

Sunday School shutdowns during Covid-19: How will this affect our children's faith nurture?

Dr Sarah E. Holmes, School of Education, Liverpool Hope University, UK.

Summary

Churches responded swiftly when physical meeting ceased due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to provide children with a replacement for “Sunday School” type meetings, many churches began compiling video content for children to access online. Of course, these online outputs were part of an emergency response to the crisis that was unforeseen and not part of the church’s intended strategy. Therefore, in the majority of cases they were produced with limited time and resources, compounded by the heightened stress and anxiety within their surrounding community at the time. There were obviously barriers to overcome, such as specific expertise and training, resources, time, and availability of appropriate tools. Despite this, the online children’s discipleship content quickly became widespread.

This research project investigated the materials provided by one hundred UK churches, to evaluate their effectiveness when compared with a theoretical understanding of children’s faith and discipleship methods. The aim of this project was to gather beneficial insights and good practice from the sector, and provide recommendations to churches worldwide in order to inform their ongoing work and improve effectiveness for children’s faith nurture through this media. Focus groups, comprising participants with diverse and extensive experience in children’s and family ministry, deliberated the tentative findings prior to formulation of conclusions and recommendations. A more detailed academic paper will be published in the future, but this report seeks to support churches in improving the effectiveness of children’s faith nurture online during this pandemic. (Please contact the author if you wish to access the academic paper.)

Introduction

This project investigated the online material provided by UK churches in the absence of physical “Sunday School” type activities during the covid-19 pandemic. The swift response of churches to support children’s faith through these tools was heart-warming, and online nurture quickly became widespread. However, it is critical to evaluate the effectiveness and suitability of the tools, so that they may be refined by churches locally to ensure that they meet the spiritual needs of the children for whom they are intended. The online material was therefore systematically and comprehensively reviewed using a framework underpinned by theories of learning and faith development. This review was supported with background information from church representatives via an online survey. Denominations and affiliations that were included in the website survey were: Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Congregational, Elim, Free, Independent, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, United Reformed and Vineyard. Focus groups were used to test tentative research findings and capture insights from a wide range of perspectives and expertise.

Faith nurture in ‘normal’ circumstances

Court (2013) suggested that the key objectives of religious curriculum were knowledge, moral values and spiritual elements. The outworking of this occurs in a broad manner of ways globally; with some geographical or denominational contexts focusing more on the importance of moral values, some intensely training children to gain Biblical and doctrinal knowledge, and others primarily focussing on experiential aspects of faith. In addition, there are contrasting styles of churchmanship and variances in theological beliefs and understandings of the child. Regardless of these nuances, children’s faith nurture has classically been birthed in Biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Proverbs 22:6 and Mark 10:16. Writers continually urge those who disciple children to take seriously their responsibility and to continually reflect upon how best to be meet the needs of the children in their care (for example Bushnell, 1861; Berryman, 1991, Beckwith, 2010). This weight of responsibility remains true whether the setting is a physical “Sunday School”, home environment or online context.

The research findings

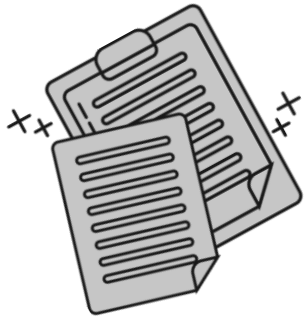
Summaries of the key findings are presented on the next four pages, along with recommendations for churches to consider adapting for their own context.



