

It's just the Toddler group

Toddler groups and mission



THE CHURCH
OF ENGLAND
EDUCATION OFFICE





TODDLER GROUPS
are one of the
BEST WAYS
The Church of England
— CAN REACH —
young families

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“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes a humble place – becoming like this child – is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.”

Matthew 18:1–5 (TNIV)

Toddler groups are amongst the most exciting and significant starting places for mission for both adults and children.

It is estimated that between a third and a half of all children in this country, aged under 3, regularly attend a church run toddler group.

Toddler groups thrive because there are many people dedicated to providing a safe, caring and welcoming environment where parents, grandparents and other carers, along with their infants and toddlers can begin to experience the Christian faith.

There are countless individuals and churches to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for their dedication, love and sheer hard work running toddler groups. Many people in churches today can trace the beginnings of their own journey of faith to an initial contact through a local toddler group. So, to all those who have helped run toddler groups, we say ‘thank you’.

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In 2016, Church of England research identified the following questions related to running toddler groups, which we will explore further in this booklet:

Missional opportunities

What are they?
Are we maximising them?
How can we best maximise them?

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Christian distinctiveness

Are our groups distinctive?
In what ways?
How can we improve this?

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Positioning within the church

How do churches view their toddler groups?
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Are toddler groups part of church strategy?

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Support

In what ways can toddler groups offer support and be supported?
How can toddler group leaders best be supported in their roles?

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Nurturing faith journeys

What opportunities are there for toddler groups to encourage and nurture faith both within the group and in the home?
How can this be done appropriately for both the children and their parents?

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Missional opportunities

What are they?

Are we maximising them?

How can we best maximise them?



Toddler groups provide the church with the opportunity to impact and transform individual lives, families and the entire community.

Just imagine half of the young families in your area came to your church every week! Research¹ has found that 52% of under-4s in England (and, of course their adult carers) attend a Church-led toddler group.

Every week, parents and their children are coming into our churches: they share food and laughter together; they experience support and care; and they are happy to participate in Biblical crafts, the reading of Bible stories, the singing of Christian songs and even the saying of prayers!

The missional opportunities presented to the church by toddler groups is significant, but how do we make the most of this unique opportunity to develop lifelong relationships and faith connections?

Find out more about mission possibilities with this video and set of articles from The Great Commission: www.greatcommission.co.uk/the-possibilities-of-a-toddler-group

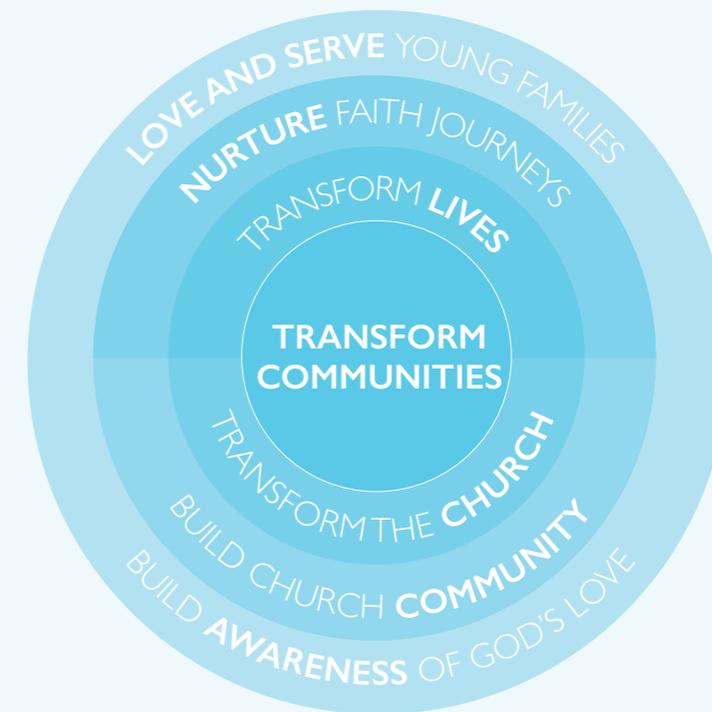
The starting point is to know, understand and seek to maximise the missional opportunities that your group offers you:

Begin by **loving and serving**, building relationships through which you build people's awareness of God's love for them.

