

Article

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

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Abstract: Attention to the spiritual flourishing of young children contributes to their well-being, both their being and their becoming, but much-needed research in this area poses many challenges. The National Institute for Christian Education Research is undertaking a funded research project investigating the spiritual flourishing of young children in church toddler groups in England. This article reports on a scoping study which investigated the feasibility of a major research study in this area. The study was multifaceted, it involved clarifying terminology, evaluating previous research studies and early years research methods, and led to the development of a potential research framework. The article defines spiritual flourishing as a dynamic state of being, revealed in nurturing the right relationship with self, others, creation, and the transcendent. The findings propose an understanding of children's spirituality as relational, based in the here and now, and shaped by the environment. Secondly, an exploration of midweek church toddler groups, a common feature across the denominations, through the lens of belonging, behaving, and believing reveals a potential critical contribution to young children's spiritual flourishing or faith development. Thirdly, following an evaluation of potential effective research methods, the discussion highlights the value of an interdisciplinary study, the potential challenges and proposes a research framework. The article draws attention to the urgent need for more research to understand what contributes to young children's spiritual flourishing within a Christian context.

Keywords: spiritual flourishing; church toddler groups; environment; relational; here and now



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1. Introduction

This article explores the possibility of conducting a research study into the spiritual flourishing of very young children in church toddler groups in England. The National Institute for Christian Education Research has undertaken two major studies in recent years investigating the spiritual development of secondary school students (Casson et al. 2017) and more recently the Faith in the Nexus research (Casson et al. 2020), looked at the spiritual engagement of pupils attending twenty church primary schools in England. The latter study revealed the benefit of an interconnected nexus of home school and church for the spiritual flourishing of school-aged children. The question was then posed as to what facilitated the spiritual flourishing of preschool children. In looking for settings where that facilitation might occur, church toddler groups were identified as an inclusive nexus that connects families and churches around the very young child. The connected role of church and families in the spiritual flourishing of very young children is an area that has received very little attention. Therefore, an initial scoping study was undertaken with three aims: to find out what is known about the spirituality of young children, to explore what is known about practice in church toddler groups in England, and to evaluate the most effective research methods to use in the context of church toddler groups. Although only an initial scoping study, this paper is significant as it highlights the need for research on

what contributes to very young children's spiritual flourishing and identifies in stay and play church toddler groups a fruitful environment for research in a Christian context.

The Nexus research is underpinned by an understanding of spiritual flourishing as a dynamic state of being, seen in nurturing the right relationship with self, others, creation, and the transcendent. This understanding is theologically associated with the Gospel of John's reference to living life to the full (John 10:10). A theological interpretation of flourishing focuses on the fulfilment of God's purposes for humans; it is relational and involves living an embodied and integrated life and living out a vocation, which can be understood explicitly in the context of a Christian narrative of calling (Messer 2021). The project team adopted the terminology of flourishing because the Nexus findings illuminated the importance of relational connections and a sense of belonging in spiritual life. The terminology of flourishing itself does not bring the knowledge acquisition sense present in other areas of school life. Attention to children's spiritual flourishing contributes to their spiritual well-being (Miller 2015). This necessitates recognising very young children both as being and becoming (Uprichard 2008), they are not only adults in the making, but also beings in the present moment.

A conceptual clarity and agreement about children's spirituality has proved elusive. Research from health shows that conceptual clarification is possible. Systematic reviews (de Brito Sena et al. 2021; Gonçalves et al. 2015) in healthcare found that spirituality was associated with 'connectedness and meaning of life' and sought to establish what is known about the health and well-being benefits of aspects of spiritual and religious practice. Within Christian education, concept development around children's spirituality owes much to Judeo-Christian religious thought and practice. Biblical and church traditions assume that all humans are spiritual beings and root spiritual flourishing in the physical and spiritual connections between humans, nature, and God. There is extensive religious literature on spirituality and spiritual traditions. A common pattern of understanding sees this as a depth of I-Thou relationships (Buber [1923] 2012) with self, others, nature and the transcendent. This is drawn from spiritual literature, elaborated in work on children's spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006; Fisher 2011).

