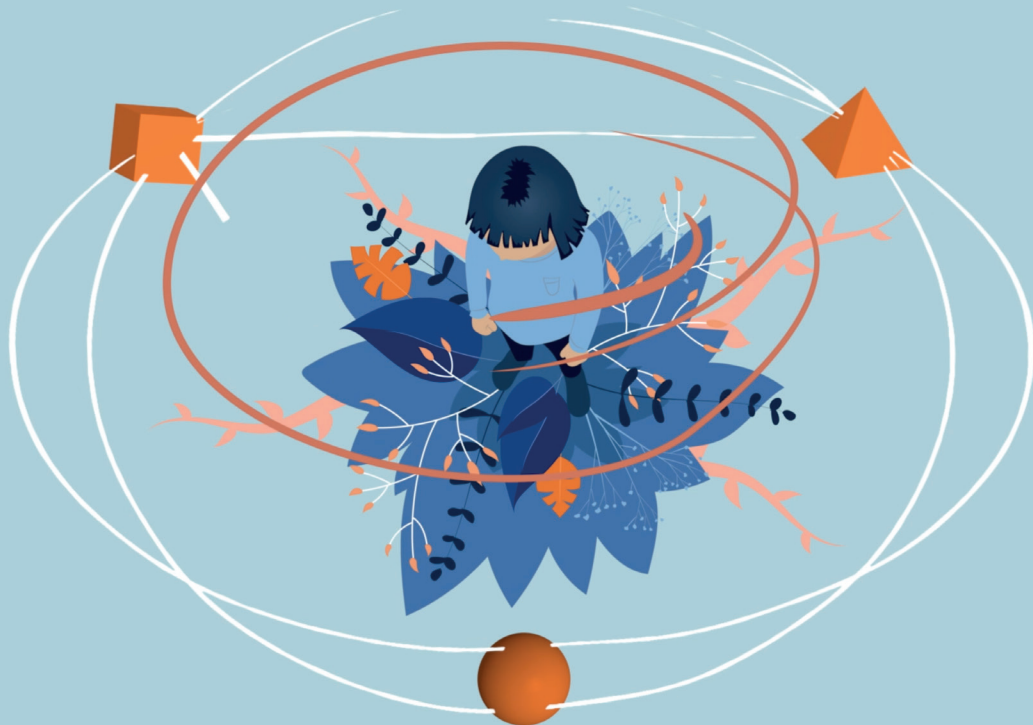


FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Faith in the Nexus and the Domestic Church

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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 sustain flourishing connections between the parish, school and domestic church?

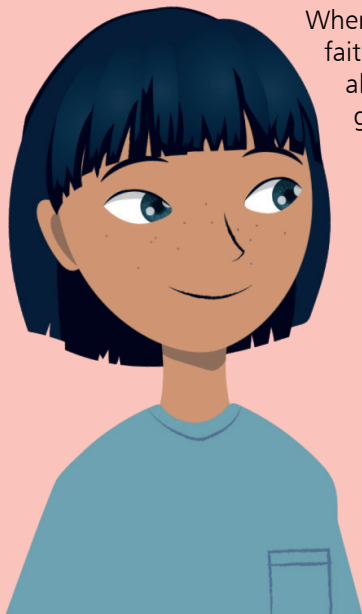
How can positive relationships across the nexus impact the domestic church?

Key findings from the research:

A strong relationship between parish and school has a strong association with attitudes and behaviours within the domestic church.

The powerful impact these positive relationships have on aspects of family faith life is mostly unseen but is apparent in the significance for church school families of their connection with the local parish.

When questions were asked about how children explored faith at home, some parents suggested that it was not about talking, praying together, or religious rituals, or going to church but about what you did to help others.



The family is the smallest unit of the Church, it is the Church in the home that Augustine referred to as the domestic church⁽ⁱ⁾. The role of the domestic church is to nurture and foster an environment that is Christo-centric and gives a living witness to the Gospel. In it parents should, by their word and example, be the first preachers of the faith to their children⁽ⁱⁱ⁾.

Findings from our Nexus report revealed that families talked about faith-related matters in the home more than they participated in faith-related activities in the home. However, our research also found that families engaged more with faith-related activities at certain times of the year linked to the key Christian festivals; evidence of increased school activity at these times rippled into the home environment. The cycle of celebrations influenced the families' perception of the rhythm of the liturgical year and offered opportunities to facilitate exploration of faith in the home.

A strong theme emerging from our report was children's appreciation of the need for space to think, reflect and pray. When children spoke about reflection time at home it was something that happened as and when, there was no set time. However, occasionally children drew attention to specific times for prayer, most commonly at bedtime. This space and time is essential for spiritual wellbeing, yet many children, like adults had no or little quiet time in daily life.

Families who spoke of a strong connection to the church school and parish signified it had a positive impact on faith-talk and interactions at home creating a climate where children's spiritual development can flourish.

^{i.} *De Bono Viduitatis* 29 (PL 40:450) See Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family*, 271-282 for Augustine's development of the term.

^{ii.} *Vatican II: Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964), paragraph 11



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

What did parent's say?