Listen to people's needs, offering care, hope and unconditional love in response.

Nurture faith journeys by sharing the story of your faith journey and inviting people into your church community.

Through this intentional loving, sharing, praying and serving, **seek the transformation** of lives, the church and the community.





“The whole church supports the toddler group – they are aware of it and hear the stories. We have more than 400 children on our books. Apart from the primary school and Tesco, we are the next biggest thing in the community – not our Sunday church but our childcare. The impact we have on the community because of that is huge.”

“This group was recommended by a friend, who introduced me to this church, and the children love it. I come to the Tuesday toddler group and I also come to Church Café on Thursday, church on Sunday and Heaven’s Kitchen to do cooking and Bible study. The children come to the after-school club and the Vine Group on Wednesday - that’s Bible stories and singing. I’m here at church nearly every day and my partner is now the deputy churchwarden. We went to church before we moved here, but we were never involved with church. This church is a huge part of the local community.”

Missional groups...

- Have an intentional strategy for the direction of the group and review progress regularly;
- Are distinctively Christian;
- Lay foundations of faith with toddlers by introducing them to Bible stories, characters and practices (such as prayer) as well as Christian values;
 - Nurture the faith of adults through toddler group activities and relationship building, supporting them with prayer and through invitations to other church activities, courses or services;
 - Consider the toddler group to be an integral part of the church community, rather than a separate outreach type activity, and build the worshipping church community by encouraging them to engage with the toddler group.



Christian distinctiveness

Are our groups distinctive?

In what ways?

How can we improve this?

Most toddler groups are active in loving and serving young families. However, whilst groups may be filled with a real sense of God's love, it may not always be apparent to the users where this is coming from and what motivates it.

Without Christian distinctiveness there is little difference between church groups and well-meaning secular groups.

Very welcoming and thoughtful
 FRIENDLY CHURCH-RUN
toddler group
lovely sense of togetherness
 CHRISTIAN GROUP

What does Christian distinctiveness look like in a toddler group?

"I didn't know it was run by a church; I didn't know that it was a church-run group; you can't tell it's run by church."

"This feels like a family. I'm not a churchgoer ... although there are religious parts, it's very subtle and it is not pushed in your face. But you are aware it is a Christian group. There is a lovely sense of togetherness, and people are very willing to help each other – that comes from the leaders. They convey family and community. I really like the vibe here, it's very inclusive."

It **WASN'T** very
friendly
 AND THE
 church part was
RAMMED
down your throat

The group could
 DO WITH MORE
structure
 it's a bit **SAD** and
A BIT TIRED

YOU ARE AWARE
it is a
CHRISTIAN GROUP
and there is a
 lovely sense of
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Very welcoming and thoughtful
 BUT WOULDN'T KNOW
this was a
CHURCH-RUN
toddler group

↑
 BE DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN

LOVE AND SERVE YOUNG FAMILIES →

Scary groups

It **WASN'T** very
friendly
AND THE
church part was
RAMMED
down your throat

“All the songs were religious and there weren't many toys. None of the helpers spoke to me or my friend.”

“They made all the children pray. All the songs were religious – I didn't know any songs, so I couldn't help my child join in. There were a small number of people there who all knew each other. We just sat in silence. People only spoke to tell us the cost and let us know that there would be juice.”

Could do better groups

The group could
DO WITH MORE
structure
it's a bit **SAD** and
A BIT TIRED

“There weren't many toys, and those that were there looked a bit tired and in need of a good clean.”

“I'm not sure the leaders really wanted to be there; the atmosphere as soon as you walked in was a bit stale and lifeless. I didn't really want to stay.”

Safe groups

*Very welcoming
and thoughtful*
BUT WOULDN'T KNOW
this was a
CHURCH-RUN
toddler group

"It was a lovely group and the leaders were lovely people: very kind. I'm not sure it has a connection to the church though; perhaps they just rent the hall from the church?"

