

FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Faith in the Nexus and Sacraments (Parish Catechists)

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How does the Faith in the Nexus Research Inform Sacramental Preparation?

The Faith in the Nexus research project.

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

The Faith in the Nexus project investigated the ways church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitated opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home.

The project involved 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools. Focus group interviews were held with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) and an online survey was completed by 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults.

Key questions raised by the research:

How can we ensure the sacramental journey is inclusive for all parents?

What resources can we offer for parents when they feel uncertain or struggle in supporting their child's faith formation?

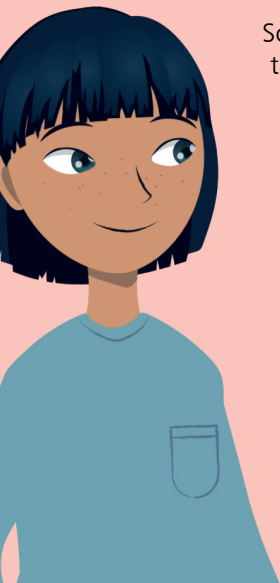
How do we enable parents to support their children effectively?

Key findings from the research:

Preparation for the sacraments of reconciliation and First Holy Communion often followed a traditional paradigm whereby catechists were responsible for children's formation.

Some parents were unsure how they should behave in Church as they had little connection with the parish community.

Many parents saw family-led catechesis as an opportunity to reflect on their own faith journey.



Catholic tradition states that the critical role in young people's faith formation is primarily given to parents who are "by word and example...the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children" (John Paul II, 1981). The parental role in guiding and nurturing their children's faith journey is given precedence, with the Church and Catholic school offering a supportive responsibility. From this perspective, the primary stimulus for a flourishing faith experience should be found in the home. Home should provide a safe and exploratory space for enquiring young minds brimming with curiosity and wonder.

Ideally, faith formation should be part of the natural rhythm of daily family life, spoken of, lived, and modelled. Findings from our Nexus report showed that many parents struggled with how to respond, often due to lack of confidence. However, with clear support and accompaniment parents were better equipped to embrace the journey of faith formation with their child seeing it as a precious and sacred time to be treasured.

John Paul II. (1981), *Familiaris Consortio* (The role of the Christian family in the modern world). Retrieved 12/01/2021 from *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), John Paul II (Vatican. VA).



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

What did children say?

I wanted to do my First Holy Communion because the way to receive God is by that.

We had to do our reconciliation and we had to say sorry, and then we filled in the "I belong books."

Some of our teachers help us learn about God.

What did parents say?



What's so nice about Holy Communion is that they are including the parents, because they used to just have the child in by themselves with the priest.

I think it starts right from when they are toddlers. You know from toddlers I took my children to a church toddler group where we sang Christian songs with them.

SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION

How does the Faith in the Nexus Research Inform Sacramental Preparation?

Parental support and engagement with sacramental preparation

A specific focus on sacramental preparation drawn from the Faith in the Nexus focus group interviews, carried out in three Catholic primary schools, reveals some interesting insights.

- It is important to accompany parents and children in sacramental preparation.
- Some parents need more support and encouragement to engage with their child's sacramental preparation.
- Sacramental programmes often place catechists as the leads for children's preparation, meaning parents can choose not to participate.



It is vital to find opportunities to make lasting connections with parents.

You have to accompany them... otherwise it will be meaningless because sometimes a lot of it depends on the parents. If the parents take faith seriously then it is something vital and vibrant in their life.
(Parish Priest)

When parents come to Mass, most of them are coming into something they have not grown with. They don't know how to behave in that situation, so they behave as they behave anywhere else.
(Headteacher)



What helps children on their sacramental journey?

Parents said:

- Well, it's through Holy Communion, and when they go to the sessions in church... then I have got the Bible with me that we're looking at.
- They get a little Communion book when they're doing their own sessions. So, when they're sitting through Mass, they can literally go through it, and it's got everything that's going to be said.

How did some parishes successfully engage with parents?

We've just started a new approach to First Holy Communion catechesis which is parent-led catechesis where the parents and children spend time together on whatever it is, on topic. And certainly, the feedback from parents is that's much better than the previous system where children were very separate to the parents.

