

# NEXUS

Researching Church Toddler Groups



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This is a general public report although in the document you will see references to academic publications. For more information, please visit <https://nicer.org.uk>

# The Headlines

This unique research project revealed fascinating insights into the spiritual flourishing of very young children and how this is nourished within church toddler groups in England. The findings have uncovered evidence of very young children exploring self-understanding and the nurturing of relationships with others.

## **We found that church toddler groups contribute to children's spiritual flourishing through:**

- Providing an environment that fosters a non-threatening connection with spirituality and faith.
- Nurturing and sustaining relationships with families.
- Offering a safe place for young families to come together, play together and feel supported in their spiritual well-being.
- Enabling a sense of belonging to the church community through engagement in the church toddler group.

## **However, we also found that:**

- There is a need for adults to have a deeper awareness of the significant role they play in enabling the spiritual flourishing of very young children.
- A common misunderstanding of spiritual nurture in terms of faith development hampers focused attention on the spiritual nurture of very young children.

# Acknowledgements

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# 1. The need for very young children to flourish spiritually

There is a critical need to ensure the spiritual flourishing of very young children. Attention to spiritual flourishing in the early years of childhood has been recognised as vital in many aspects of human development; it inevitably brings about a benefit, a later good for all young people. In addition, we know that attention to faith development in the early years is critical for future faith.

However, despite being widely regarded as essential for holistic development, the spiritual flourishing of very young children is a neglected area of research, policy, and practice. There is a lack of policy focus on spiritual development within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and a limited focus on the spiritual nurture of children within church settings. There have been a limited number of detailed observation studies of very young children's spiritual flourishing and the role of adults working with those children.

Therefore, we aimed to conduct a research and dissemination project to investigate what contributes to the spiritual flourishing of very young children in church toddler groups with a multidisciplinary team of researchers. We wanted to know:

- What does spiritual flourishing look like among very young children?
- How do church toddler groups support spiritual flourishing?
- In what ways do adults within these groups support the spiritual flourishing of very young children?

## What do we mean by Spiritual Flourishing?

The research team employed an understanding of Christian spirituality rooted in the relational, expressed in self-understanding, and meaningful relationships with others, nature and the transcendent.

Spiritual flourishing is a dynamic state of being. It is seen in nurturing the right relationship with self, others, creation, and the transcendent. It is about living life to the full (John 10:10). This definition is informed by the spiritual traditions of the church, and the evidence based from the social sciences, especially psychology, on spirituality. This understanding of spiritual flourishing is underpinned by the view that all humans are spiritual beings. It draws on Biblical and Church traditions and the work of Buber<sup>1</sup>, Fisher<sup>2</sup>, Hay and Nye<sup>3</sup>, and Miller<sup>4</sup>.

## Building on prior knowledge in the post pandemic context

The Faith in the Nexus research undertaken by NICER in church primary schools revealed the importance of nurturing the spiritual well-being of children<sup>5</sup>. These findings with primary-age pupils complemented the robust existing literature on the benefits of attention to spiritual flourishing in the early years<sup>6,7</sup>.

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1 Buber, M. (2012). *I and Thou*. eBookIt.com. (Original work published 1923)

2 Fisher, J. (2011). The four domains model: Connecting spirituality, health, and well-being. *Religions*, 2(1).

3 Hay, D. with Nye, R. (2006) *The Spirit of the Child*, Revised Edition. Jessica Kingsley Publishers: London.

4 Miller, L. (2015) *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. Macmillan Publishers: USA

5 Casson, A., et al. 2020. Faith in the Nexus: Church schools and children's exploration of faith in the home: A NICER research study of twenty church primary schools in England.

6 Miller, L., 2016. *The spiritual child: The new science on parenting for health and lifelong thriving*. Macmillan.

7 Schein, D., (2017). *Inspiring wonder, awe, and empathy: Spiritual development in young children*. Redleaf Press.

Within the Christian tradition, the family is seen as the primary educator of the child, and the significant influence of the family on religious socialisation is well documented in research<sup>8</sup>. However, within the institutional church, there is a general lack of attention to nurturing young families' spiritual well-being or faith. This was apparent in the limited or lack of response by churches to the spiritual needs of young families during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>9</sup>. There are vital points when the Church does pay attention to young families, such as the rites of initiation and Sunday worship, and increasingly in the Anglican tradition activities such as Messy Church.<sup>10</sup> However, the most common point of contact with young families is through church toddler groups.

