

# How Might Church More Fully And Effectively Engage With Its Toddler Group?

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# How might church more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group?

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# Abstract

Numerous studies have shown that toddler groups are a popular activity run by many churches across the United Kingdom, yet are often undervalued and under-resourced. So how might we encourage churches to more fully and effectively engage with their toddler group? This study used a mixed methods research approach drawing on quantitative and qualitative methods to gain insight from both toddler group and church leaders. Firstly, the findings reinforced the impact that toddler groups have as a missional outreach for the church, through reaching out to the community, building relationships with families, offering a first point of contact with the church, and telling others about Jesus. Secondly, the findings identified the disconnect that exists between the church and the toddler group, and suggests ways to encourage a more full and effective engagement with the group. Thirdly, the findings underline the significance of intentionally providing 'next steps' for toddler group families. This study also provides recommendations for further research related to the church's relationship with its toddler group and areas for development including an introduction to how we are defining 'church'.

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# How might church more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group?

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Church-based toddler groups are a popular activity for many churches of all denominations across the United Kingdom, with 55% of churches running them (Hewitt, 2016, p. 1). Taking many different shapes and forms, essentially they are an informal meeting place for parents/carers and their Under 5s. Rather than a childcare provision where children are separated from their parents, families stay together during the sessions therefore providing an opportunity to participate in the activities together. The group sessions usually consist of playtime, craft activities, stories, singing, and refreshments; all which vary per church group. The groups usually run in some area of the church building, some in the church itself, offering a window into the church for many families that come along. Some groups intertwine and utilize their Christian distinctiveness in overt ways in the sessions whilst others are more subtle about it. Toddler groups attract many families in this demographic; 74% of all parents of Under 5s are in contact with the church, with toddler groups being the most popular activity (Hope Together, Evangelical Alliance and Church of England, 2020, p.2).

Despite their popularity, there appears to remain a certain level of disengagement with the toddler groups from the churches that run them, mainly in the form of lack of volunteers, lack of support and a general lack of feeling important in the life of the church. It has led to previous research trying to find out how to better utilise toddler groups and offer better support for them (Burt, 2017; Church Times, 2015; Hewitt, 2016). Because of this research, and due to my own experiences with toddler groups, I was keen to investigate for myself to better understand what changes could be made for churches to more fully and effectively engage with their toddler groups.

### 1.2 My own bias

I have served for many years within the Children's Ministry of my church, both in a voluntary and paid capacity. Part of this ministry area has led to my engagement and experience with



our church's toddler group, which I visited initially as a parent with my own young children, and then co-led in a volunteer capacity for a couple of years. Taking on the paid Children's Worker role in my church a few years ago gave me oversight of the toddler group and its team initially, and I then relaunched and refreshed the group to lead it on the ground after the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. In fact, it was the *Talking Toddlers* research which influenced this relaunch, and I presented this research to my church leaders to show the importance of the toddler group ministry (Hope Together et.al., 2020, p.2).

As part of my current MA study with CYM I also did a small-scale community research project based on my church's toddler group, which started to peak my interest even further and opened my eyes to things I had not considered before. Having experienced firsthand the opportunity and blessing it is to run a toddler group, I have also experienced and seen the lack of engagement from the wider church. Doing further research into this area, and networking with other toddler group leaders, I realized that this was not an isolated case. It made me wonder, therefore, what might be going on to make what seemed a wonderful mission opportunity somehow not very important in the life of the church. It provided motivation to probe deeper into this and hear views from other toddler group leaders.

I was very aware of my own bias coming into this research study as a toddler group leader myself, and knew I had to manage my own views and perceptions especially when conducting the face to face interviews. I was not only doing this from a researcher point of view, but also as an insider with lots of experience in both being part of and running a toddler group. This certainly impacted the impressions and feelings that I had throughout my research because it was hard not to compare these different settings to my own toddler group setting. I also had to be mindful that when asking questions of toddler group leaders not to let my own opinions and preferences sway them in any way.