What's so nice about Holy Communion is that they are including the parents because they used to just have the child in by themselves with the priest. But now they have the parents and the children together doing work at the table. (Parent)

Family-led catechesis and sacramental preparation

- Many parents often see family-led catechesis as an opportunity to reflect on their own faith journey.
- Parents are in a unique position to stand alongside their child and explore faith or spirituality with them.
- Parents' confidence in talking about faith or spiritual matters increased when they were offered opportunities to encounter faith beliefs and practices in school and parish.
- Relationships are crucial to sustaining opportunities to explore faith or spirituality.
- Parents need their own resources to go to when they are uncertain or have questions.



From baptism, the parish community should reach out and walk with the family. With careful accompaniment and the correct support parents will feel more equipped to be the primary educators of their children.

Children's attitudes to First Holy Communion

Focus group interviews were conducted with year 3 and year 4 pupils preparing for or having just received their First Holy Communion. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

Year 3

Why are you going to make your First Holy Communion?

- Because we want to be Catholic.
- Because our Mums want us to.
- Because my Mum wants me to do confirmation.
- Because we're Christians and we have a God too.

Year 4

Why did you want to make your First Holy Communion?

- I wanted to be close to Jesus.
- So I could be part of God's family.
- So I can be a Catholic and so the Holy Spirit will always be with me.
- Because I believe in God.

Year 3

What do you think you will be doing to prepare for your First Holy Communion?

- How Jesus wants us to be.
- Wear a white dress.
- You've got to go to lots of meetings.
- We are going to have books yeah, that we need to write on it.

Year 4

What did you do for the sacramental programme?

- We had to go to Mass.
- We went to Father and got the Body of Christ
- We had to do our reconciliation and we had to say sorry and then we filled in the "I belong books."
- There were things out of the Bible that we read.

Year 4 attitudes to First Holy Communion

What do you still do either at home or elsewhere to remember the things that you did?

Our research revealed that for some children and parents talking about faith only happened in school. School and diocesan leaders identified possible obstacles such as parents' lack of confidence, interest or knowledge.

At home you can feel a bit more grown up because you can take Jesus' body.

We do religious education lessons, and we also do assemblies on one day...And on Monday we do prayers.

It helps us because we see loads of pictures of Jesus and we do prayers every day before we go home. It just helps us remember.

It helps me remind about it because in the halls there's like pictures of Jesus.

So, when we go to Mass, we receive the Communion.

Some of our teachers help us learn about God.



Focus group interviews in response to this question suggest that spiritual development and ongoing faith formation tends to give emphasis to the school, rather than the home environment.

The importance of connection through the Nexus

Sacramental preparation is a time when parish, home and school connect.

This proves a challenge when there are barriers to connection such as the absence of a local church building and local parish community.

When the local church closed, we were bereft really. We were left without that, and there were no parishioners. You know, parishioners would normally do things... we haven't got the parishioners to do it. (Staff)

The school's solution to this absence of local church building and parish community was innovative.

The School's Response

- Children preparing for their First Holy Communion traditionally had their names and work displayed in church, and local parishioners were encouraged to pray for them.
- Staff keenly felt the absence of this involvement.
- In response, the headteacher linked up with a local convent, and the Sisters supported the children through the sacramental programme.
- The children went up to the convent during the year and met with the Sisters who would pray for them and celebrated with them in their chapel.
- Many of the Sisters had taught in schools; they enjoyed engaging with the children.
- The children, many of whom came from large families, appreciated having someone to talk with them and pray for them.

Questions for discussion

What are the key opportunities and challenges for improving sacramental preparation in the home, school and parish?

What is available at present to support parents in supporting their child?

Are some traditional approaches to sacramental preparation unintentionally encouraging the separation of parents and child in the process?

How can sacramental preparation be planned to ensure that the catechetical role does not lead the process, but rather accompanies parents in guiding their children on that journey?

How can connection with the home be sustained and developed beyond sacramental preparation?

FURTHER READING

For the full Faith in the Nexus report and to watch our animation go to nicer.org.uk