The connection between religion and spirituality is often confusing; the terms are frequently conflated. Both can be held in balance if children are viewed broadly as spiritual beings, with innate spirituality within an existential nexus of connection with self, others and the unknown, who are then socialised or formed by a tradition, religious or otherwise, that has expressions of spirituality (Boyatzis 2012). One way of interpreting this connection is to use Alexander and McLaughlin's (2003, p. 359) understanding of religiously "tethered" spirituality attached to various aspects of a religious tradition in contrast to religiously "untethered" spirituality, which is disconnected from, and may even be discomfiting to, religions. These working understandings are held lightly, not dogmatically, and remain open to reclassification, as findings might indicate other omitted dimensions and relational factors. This is the understanding of spiritual flourishing that the research team adopted, working in settings that found this dynamic sensible, if ultimately provisional.

This paper starts by outlining the scoping study methodology. The findings section provides insights into understanding the relationality of children's spirituality, its expression in the 'here and now' and the significant role the environment plays in nurturing spiritual engagement. Secondly, it explores the notion of church toddler groups as a critical nexus for young families and as an expression of Christian faith in the three dimensions of belonging, behaving, and believing. Thirdly, it focuses on the challenge of researching the spiritual flourishing of children in church toddler group settings and highlights the value of observation, intentional listening to all the languages of the child, and a mosaic approach to research. The discussion reflects on the challenges and opportunities identified in the scoping study and presents a potential research framework. In conclusion, the urgent need for more research is highlighted in order to understand what approaches are most effective in nurturing very young children's spiritual flourishing within a Christian context.

2. Methods

A scoping study was undertaken between September and December 2021 to map existing research and practice regarding young children’s spirituality in inclusive Christian settings, aiming to identify the gaps in knowledge and understanding (see Table 1). The study was shaped along the lines of [Arksey and O’Malley’s \(2005\)](#) methodological framework. It consisted of three interwoven parts: a rapid narrative literature review ([Ganann et al. 2010](#)), consultation with an interdisciplinary panel of experts and research visits to five church toddler groups in England. A narrative literature review ([Baumeister and Leary 1997](#)) was undertaken, as it has the advantage of addressing abstract questions and works well across disciplines. Online databases (EBSCO) and search engines (Google Scholar) were employed to source peer-reviewed articles published between 1990–2021. Publications were selected that referenced children’s spirituality, particularly young children under 8 years old. Given the time limitation of this review, prioritisation was given to leading pioneer studies and empirical research published in the last 30 years within a Western context (UK, USA, Canada, and Australia). There was a separate search of key journals in the field, such as the *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* and the *Journal of Religious Education*. Having identified key figures such as [Hay and Nye \(2006\)](#), [Hyde \(2008a\)](#) and [Schein \(2017\)](#) from peer-reviewed articles, recent relevant books were reviewed. ‘Grey literature’ ([Cooper et al. 2019](#)) was included in the review, such as recent research commissioned by HOPE Together, the Church of England, and the Evangelical Alliance ([Talking Toddlers 2020](#); [Hewitt 2016](#)). This also included relevant theses, Church documentation, conference papers, such as those delivered at the International Association of Children’s spirituality, church toddler group websites, and Facebook pages.

Table 1. Scoping study research questions and methods.

Research Questions	Method
What is known about the spirituality of young children?	Rapid literature review Consultation
What is known about practice in church Toddler groups in England?	Grey literature Consultation Research visits (Autumn 2021)
What are the most effective research methods to use in the context of church toddler groups?	Rapid literature review Consultation

Three critical assumptions underpinned the review: children have the capacity and capabilities for spiritual engagement, even the very youngest, before they have language; they are active agents who must be valued as persons and their rights recognised ([Boyatzis and Janicki 2003](#)). Secondly, signs of a child’s spiritual engagement are often individual, private, and unique ([Hay and Nye 2006](#)). Third, children may be more open to spiritual capacities than adults ([Adams et al. 2008](#)) and express these in many ways through a hundred languages ([Malaguzzi 1987](#)).