Church toddler groups, therefore, provide a fruitful setting for this research as they are common to all churches across the denominations in England and reach out to non-church families on the margins. The groups are popular mid-week stay-and-play sessions, usually held in a church or the church hall, run by volunteers or occasionally paid children's workers from the local church community. They are a community resource with an open invitation to families in the local area.

## What is the value of this project?

This research study has provided invaluable insights into very young children's spiritual engagement and the nurture of their well-being within church toddler groups.

There is a key dynamic of intergenerational support offered by the volunteers who accompany families in church toddler groups in helping them feel a sense of belonging and connection to a wider community. It also revealed the significance of the toddler groups in developing and sustaining relationships between young families and the local church.

The project brought together an international consultancy team comprising experienced professionals, practitioners, and academics in the field of childhood spirituality.

There are learnings for Early Years Studies, a gift from the Church of a deeper understanding of the importance of spiritual flourishing of the very young child. There are learnings for the Church, an opportunity for Early Years Studies to gift the Church an understanding of the capabilities of the youngest children.

The dissemination of these research insights can empower and inform changemaker groups focused on the spiritual flourishing of very young children within the Christian community.

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8 Mark, O., & Cooling, T. (2016). *Passing on faith*. Theos

9 Casson & Holmes Casson, A., Holmes, S., Logan, S., & Powney, R. (2023). Rethinking the place of the family in the post-Covid church in the UK: an exploration of families' engagement with church during and after Covid. *Practical Theology*, 16(5), 642-654.

10 [https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/369055/Talking\\_Toddlers.aspx](https://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/369055/Talking_Toddlers.aspx)

## 2. Investigating young children in church toddler groups

The research project was divided into three phases.

**Phase 1** involved observation and informal conversations with leaders, volunteers, and parents in four groups in the Northeast, Midlands, London, and the Southeast of England. An analysis of these findings highlighted the need for an in-depth study employing a variety of methods. For further information on Phase 1, see the Open Access article<sup>11</sup>.

**Phase 2** consisted of an in-depth study of three inclusive church toddler groups situated within church premises in the southeast of England. The faith component varied from implicit to explicit in messaging and activities. Each group was visited four times by two or three researchers to help correlate observations and interpretations of what happened during the visits. The research team trialed a variety of research methods, facing some inevitable challenges such as the short sessions (ninety minutes once a week), a change in attendees – some came every week, others less regularly; the noise and busyness of the group environment, and young parents/carers' busy lives. The most fruitful methods were a focus on detailed observations of the children's activity and engaging in informal research conversations with the adults. Within each session Researcher 1 closely observed children as they played and took detailed notes which were subsequently discussed with the team. Researcher 2 chatted to parents, making notes afterwards, and when a third researcher was available, they interacted with the children using resources chosen to elicit interactions and facilitate useful responses from the children.

In **Phase 3**, the research team undertook further analysis, consultations, and investigation of initiatives that intentionally paid attention to nurturing the spiritual well-being of young families. This was done by two members of the team and preliminary insights were tested with the advisor group.

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<sup>11</sup> Casson, A., Woolley, M., Pittaway, A., Watts, T., Kemp, N., Bowie, R. A., ... & Aantjes, R. (2023). Paying Attention to the Spiritual Flourishing of Young Children in Church Toddler Groups: A Scoping Study Evaluating the Feasibility of a Research Study in This Context. *Religions*, 14(2), 236.



## 3. Pen portraits of toddler groups in the pilot study

The following portraits refer to the church toddler groups visited during phase 3 of the project.

**Toddler Group 1** is held within a Salvation Army Church. It is run by one paid leader, a member of the Salvation Army, with substantial support from volunteers, many of whom are also Salvation Army members. The Salvation Army minister attends when possible. Children and adults attending are given a warm welcome by all in the toddler group, and support and outreach are core features here.

It is a popular group in the local area providing for children from babies to four-year-olds. In addition to parents attending, there are also extended members of the family, such as grandparents.

The first hour of the session is set up as free play, with music being played as a signal for children to tidy away the toys. Following snack time, an animated version of a bible story is played for the children to watch with their family members. The bible story is followed by a short and related craft activity that extends the message of the animation. The toddler group leader then runs a 5-minute session of nursery rhymes and songs, which the children engage in as they involve movement and actions. At the end of the session, families are often invited to other Salvation Army sessions at the weekend.