Improving the format

Our research showed overwhelmingly that children's workers felt very out of their depth producing video content. However, many were growing in confidence as they experimented. Here are a few things that worked well:

- Keeping it very simple for children (or their parents!) to access your session content. It is much easier to click and play a single video than a whole sequence of separate ones. Also make sure it is easy to find on your church website! (In the research, many were not well sign-posted!)
- Establish your aims and purpose! The vast majority of churches who took part in the research said that their main aim was discipleship. However, in many of the videos there were significant portions attempting entertainment of the children, with little or no connection to discipleship. Yet children have many other choices of entertainment available already, so make full use of your video to provide activities that match with your aims and enable the child to connect with God.
- Do not feel the need to produce lengthy content. Many of the videos that are highly effective and engaging for children were only 10-15 minutes long. It is very difficult to produce 30-40 minutes of material that is consistent, holds the child's attention and is beneficial to their faith journey.
- Try not to over-fill your sessions with content. In fact, including some times of quiet space within each session appeared to be very effective in helping children reflect, ponder, and connect with God in their own way. Using background music, an object or image as a focus was often helpful.
- Even if you are filming your session on your own in your quiet home, try to imagine that you are standing in front of a group of lively children in the church hall... bouncing around to keep their interest. Our research showed that many online presenters were very gentle, quietly spoken and sedentary when they delivered their sessions. But this is not a usual image of children's workers! So, try to be more of your normal active and vibrant self as you reach out to these kids.
- Be authentic! There is no need for your online sessions to be absolutely perfect. Of course, there needs to be a level of quality and professionalism but try to consider the effect of projecting perfection through your online session...children may feel they have to live up to a certain standard to be "good enough", parents may feel less empowered to support their child's faith if they can't do it like you, and it makes the task virtually impossible for children's workers! Children can relate much more easily to an experience that they feel is genuine.



The session content

There was a wide range of content uploaded by UK churches. Most contained some form of Bible reading or story, prayer and often worship and craft. A very small number contained testimonies, liturgy, communion and discussion. Here are some ways that made content more effective:

- Our research showed that much of the web content was passive for the children, which is not a good way for them to learn. We found that the experience was greatly improved if interaction and audience participation occurred, for example shouting out responses every time key words are said in the story, or tell the children to pause the video whilst they draw a picture of their house, or to somehow be involved in acting out the Bible story. Even asking them to run and get their Bible and pause the video until they have found the relevant passage, worked well.
- Modern theories show that children learn and develop best when they are curious, playful, exploring and working in collaboration with their teacher. Yet this research showed that only 9% of the churches examined included these traits. So rather than simply telling children a Bible story or passage, try to present it in the form of a dialogue during which you are pondering and wondering, allowing the children time to reflect and imagine for themselves. This provides a much richer learning experience, and enables the content to be better embedded into the child's own context.
- Almost universally, the content uploaded for the children was presented in a "one size fits all" style. However, this resulted in it not meeting the specific needs of individual children. Some presenters tried to enable the children to personalise the content by suggesting a range of responses, or asking the child to think how it would connect in their context, or by providing follow-on activities to enable further exploration by the child.
- It was noticeable that many of the videos contrasted with the theories of learning by not embedding elements of exploration and open-minded dialogue into the sessions. However, there was great benefit in facilitating the child in these skills as they developed on their own faith journey. Fostering the child's open-mindedness and ability to consider alternative perspectives encourages mutual respect, awareness and understanding, and ultimately enhances the fullness of their own beliefs.
- There were a small number of settings in which the presentation style intimated a controlling, coercive, pressurised or judgmental manner. It is critical that those nurturing children's faith are respectful and aware of the messages that they may be inadvertently conveying.



Connecting and engaging

Our research showed that helping children (not only their parents) to feel connected was crucial. But it was very challenging within the confines of the lockdown. A few things that seem to work well:

