

FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Spiritual Wellbeing and the Implications for Spiritual Leadership

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Addressing Children's Spiritual Wellbeing Needs

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:

How can we address a child's spiritual wellbeing needs?

How can we encourage all in the school, home and church to attend to the spiritual wellbeing of children?

Key findings from the research:

Children search for meaning through questions: they desire a sense of belonging, seek out reflection time and space, and value relationships. All these aspects contribute to spiritual wellbeing.

There needs to be strategic prioritisation in school, home and church of children's spiritual wellbeing.



What is clear from our research is that no one way is sufficient.

A variety of approaches, from different people and different spheres of life, are needed to create an environment in which spiritual wellbeing can flourish.

Concern for the spiritual wellbeing of all children should be the main focus for the Nexus.



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

What are the children's spiritual needs?

We have certain children that know when they need to calm down and they'll take themselves to the reflective area (Staff).

Responding to children's talk about faith is challenging; adults may struggle with how to respond, avoid or close down such conversations (Faith in the Nexus p.13).

By the seat in the little waiting area quite often you'll see a child picking a heart and they'll read it and then hang it on the little [prayer] tree. (Staff)

He comes home and asks what was there before God. How do you answer that, you know what I mean? He's really, really deep into it. He wants to know answers. He's asking questions that I can't really answer. (Parent)

RE was perceived to make an important contribution to stimulating the questions in the home. However, many parents, clergy and other stakeholders were not aware of the depth of study and the level of discussions that pupils engage within RE.

(Faith in the Nexus p.23)



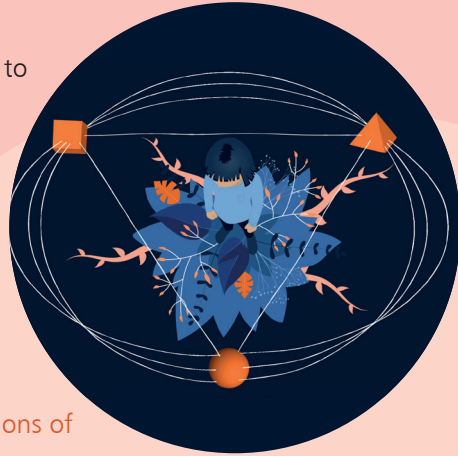
SPIRITUAL WELLBEING

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

How do children attend to their spiritual wellbeing?

A theme that emerged across all aspects of our research was that children are active agents in their spiritual development and wellbeing.

- Children seek reflection times and spaces.
- Reflection time and space offers opportunities to talk to God.
- They often use reflection time when they feel sad.
- Children spoke of going to their reflection space to think of or pray for someone who had died.



There may be differences in language and framing of prayer and reflection between schools and between home and school, but pupils' appreciation of this time and expressions of need was common across all schools.

If they've got anything sad on their mind I'll just sit them down and say "Do you want to share?" It's just like it's a place where they can feel safe and nothing bad is going to happen whilst they're there. (Staff)

If we get sad and..just want to be alone we can pray up to God...

I do pray when I get a bit sad because it kind of makes me feel a bit more... it makes you feel safe.

I once went in there when my cat died. It just helped me being alone.