**Toddler Group 2** is run in Southeast London within a traditional Anglican church building and its adjoining hall. The sessions are run by a group leader and team of volunteers, comprising mostly retired members of the congregation. Prior to the session, the volunteers unite in a short prayer. There are often over 50 'family' units in attendance in this popular group, which is run on a drop-in basis. Most children come with their parents, but there are some grandparents and childminders in attendance too.

The families are welcomed on the way into the Church, usually by the group leader, and many are regular attendees. The group is very well-resourced, with a good selection of toys for the toddlers to explore and play with.

The sessions start with a period of free play, and parents supervise their children. There is a biscuit and drink 'break' at 10 am, and adults are offered a hot drink and a biscuit at this time too. Story time follows, and this is led by one of the volunteers who retells a Biblical story with interactive opportunities for the children. Despite being such a large group, there is a real sense of community and togetherness, and many families clearly attend to socialise with people they know in a safe and welcoming space.

**Toddler Group 3:** is held within a Church of England church hall and is supported by the local parish. Conversations with both the toddler group leaders and minister demonstrate that the main purpose of the group is to invite people into a safe place where children can play, and adults can meet with each other.

The toddler group serves the immediate community but also surrounding areas. Amongst the adults attending, there is a mix of parents and childminders as well as a strong presence of grandparents, which brings an intergenerational presence to the group.

Children spend the first part of the session in free play while adults are offered a constant service of hot drinks from three church volunteers. Following this, the children can choose from a buffet style of snacks, including fresh fruits, biscuits, and cakes. Parents then lead the music and singing session with the children, which brings them actively together for the final session.

The minister pointed out that Christian faith in action is simply walking alongside others and meeting them where they are, building trusted relationships. Therefore, they purposely avoid any part of their sessions being set aside for Bible stories and worship activities.

## 4. Observing children's spiritual flourishing

This section looks at what spiritual flourishing looks like in very young children in church toddler groups and what the characteristics of spiritual engagement are. We applied the findings from the scoping project (Phase 1) to our analysis of Phases 2 and 3, identifying the importance of the relational – understanding of self, relationships with others, the world and God. We looked for evidence of being in the Here and Now and Moments of Ordinary Grace. We also considered the influence of the environment on spiritual engagement. This report brings together all we have learned from the three phases, develops the initial findings outlined in the previous pilot study report<sup>12</sup> and offers recommendations for changes to practice and policy in addition to further research.

### What did we see?

#### Understanding of self

Play is essential for developing children's spirituality, and often, this play can involve children being creative and imaginative in the silence of their minds. Having time and space to do this is vital as it allows them to develop an understanding of self.

*Loose play items such as mini-me figures and craft activities encourage individual engagement and provide opportunities for children to connect to self and others. Some verbal interactions also occurred; the story stones prompted the identification of images and the mini-me figures encouraged play narration. Moreover, the children's delight at the celebration of birthdays evidences a relation to self and growing awareness of their capacity for growth and change (Researcher notes).*



*The mini me figures and the loose play activities encouraged children to sit and play reflectively on their own. Sometime creating their own stories and actions to accompany their play. (Researcher)*

<sup>12</sup> <https://nicer.org.uk/toddlers-in-the-nexus>



*An 18-month-old girl, saw the figure and wanted to put a heart on it. Once she did this, she used no language, but her face lit up and she hugged the figure closely to her. (Researcher)*



*Celebrating birthdays gave children a sense of change and growth . (Researcher)*

## Relationships with others

The church toddler groups were busy places; there were often between 20 and 60 people in one session. The researchers noted much communal play and compassionate interactions between children and between parent and child. Coming together for stories and songs was mentioned by parents as important for bringing the community together. Sharing with others and caring for others in this way offers a crucial opportunity for children to develop values that help build loving relationships.

The sense of community within the group was strong, sustained by having a routine for each session, enhanced by the sharing of food and drink provided by the church group, and strengthened by the weekly communal singing activity.

The regular routines observed within the toddler groups helped children establish a sense of familiarity and belonging. For instance, the signs used within specific groups to transition from one activity to the next helped the children feel part of the wider group community.



*The toddler group helps build community and trusted relationships. (Minister)*



*The toddler group leader buys lovely snacks for the children, including fresh fruit, and when it is their birthday, they all get a present. (Parent)*

## The Environment and the World Around

In Phase 1, we recognised the significance of the environment for the spiritual flourishing of very young children. The researchers noted that all groups provided a safe, welcoming space for the families. Children and parents moved freely, independently, and together, through the space.