Ideal groups

YOU ARE AWARE
it is a
CHRISTIAN GROUP
*and there is a
lovely sense of
togetherness*

"I was a little concerned about coming along as I'm not a churchgoer, but you are not judged at all; they are lovely people and really welcome you."

"Although there are religious parts, it's very subtle and it is not pushed in your face. But you are aware it is a Christian group. This feels like a family and it's very inclusive."

"This group was recommended as being friendly and welcoming. I was a non-churchgoer but now go along to the family services and I've started helping at Messy Church too. My husband is not religious but he comes along to family services. It's nice for my daughter to grow up feeling part of the church family."

Distinctively Christian groups...

“I would expect the church to be mentioned at a church toddler group; it’s in a church.”

“I am a Buddhist. Being at a Christian group is not a problem for me. I don’t feel it’s imposed. I am welcomed with open arms. I like the Christian parts of the group and take it as a cultural rather than religious experience.”

- Can articulate and are clear and open about their Christian distinctiveness;
- Understand what it means to express their Christian distinctiveness;
- Are led by leaders and helpers who are open about their faith and willing to share their story of faith with those in the group;
- Include times of singing, story and prayers that introduce the children, and their parents/carers, to the Christian faith;
- Build and nurture a sense of Christian community within the group.



Positioning within the church

How do churches view their toddler groups?

What are the relationships between church and toddler group?

Are they part of church strategy?

Where does the mission of the toddler group fit within the vision and strategy of your church?

“To my shame, I saw it as unimportant, even trivial. I saw it as just a few mums gathered together to natter about kids’ stuff. Somehow I had segregated the group from the rest of the life and mission of the church. I visited the group one week to ask how many of those present attended church. I sort of knew that 80% of them didn’t and had assumed that most of them weren’t really interested. But when I asked the question, to my surprise, every single parent put their hand up.

I was shocked! In my confusion I asked ‘Which church?’ They looked at me as if I was mad and said in unison: ‘This one.’ Suddenly and unexpectedly I was forced to change my view of the group. Despite the fact that they were not yet believers, they saw themselves as part of the church.

I began to realise that the toddler group was not some fringe activity but, in the economy of God, a valuable part of His mission to our community. More people from the surrounding area attended this group every week than any other in the life of the church.”

As a church, we began to ask ourselves key questions:

- **What is the toddler group for?**
- **How can we deepen our relationships and draw those who attend further into the life of the church?**
- **How can we show greater love and support?**
- **How can we get to know the rest of their friends and families?**

To ensure suitable support for the toddler group, the church needs to recognise and celebrate the mission being undertaken by the toddler group and its leaders.

Adjustments can be made by the church leadership to raise the profile of the group and to inform the church about its development, its needs and its successes. If successful, everyone in the church should know about and be able to speak positively about the toddler group.

When church mission statements and action plans are developed, these should feature the mission of the toddler group and highlight how this is integrated with the wider mission of the church.

“Oh you just run the toddler group....that’s nice.”

Well, actually today we...

- provided a safe, fun and loving environment for 40 children and carers
- wiped tears of children and adults
- dealt with 3 first aid incidents
- celebrated as one child took their first steps
- filled in a universal credit form with a mum who’s life is falling apart
- counselled a mum whose child has refused to eat for 5 days then hugged her as we watched her toddler wolf down 2 pieces of toast with the other children
- gave out a food parcel to a family in need
- tried to advise another new mum on getting baby to sleep
- spread the gospel and yeah....

...just run the toddler group!....

And we’ll do it twice more tomorrow!



Building links between the church and community

Links and awareness can be built between the church and the toddler group through:

- Regularly communicating news, activities and events
- Offering invitations to engage and get involved
- Christenings and baptisms
- Messy Church services
- Toddler Praise services
- Who Let the Dads Out? groups for dads
- Starting a prayer group for parents of toddlers
- Starting a daytime faith exploration group with suitable arrangements made for childcare



Church rooted groups...

