

# An exploration of online Christian faith nurture for children, using UK churches as a case study

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ice](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ice)**Sarah E Holmes** Faculty of Education, Liverpool Hope University,  
Liverpool, UK

## Abstract

This article documents a systematic analysis of the online materials produced by UK churches for children's faith nurture in response to the closure of physical 'Sunday Schools' during the Covid-19 pandemic. A theoretical underpinning guided the development of a framework to examine the discipleship tools and to uncover examples of good practice which could inform children's online discipleship globally. Tentative conclusions highlight how faith nurture of this nature may be refined and enhanced and emphasises the significance of positive relationships to supplement these tools.

## Keywords

children, church, discipleship, faith nurture, online, Sunday School

## Introduction

The mainstream perception of and access to online church adjusted markedly in the United Kingdom since the commencement of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> While the profile of faith nurture in the home has been raised in recent years (Mark, 2016), church attendance remained as key to supporting a child's faith journey (Turner, 2014). Therefore, the impact of social distancing and consequent church closures in Spring 2020 was expected to have a significant impact on children's

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### Corresponding author:

Sarah E Holmes, Faculty of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD, UK.

Email: [holmess1@hope.ac.uk](mailto:holmess1@hope.ac.uk)

faith nurture globally. Many churches produced online outputs as part of an emergency response to meet this need (Evangelical Alliance, 2020). This article examines the online content that was targeted towards children in order to understand the potential impact of this content on children's faith. It must be highlighted that the online responses of churches were emergency solutions to an unplanned scenario, so this analysis does not seek to undermine or criticise their attempts within this incredibly difficult situation. In fact, those producing this content must be applauded for their efforts. Specific expertise is required to produce such content and there are substantial barriers such as training, resources and time. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the majority of those producing this online content may have been unaware of many of the theories and ideas utilised for analysis within this research project, so this article in no way seeks to judge or criticise. The aim is to gather beneficial insights and good practice from the sector, making comparisons with a theoretical underpinning and framework and providing tentative recommendations to churches and organisations worldwide, in order to inform their ongoing work and improve effectiveness for children's faith nurture through this media.

The term 'Sunday School' dates back to 1785, with a desire for 'every person in the world to be able to read the Bible' (Marler and Hadaway, 2014: 18). It is evident that in contemporary churches, children's ministry occurs through a broad range of models, each with the intention of influencing children's spiritual formation (May, 2004: 403). As Beckwith (2010: 17) highlighted, despite many churches no longer using the word 'school' to describe their provision for children, the majority still adopt a schooling or formal education model in their children's ministry, whereby Bible facts are taught in the endeavour of encouraging the child's development into being a Christian. In contrast, the term 'Christian nurture' coined by Bushnell (1994 [1861]) emphasised the importance of guiding children towards faith as part of their daily lives, connecting with the notion of informal education which facilitates children's acquisition of attitudes, values, skills and knowledge (Beckwith, 2010: 18). This article seeks to explore both formal and informal modes of discipling children in the church context. Hence the term 'faith nurture', rather than 'education', is adopted to describe the aim of church activities for children since it conveys both avenues.

Technology, when used properly, can provide increased learning opportunities for all children (Donohue and Schomburg, 2017). Indeed, it broadens the variety of learning methods and materials to spark the interest of learners (Kim and Lee, 2011). But is it possible to use online media to bring students to an authentic 'religious attitude in the soul', which Court (2013) stated was the main goal of religious education? Limited empirical research into this has occurred, but there is evidence that online courses may be a valid tool for fostering spiritual growth (Fryar et al., 2018). Indeed, Plummer and Hilton (2014) found no significant difference between the spiritual outcomes of face-to-face and online segments of religious education courses. Aspects such as imagining, playing, wondering, creating and reflecting have all been shown to be possible through technological media

(Donohue and Schomburg, 2017), which are also key components of spiritual development (Nye, 2009).