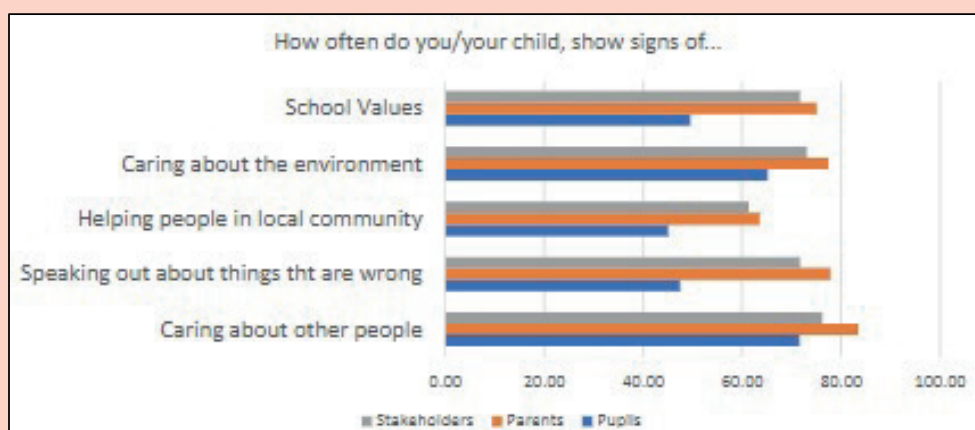


Relationships with others

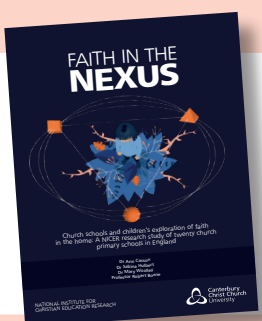
Spiritual development is marked by changes, the most visible of which are changes in behaviours. Key relationships are needed to encourage and sustain those changes.

Developing behaviours based on Christian values such as forgiveness and compassion can be encouraged in a diversity of ways. Caring for others through involvement in community action or raising money for others are activities common in many schools.

Church primary schools do facilitate opportunities to explore faith in action in the home, and parents are fully supportive of this. It is an area perhaps neglected by the local churches.



- The bar chart highlights the priority given to everyday behaviours.
- Caring about other people' is the behaviour observed more often.
- The analysis revealed that caring about other people is more strongly associated with a connection to school than a connection to the local church.



FURTHER READING

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

Report references:

Spiritual wellbeing. pp.62-63

Relationships. pp.77-79

Conclusion. pp.84-91

Children's spiritual wellbeing in the home

Spiritual wellbeing at home includes:

- Concern for others
- Wondering about creation
- Reflecting on their behaviour
- Thinking about and/or praying to God.
- Thinking about and/or praying for grandparents who had died.

I would lie on my bed or in the garden in my hidey hole.

Children's description of reflection activities at home echoed the practice in school:

- Prayer tables
- Prayer gardens
- Images/posters

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



Children's desire for solitude, for time to think is perhaps not sufficiently recognised in home, school or church.

How do we strategically prioritise children's spiritual wellbeing?

The findings of our report provides a strong impetus to ensure that children have the time and space to explore faith and spiritual life in the Nexus of home, school and church.

There is a need to:

- Overcome the challenges associated with articulating the term 'spirituality.'
- Establish a shared spiritual language that is understood across the Nexus.
- Create an understanding of the spiritual that is inclusive.
- Identify various opportunities of facilitating meaningful reflections and spiritual development.
- Establish space for discovery, wonder, stillness and relationships.

For children's spirituality to flourish and mature fully, it is important that these strategies apply to all spheres of a child's life.

What does the Nexus look like when we place the child's spiritual needs at the centre?

A welcome and inclusive Nexus focuses on the spiritual needs of the child and understands the diversity of self-understanding that different components of the Nexus have.

Within the Nexus there needs to be:

- Spaces for reflection, thoughts and prayer are essential for spiritual wellbeing.
- Frequent opportunities for children to explore and question.
- Opportunities to connect the spiritual and faith life of the school with the natural world.
- Investment in study of the Bible through good religious education and Bible gifting opportunities.
- Encounters with experiences of lived religion.
- A framing of the life of the school around the festivals and seasons of the whole year.
- Encouragement of children to be active agents of their spiritual and/or faith development.

Questions for discussion

As Foundation Governors, Parish Council members, School Heads, teachers and associate staff, what leadership role can we play in supporting the spiritual wellbeing of our children?

As leaders in our own context, what do we mean by 'spiritual wellbeing'?

How would you define spiritual wellbeing in fewer than 20 words?

Can you say that in words that a child (and an adult) can understand?

How might you use your definition to plan ways to help children's faith to flourish in your context?

As leaders in our own context, how do we help...

Everyone to share in this meaning of spiritual wellbeing?

Parents to gain the confidence to allow children to ask questions about faith and to respond by standing 'shoulder to shoulder' with them and exploring together?

As leaders in our own context how do we work together with other leaders in the nexus of church, home and school?

Are we speaking the same language when we talk about spiritual wellbeing?

Are we clear about how we each perform a different but vital role in helping our children explore difficult questions and develop a resilient faith?