- Welcome newcomers by making it clear that the toddler group is an important part of the church community;
- Talk about the church when welcoming newcomers;
- Invite group members to special church activities, services, events or festivals;
- Are visited by the clergy, priests or ministers who provide a visible link to the wider ministry of the church;
- Provide a welcome pack. This could include information about: the group, relevant toddler/family services, baptism/marriage, seasonal services, other community activities, who's who, contacts and how to get help and advice. A welcome from clergy and other church leaders could also be included;
- Are prayed for within church services;
- Are profiled, promoted and valued alongside other missional ministries that the church runs.

Support

In what ways can toddler groups offer support and be supported?

How can toddler group leaders best be supported in their roles?

1 Support families

Create support networks for those who may be isolated; listen to and support individuals who may be going through difficult times, and demonstrate care – parenting can be an exhausting (but rewarding) task.

2 Support toddler group leaders

Honour their service; invest time in them; resource them for this mission and ministry; commission them for, and pray for them, in their role.

3 Support the community

Identify, understand and meet local needs. This might take you beyond the toddler group in to wider areas of ministry such as parenting courses, marriage courses, foodbank provision, campaigning or community activism. Through this, the toddler group becomes a catalyst for a wider programme of church-based mission and ministry.

“We tell mums to let go; ‘we are your safety valve’. They can cry on us.”

“We remember everyone’s names, even if we haven’t seen them for months.”

“This group helped me through a period of major postnatal depression.”

“If you’ve had a bad night then come here, you feel better. It livens you up. You can’t stay down when you are here.”

“I’ve lived here for most of my life and never really felt part of the community until coming to this group.”

It’s like coming home now; I know everyone. It feels like family.”



Toddler groups should seek to offer support in three ways

HOSPITALITY

Most groups serve tea, coffee and biscuits for the adults, with healthy snacks and drinks for the toddlers. Some groups provide homemade cakes each week or bake cakes for birthdays. Hospitality speaks of the love of God and the service of His church. Investing here speaks volumes.

In some groups breakfast or a full meal, including soup, pasta, fish fingers, fresh fruit, and yoghurt, is provided. In deprived areas this can be an important part of loving and serving the families and the local community.

How does the hospitality your group offers reflect the love of God and the service of His church? What room for development is there here?

“Eating is a big deal. We all sit around a big table to eat together, it’s extraordinary, and that for me makes it more sacramental, it has that sense about it. For all the world it looks like a mini Leonardo da Vinci [Last Supper] with tiny people”



Without a doubt, the most important question that can be asked is: how can the church support, value, encourage and resource the toddler group leaders to be more effective in their ministry?

1277 Make Them Count is the National Network of Toddler Groups with a Christian Ethos.

On average a UK child has just 1,277 days between birth and starting nursery education - and 1277 exists to support churches to make those days count.

Ideas and resources and support can be found online at: www.1277.org.uk

www.facebook.com/groups/1277makethemcount

1277: make them count
On average a UK child has just 1,277 days between birth and starting nursery education. Together, we want to 'make them count' for the children, for their families and for the toddler groups that they attend.

Stay in touch
Registering allows you to receive updates and access the latest resources for toddler group leaders.

Are you a church leader?
Join 1277 to discover how you, and the other estimated 27,000 churches who currently run toddler groups, can make the most of them.

National Day of Prayer
Find out more about getting churches across the nation to pray for toddler groups; how to get involved and resources to help.

Supportive groups...

- Build relationships with individuals;
- Foster relationship building between members of the group, to create a sense of family and community;
- Provide a good quality welcome to all, particularly newcomers;
- Offer generous hospitality;
- Understand and respond to the needs of young families;
- Care for the individuals and families within their groups;
- Value, care for, invest in and equip the group leaders and volunteers;
- Are led by people who are supported in their role;
- Build links with the wider community to enhance the services they provide – links to the local Children's Centre, NHS, Foodbank and other Christian charities.