*I have only been coming here for the past 3 weeks, and it's been a long time since I have been in a church environment. This group is how the church should be. I enjoyed seeing the vicar last week, it wasn't threatening or anything, just really friendly and he was interested in me and what I had to say. I wish church was like this, a real community where we can support each other and be there for each other. (Grandparent)*

Sometimes it was the environment that caught the attention of the children. One child entered the hall with enthusiasm, leaving his mum to follow behind him. He climbed onto the chairs and looked up to the ceiling. "Wow" he said. When I looked up, I could see the roof and the small stained-glass windows. He said – "look a web". Looking up again, I could see a huge web in the window – he went on to tell me a spider lived there – he tried to reach up and said, "I cannot reach it" and went on to discuss how you could reach it if we had a big ladder (Researcher).



## The natural world

One key aspect highlighted in our review of previous research was the value of being in nature. For a variety of reasons, many toddler groups do not have access to outside space, or the space they do have available is not safe. However, despite many challenges, some groups are able to ensure that children and their families encounter nature.

*We run an outdoor toddler group in a park, but there are challenges - little car parking and, therefore, very time intensive for setting up and transporting resources. However, it is worth overcoming the challenges for the benefit of the group! (Toddler Group Leader)*

One of the intervention activities the research team introduced to the groups they visited was to bring the natural world indoors.





*One three-year-old boy looked for the leaf under the paper stating, “where gone”. There is a small moment of wonder when its image appears on the paper, and Mum shares her memory of doing this activity as a child as she helps him. (Researcher)*

## Being in the Here and Now and Moments of Ordinary Grace

Moments of Ordinary Grace and being in the here and now are moments when children are enthralled in a personal awe and wonder encounter; this draws the adult into the spiritual experience to be present with them and share it. Lamont<sup>13</sup> describes Moments of Ordinary Grace as totally unquantifiable – ‘an extraordinary moment when a child makes you aware of how close they are to God at that point of time.’

Spiritual moments are nourished through opportunities for children to be still, be alone and engage in the here and now. The research team observed many children absorbed in the here and now, totally engaged in what they were doing at that moment. However busy the space around them was, the child was engaged and embracing the moment.

Sometimes, the research team felt that the environment was congested with too many activities and toys, leaving little time for quietness and stillness. In fact, during one visit, the leader decided not to put all their toys out, and this resulted in a much calmer space.



*Candles and lights were introduced to encourage awe and wonder moments. (Researcher)*

13 Lamont, R., 2020. *Faith in Children*. Monarch Books, p.18

## Faith Encounters: God and the Transcendence

When adults were asked about the spiritual nurture of the families, they focused on the time for Bible stories and worship songs. In two groups, there was a routine of stopping for a Bible story. These were often told by one of the volunteers with the aid of a puppet. This was a time when children and parents/carers came together – some listened attentively to the Bible story. Children's and parents/carers' engagement varied depending on the delivery of the story.

In the third group, the leader and the local vicar had decided not to have a Bible session, in fact, not to have anything that was explicitly Christian. By explicit, they meant 'we do not have a section of the toddler session for worship songs and Bible stories,' (Minister).

The minister argued that an explicit slot each week for Bible stories could communicate the idea that faith can be compartmentalised. It could also act as a barrier as 'people do not know the language and can feel uncomfortable'. (Minister).



*Toddler group ministry is all part of loving our neighbour – that's what we are called to do, no strings attached, just reaching out and loving people. (Minister)*



*Using props, like a puppet to tell a Bible story or using resources that gave visual context to the story helped to engage the children. (Researcher)*

## 5. Supporting children's spiritual flourishing

**When visiting all the church toddler groups, the research team found evidence of unintentional nurturing of spiritual flourishing.**

- The environment itself contributed; some groups were held in lovely traditional church buildings with magnificent stained-glass windows surrounding them.
- We also saw opportunities for spiritual flourishing in the provision of toys and activities that prompted imaginative play and moments for children and parents to engage with each other. Some activities were set up to encourage sharing and engagement with others.
- Interaction with others also gave children a sense of community and belonging.
- Evidence of role modelling from adults not only helped the children but also the parents. One parent said the leader *'helps me to parent; she is a great role model on how to let children be children and is a calming presence in the group, and this sets the atmosphere for all of us'*. The role modelling of Christian values such as compassion, hospitality, and support of need was valued by all attending.