However I was also aware of the strength there was in my role as a toddler group leader in doing this research and speaking to other leaders. I had an understanding of their role and the groups that they led; I 'got' it. I could identify with how they felt towards the families that come along to the group, the teams that they lead, and the connection with the church leader and wider church congregation. These things helped me to shape some of the questions I asked and helped me to identify what needed to be investigated and addressed. Balancing out the strong and weak parts of this bias was a challenge, and I know that the findings from this research will have been influenced by that.

Whilst I know that this research has been helpful for my own role, I hope it will also be helpful for the many others in a similar role to myself. I am writing this for those who lead toddler groups, who lead churches and anyone who has an interest in what toddler groups

have to offer. I recognise that whilst this is an academic paper, for mainly an academic audience, it is overall not for that purpose. Therefore my style of writing will reflect this, to make it accessible for the wider audience intended.

### 1.3 Aims

The focus of this study was on church-based toddler groups and explored the role and relationship they have with the churches that run them. The purpose of this study was to address the question: How might church more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group? The aims of the study were:

1. To explore toddler and church leaders' views regarding the toddler group and its relationship to the church.
2. To examine and develop ways in which the toddler group might be more fully prioritised as a missional outreach for the church.
3. To evaluate ways in which church might learn from the toddler group in drawing people in through developing community and a sense of belonging.

It is important to define what 'fully' and 'effectively' engage means in light of this study. Firstly, to consider something fully means to 'consider it to the greatest degree or extent' (Vocabulary.com, 2024a). And to 'engage' with something means 'choosing to involve oneself in or commit oneself to something' (dictionary.com, 2024). In terms of using this to describe a church's relationship with its toddler group, I would expect this to be reflected in the priority and effort given to it rather than it be, as previous literature has referred to, 'hidden in the midweek schedule' or 'neglected' in some way (Burt, 2017; CATS, 2009; Hawes, 2019; Hope Together et. al., 2020). The main way I measured the priority of engagement with the toddler group was based on both the level of and type of support it received based on the results from the research.

Secondly, to be 'effective' means to have the ability to accomplish a purpose, or to be 'capable of producing an intended result' (Vocabulary.com, 2024b). Each toddler group and church will have its own sense of purpose, but within this study I was interested to evaluate the overall effectiveness that toddler groups are having as a missional opportunity, and therefore look at how churches can better strengthen and support these aspects.

## 1.4 Key terms

For the purposes of this research study, I have also defined how I am using the following terms:

Church – mainly relating to the church congregation that usually meet on a Sunday morning or in some similar capacity for their main form of corporate worship

Church-based toddler group – this will be interchangeable with toddler groups throughout the paper, but will carry the same meaning

Mission – Based on the ‘great commission’ given by Jesus in Matthew 28: ‘go and make disciples’ and ‘teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.’ In this study I will be particularly looking at these three ‘marks of mission’, from Churches Together in England (2024):

- to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- to teach, baptise and nurture new believers
- to respond to human need by loving service

## 1.5 Structure

### Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter will give some background to toddler groups and my own role with them. It will also lay out the research question and aims of the study, define key terms, and point to the layout of the paper.

### Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will draw out some key findings from previous research based around the impact that toddler groups have had more specifically on community and spiritual development. It will also look at key themes around their missional opportunity that I intend to build on and interrogate in my own research.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will explain the mixed methods approach I took to this research, which used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Within this I provide more detail about how I did this and who I spoke to. It will also discuss the reliability and validity of the research, as well as the ethical considerations.

#### Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

This chapter presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data lent itself to statistics and graphs, whilst the qualitative data was coded using thematic analysis.

#### Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings chapter

In this chapter I will start to synthesize the results across the data sets and situate them within the previous bodies of literature and research, as well as theory and theology. I will discuss more fully the themes that emerged from doing this to demonstrate how this study has addressed the research question.

#### Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter provides a summary of the findings, draws conclusions and discusses the success of this study in relation to the research question. I will also point to recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 2.1 Previous Research

It is established that church-based toddler groups are popular and offer a significant missional impact on the community as well as offer opportunities for spiritual development (Burt, 2017; CATS 2009; Church Times, 2015; Hawes, 2019; Hewitt, 2016; Hope Together, et.al., 2020). Whilst toddler groups can have an impact in other ways, such as on other stages of development with Under 5s and on parent-child relationships, I will not be making this my main focus (Action for Children, 2023; Crasnow et. al., 2020; Owen and Anderson, 2017; Unicef, 2022; Williams, K. E., Berthelsen, D., Viviani, M. & Nicholson, J. M., 2018; Woods, 2000). This chapter will instead look at some of the significant findings and insights from research specifically related to church-based toddler groups and their mission opportunity whilst also identifying any gaps and opportunities for further research.

A survey among Baptist Churches in the Central Baptist Association, carried out in 2004 by Rev. Colin Cartwright, looked at the mission potential of toddler groups. Encouraged by the findings, he stated, "On the basis of this research I believe it is not claiming too much to say that church toddler groups could play a vital role in the growth of the church in the 21st Century" (Lear, 2009, p. A2). From this study, Cartwright identified five factors that would increase the evangelistic impact of toddler groups (CATS, 2009, p. 22):

1. Longevity: the longer a group had been running, the greater the impact
2. Alpha (or similar group) running alongside
3. Parenting groups
4. Having Christian parents and carers within the group
5. Size of church played a minor factor

Lear's key question based on this research wondered if some churches are missing a golden opportunity with toddler groups, essentially out of timidity or lack of strategic thinking (2009, p. A2).

The first report said to detail the influence that church-based toddler groups are having on the lives of the parents and children who attend them, as well as the group leaders, was done in 2015 by the charity Jubilee plus (Church Times, 2015, n.p.). The report, titled *The Impact of Church-based Parent and Toddler Groups*, estimated that up to 27,000 churches in the United Kingdom run a toddler group, which are accessed by 52% of children. It also

stated that toddler groups were only second to foodbanks in churches' outreach ministry (Church Times, 2015, n.p.). They interviewed 440 group leaders and 30 parents, and found that the greatest impact toddler groups have is in building friendships and improving children's early social skills. 88% of parents built a friendship support network through the groups, and 79% of the parents built friendships with the toddler group team members (Church Times, 2015, n.p.).

Research carried out in 2016, titled the *Toddler Group Research Report*, also recognised the popularity of church-based toddler groups and wanted to explore how they could be more confident in their Christian distinctiveness and the missional opportunities that they offer (Hewitt, 2016, p. 5). Over a three month period they visited 23 toddler groups across five Diocese to obtain qualitative face to face interviews with toddler group leaders and users (Hewitt, 2016, p. 6). They had telephone conversations and did an online survey with Diocese advisors, and did an online survey with 115 toddler group leaders (Hewitt, 2016, p. 6). From this research, Hewitt produced five key recommendations to aide toddler groups in being missional (2016, p.7):

1. Love and serve young families
2. Be distinctively Christian
3. Nurture faith journeys
4. Build the church community
5. Support toddler group leaders

The need for support for toddler group leaders was identified, noting a disconnection between the church and the toddler group in the interviews. The responses from toddler group leaders were that they felt unnoticed and unsupported in their roles, and the toddler group was not seen as very important in the life of the church (Hewitt, 2016, p.10). This research provides a comprehensive look at what toddler groups can offer those that come along, and how they can strengthen their Christian distinctiveness in what they offer. It also looks at how toddler groups might be better supported and integrated into the wider church, recognising that this is a gap where change is needed.

Referring to Hewitt's research, Mary Hawes states in her booklet *It's Just the Toddler Group* that it is estimated that between a third and a half of all children in England, aged under three, regularly attend a church-run toddler group (2019, p. 3). She also says that many people in churches today can trace the beginnings of their own journey of faith to an initial contact through a local toddler group (Hawes, 2019, p.3). Identifying once again the

significant missional opportunities presented to the church by toddler groups, Hawes asks if churches are making the most of this unique opportunity to develop lifelong relationships and faith connections (2019, p. 6).

