

FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Children's encounters with the Bible

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How can we encourage children's encounters with the Bible, at home and in school?

The Faith in the Nexus research project.

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

Key questions raised by the research:

What are the major obstacles to children's engagement with Scripture in the home?

Where are the opportunities to facilitate encounters with Scripture?

Key findings from the research:

Children rarely read the Bible at home; when they do, they are more likely to do so in private.

The gift of a Bible may facilitate exploration in the home.

In school, engagement with Bible stories occurred in RE and in collective worship through initiatives such as Open the Book.

There were a variety of initiatives that sought to facilitate opportunities for children to encounter the Bible in school. However, the majority of these did not seem to ripple into the home environment. The crux of our research findings is that there is potential scope here for increasing opportunities for children to explore Scripture in the home.



The major challenges are a lack of resources in the home environment – whether Bible or family knowledge and understanding of Bible stories. Opportunities which did appear to make ripples included gifts of Bibles, a variety of Bibles in the school library and experiences of Open the Book, particularly when parents were invited in. Children's engagement with the Bible at home was limited. The surprising finding was that several children spoke of the gift of a Bible from grandparents, school or church.

We believe there is a clear need to review the approaches taken around engagements with Biblical narratives in the wider life of the school.

It is clear that there is a need to rebuild confidence among teachers as voyagers into Bible narratives, recreate a visibility of the Bible in the life of school, and explore new practices.

There is a need to invest in study of the Bible through good religious education and Bible gifting opportunities.



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

I read sneakily my Bible at night, but the Bible is really special to me because it was [from] my Grandma and Grandad from when I was born, but my Grandma's died now so it's really special (Pupil).

The governors buy every child in Year 1 a Bible (Staff).

We have books like children's Bibles but they don't really read them that often (Parent).

The Open the Book on the Friday. Rather than just hearing about it in lessons you actually get a little show to watch which I think is good (Parent).

Quite often my son would pick up a Bible that's not instigated by me, it's what he chose to do. (Parent).



ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIBLE

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE BIBLE?

Do Children engage with the Bible at Home?

Our research found little engagement with the Bible in the home.

- Survey results showed that reading the Bible or talking about the Bible stories was not seen to happen frequently in the home.
- Few schools reported high scores for these questions.
- The rest of the schools have scores in the bottom part of the scale demonstrating the overall low engagement children have with the Bible.

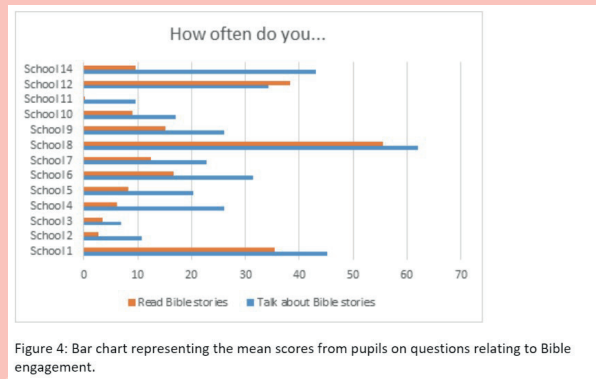


Figure 4: Bar chart representing the mean scores from pupils on questions relating to Bible engagement.

What are the obstacles to engagement in the home?

Our research identified a key obstacle to engagement: a lack of resources in the home, whether Bible or family knowledge and understanding of Bible stories.

- Where were the opportunities to resource the home?
- For many, the presence of a Bible in the home was because it had been given as a gift.
- Bibles were often gifted by grandparents, school or church.

In one school, a selection of different versions of the Bible could be borrowed from the school library. The Minecraft version was popular with boys.



The practice of giving the gift of a Bible as a child leaves school misses the opportunity for the children to engage with it earlier; at home for instance.

What did pupils tell us about reading Bible stories at home?

They rarely read the Bible at home
When they do, they are more likely to do so in private..

I read sneakily my Bible at night...

I read the Bible, and I pray 'cos I have a little Mary thing I pray to her before I go to sleep at night.

What did children think of the Bible?

We found that children appreciated the Bible stories in school, they remembered especially stories acted out in worship time, or the challenging stories discussed in RE.

Older pupils told us that they had read Bible stories when they were little, but no longer did so.

The Bible was seen for young children, not something older children or adults read. This is reinforced when the only Bible they encounter is a children's Bible.

In year 1...you get like a little kiddy Bible that you come home with...

We have books like children's Bibles but they don't really read them often.

Open the Book in school

Open the Book is when there's these people that come in to perform a kindness story for year 1. (Pupil).

We found that many encounters with the Bible in school came through the work of Open the Book (OtB).

There was a feeling from the Open the Book team in one school that certain groups of parents saw occasions such as Open the Book collective worship as church.

Open the Book (Bible Society) brings schools and churches into partnership. It has a dual purpose of bringing Bible stories into schools while also providing a volunteering opportunity for Christians across a variety of churches

Godly Play sessions

Another initiative which we found offered pupils encounters with the Scriptures in school was Godly Play. Godly Play aims to encourage children to develop a deeper understanding of Bible stories.

What's the one in the desert? Abraham. I like that because like his family never ends. There's never a stop to his family... It makes me think... Why does Abraham's family never end?

- Pupil

Children rarely talked about Godly Play at home. The findings about Godly Play are intriguing as the pupils who participate in school enjoy the experience. However, it may be as one parent suggested, that the thinking and wondering remains, 'within their own thoughts.'

We are also getting parents asking if their children can take part... (OtB team).

The parents are keen for their children to have a knowledge of Bible stories. (OtB team).

Will one of us ever be in one of those stories? Will we be told in the future? (Pupil)

I think Godly Play is designed to leave them asking. (Parent)

What happens in school to facilitate exploration of the Scriptures at home?

- There were three main areas where children encountered the Scriptures in school, namely Religious Education lessons, collective worship and organisations such as Open the Book and Godly Play.
- Some year 5 and 6 pupils considered that they explored more complex stories in RE than those they heard in collective worship.
- Some parents, pupils and staff stated that the Bible stories used in collective worship were to provide a moral message linked to the school values or to give examples of how people should behave.



The perception of the Bible as a source of moral teaching is not new. There is however, a question of whether for some that is its only function.

RE is where you talk about God and the Bible. (Pupil)

[In RE]... normally we use the Bible to know more. (Pupil)

With our [RE] teacher we start from the beginning of the Bible and work our way through to the end of the Bible... we cover all of the Bible. (Pupil)

The minister] would say we were looking at courage he would maybe find a story from the Bible that reflects courage and talk to us about it. (Parent)

Questions for discussion

How does your local school help to facilitate an exploration of the Bible in the home?

What involvement is there from the local church and its community in encouraging children's encounters with the Bible?

Are children encouraged to offer their own interpretations of scriptural texts?

What opportunities do children have for unpacking the various levels of meaning associated with scripture?

At home, what resources would be of benefit to support family encounters with the Bible?

FURTHER READING

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

Report references:

Encounters with the Bible. pp. 65-76

Conclusion. pp.84-91