Nurturing faith journeys

What opportunities are there for toddler groups to encourage and nurture faith both within the group and in the home?

How can this be done appropriately for both the children and their parents?

Young children are seeing many things for the first time. For them, there is a fascination and excitement over the smallest sights – a smooth stone, the switching on and off of a torch, the first daffodil. They express their spiritual awareness by their responses – stopping to stare, collecting objects, repeating an action that gets a response, sharing their discovery with an adult.

As children grow, they become used to all sorts of things around them and our culture tends to dull our spiritual sharpness. By the time we are adults, we need special occasions or exceptional sights to feel this spiritual awareness, unless we nurture it.

Young children need opportunities to explore and nurture their spiritual life and people to help them do this.

Toddler groups can play a pivotal role in providing these opportunities to toddlers and in equipping parents to continue to nurture this spiritual awareness and faith exploration in everyday life and experiences. Growing up in a Christian family is the biggest influencer on young people coming to faith, so helping parents to explore, nurture and grow faith in children as they grow up is an essential task of the church.

Age at coming to faith

Under 5 years	40%
5-10 years	16%
11-18 years	20%

Don't know

45-54 years

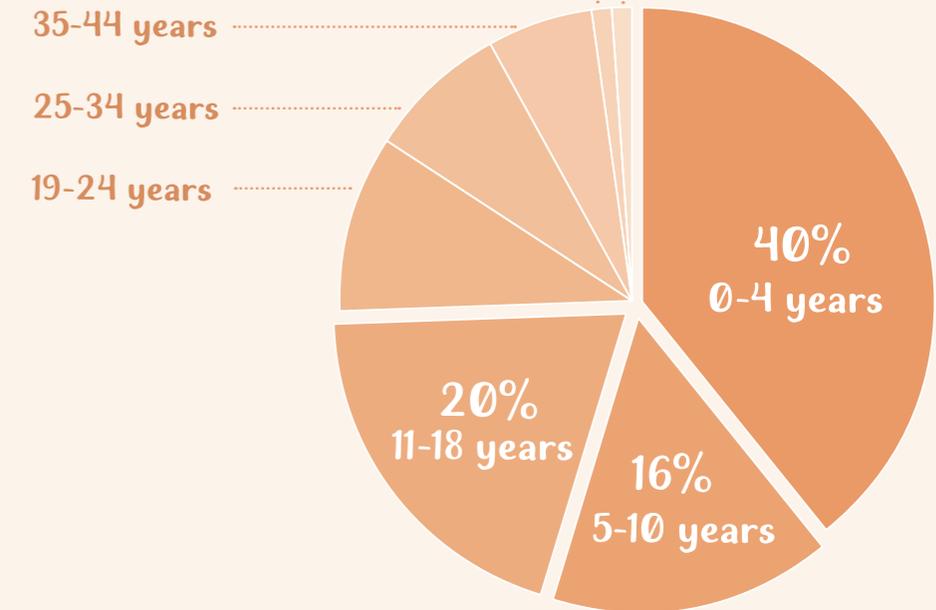
35-44 years

25-34 years

19-24 years

Researchers asked adult practicing Christians, at what age they felt that they had come to faith, 40% said that this was under the age of 5.

This highlights the significance and importance of nurturing faith at an early age and the significance of the role that Christian toddler groups and parents can play in faith development.



“Coming here opened up the opportunity to re-start a relationship with God...”

“I came to the toddler group then did an Alpha course, then started going to church”

“Going into church reminded me of going to Sunday school; it was comforting and had a familiarity about it, like coming home”

“I’m beginning to feel part of the Church of England community, through the community of this toddler group”

“I was a non-churchgoer ... I’ve started helping and planning Messy Church ... we feel part of the family”



“It is good as it gets me involved too and takes me back to my Christian roots”

Create links for faith at home

Supporting parents to enable their children to explore, discover and nurture faith at home is a key role the toddler group can play that extends their impact beyond the meeting times of their groups.