## **Methodology**

The research comprised primarily a systematic and comprehensive review of UK church web content aimed at school-aged children (aged 5–11 years). This review occurred 8 weeks after churches physically closed, allowing churches time for settling into this new regime. The theoretical underpinning of the framework used for analysis of the web content is detailed below. The web review was supported by background information from a four-question survey completed by church representatives, enabling the context to be clear and ensuring that viewing of the online resources was complete and accurate. The survey asked participants to detail any online activity that they were providing for children aged 5–11 years, what their main aim was, what (if any) feedback or effects they had obtained and information about their church denomination. This survey information ensured that outputs were not overlooked in the analysis. Content from 100 churches was reviewed, capturing a representative geographical coverage of the United Kingdom, although it was not possible to include a full range of church sizes and settings because the sample pool was limited to churches with an online presence. In line with the focus of this project being an exploration, rather than measuring the scope or availability of such provision, churches were only contacted if they had a significantly active church website. Denominations and affiliations that were included in the website survey were Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Elim, Free, Independent, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Vineyard.

The final strand of the research was focus groups which comprised evaluation of the tentative findings by 28 contributors chosen due to their experience and expertise in the field. Invitations to take part in the focus groups were sent to church and para-church organisations involved in training, resourcing or providing children's discipleship. This facilitated a hybrid approach to interpretation of the data, incorporating practical and mainstream awareness alongside academic theories. In addition, church survey participants were invited if they had indicated on their survey a desire to be included in the focus groups. Throughout all stages of this project, ethical considerations were actively interwoven, under the scrutiny of the Liverpool Hope University Ethics Committee. This included ensuring that informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, safe storage of data and limiting issues of power relations all occurred.

## **Framework for analysis of online resources**

A framework of objectives for religious curriculum was adopted as the basis for the analysis framework because it incorporated knowledge, moral values and spiritual elements of faith (Court, 2013). However, this tool primarily investigated formal elements of faith nurture, so required augmenting for the purposes of this project.

In addition to scrutinising the online resources in each of these facets, the nature of the learning environment and relationships were reviewed also because they are fundamental in supporting the learning experience (Bowlby, 1979; Erikson, 1963; Underdown, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Combining all of these aspects, a framework of five elements was produced to analyse the online resources (Table 1). Each of the five elements encompassed a range of characteristics which were analysed and recorded using codes. Table 1 shows the characteristics, and the justification of each element is detailed below.

### *Knowledge aspects*

The notion that faith precedes understanding (Stuhlmüller, 1996: 301) may lead to an assumption that knowledge transfer is less important within Christian nurture. Yet there are many suggestions that knowledge is integral to faith. Stonehouse (2006) stated that children require knowledge of Biblical narrative to support their growth and understanding of God. Equally, Berryman (1991) viewed religious language as a tool for an individual's meaning-making at the limits of their being and knowing, and Court (2013) stated that acquiring religious knowledge of texts, rituals, values and beliefs provides the conceptual framework for religious experience. While Bushnell (1994 [1861]) similarly encouraged training in the creeds, Christian doctrine and Biblical content, he also emphasised that the method and timing should be sensitive to the child's needs and understanding. This concurs with both Vygotsky's (1978) idea of the zone of proximal development and Berryman's (1991) assertion that young children live on the limit of their experience most of the time, demonstrating that knowledge cannot simply be delivered generically at a set time but rather needs to be specific to the context and needs of the individual child. It is clear that all children are unique and so is their faith journey (Harris, 2015; Hay and Nye, 1998; King, 2013). In light of this theoretical underpinning for the importance of knowledge in a child's faith formation, analysis of the form of knowledge transfer within the online Sunday School content was a key aspect to include in this research framework.