*A donation of only 50p per family is asked for, it is incredible and yet we are given so much more in return (Parent).*

*There are lots of parents who come here and are in need, and in this community, they are offered welcome and care. One parent said she loves it here as she feels safe and welcomed (Volunteer).*

One parent said that she was a newcomer to the group that morning and had been really anxious about attending. She said her anxiety melted away as she arrived through the door and was greeted by name by the CTG leader and introduced to some of the parents already there.

### What do adults perceive their role to be in the group?

**The research team identified a variety of perceptions.**

For the parents/carers, there was a focus on the social side; they came for the company for themselves as much as the children. Some of them referred to the Covid pandemic and how much they and their child have missed this social contact. When pressed as to why they chose to attend this specific church toddler group, many shared how welcoming they found the group to be and how they appreciated the care and hospitality shown to them. They spoke of community and a sense of belonging.

Many of the volunteers saw their role as a service to the church and often prefaced their reply to us with 'I just' make the teas, do the washing up, put the toys out. In fact, many of these mainly older volunteers offered an invaluable service to the young families, welcoming them, developing relationships, and engendering a sense of belonging.

The clergy and the leaders often focused on pastoral care. They offered a listening ear and signposted parents to local support such as foodbanks. All the leaders were keen to provide a safe space for families to build community and friendships.

For some clergy, the church toddler groups were seen primarily as a missional opportunity. They regularly offered invitations to church events such as Family Sunday worship or Messy Church.



However, other clergy believed the significance of relational connection and outreach to offer a broader perspective of 'church' and 'mission'. A perspective that transcends the exclusive notion that regular church attendance alone defines one's membership and sense of belonging within the church community.

The common theme shared across all four groups, parents, volunteers, leaders, and clergy, was a focus on relationships and the engendering of a sense of belonging.

### **Thoughts from the parents/carers**

- It is a warm place where you can have a hot drink and get support from others.
- Secular toddler groups I've been to are more business-like and more expensive whereas this church toddler group is more friendly, community and homely.
- It gives my child space to play; space that we don't have at home.
- Where else can I go where I have a warm cup of tea made for me, someone to talk to and have extra pairs of eyes on my child so I can relax with other parents for a little while?

### **Thoughts from the toddler group leaders**

- Most of the families attending this toddler group are not church goers, although we find many of them want their children baptised.
- I am here to provide somewhere for young families to come and be safe. We do not explicitly include religious activities in our session as many of our parents wouldn't come. It is important that we are here for everyone and sometimes religion can act as a barrier.
- I spend my time listening to parents, so they know someone cares.

### **Thoughts from the clergy**

- This toddler group is an opportunity for relationship forming, but it is equally fertile soil for providing opportunities to bring people a step closer to the church.
- Toddler groups are so important especially when they take place in church, like this one, as they transform the place into amazing, exciting spaces rather than museums of the past.
- Look around, children interacting, caring, sharing, using their imagination. This toddler group exists and can provide the beginnings of faith.
- I meet people in their space, on their terms where they feel comfortable and in control. Sometimes I get asked about Baptism and Church and that's a bonus but that it not why I am here. I am here to let people know we, the church, are here for them in any way they want us to be.

### **Thoughts from the volunteers**

- We just prepare the snacks and drinks.
- I just serve coffee, put the toys out and take them home to clean and repair them every so often. I also pray for the group.
- The toddler group is obviously here for the children also, but I think it firstly supports the parents.
- I may not know all their names, but I do know who likes decaf coffee without asking them and that lets people know that I know them. It's little things like that, that show people they matter.

## 6. What did we learn from our investigation of church toddler groups?

### The importance and significance of church toddler groups

In Phase 3, the research team undertook further consultation and investigation of initiatives that intentionally paid attention to nurturing the spiritual well-being of young families. From this investigation and detailed analysis of the church toddler groups in Phases 1 and 2, we identified some critical factors for the nurture of the spiritual flourishing of very young children.

The inestimable benefits of a robust relationship between the church toddler group and the church were apparent in expressions of belonging to a vibrant community. This relationship was most beneficial when it functioned on many levels, between the group leader (paid or unpaid) and clergy/ minister, between the church community, the volunteers, and the parents/carers.

