

Growing Faith Foundation Research Report

Holiness in the Early Years

Methodology

Carolyn Edwards and Alison Keddily

“Mummy, all songs come to an end. Apart from Jesus’s song, cos Jesus’ song is Jesus” Song¹ (aged 4)

1. Introduction

In 2021 Carolyn completed her doctoral research into children and holiness concluding that ‘If holiness is an ontological reality that is rooted in being human then it could be argued that a child is closer to holiness than an adult because they do not have the same level of ‘tarnish’ associated with living in a fallen world.’² Her research demonstrated that the children that she interviewed were involved in ‘holiness behaviours’ and had ‘holiness experiences’, and that each child exhibited a ‘holiness style’ relating to their personality, worldview, context, upbringing and experience. She also concluded however, that this was not understood or respected by the church in general. As evidenced by absence of reference to children or young people in writings on holiness, and a continued latent theology of the importance of ‘reason’ over experience and action in relation to faith.

The purpose of this research project was to expand on and deepen this research base paying particular attention to those in the early years (under five) so that those who are seeking to nurture children’s faith and spirituality in the contexts of church, home and school will be better equipped to do so. This research was carried out in recognized areas of deprivation in the North of England in order to see if any insights could be gained on the impact of context on a child’s faith and spirituality.

2. Aims of the research

- To give children the opportunity to talk about their faith and spirituality
- To listen to what they have to say in order to improve mission and ministry with children and young people in the contexts of church, home and school
- To explore what faith and spirituality looks like in those under 5 years of age
- To identify more ‘holiness’ styles so that helpful approaches can be suggested
- To consider what impact context might have on children’s faith and spirituality³

¹ Each child has been given a research name to maintain anonymity

² Edwards (2021) unpublished doctoral thesis

³ Bearing in mind the impact of the pandemic on the socialization of under fives and the current cost of living crisis

3. Research methodology

This research project has drawn data from the following sources:

- Interviews with 6 children aged between 2 and 2.5 years conducted by Alison. These children were all members of the toddler group that she runs, and were interviewed at home or in church, with an accompanying parent. Some of these households readily identified as Christian, others were not sure. In addition, each child was invited to take photographs of anything at home, in church, or outside that helped them think about God or Jesus.⁴ The data from these interviews and the photographs was then analysed and reported in her MA dissertation for Padarn Institute⁵
- Interviews with 3 children aged between 2 and 5 years conducted by Carolyn. These children were from families known to her who are actively encouraging faith at home.
- Observations of four toddler groups – one in Hull and three in Middlesbrough. These offered a variety of Christian content as part of the sessions.
- Questionnaires and conversations with parents attending toddler groups and interviews about the faith and spirituality of their children and discipleship practices at home
- Insights from interviews with primary aged children carried out as part of Carolyn's doctorate

3.1 Interviews

In each of the interviews the children were shown a selection of pictures (seen below). They were asked questions like 'which is your favourite?' and 'which pictures help you think about God?' as a means of initiating conversation about their faith. But the process was very much child led. Both interviewers are experienced early year practitioners so were proficient in the 'serve and return' style of communication⁶ which enabled effective communication and rich data.

Interviews were recorded to enable transcription. Alison also video-recorded her interviews as the younger children were more likely to communicate non-verbally.

3.2 Observations

Carolyn attended one toddler group three times over the course of three months to build to observe a variety of inputs including an 'Easter special'. The other three were visited once. At each she observed the toddlers at play and taking part in activities, made notes on the structure and input of the sessions and had conversations with parents, carers and the group leaders.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. This qualitative research process examines how people 'make sense' of major life experiences and gives the researcher scope to interpret what the children said, did and expressed.⁷

⁴ Parents were instructed to help the child with any technological difficulties, but if any direction was given from the parents about the subject of the photograph, that it should be reported as a parent-child produced photograph. Parents were asked to submit child-generated descriptions of their photographs and/or meanings of their photographs.

⁵ She got a distinction!

⁶ Expounded by the Oxford Brain Story (<https://www.oxfordbrainstory.org/>)

⁷ It was developed in the field of psychology but is now increasingly used in human, social and health sciences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1).