Alongside the literature review, an interdisciplinary and international network of twenty-one researchers, practitioners and policymakers were brought together for two online consultations in the autumn of 2021. These included leading researchers in the field, representatives of the churches in England, Early Years specialists and practitioners in preschool faith settings. In addition, where relevant, one-to-one conversations were held with key individuals. This network provided a forum to share ideas and a quick response to questions raised by the literature and visits to the toddler groups. The consultation process generated interdisciplinary debate about the nature of spiritual flourishing in young children, the need for clarity of the definition of spirituality and faith, and a need for greater awareness across disciplines of the capacity and capabilities of the very young child.

The third element of the scoping study involved research visits to five church toddler groups from across England, including Anglican, Free Church, and Salvation Army. The

groups were selected from suggestions by children's ministry advisors. Each visit was set up in consultation with the toddler group leader. The visits aimed to observe the environment, and the engagement of children and parents in the setting, to speak with leaders, parents, and church leaders about their perceptions and to explore the potential for further research. The visits were invaluable in helping shape the methods of the final research design, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of research in church toddler groups and setting the criteria for selecting toddler groups in future research.

The following section considers the findings drawn from all elements of scoping study. It looks at the three aims of the scoping study: what is known about children's spirituality, practice in church toddler groups in England and an evaluation of potential research methods in this field.

3. Young Children's Spirituality

An understanding of how young children encounter and engage with the spiritual dimension of life was sought from a review of recent literature. It was apparent that there was limited literature on very young children in a Christian setting; the focus was often on older children or within a secular setting. Understandably so, as spirituality is only partially observable; very young children will only manifest this indirectly. Nevertheless, several critical research studies from the last thirty years were identified that illuminate how young children engage with the spiritual dimension of life (Champagne 2003; Frady 2019; Giesenberg 2007; Goodliff 2013; Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008a; Mata-McMahon et al. 2019; Schein 2012; Price 2020). Three critical conceptual insights were identified: the relational nature of children's spirituality (Hay and Nye 2006; Nye and Hay 1996), how it is expressed in the here and now (Hyde 2008a), and thirdly, the importance of the environment (Schein 2012).

3.1. Relational

Several studies identified opportunities to develop relationships as the key to nurturing spirituality in children (Hay and Nye 2006; Champagne 2003; Hyde 2008a; Nye 2009; Schein 2012). From the very beginning of life, a sense of love and attachment provides the essential foundations for spiritual growth. Humans develop holistically through deep, meaningful connections with others, particularly in relationships with caring adults (Greenfield 2018). A young child shows the importance of this through loving peers, family, and friends (Giesenberg 2007). Through this foundational lens, children's spirituality can be understood through the I–Thou relationships of (Buber [1923] 2012) and the relationality of imago Dei (Price 2020). Hay and Nye (2006) identified the four dimensions of relational spirituality, child–self, child–other, child–world and child–God or the transcendent.

Hay and Nye (2006) identified three sensitivities as expressions of children's spiritual capabilities: awareness sensing, mystery sensing and value sensing. The child–self and other dimensions can be expressed through value-sensing, the experience of emotions and recognising feelings about what is of value (Hay and Nye 2006; Mata-McMahon 2016). The connection to the world can be seen in mystery-sensing, which involves a sense of awe and wonder, children's questioning, and curiosity as they encounter the world (Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008a; Mata-McMahon et al. 2020). Mystery-sensing can be seen as a child seeks to weave the threads of meaning and in focus on existential questions. Drawing on this wonder, children seek to make meaning and construct their worldview. Awareness sensing is about being in the here and now, being present in the moment. Children's experience of being related to others (Adams 2013; Champagne 2003) can point to the human capacity to transcend the here and now and reach out towards the transcendent, God, the something beyond the everyday. It was clear from the literature review that children's spirituality is by its very nature relational.