- The nurturing and sustaining of relationships with the young families engendered a sense of belonging to the local and the church community.
- The strategic prioritisation of the pastoral needs of the families was apparent in signposting to other services, providing access to food banks or baby clothes tables. Other ways were, for example, regularly inviting local health professionals to group meetings to support the parents. The church toddler groups offered a safe place for young families to come together, play together and feel supported in their spiritual well-being.
- Another common factor was the application of learning from Early years studies, either through having a paid employee or unpaid volunteer with recent experience in Early years studies. This meant that the activities provided, including faith materials, were age-appropriate and nurturing very young children's spiritual well-being.
- Linked to this application of Early Years learning was a program of support for leaders and volunteers, whether within the church community or developed through networks of leaders and volunteers in the local area.
- The benefit of the strategic planning linked to the rhythm of the church's year is that it strengthens the connection between the toddler group and the church community. It provided the families with an opportunity to experience and engage with the rhythm of the church's year, thus enabling an environment that fosters a non-threatening connection with spirituality and faith.
- We have mentioned previously the limited use of outdoor space. However, the benefit of using outdoor space was visible in the engagement of children in moments of awe and wonder.

## The need to move towards a more holistic approach

Church toddler groups provide space and time for the nurturing of the spiritual and faith flourishing of young children, both unintentionally and intentionally. They function as a nexus, bringing together young families and the church community and are an invaluable community resource. However, leaders, volunteers, and clergy often seemed unaware of the opportunities to nurture these young families by facilitating a holistic approach to spiritual nurture through the environment surrounding them and the play activities provided for them.

Facilitating a holistic approach to spiritual nurture is a missed opportunity. There seemed to be a considerable unawareness of how children experience and share their spirituality at a conscious level and in the ordinary moments of life. There was a perceived underlying tension between faith and spiritual nurturing. Often leaders and volunteers saw the 'play' element to be separate from the 'God spot.' The concept of spirituality as separate from religion or faith is relatively new and it was difficult for this to be understood. In most cases, any discussion about spiritual nurturing was automatically affiliated with faith development and religion. We argue that both can be held in balance if we view children as spiritual beings first, who are then socialised into a religious tradition with their expressions of spirituality (Boyatzis, 2012<sup>14</sup>).

For these groups to function at their best, exploring the concept of spirituality would be hugely beneficial. Recognising and sharing Moments of Ordinary Grace with a child enables the adult to enter the child's world and encourages the child to rest in that moment. It is hugely beneficial for the child's and adult's spirituality. Environments that foster awe and wonder moments enable and facilitate a connection to the world and to God through our hearts and senses as well as our intellect.

It is beneficial to have opportunities to enable all the adults to play with the children as well as chat with the carers and hosts. Many adults find playing with children challenging, especially in an environment where it is easier to sit and chat. Providing play material where adults play alongside a child enables conversations and bonding.

- The research team found evidence that church toddler groups provide opportunities for children's spiritual moments. They are making space for the spiritual flourishing of very young children.
- The groups are an invaluable resource to the local and church community. They are filling a noticeable gap, providing inexpensive spaces for parents and children to play, engage with other parents, and connect to the local community,
- The church toddler group engenders a sense of belonging to the local and church community.

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14 Boyatzis, C. J. (2012). The nature and functions of religion and spirituality in children. In *APA handbook of psychology, religion, and spirituality (Vol 1): Context, theory, and research*.

## Recommendations

Overall, the research team concluded that while toddler groups are nurturing the spiritual flourishing of young children much more is possible to enhance this, to realise the full potential, there needs to be:

### For Educators

- A focus on addressing the limited or confused understanding of faith/spiritual needs of very young children.
- A program of support for toddler group leaders and volunteers.
- A close and positive relationship with church toddler groups, church primary schools and church communities that fosters, within young children, a well-grounded spiritual foundation.

### For Church Leaders and Clergy

- A greater awareness of the value of church toddler groups for young families.
- To be more open to what constitutes church and mission, appreciating that church attendance is not the sole measure of what it means to belong to the church community.

### For Practitioners

- Resource input for volunteers and leaders.
- Innovative ways to overcome the lack or limited use of outdoor space, possibly by bringing nature into the toddler group environment.
- Creative ways of setting out the indoor environment so that it engenders curiosity, imagination, messy play, and moments of stillness.