Fiona Burt also talks about the popularity of the toddler group, referring to the Family Matters Institute's *More than Sundays* report which states that more than half of all children under four have been to a church-based toddler group, and that over half of the UK's churches are running such groups (2017, n.p.). Referring to research by Sue Stout, Burt states there are five distinctive features that regularly see people coming to faith through toddler groups (2017, n.p.):

1. Clarity of aims and objectives
2. Support from the church leadership
3. Small groups
4. Enquirers' courses
5. Regular prayer

In agreement with Cartwright and Hewitt, Stout's findings are consistent with a need for nurturing faith journeys, and there is also the acknowledged need for support from the church leadership for toddler group leaders.

Further research in 2020 commissioned by Hope Together, the Church of England and the Evangelical Alliance, called *Talking Toddlers*, built on the previous research and reinforced some of their findings. It recognized that the ministry of toddler groups is often hidden or seen as secondary to the main activities in the church that focus on adults, which is similar to what came out of the research by Hewitt (Hope Together et. al., 2020, p.1). There is a desire for especially church leaders to grasp the importance of the toddler group ministry and its mission opportunity. It also revealed something quite significant; that 40% of practicing Christians came to faith before the age of 5, meaning churches have the biggest impact on this generation for faith than any other age group (Hope Together et. al., 2020, p. 1).

The results also reinforced how big the reach is to parents and Under 5s across the country (Hope Together et.al., 2020, p. 2):

- 12% of all parents of Under 5s are practicing Christians, compared to 6% of the whole population.

- 74% of all parents of Under 5s are in contact with the church, with toddler groups being the most popular activity.
- 55% of parents said attending a church activity with their Under 5s have helped them explore their own beliefs.

These bodies of research show that this demographic of parents with Under 5s is one that the church is already in touch with, who are open to church-based activities, and who are even open to exploring faith. There is acknowledgment of a missional opportunity which the church-based toddler groups offer, and the previous literature points to two main themes with this: the impact of spiritual development and the impact of building community.

## 2.2 The impact of church-based toddler groups on spiritual development

The research discussed above asserts that church-based toddler groups offer a tremendous opportunity to sow seeds of Christian faith in all ages of people that come along. According to Casson et. al., toddler groups offer ‘a rich environment to explore the nurture of spiritual engagement of the very young child in an intergenerational setting’ (2023, p. 7). Church-based toddler groups connect families and churches around the young child in a way that require further investigation, but has so far has received very little attention (Casson et. al., 2023, p. 1).

According to Beckwith, the early months of life are truly crucial to the positive spiritual formation and growth of all children (2004, p. 45). Toddler groups offer a space to do this, and when children’s spirituality is taken seriously, it can significantly influence our view of children (Nye, 2009, n.p). The Bible also has something to say about the faith of young children. In fact, we often refer to Proverbs 22:6 when talking about nurturing Christian faith, as it states that we should ‘start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it’. Psalm 139 even talks about the nurturing of faith that starts in the womb, which is very appropriate for the expectant parents who come along to toddler groups before their babies are even born. This highlights the significance and importance of nurturing faith at an early age and the significance of the role that church-based toddler groups can play in faith development (Hawes, 2019, p. 35). As Yust comments, spiritual awareness, in contrast with spiritual experience, has to be ‘activated’ or it may remain dormant for long periods, even most of a lifetime (2003, p.140). Activating spiritual awareness can happen within a toddler group, and requires that toddlers learn some mode of religious expression for their spiritual experiences (Yust, 2003, p. 140). Some church-based toddler groups offer opportunities for this religious expression and spiritual



development in very subtle ways, and others' more explicit; through sharing a Bible story, singing Christian songs, and offering simple prayers to introduce the Christian faith.

However, these groups are not just impacting the spiritual development of children. May says there is an opportunity within these settings to encourage faith exploration for all ages (2023b, p.12). She points out a dual ministry and mission that church-based toddler groups uniquely offer, saying there's an opportunity for 'infants to begin to hear about the God who made them, knows them and loves them from their earliest days, while, at the same time, parents can begin to explore questions of faith and themselves draw closer to the God who made, knows and loves them' (May, 2023b, p. 9).