3.2. Being in the Here and Now

The spiritual dimension of a child's life is found in their lived experience, lived religion (Adams et al. 2015), in play, imagination, stillness, and silence. The importance

of the present moment, the being in the now, emerged from many studies (Hyde 2008b; Schein 2012; Champagne 2003). Spirituality inhabits ‘the being and is expressed through the being’ (p. 52); it is about allowing the child both to express its being-in-the-world and be constructed by the world, to enter the movement of its becoming, as a child (Champagne 2003). In empirical research with older children in Australian Catholic primary schools, Hyde (2008b) identified four characteristics of spirituality, the felt sense, the integrating awareness sense, weaving threads of meaning and spiritual questing. Weaving threads of meaning and spiritual questing speak to the mystery-sensing as described above. Felt sense is being conscious of bodily awareness, a primal, natural, and legitimate way of knowing (Hyde 2008a, 2018). This way of awareness, often revealed in children’s play, is a crucial area of research in children’s spirituality. Integrating awareness (Hyde 2008a) is more profound; it is where the immediate activity forms the foundation for an emerging consciousness, which can be expressed in ‘free-flowing’ conversation (p. 104) or through silence. It may provide a foundation for a connection to the ‘Other’.

There is a need to be attentive to the many ways this is expressed through qualities or dispositions such as imagination, and creativity and activities such as play, and silence. Each child has unique dispositions, basic and complex (Schein 2014), which are nurtured by moments of awe and wonder. Such spiritual moments are fleeting, spontaneous and ephemeral. Activities such as play are how children make sense of the world, and a child’s spirituality is often expressed through creative play, drawing, and painting (Adams 2013; Giesenberg 2007). Frady (2019) and Hyde (2010) in different ways employed Godly Play to explore children’s spirituality in faith settings. Silence connects to ‘the very heart of being and therefore to the spiritual realm’ (Gellel and Calleja 2022, p. 428). The spiritual engagement of the youngest child is seen in the moments of stillness, how the child is engaged in the here and now. Price’s (2020) research revealed how nonverbal children’s relationships are expressed and formed through the ‘languages’ of silence. Children express their spirituality in the here and now, through observable dispositions and activities.

3.3. Environment

Several research studies (Casson et al. 2020; Hay and Nye 2006; Hyde 2008a; Schein 2012) have highlighted the contribution the environment makes to the spiritual flourishing of young children. Early childhood pedagogic approaches, including the Italian Reggio Emilia identify the environment as a third teacher; the arrangement and use of space is critical (Strong-Wilson and Ellis 2007). Church buildings can offer a spiritual space for children as the building itself may engender a sense of awe and wonder. Sagberg (2008) cites Steinholt’s (2007) research in which she observed young children (three and under) transcend time and space in search for meaning in a Norwegian Cathedral chapel.

Children explored the chapel with all senses and their whole bodies. They played through movement, song and dance and some roles play also took place. Some areas in the tiny chapel seemed to attract special interest: the window niches, one in the south, the other in the north. (Sagberg 2008, p. 359)

The boundaries between sacred and secular space are fuzzy. What characterises a space as sacred is often the rituals, stories and traditions associated with the space (Hamilton and Spicer 2016). One way of understanding children’s engagement with sacred space is to look at the rituals that happen within (Sasso Eisenberg 2019). Another way is to consider the setting of the Godly Playroom as a sacred space. Hyde’s (2022) analysis of Godly Play sessions revealed the critical role of the adult storytellers in enabling such an environment.

The impact of the natural environment and the opportunities for experiences of awe and wonder in nature has been highlighted in several research studies (Schein 2014; Greenfield 2018; Kemp and Josephidou 2021). When children are allowed to engage with nature outdoors and indoors, they begin to build a connection with nature, a way to stimulate and sustain a child’s spiritual development (Schein 2014). Robinson’s (2019) research has highlighted the importance of nature for children’s spirituality and the need for further research into how this can be nurtured through encounters in early years

settings. The literature raises the question of how much the environment contributes to children's spiritual flourishing within church toddler groups. How much attention is paid to children's encounters with the church building or grounds?