At home we do stuff mostly around the festivals like the Christmas crib service. (Parent)

I think for me it's action...cos personally with our family, I find it hard to find time to sit down and have quiet time and praying but we do a lot of things for our community. (Parent)

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

What did children say?



For reflection I lay on my bed, and I shut my eyes... I reflect on the world and how lucky we are to have the things that we have. (Pupil)

Sometimes before I go to bed, I do a prayer but I mean sometimes because I don't always. (Pupil)

FAITH IN THE NEXUS AND THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

The Church in the Home

How do families interpret their sense of belonging and connection to the Church?

Belonging in terms of Sunday Mass attendance does not seem relevant for many families.

Many parents perceived a sense of belonging to the parish through regular half-termly or weekly Masses in the school or in the church.

Family engagement in sacramental programmes of preparation for First Holy Communion.

A sense of belonging was engendered for parents, through attending celebrations of the Christian festivals in the local parish with school.

Occasional involvement with the local parish gave a sense of belonging.



There is a need to recognise the importance of the connection between school and parish for the domestic church, and the influence it has on facilitating opportunities for the exploration of faith in the home.

What does the rhythm of the Church's year look like to a family in a church school?

- Many of the faith-related activities that happen in the home occur at times of the key festivals.
- Findings from our focus group interviews highlighted that the Christian festivals are significant points when families connect with the Christian faith.
 - Three main times of the year were mentioned: Harvest, Christmas, and Easter, although Pentecost was noticeable by its absence.



At home we do stuff mostly around festivals like the Christmas crib service. (Parent)

You get the sense of the rhythms of Christian life because there are nativities and church services. (Parent)

Singing hymns and worship songs

One theme which emerged from our interviews with parents across the schools was that the most common faith-related activity that happened in the home was children singing hymns or worship songs they had learnt at school.

He comes home singing hymns. It delights me because you know I haven't provided that experience with him. (Parent)

It's the same hymns so we can all sing together. It's quite nice that they're singing the same old hymns. (Parent)



Encounters with the Bible at home

Results from our survey signified that reading the Bible or talking about Bible stories was not seen to happen frequently in the home.

Those that did read the Bible at home spoke of reading it at night by themselves as a solitary activity.

It was apparent for many that the presence of a Bible in the house was because it had been given as a gift by grandparents, school or parish.

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... (Pupil)

Family engagement with liturgy in the home

Some parents spoke of children acting out worship at home with younger siblings or toys.

An example described by many parents and pupils involved the Posada, (a travelling crib taken home from school). The whole family was encouraged to take part in the little service.

Me and my sister set up this little worship table. We put a blanket on [a box] and we put our bowl of lavender on it. We thought that would represent like the colours of Christmas. (Pupil)

So every night [two children per class], will take home a travelling crib... you'll get it out and you'll arrange it on the cloth and you'll say some prayers as a family and you'll light the candle and it's like your own little mini-Liturgy type Mass. (Pupil)



Nurturing spiritual wellbeing in the home.

- Children seek reflection times and spaces as essential for their wellbeing.
- At home children made their own times and spaces.
- It is in this space that children place some of the most serious things in their lives.
- Children thought that members of their family were most likely to know about their spiritual life, with the most common response being, 'my mum.'
- Some pupils mentioned their father or other family members such as their grandparents.

I have got this big table in my bedroom and I make it like a prayer focus. (Pupil)



The role of grandparents in supporting the domestic church cannot be overlooked.

Faith-talk in the home

Home can provide a safe and exploratory space for faith-talk. Our research found that: Children initiate faith-talk in the home.

Children ask questions about things they are curious about, do not know or understand.

Grandparents play an important role in faith – talk.

Common topics include God, Creation, Death, Religion & Science.

Some parents feel they don't have answers in response to big questions, and this concern is understandable, but allowing the space for questions and exploration is far more important than providing answers.

The challenges parents face in the home

- Providing answers.
- Not having the correct language.
- Lack of knowledge.
- Not sharing the same Christian beliefs as the school or parish.

(He) comes home and asks what was there before God. How do you answer that, you know what I mean?

How do you answer the question when they say why does everybody have to die?



While adults were often looking to provide a definitive answer or solution, children may be rather just seeking to explore these issues with parents, teachers, and others.

Faith in action

Some parents suggested that it was not about talking, praying together, or religious rituals, or going to church, but what you did to help others that was important.

It's living it not just the religious part of going to church every week... it's more about how you live out your faith. (Parent)

It's not you go to Church you've done your bit, now we get on with life. It's about how you live your life. (Parent)

We do a lot of things for our community- the food bank. We focus a lot on that and, also helping refugees...and the children see it in action. (Parent)



Questions for discussion

What does it mean to be the domestic church in the 21st Century?

How can connections between home, school and parish be sustained and developed?

How do we reach families who are not active in, or are on the fringes of parish life?

What insights does the Nexus report offer regarding faith activity in the home?

FURTHER READING

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

Report references:

Talking about faith. pp. 13-34; Sense of belonging pp. 43-49. Being pp. 50-64; Doing pp. 65 -79; Conclusion. pp.84-91.

