

ONLINE SUNDAY SCHOOLS DURING C-19



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In this issue:

- Key findings of c-19 Sunday School research
- How the findings will be used
- Areas of ongoing research



Researching Online Sunday Schools

We wanted to find out what was being provided by churches for school-aged children (ages 5-11years) whilst churches were physically closed.

During May and June, a review was carried out of the online content for this age range during lockdown. We investigated the form of Bible knowledge and spirituality that was being communicated, the presentation style and learning environment, and how relationships were developed during the sessions. An online survey was also carried out amongst UK churches. The findings were discussed in focus groups and then presented in a report to help churches to most effectively support children, parents and carers during this time.

What issues were churches facing?

- > Availability of technology skills and resources to provide online material.
- > Isolation of children accessing the content from their homes, sometimes unable to ask questions or gain support or advice in their faith experiences.
- > Very little feedback from families about whether the content meets their needs.
- > Making contact with children often has many barriers (willingness/time of parents and carers, availability of technology in the home, child's desire to use technology to make contact)
- > Safeguarding needs addressing differently in the online context.
- > Discipleship has become the main focus of many churches, as mission amongst children is incredibly challenging.

“it’s been hard to know if what we are doing is what our church families want and need. This report really helps us with that”

- a volunteer children’s leader

Inclusive, impartial and confidential

The research captured thoughts and experiences from a wide range of people and contexts. Participants felt able to speak freely and openly, and without fear of offending anyone because the university impartial and unbiased. The research was overseen by the LHU Ethics Committee, ensuring that it was carried out ethically, including confidentiality and anonymity for participants and an appropriate approach to analysis of the data.

How will these findings be used?

Full report is available at www.NurturingYoungFaith.org.

*Many thanks to all of the churches who responded to our online survey.
Thanks also to those who participated in the focus groups, to discuss the key findings.*

Key observations about teaching style:

- 85% affirmed and reinforced children's faith.
- 64% encouraged spiritual growth. Conversely 36% did not encourage the children to grow and develop in their faith. This could have long term consequences as the pandemic continues—if children remain static in their faith they may start to lose interest.
- 60% presented the material in a generic way, rather than equipping the children to apply the teaching to their own personal circumstances and express their faith in their own unique way.
- 93% did not include any quiet space or reflective time. During pandemic times it is especially important to model to the children the importance of "Be still and know that I am God."
- 91% presented the material as factual instruction, rather than seeking to engage the child's curiosity and wonderings to help them to explore it for themselves. Only 4% used a collaborative style of walking alongside the child supporting their exploration of Biblical truths.
- There was very little 'audience participation' in the Bible stories, with the majority having children still and passive during sessions.

Practicalities

The videos ranged from 3-45 minutes long. The majority (94%) were single videos, although a small number were a series of short videos. The majority (81%) presented their session in the style of a friend to the child, and all of the churches conveyed a sense of valuing the child's faith.

Findings—Spirituality

76% showed a good balance between inward and outward expression of faith.

70% enabled the child to see God as trustworthy amidst chaos.

62% included prayer. This is perhaps a missed opportunity for the remaining 38% to model prayer.

44% explicitly encouraged the child to connect with God themselves.

Areas for reflection

- > Are you speaking into a vacuum, where the children have no knowledge or experience of faith? If not, can you be aware of the children's existing faith experience so that your ongoing content is targeted to their specific needs and next steps.
- > Do you want to cuddle them, coax them or convert them? Being clear about your aims will help you to streamline your approach accordingly.
- > How can you encourage them to interact and engage during your sessions so that they are not passive consumers? Can you convey a sense of collaborating with the child in exploring together?
- > How can you facilitate the child's relational connection with their church community?

Opportunities to be involved

We would love to hear your experiences of church and faith during lockdown. Please complete this short, anonymous online survey to share your thoughts: <https://lhubos.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/parentcarers-views-child>

Please share this survey with as many church-going parents and carers as possible, so that we capture a broad range of responses.

If you know of any good ideas or ways that churches are helping children to feel connected to their church family during these pandemic restrictions, please email us at youngfaith@hope.ac.uk. We would love to share these ideas with others!