4. Church Toddler Groups in England and Wales

The existing research literature is a fruitful source of information about concepts and ways of understanding children's spirituality. However, all the studies had limitations regarding answering the research question of how very young children flourish spiritually in church toddler groups. Hyde (2008a) conducted his research with older children in Catholic education, Champagne (2003) looked at 3–6-year-olds in a secular setting, and Price's (2020) study was with severely disabled children. Apart from Frady's (2019) study, when studies have focused on the very young child (Schein 2012; Goodliff 2013) it has been within secular settings. None of the studies investigated the child's spirituality in a faith environment with parents and carers present. Therefore, there is a need for an empirical study with very young children in a Christian setting, which functions as a nexus for church and family.

Church toddler groups offer an opportunity to focus on the nurture of the very young. The groups are 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. Typically, each weekly session lasts for ninety minutes, and groups range in size from ten to sixty parents, carers, and child. They are a community resource with an open invitation to families in the local area and popular with parents. Indeed, *Talking Toddlers* (2020) concluded that 74% of the 1182 parents of under-fives sampled had attended a church-run activity in the previous year, either a church toddler group or preschool playgroup. This section draws on recent church-commissioned research on church toddler groups and researcher visits to five toddler groups to explore how the groups express Christianity. Faith in the Nexus (Casson et al. 2020) highlighted the importance of the church primary school for families. It is key to the nexus of family, school, and church, facilitating encounters with faith and the spiritual dimension of life. The church toddler group fulfils a similar function for families with very young children, bringing together families, the church and local community. However, it is much neglected in research, policy, and practice (*Talking Toddlers* 2020; Hewitt 2016). This points to a wider issue of lack of attention to the faith or spirituality of very young children in the church. The focus has been on the parents as primary educator of the child, although parents' understanding of that role is ever-changing (Holmes 2022). Traditionally, where the church has become directly involved in children's faith development, the focus has been on school-age children, the Sunday School movement in the Church of England (Griffiths 2009), and the First Communion program in the Catholic Church. The development of an age-segregated approach in Sunday worship (Griffiths 2009) has also unintentionally resulted in neglecting the very young child.

An Expression of Christianity as Belonging, Behaving, and Believing

One useful way of looking at church toddler groups is through the religious dimensions, of belonging, behaving, and believing (Day 2011; Saroglou et al. 2020). Although the believing dimension is problematic with very young children, perhaps this should be understood as a refocusing on religious practices, rituals, and scripture. A sense of belonging is visible in the parents' perceptions, who spoke of a sense of community and being like a family. Many users attend weekly and over several years with all the children in the family. Church toddler groups are welcoming spaces within a Christian environment; there is a focus on welcoming and hosting parents in a supportive manner. Many users of church toddler groups had little or no other connection with the church community (*Talking Toddlers* 2020; Hewitt 2016; research visits) and yet however tenuous there was a sense of belonging through engagement with the toddler group. For some leaders, the groups offered a missional opportunity, a positive encounter with church and a steppingstone into a church community. Church-commissioned research (*Talking Toddlers* 2020; Hewitt 2016) concluded that there was a need to encourage

and support toddler group leaders to become more confident and engage with families in distinctively Christian ways.

The behaving dimension was visible in the focus on the pastoral care of both parents and children. For some leaders and volunteers, there was the prioritisation of community outreach and care, pastoral care for the local community. Toddler groups are an important community resource that is inclusive and accessible, attractive to many who cannot afford other forms of childcare. Some groups also offer access to a food bank and act as a signpost to other social care resources in the community. The research visits highlighted the welcoming hospitality often characterised by offering refreshments and providing children with a wide selection of toys. The visits also offer insights into how leaders and volunteers intentionally model Christian values, encourage kindness and sharing among the children. Intergenerational engagement was important in these groups, relationships between parent and child, were complemented by connections with the volunteers from the church who were often an older generation. The focus of church toddler groups is on the family, not solely on provision for the child. The generational mix is further strengthened by the presence of the volunteers from the church community, who are retired, often grandparents themselves. This is an aspect worthy of further investigation; toddler groups offer a rich environment to explore the nurture of spiritual engagement of the very young child in an intergenerational setting.