Church toddler groups have a unique space within the nexus of home, church, and school. They are, in a phrase often used of Cathedrals, both Common ground and Sacred Space<sup>15</sup>. Engagement in pastoral care and outreach mission is critical as is the need to nurture the leaders and volunteers in an understanding and valuing of their role within the toddler group. There is without doubt the potential to enhance their role as a crucial nexus for young families, connecting these families better with the church community, but also with the local church primary schools. A close and positive relationship between the church toddler group, church and church school would help nurture consistency in children's spiritual flourishing.

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<sup>15</sup> Muskett, J. A. (2019). Shop Window, Flagship, Common Ground: Metaphor in *Cathedral and Congregation Studies*. SCM Press.

# 7. Appendices

## Useful links

See below for some helpful links which give insights into some of the points made above:



In the Manchester diocese, the Children Changing Places Project:  
<https://www.manchester.anglican.org/faithlife/youth/children-changing-places/#Early%20Years>



Get OWT! is a Salvation Army family-oriented programme that uses nature to nurture little ones:  
<https://www.salvationist.org.uk/resources/community-engagement/get-owt>



5 Minus  
<https://www.wscfchurch.com/home/connect/kids>



Mainly Ministries  
<https://mainlyministries.org.uk>



Bible Society  
<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk>

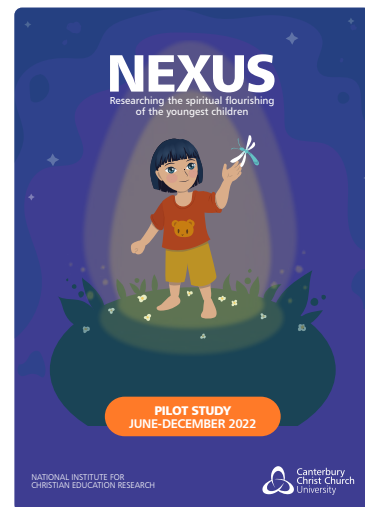
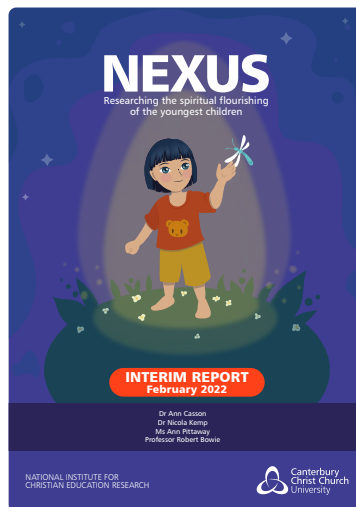
## Project insights

- During phase 1 of the project, we held an international online consultancy meeting comprising 20 experts in the field of early childhood studies.
- We established a core consultancy team comprising 12 academics and practitioners with expertise in the field of young children's spirituality.
- Phase 2 and Phase 3 involved visits and contact with 9 church toddler groups across England and Wales.
- We spoke with 111 adults across the church toddler groups we visited including, 67 parents, 35 church toddler group leaders and volunteers and 7 clergy.
- We have held two webinars disseminating our initial findings. One in September 2022 following phase 2 with 22 in attendance. The second in December 2023 following phase 3 with 36 in attendance.
- We have presented at the IACs Virtual International Symposium Children's Spirituality in 2022 and 2023

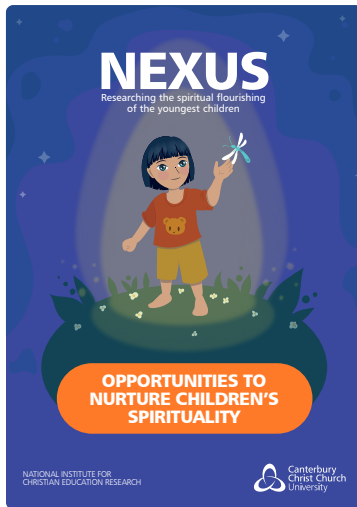
### We have had an article published.

Casson, A.; Woolley, M.; Pittaway, A.; Watts, T.; Kemp, N.; Bowie, R.A.; Clemmey, K.; Aantjes, R. Paying Attention to the Spiritual Flourishing of Young Children in Church Toddler Groups: A Scoping Study Evaluating the Feasibility of a Research Study in This Context. *Religions* **2023**, *14*, 236. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020236>

We have produced 3 reports which can be downloaded at <https://nicer.org.uk/toddlers-in-the-nexus/reports-and-updates>



We have produced practitioner facing resources which can be downloaded at <https://nicer.org.uk/toddlers-in-the-nexus/resources>





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