.

- Parent.

Children spoke of silent reflection time on their own.

School and church leaders identified possible obstacles such as parents' lack of confidence, interest or knowledge.

What are the key findings from the Faith in the Nexus report?

- Children are often the initiators of faith-talk in the home.
- Children value the opportunity to engage in faith-talk.
- The stimulus includes activities, curriculum, and worship in school.
- Church primary schools provide safe spaces for faith-talk; pupils identified RE lessons as such as a space.
- Adults may find responding to faith-talk a challenge.

Questions for discussion

How is your school or church prioritising the spiritual development and religious literacy of all pupils?

Consider the different ways you support families in articulating the language of faith and spirituality.

What opportunities do you provide for children to be initiators and leaders of faith and spirituality?

What are you doing to develop a common language of spirituality and faith within your church or school community?

In what ways can space and time be given to children so they can explore big questions about life and death?



FURTHER READING

For the full Faith in the Nexus report: Faith In The Nexus (nicer.org.uk)

Report references:
Talking about faith. pp. 13-34
Conclusion. pp.84-91