The most contentious dimension expressed through the groups was engagement with Christian practices and scripture. The nature of explicit Christian activity within the session varies from group to group. Most groups will pause at some point for a Bible story, and communal singing led by either the leader or a volunteer. The parents welcomed intentionally Christian activities and were happy to stay and for their children to be engaged; inevitably, this sample was biased as those who disagreed with this approach would not attend these groups. The leaders remarked on opportunities for faith development by providing a Bible story and worship songs. There was no evidence of purposeful attention to the spiritual development or engagement of the child. There is a need to investigate the mix of motives expressed by parents and volunteers, to explore further parents' sense of belonging to the group and the nature of the explicit Christian engagement.

There were necessarily a limited number of visits possible with a scoping study. However, they did highlight some of the challenges of research in this area: the limited time, often only 90 min in one week, the informality of the sessions, and irregular attendance in some groups—they are run on a drop-in basis so clientele can differ week by week. What was notably absent from the research studies or conversations with leaders and volunteers was attention to the provision for the spiritual nurturing of very young children. This opens opportunities for research activities, such as observing very young children in a sacred space, the interactions between parent and child, parents and church leaders and volunteers.

The question of the inclusivity of these toddler groups needs to be considered. There is potentially a tension between being open to all and intentionally or implicitly offering opportunities to encounter Christian faith tradition. The ways in which groups navigate this tension will provide interesting insights into an understanding of their mission. One way to address this issue would be to distinguish the intentional provision within the group from what is implicit within the group's ethos.

5. Fruitful Research Methods

The final focus of the scoping study was to identify how a large-scale empirical research study could be carried out. The two previous sections have highlighted the lack of research about the spiritual flourishing of the very young child in Christian settings and the potential of church toddler groups as key nexus sites to investigate this. The scoping study also spotlighted the challenges of undertaking research with very young children in the field of spirituality in a Christian setting. Three of the main challenges identified were: researching children in the early stages of expressing themselves verbally, the ephemeral nature of spirituality and the confusion of understanding of spiritual and faith nurture. Investigating

children's spirituality within a faith setting is not without its challenges. Adults are often unclear about the language of spirituality and faith and may place little value on this.

The literature review and consultation with the network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers revealed that research methods that explore young children's perspectives and experiences are now well-established within early childhood studies research. Such methods are attentive to the multiple ways, the 'hundred languages' (Malaguzzi 1987; Hewett 2001) including silence as a 'language of its own' (Price 2020, p. 77) in which very young children express themselves.

The Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001) incorporates multiple methods including close observation, photo elicitation, informal conversation, and other stimuli. The mosaic approach has been adapted and developed and is now widely respected within the research community. Existing research exploring young children's spirituality has drawn upon various aspects of the approach, recognising that it is well-tested and accepted as trustworthy, rigorous, and having situated validity (Mukherji and Albon 2018; Einarsdottir 2005). The critical elements of this approach (Clark 2005) fit well in a study of the spiritual flourishing of the youngest child. The approach acknowledges the different voices or languages of children, treats children as experts and agents in their own lives and is reflexive, includes children, practitioners, and parents in reflecting on meanings, and addresses the question of interpretation.

Several studies have emphasised the fundamental role of observation. Ethnographic observation requires the researcher to participate in and observe people's daily lives for a period, watching, listening, and asking questions (Atkinson and Hammersley 1998). Participant observation is characterised by developing rapport, practising epoché (setting aside our assumptions and beliefs), maintaining empathy, and critically paying attention (Harvey 2021). A critical issue for the participant observer is reflexivity, reflection on their positioning within the field. Harvey (2003) suggests a way to mitigate the insider/outsider debate is to employ the notion of 'guesthood'. The researcher is accepted as a guest. Harvey (2003, p. 143) argues that 'the host-guest relationship includes "us"; it offers a more equal and respectful relationship. One challenge common to religious research is that 'it involves only periodic or regular observation of significant events or processes' (Harvey 2021). Nevertheless, this method has been fruitfully employed, for example, in Ridgely's (2017) observation of First Communion classes. Therefore, participant observation which allows for an in-depth holistic understanding of the toddler group must form part of the mosaic of methods.