- Using zoom calls before, during or after your session is broadcast to allow children to discuss content together.
- Include informal opportunities for the children to connect at a time other than the scheduled session. Some churches simply had 'drop in' zoom times for informal 'catch up' conversation, whilst others scheduled fun activities such as family quizzes and challenges.
- Incorporating videos or pictures of children and/or adults taking part in aspects such as song actions, weekly challenges, memory verse recaps, Bible readings and prayers. The videos which showed a variety of congregation or children's team members conveyed a strong sense of community and affirmation of belonging. Those which enabled the child to participate in worship alongside a number of other children (whose videos were shown throughout the song), enhanced the feeling of a shared experience.
- Recording multiple voices saying parts of liturgy at the same time was very effective. When the children joined in, they could feel part of something bigger. The use of liturgy could be developed further in the online videos, to provide children with a form of corporate worship and response.
- Look for opportunities to cross-pollinate across church groups which may not otherwise meet, for example asking older generations to share brief testimonies or record a prayer for the children, or prompting the children to make encouraging cards or letters to deliver to others in the church.
- Only two of the churches analysed provided a mechanism for children to pass on prayer requests, thanksgiving or news items to the children's team. Yet witnessing the presenter affirm that they were praying for the specific needs of children watching (whilst maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality around the prayer request) would be a significant relationally affirming experience.
- A small number of churches delivered items to the families in preparation for the scheduled session. The children then used the items provided as they followed along with the session.
- Discuss the safeguarding considerations of these activities in your specific context with your church safeguarding co-ordinator.



Equipping and supporting families

Many churches identified the need to support and equip parents in their role of disciplers of their own children. This is particularly important at a time of churches being physically closed. Some ways that this was being carried out by churches:

- Developing communication throughout all church channels, emphasising the role of parents as disciplers of their children. Continually affirming and praying for parents in this task is crucial in maintaining their involvement in this role.
- Facilitating open and honest conversations between church workers and parents about the expectations of each other in nurturing the child's faith during this time.
- Deliberately building into each session times of discussion and prayer amongst families. This is best done during the sessions, rather than suggested as an optional extra at the end. A few of the churches directed the children to pause the video whilst they discussed it with their family, and this was generally very effective in ensuring that this aspect occurred.
- The research revealed that a small number of churches suggested how activities could be adapted for older or younger children, or for those who don't enjoy art or action songs for example. This was effective in facilitating families to make the discipling experience bespoke to their own child and context.
- Similarly, some of the churches provided parents with development activities which could be used to further explore the session material as a family, and apply it more fully to their context and every-day situation.

However, research participants repeatedly stated that it is vital that churches are aware of the pressures and strains that families are under at this difficult time. Some ways that churches were seeking to support families:

- Making contact and asking how they are getting on, listening and responding appropriately.
- Trying not to add additional pressures, such as imposing compulsory discipleship activities.
- Instead, suggesting a couple of ways that they could easily encourage their child's faith as part of daily life, such as briefly praying together in difficult situations, modelling the parent's faith journey by allowing their child to see them reading the Bible, praying and worshipping, allocating time occasionally (as the need arises) to discuss in depth some challenging faith questions.

Conclusion

It is greatly encouraging to see how much progress has been made to develop online children's faith nurture in such a short timeframe. However, there are some ways that the effectiveness of this discipleship could be refined and improved. The recommendations included within this report need to be considered carefully within each local context, to ensure that they are appropriately applied since there is no universal solution or scenario. It is clear that whilst some work is still needed on the style and content of the sessions, this is not the only aspect that is important. Indeed, the relationships and connection that occur within and around the online sessions are key to ensuring the positive trajectory of children's faith nurture during this pandemic, and onwards. The scope and prospect of online faith nurture for children is immense, but it must be emphasised that it can only ever be a tool of the overall nurture experience for the child, and is ideally utilised as part of a family or church strategy to equip and nurture the child in their onward faith journey.

References

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About the author

Sarah Holmes is a lecturer of Early Childhood Studies at Liverpool Hope University, UK. She has a range of experience working with children and families in both community and local church settings. This experience is combined with her ongoing research projects connected with children's spirituality, Christian faith formation, the influence of family on young children and holistic well-being.

Email correspondence: youngfaith@hope.ac.uk

Website: www.NurturingYoungFaith.org

Twitter @FaithNurturing