### *Moral values*

While great complexity of theology surrounds the understanding of a child's moral compass, in relation to innocence, sin and salvation, moral education is considered a valuable part of Christian nurture (Richards and Privett, 2009). Hart (2003) cautioned against becoming overly moralistic, repressive or superficial when teaching moral values to children. Indeed, rather than children being reliant on external authorities imposing morality, Hart (2003) favoured a child being empowered to develop their own internal compass in dialogue with external ideas, influences and agencies. This resonates with the notion of encouraging self-direction and supporting the child in exploring their inherent spirituality and personal experience of God

**Table 1.** The framework for analysis of the web content.

Framework elements	Characteristics
Knowledge	<p>Form of knowledge (Bible, doctrine, Christian living)</p> <p>Explanation/connection to daily life</p> <p>Does it aid understanding?</p> <p>Does it encourage/affirm their existing faith?</p> <p>Does it equip/encourage spiritual growth?</p> <p>Age suitability of content</p> <p>Unique child personalisation</p> <p>Is ecclesial tradition/background knowledge required?</p>
Moral values	<p>Inclusion of moral guidance</p> <p>Weight of focus (primary, secondary, superficial, integral)</p> <p>Source of guidance</p> <p>Explanation/connection to daily life</p> <p>Mode of delivery (instruct, equip, empower)</p> <p>Age appropriate</p>
Spiritual aims	<p>Space for spiritual experiences (reflection, exploring, questioning)</p> <p>Balance – inward and outward expression</p> <p>Divine connection with trustworthy God</p> <p>Connection to daily life</p> <p>Response/application of the content</p> <p>Encourages informing of child's world view</p> <p>Enables movement from reality/disorder to awareness of trustworthy, dependable God</p>
Environment	<p>Components (rituals, liturgy, prayer, worship, craft, discipleship, meditation, prayer requests, response)</p> <p>Presentation style/tools (usability, enhance/distract, consideration of gender, learning styles, ages and abilities and SEN. Presentation quality)</p> <p>Ethos (sense of worth, curiosity, careful looking and listening, play, solitude)</p> <p>Presenter (male/female)</p> <p>Ethos (value of child's faith: values, ambivalent, unvalued)</p> <p>Ethos (open-minded, respectful debate, instructive, collaboration, coercive, controlling)</p> <p>Uniqueness and personalisation</p>
Relationships	<p>Teacher/presenter style: 'Jackanory', 'popstar', 'friend', 'parent'</p> <p>Teacher/presenter attributes: caring, warm, encouraging, gentle, listener, fair, respectful, promotes enthusiasm, motivates learning, understands student's concerns, gets to know individuals</p> <p>Faith community (isolation, new community, pre-existing community but less connection, pre-existing community but more connection)</p> <p>Peers (social interaction, emotional connection)</p> <p>Parents and siblings (relationships encouraged and strengthened)</p>

SEN: special educational needs.

(Berryman, 2013). Similarly, Kibble (1996) emphasised that although the goal of moral education is to aid children in making reasoned moral decisions of their own, this is not a purely cerebral quest but must connect with life experience. Another important focus is to enable children to take responsibility for their own actions and any consequences (Ford and Wong, 2004). These aspects were incorporated into the analysis framework.

### *Spiritual experiences*

A broad field of literature has explored spiritual experiences of children (Hart, 2003; Nye, 2009; Ratcliff, 2004). Such experiences are essentially unprogrammable since they cannot be predetermined or scheduled, although there are often ‘triggers’ to spiritual experience, such as natural beauty, sacred places and emotional life events (Hart, 2003; Kibble, 1996). It is therefore important to include opportunities for reflection, exploration, sincere questioning and dialogue within a curriculum, providing space for spiritual experiences (Court, 2013; Harris, 2018). Within Christian nurture, this would include direct apprehension of the Divine as the worthy object of trust (Friedrich, 1968; Stuhlmüller, 1996). Hence, fostering a child’s ability to experience intimacy with the deity is a valuable aspect of Christian nurture (Heller, 1986). In contrast to traditional religiosity, wherein individuals may outwardly present observable actions, traditions and practices without having an inward spiritual connection with the divine (Smith, 1991), it is possible that within the confines of online faith nurture, faith could be experienced solely on a personal level with little or no outward expression (Court, 2013). It is therefore the challenge for those nurturing children’s faith online to encourage a balance of these two avenues, guarding against what Nye (2009) described as compartmentalising spiritual practice from ordinary daily life. Since spirituality forms the foundation for constructing meaning and making sense of the world (Fowler, 1976), spiritual experiences often inform and interact with a child’s world view (Harris, 2018). Hence, the role of educators is to bridge the gap between spiritual encounters and daily life (Kirk, 2004), enabling children to connect with the invisible Creator God while still in their disordered surroundings. With this in mind, the analysis framework sought to examine the opportunities for spiritual experiences provided for children, in addition to evaluating the extent to which the balance between spiritual and daily life was encouraged.