Alongside participant observation, another critical method fruitfully employed is the attentive observation of the child (Clark 2005). Champagne (2003) conducted a phenomenological research project investigating children's spirituality in daily life experience of preschoolers (3 to 6 years old); her method was attentive observation to the children's words, facial expressions, attitudes, and gestures. Price (2020) prioritised the observational in her research with severely disabled children. She describes her method as 'to be with them in their 'ordinary' of that moment'. Price (2020) adopted a contemplative stance which involves active attentive listening, watchfulness and waiting. Alongside ethnographic observation detailed attentive observation of the child is required. An implication for any research study is whether one researcher can undertake both or whether two researchers are needed to capture both the holistic view of the group and the individual engagement of the child.

In any research with children the focus must be on capturing the child's voice as authentically as possible. Researchers must be sensitive to power issues and address the issue of consent. The process of assent and dissent can be made clear to the youngest children and must be respected (Einarsdottir et al. 2009). Several researchers have developed creative consent/dissent artefacts; for example, Price (2020) employed innovative methods in her research with nonverbal children to convey the sense of the duration of the research process.

Researching the 'hundred languages' of children requires a variety of methods. Potential other methods to build into a research design include semi-structured interviews (Clark 2005). These have proved a valuable tool in previous Nexus research projects generating rich seams of data (Casson et al. 2017, 2020). Child-led tours of the setting (Clark 2005),

photo elicitation (Einarsdottir 2005) offer an insight into the child's perceptions of the group. An interesting method to explore further to gain insights into the spiritual engagement of very young children is an intervention method such as storytelling using artefacts to enable the child to tell a story (Davis 2007). Frady (2019) and Hyde (2010) employed a similar approach using Godly Play.

This scoping study highlighted the challenges of research with children in the early stages of expressing themselves verbally and illuminated the opportunities. It became clear that employing a mosaic of methods is essential when researching young children. A similar multi-method approach is needed to capture how adults understand children's spirituality. The data generated by the different methods can be layered up to provide insights into the opportunities offered by the church toddler group and the response of children and adults.

6. Discussion

The rapid scoping study provided an overview of the landscape of research on very young children's spirituality in faith settings. Three crucial issues became apparent. There is a lack of robust empirical research on the church's early years provision. Secondly, church toddler groups are uniquely placed as a space to explore children's spirituality. Thirdly, the review revealed the value and potential opportunities for fruitful interdisciplinary research. There are rich learning opportunities with mutual benefits, bringing together recent work in Early Years Studies with Christian research and practice.

There is little empirical research on very young children in a Christian setting, such as church toddler groups. Research about children's spirituality has focussed on older children, often in an educational setting. Empirical studies that have addressed the younger age group have been conducted in a formal setting, such as a nursery or playgroup, not in a setting where parents and children are together. Research undertaken within a Christian setting, such as church toddler groups, has focused on the adult's engagement with the church or the nurture of a child's faith. The scoping study allowed us to identify the gaps that need to be addressed, critically the lack of attention to 'listening' to the languages of the very young children as they develop spiritually with a church community and family.

Church toddler groups are a unique nexus for the very young child; they provide a fertile ground for researching young children's spirituality. They are an inclusive space provided by the church, that actively welcomes families unconnected or loosely connected to church. They function as a nexus, bringing together families and faith communities. There is a need for further research to explore how the toddler group space functions as an intergenerational space for families to encounter faith and spirituality. Critically, for this study, how they do, or could, contribute to the spiritual flourishing of very young children needs to be understood, along with whether the church toddler group engenders a robust sense of belonging to a Christian community.