Resources to support the nurturing of faith at home can be found in the following places:

www.faithinhomes.org.uk

Easy-to-use ideas and resources to help you live out faith together.

Parenting for faith

Inspiring and equipping parents and leaders to raise children in the Christian faith.

www.churchofenglandchristenings.org/after-a-christening

Practical ideas for linking faith and home.

www.flamecreativekids.blogspot.com

Creative ideas for prayer and for linking Bible stories and Christian themes.

www.buildfaith.org/home-practices

Good ideas about faith in the home from the Episcopal church.

www.godventure.co.uk/category/prayer-activities

Lots of prayer ideas (and more) from GodVenture.

www.kitchentable.org.uk

Simple ideas to nurture a living faith at home.



Faith nurturing groups...

- Have leaders who are open and willing to share their faith journeys and offer to pray with and for group members;
- Provide stimulus to encourage faith conversations at home, such as craft activities to share or engage with others at home;
- Encourage 'faith as everyday' activities at toddler group that could easily be repeated at home, particularly prayer activity such as saying grace, thanking God, asking God for help or support;
- Make it easy to repeat toddler group activities at home by, for example, offering parents copies of words to songs or prayers used;
- Give gifts to encourage faith at home, such as storybooks, Bibles, prayer books, Christian toys or games;
- Offer ideas for celebrating Christian seasons and festivals;
- Invite the parents and carers to participate in exploring the practices of the Christian faith within the group and at home;
- Don't assume a level of basic Christian understanding by the parents – today's parents are unlikely to have attended a Sunday School as a child;
- Introduce faith in exploratory, engaging, interactive and fun ways.