### *Environment*

The importance of the learning environment is widely recognised, emphasising that neither an instructor nor a curriculum can force a religious experience, but can help to create the right conditions for it (Fryar et al., 2018). To this end, Court (2013: 259) emphasised the importance of these environments in facilitating the child’s spiritual growth, through experience. The analysis framework of this project therefore explored aspects of the learning environments created by each of the church

websites examined. This included the presentation, style and tools adopted and how they impacted upon the usability and functionality of the web content. Both the positive and negative effects of this were considered, since Chassiakos et al. (2016) found that features designed to improve engagement may actually decrease the child's comprehension or distract them. Consideration for different genders, learning styles, ages and abilities and any special educational needs (SEN) were also noted. The overriding ethos was also investigated, since encouraging a sense of worth, trust, curiosity, careful looking and listening, play and moments of solitude are all valuable in nourishing the soul and enhancing formation of spiritual identity (Hart, 2003: 50). Another aspect of the ethos to capture was the messages that were being conveyed through the resource about the value of a child and their faith and whether this value was conditional upon any action or conversion experience (e.g. Pridmore, 2009). Hart (2003) observed that each child is unique in their spirituality, and therefore this requires a flexibility and personalisation of any approach attempting to nurture them spiritually. With this in mind, analysis included investigation of the ethos of faith nurturers regarding respectful debate and fostering an open mind in children to explore different perspectives (Hay and Nye, 1998: 163). The antitheses of this, namely unhealthy patterns such as coercive, abusive or controlling spiritual nurture, were also evaluated.

### *Relationships*

It is widely accepted that relationships are of key importance in a child's learning experience. Indeed, Rogers (1994: 89) emphasised that a computer can educate about the experience of a hug but can never know the risk or joy of actually giving or receiving one. Connection and collaboration with others are therefore fundamental ingredients of learning, even when learning is online. It was therefore key to investigate the relationships and interactions that were facilitated through the online church resources with peers, parents, teachers and the faith community. Evidence has shown that online student satisfaction and the overall learning experience is improved when students have support from a teacher, rather than learning in pure isolation (Haythornthwaite et al., 2004; Kim and Lee, 2011). In fact, it is believed that isolation and disconnectedness within the online environment is a major cause of student dropout (Inoue, 2007). It therefore follows that it is crucial for relationships to be an integral part of online faith nurture in order to retain their interest and contact. Indeed, Donohue and Schomburg (2017) stated that technology should invite and enhance interactions and strengthen relationships with peers, siblings and parents. Furthermore, peer interaction has been shown to promote a deepening understanding and testing of ideas (Fryar et al., 2018: 71). The effectiveness of teachers has been connected with their personal qualities, so that attributes of being caring, warm, encouraging, gentle rather than harsh, good listeners, fair and respectful, promoting enthusiasm and motivating learning, understanding their student's concerns and trying to get to know them individually are all of great value (Court, 2013: 260). The approach adopted by faith nurturers



is of significant importance in the overall effectiveness of the experience for the child (Fryar et al., 2018; McMillon and Edwards, 2000), so these characteristics were monitored in the presenters of the online faith resources.