The scoping study revealed that there is a fruitful partnership to be developed between Early Childhood Studies and research in children's spirituality and faith. An interdisciplinary approach would enable Early Childhood Studies to learn from a Christian understanding of children's spirituality. For example, church ministry with families and young children could benefit from insights from early childhood education pedagogy; they could adapt approaches to recognise the capacity and capabilities of the very young child. Early Childhood Studies would benefit from great attention to the spiritual development of the child, an area much neglected in early years policy and practice in England. There is a need to further explore how one can inform and support understanding and future insight for the other.

The three elements of the scoping study were essential to address the research aim to establish what is known about young children's spirituality, the practice of church toddler groups and effective research methods. The literature review provided insights into academic debates, which could then be discussed and reflected on with other researchers and policymakers and practitioners in the field. The research visit element provided

insights to the research team of the how toddler groups function in practice, but also enabled them to bring the learning from the literature and the consultants and envisage different ways in which research could be undertaken in the toddler group setting.

The challenge for a research study exploring spiritual flourishing of very young children in church toddler groups is then bringing together what is known about children’s spirituality, identifying where this could be evidenced in church toddler groups and selecting fruitful methods. The research team sought to address this challenge by developing a research framework. The aim was to devise a framework that could facilitate an exploration of children’s relational spirituality in toddler groups, and capture data on the provision of church toddler groups, and children’s response to the provision. A study based on such a framework could offer new understanding to research community and the church on how an environment that nurtures the spiritual flourishing of very young children can be developed.

The basis for the framework (set out in Table 2) is the four relational dimensions of a child’s spirituality, self, others, world, and God (column 3). These four dimensions were deemed necessary for unpacking young children’s spirituality within a faith setting. The next step was to identify what could be captured as evidence of these relationships. The self, others and world are potentially more easily visible. The challenge will be to interpret the engagement with God/the transcendental. An alternative option for the framework would be to interpret the child–God relationship as underpinning the other three rather than treat it as a separate dimension. This latter option needs to be seriously considered; it could potentially be a way to recognise that spirituality is often only expressed indirectly. Column 2 outlines the data that could be captured as evidence of a child’s expression of spiritual engagement. On the other side, Column 4 outlines the data needed to detail and evaluate the toddler group provision. Columns 1 and 5 show the potential methods that could be employed to capture that data. The framework facilitates the design of a research study with a focus on a better understanding of what contributes to the spiritual flourishing of very young children.

Table 2. Research framework—Spiritual Flourishing (SF) in church toddler groups (CTG).

What Does Spiritual Flourishing Look Like among the Youngest Children		SF of the Child	How Do Church Toddler Groups Support Spiritual Flourishing?	
Potential methods	Evidence of the child’s response	Relational dimensions of spirituality	Evidence of intentional and implicit provision and family engagement	Potential methods
Attentive observation Interviews Child-led tours	Bodily awareness and absorption (flow), stillness, creativity, imagination	Self (the child)	Who they are—age, demographics	Participant observation Mini online survey Semi- structured interviews
Attentive observation Storytelling (faith/spiritual) Interviews	Empathy, care, valuing	Other (parents, siblings, adults at the setting)	Why they come	Participant observation Mini survey Interviews
Attentive observation Storytelling Photo elicitation Artefacts	Curiosity, questioning about their place in the world	Environment	Indoor/outdoor Natural/manufactured Sacred space, Quiet space, Social space	Observation Interviews
Attentive observation Photo elicitation	Awe, wonder, mystery sensing	God/the transcendental	Sacred stories/songs, rituals, symbols, beauty	Interviews

The scoping study has revealed the many challenges of researching the spiritual flourishing of young children in church toddler groups. It has highlighted an urgent need for research into how the church community can contribute to the spiritual flourishing of the young child, an area much neglected in practice, policy, and research. However, the study has also revealed opportunities and the rich potential for a research study in

this area. There is clear value in building on the Faith in the Nexus research with primary school-aged children and exploring the church toddler group as a potential nexus for the very young child. Without doubt, bringing together early years studies, and Christian education researchers, alongside policymakers, and practitioners is mutually beneficial, and better contributes to the spiritual wellbeing of children. In conclusion, this paper has shown that an interdisciplinary approach to research into the spiritual flourishing of young children is essential.

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