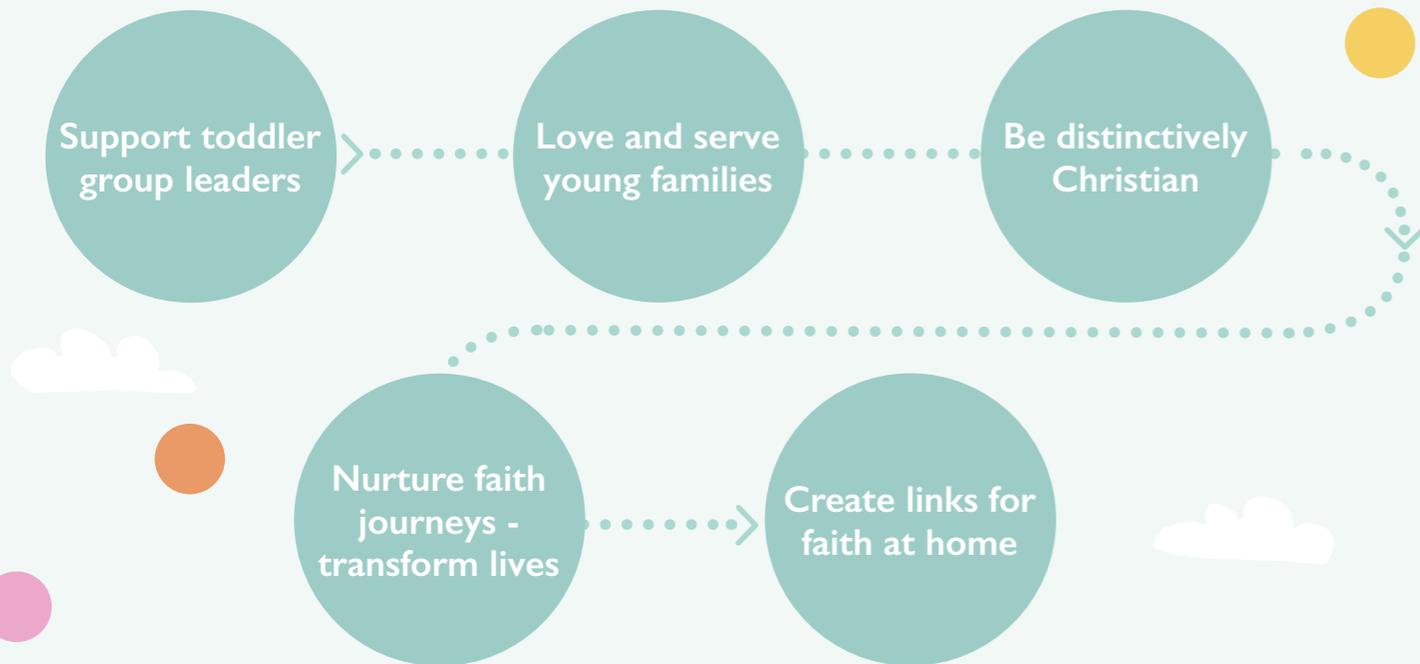
Conclusions

Where do we
go from here?

How do we make the most
of the opportunities?

A positive approach

These five steps highlight an approach that toddler groups can take to implementing the principles explored in this booklet to develop the missional focus of toddler groups.



Questions and ideas

Here are some 'next step' questions and ideas for you to consider.

Support toddler group leaders

- How do you currently support the leaders/volunteers involved in the toddler group?
- Where could relationships within the team be improved?
- What could the wider church do to strengthen the current level of support provided?

Consider...

Meeting regularly as a team: Talking, planning, debriefing, socialising and praying together as a team is a good way to build confidence, trust and unity.

Appointing a toddler group champion: Ask a minister, churchwarden, PCC member or someone else in the church, to support the team and champion the group within the church leadership structures.

Love and serve young families

- How does your toddler group care for the children and adults that attend?
- Where are the opportunities to further extend this love and care?
- What are the needs of the families who attend your group and how might you meet these?

Consider...

Celebrating birthdays: Give a gift to the children (and adults too) like a toddler-friendly Bible or a box of chocolates as a nice way to show love and care to group members!

Providing hot meals: Extend the gift of hospitality to families where a member is recovering from childbirth, illness or going through a challenging time. See Take Them a Meal for ideas (www.takethemameal.com).

Be distinctively Christian

- How might people identify your group as a 'Christian toddler group'?
- Where are there opportunities to develop the Christian distinctiveness of the group?
- What can you do to enhance the ways the group shows and shares God's love?

Consider...

Providing welcome packs: This is a great way to communicate key information about the group, its leaders, the church and church activities to new members.

Setting up a prayer space in the group: Dedicate an area for a prayer activity to encourage prayer during the toddler group. See Prayer Spaces in Schools for some simple and adaptable ideas (www.prayerspacesinschools.com).

Nurture faith journeys – transform lives

- How is faith shared and relationships nurtured at the toddler group?
- Where are faith conversations encouraged and supported?
- What opportunities exist to help families discuss and explore faith and worship together?

Consider...

Discussing issues of faith in your group: Wonderfully Made, by the Good Book Company, is an excellent DVD resource designed to facilitate these conversations.

Hosting toddler group social activities: This could be a themed party, an outing or a teddy bear's picnic at the local park.

Create links for faith at home

- How can the toddler group help parents/carers nurture their child's faith at home?
- Where can parents/carers access relevant resources?
- What can the wider church do to support and resource the development of faith in the home?

Consider...

Sending personal invitations: Write regular personal invitations to group members inviting them and their families to appropriate special services and events e.g. Easter, Harvest, Crib service, Carol service or Messy Church.

Providing prayer resources for families to use at home:

The Kingdom Kit www.thykingdomcome.global

Treasure boxes www.thetreasureboxpeople.co.uk

Family Prayer Time written by Lucy Moore www.brfonline.org.uk/9780857467157

How to...Pray with babies and toddlers www.bristol.anglican.org/toddlers-prayer

Further support

The Care for the Family Good Practice Guide

www.careforthefamily.org.uk/faith-in-the-family/playtime/the-good-practice-guide

The 1277 network www.1277.org.uk

Content for this booklet is based on a presentation by Mary Hawes, National Children and Youth Adviser for the Church of England. The 'Toddler Group Research' was conducted by Benita Hewitt of 9dot-research on behalf of the Church of England's Education Office.



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