## **Results**

The video analysis and church surveys revealed that the touchstone and overall goal of the churches during the pandemic was discipleship, with fellowship also emphasised as a key goal. Many churches voiced frustration that missional activity among children was a significant challenge within the social distancing climate, exacerbated by often not having contact details of children and families on the fringe of their church community. In connection with this, there was awareness among churches that parents were the gatekeepers of their children, hence gaining engagement with children was a two-stage process. While many churches reported that they had received positive feedback from parents regarding the online material, many also reported the immense difficulty of recording the sessions in a stark, isolated context, whereby they were not able to gauge the correct level to meet the needs of their virtual audience. In many cases, this was compounded by a lack of training, technological skills and confidence to produce good quality content. Despite this, all of the videos included in the study were child-oriented and conveyed discipleship to some degree. The observations from the systematic analysis are detailed below, grouped according to the framework of analysis.

### *Knowledge and moral values*

Ninety-six of the videos contained discipleship in some form, mainly teaching or explanation of Biblical content. Of the remaining churches, two only included prayer, one was only Bible reading and one was un-expounded liturgy. In addition to discipleship, 62 of the churches incorporated prayer, 47 included worship, 29 involved craft activities and 2 encompassed liturgy. In only two cases did the video content require prior knowledge, which was books of the Bible and the Trinity. In all other cases, the material was well explained and did not require prior knowledge in order to access it. Only three of the settings explicitly referred to moral values, and these were in all cases presented as secondary to the Biblical content.

In the majority of cases, the presenters took the time to ensure that they explained the content in an appropriate way for this age group. In 85 of the churches, the presenters affirmed and reinforced the child's existing faith and beliefs, and the material explicitly encouraged the child's onward spiritual growth in 64 cases. Concerning the personalisation of the teaching material, some uniqueness was facilitated in 40 of the churches evaluated. This occurred through activity sheets, encouraging children to individually explore content more in depth during or after the session, breakout videos for small groups and Zoom meetings on separate occasions. Four of the churches analysed utilised videos which had been produced elsewhere, for example, by a parent-church or affiliated organisation. These were beneficial



since they were of high quality but did not allow for personalisation to a specific group of children. As highlighted in focus group discussions, they also lacked the basis of relationship between the presenter and child, which was detrimental. Only one of the videos utilised sign language throughout, and one other church included it in parts of the video. Some of the churches reported that catering for SEN was indeed incredibly challenging in this context.

The teaching style implemented in the vast majority of cases was instructional, although four presenters were more collaborative, encouraging children to explore the material with the presenter, and five of the videos included elements which engaged the child's curiosity and playfulness as part of the learning experience. One video included a quiet reflective time towards the end of the teaching to permit the child to consider applying it in their own setting. In the majority of cases, the worship songs were sung without any explanation of the wording or reason for their inclusion. Similarly, there was very little 'audience participation' in the Bible stories, with the majority keeping the children sedentary and passively watching. There were a small number of negative cases whereby the teaching in one video was presented in a controlling, domineering and coercive manner; in another church a very pressured, conditional and uncomfortable atmosphere was conveyed, and in a different church the teaching conveyed negative judgement of the child's spiritual condition.

### *Spiritual aims*

There was a good balance between inward and outward expression of faith in 76 of the videos, with 70 conveying a sense of enabling the child to see the potential of God to be trustworthy and dependable amidst difficult situations and the reality of a disordered everyday life and world. While 62 churches included prayer in their video, only 44 explicitly encouraged the child to connect with the divine and provided opportunities to that end. Only seven of the churches included a quiet or reflective time and space as part of the video. In some of these cases, instrumental background music was provided and the child encouraged to reflect on an image or idea, and in other cases there were times of quiet amidst the prayers or worship. However, in the remaining 93 of churches the videos were content-full with no moments of quiet or reflection included.

### *Environment*

The church videos analysed were all uploaded weekly for use on Sundays, although a small number provided additional online content for use during mid-weeks. The videos ranged from 3 to 40 minutes. All except six of the churches provided a single video for the week. These six churches opted to produce a series of shorter videos, sometimes reusing segments (such as worship) on consecutive weeks and, in some cases, providing choices of material for different age groups through this sequence of videos. This facilitated increased tailoring of the material, although in terms of usability it was considerably simpler to watch a single video. Some of the

churches observed that a large amount of resources and ideas had been ‘thrown at families’ as the lockdown began, and this had been overwhelming for many. Indeed, many were struggling to ‘fit church in’ according to some of the church representatives. Nevertheless, churches reported that they had generally received very positive feedback from parents regarding their content, with a small number highlighting that they enjoyed seeing their children included in pictures of videos.

In terms of presenters, there was a mix of male and female presenters, three of the churches utilised puppets to lead the session, one was entirely presented by a group of children and a polar bear cuddly toy was a conversation partner in one case. The majority of these presenters could be described as warm, caring, approachable and encouraging, although two were categorised as strong and overpowering. The majority were depicted as ‘friends’, although in 13 cases the image of the presenter being a parent-type was portrayed, while 4 churches utilised traditional storyteller-type characters and 1 opted for a ‘popstar’ figure. In all of the churches analysed, there was an ethos of the child and their faith being of worth and value, although in three cases there were some overtones of that value being conditional upon the child’s level of faith or belief.

### ***Relationships***

Churches frequently reported that they found the element of relational connection most challenging. Some churches reported that while the adults were engaged with church online, their children were not, and many stated that a significant challenge was that all of the church families seemed to present slightly different levels of involvement and needs during the pandemic. On the web content, there was limited engagement with the child’s peers, family and wider church community, although the surveys revealed that many churches carried out individual pastoral contact, small group Zoom meetings and other forms of relational work to supplement the web content. However, many churches reported that it was difficult to schedule Zoom calls because the families had very busy schedules. Nevertheless, within the web content there was in some cases considerable effort made to include a variety of presenters from the church, video clips of news items from church families, drawings and artwork by children, Bible readings by different children, and a range of children and team doing action songs. In two cases, the presenter welcomed by name each of the children who were watching the session live. In one video, a sense of corporate worship was conveyed by different voices all saying the liturgy together in the recording. In nine of the churches, children were encouraged to pause the video when directed and discuss the content or pray together as a family. This reflected the main aim reported by one of the churches: to equip parents in discipling their children.

### **Discussion**

The key themes which emerged from this project are expounded below, following rigorous dialogue with the focus groups. Comparison of these UK findings with

other contexts would be beneficial in providing a more holistic understanding of children's faith nurture online.

### *Teaching style and space for spirituality*

It is clear that there is a distinct difference between the instructional teaching style adopted by the majority of the churches and the ideal approach promoted by contemporary learning theorists, fostering collaboration, curiosity, playfulness, careful looking and listening and open-minded and respectful dialogue and debate. The reason for this contrast was deliberated within the focus groups, with some perceiving it as the result of nervousness in those new to online presenting, while others believed it to be a true reflection of the patterns in contemporary 'Sunday Schools'. As churches globally develop their strategies and tools to nurture children's faith online, it is vital to incorporate more of the ethos of exploration in order to improve the learning experience and effectiveness. Similarly, incorporating a greater variety of activity types will be beneficial to guard against the child being passive and sedentary, and instead much more interactive, while also catering for different learning preferences. Alongside this, a greater degree of explanation around elements such as worship, prayer and liturgy would ensure improved engagement of children in the activities, as well as being more inclusive of children with less prior experience and knowledge. Throughout this approach, respect and unconditional valuing of each child is critical in conveying the true essence of God's perspective, as well as ensuring that a welcoming and inclusive place of nurture is accessed by all children.

There was very little 'space' included in the videos analysed, since the majority of churches had filled every second of the video with activity. However, in a culture where children's lives are very full, it would be beneficial to provide them with some opportunities to pause and reflect and reorientate themselves towards the divine. This would replicate what children may experience at times in physical churches. These moments could serve the purposes of providing the child with opportunities both to experience intimacy with God and to inwardly process the messages that they have heard and consider how they may apply in their own context. Without capturing such moments, the risk is that children will simply be bombarded by a constant stream of Biblical content which is not embedded into their daily lives after the video ends. Fostering the child's ability to critique, discern and connect spiritual experiences within their own context is of immense value in the child's ongoing faith journey.

The majority of the churches presented their material in a 'one size fits all' manner, so that no personalisation of the content was suggested or facilitated as part of the session. This presents an issue for all children, and particularly those with SEN. In a small number of cases, there was an attempt at enabling this through use of activity sheets, exploring and discussing Bible passages together in family groups, and Zoom calls with peers or children's team. Activities of this nature are essential in order that the content will meet the needs of each child and

challenge them to develop in their faith, beyond their existing limits and experiences. One of the focus group participants highlighted that such awareness and personalisation flows out of pre-existing relationships with the children, which may be utilised to gauge the needs and appropriate levels of teaching for each child. The fact that such personalisation flows from positive relationships means that parents are also well placed to facilitate this occurring.

### *Connection and engagement*

Responses from church surveys and focus groups highlighted the critical role of connection for children. In some cases, this was conveyed throughout the video content by including a variety of children and adults in the video, sometimes compiled to create the effect of them being together. The power that arose through shared experiences, such as collective prayer, worship and Bible reading, was evident, and these aspects define the content as 'church' rather than simply an educational video. In other cases, churches were utilising Zoom calls before, during or after the session broadcast to further enable community interaction. It is engagement of this nature with others from the faith community which will both aid the child to have a sense of belonging and ultimately remain a part of the community, but also provide role models for the child to support them in their faith journey. Furthermore, a strong peer community can provide a safe place for the child to test and discuss different spiritual perspectives (Fryar et al., 2018: 60). The importance of the intergenerational aspect of church was highlighted in focus groups and is a further possibility to strengthen relationships within faith communities.

### *Equipping families for discipleship*

Focus group participants strongly emphasised that the role of parents in nurturing their child's faith was particularly important given the Covid-19 situation. This resonates with an increased prominence that has been placed on 'faith in the home' ministries in recent years across the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Even the simple action of the parent actively co-viewing and engaging with the content can improve the child's learning (Donohue and Schomburg, 2017). Some of the churches provided discussion guides for parents alongside the online content, or discussion prompts embedded into the video, and suggested that families momentarily pause the video for that purpose. Such engagement could be beneficial in reinforcing the online messages, strengthening the parent-child relationship and grounding the online content into the specific unique context for that child. However, both church surveys and focus groups highlighted repeatedly the pressure and struggle of many families during the pandemic, in the light of juggling work, family responsibilities and their child's education. In addition, the wealth and variety of resources hurriedly produced and distributed at the start of the pandemic was overwhelming for many parents. Therefore, while in an idealistic mindset it would be beneficial for parents to take more responsibility of nurturing their child's faith, for many Christian

parents that would be an unrealistic expectation and pressure. This is therefore an area that needs further research and resourcing in order to better equip and empower parents for this task and to enable churches and families to communicate and resolve this often-unspoken clash of expectations.

## Conclusions

It could be beneficial to incorporate the direct voice of the child into future research, in order to better understand the effectiveness of these tools from their perspective. Nevertheless, from a theoretical standpoint, online children's discipleship would be more effective by implementing strategies to encourage greater collaboration, open-minded exploration and space for divine connection. It is also vital that there is a dual emphasis upon conveying a sense of being part of a faith community in the video content, in addition to explicitly fostering positive relationships outside of the scheduled sessions. These relationships would facilitate personalisation of the discipleship for the individual child. More broadly, online video content is most constructive when viewed purely as a tool which is part of a child's overall discipleship experience, rather than an end in itself. The wider discourse regarding responsibilities of faith nurture in the home needs to be revisited by churches locally, in order to establish how they can best equip and empower parents and to gain understanding of the role that online discipleship has within that way forward.

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## ORCID iD

Sarah E Holmes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5475-0072>

## Notes

1. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/1-may/features/features/isolation-and-the-church-online-and-offline>.
2. For example, <https://www.careforthefamily.org.uk/> and <https://parentingforfaith.org/>, and Mark (2016).

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