According to Andy Biggs, one of the authors of *The Impact of Church-based Parent and Toddler Groups*, this mission requires intentionality in the way the groups are run, This includes being a part of the church's vision, having the support of the church leadership, and being supported by prayer, all of which make a big difference to the impact that the group is able to have (Church Times, 2015, n.p.). Another way of being intentional can be done simply by showing Jesus' love to the wider community if the toddler group is led by Christians (CATS, 2009, p. 6). Referring to Matthew 5:14-16, this is a way of 'letting your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in Heaven.' Part of this also includes offering a safe and welcoming space where the needs of all ages in the group are met and taking the opportunity to share something of God's story (CATS, 2009, p.19). When there is an intentionality to nurture the spiritual lives of the families that come along to the toddler group, it helps them to be more open to the questions of faith (CATS, 2009, p. 17).

In his *Building Blocks* training session for toddler group leaders, Nick Lear states that there is an opportunity to help those who come along to the toddler group understand more of who Jesus is and why we follow him (2009, p. A6). He asks, 'Will we continue to keep discreetly quiet about our faith and neglect this mission opportunity? Or will we seize this God-given opportunity to fulfil our Great Commission following' (Lear, 2009, p. A6)?

Not only is a toddler group a place to nurture faith, but Withers even suggests that it is a 'vibrant, midweek church in its own right' (2006, p. 77). She also suggests that toddler groups and the work with parents with Under 5s offer the biggest growth point in many churches (Withers, 2006, p.32). May agrees and goes further to suggest that a toddler group is the 'most misunderstood and underutilised activity in the life of the church' (2023a, n.p.). Toddler groups are a first step to engaging families with the Christian faith and the local church, and have immense value in starting lifelong discipleship journeys for entire families

(May, 2023b, p. 22). This setting, outside the usual church service on a Sunday morning, is where other writers agree is a good place to start; offering a different way of 'being church': witnessing and bringing the gospel to meet people where they are at first (Cray 2004; Withers, 2006). The Carer and Toddler Strategy (CATS) consultative group agrees and asks this poignant question: 'Where else in today's society do we see so many families flocking through the doors of the church' (2009, p.37)? Of course, this is not referring to church as just a Sunday morning gathering, but picks up on this idea of a fresh expression of church that will meet people where they are at in their faith exploration.

## 2.3 The impact of church-based toddler groups on establishing and building community

Another key aspect of church-based toddler groups is that they offer a network or community which many are longing for (Cray, 2004; Reed, 2013; Smith, 2020). People are searching for a place to belong, and a toddler group can provide an important social network for young families (Cray, 2004; Drake and Drake, 2021; Reed, 2013; Smith, 2020). Woods talks about the warmth and consistency of settings like toddler groups which give parents a model to emulate with their own children, and also give parents a sense of being cared for and empathized with (2000, p. 211). Popple agrees, saying that receiving some element of care is a key element of this type of community outreach, and one of its main features is to cultivate social networks for the welfare of its people, aimed at especially those with young children (2011, p. 211). With community being re-formed around networks, Cray says the church has an opportunity to build lasting relationships with these young families which echo the ties of loyalty and faithfulness through Christ, something not found in many other places (2004, p. 7).

The *More Than Sundays* report suggests that the church is a resource that must be utilised to tackle the rising crises within the social care system, and toddler groups uniquely offer pre-existing supportive communities for children and families (Safe for Families and Home for Good, 2022, p. 17). As a consistent gathering of people, this is where relationships can be formed and the needs of families can begin to be met. The report goes on to suggest that a church's authentic social engagement should include 'persistence, relationality and localised engagement' and might also include 'hospitality, hopefulness, or unconditional acceptance' (Safe for Families and Home for Good, 2022, p.55). Aspects of all of these are seen in church-based toddler groups.

It is quite clear that running a group in the community for those with Under 5s is a crucial way to support new parents and young children. Not only does a toddler group help to

provide a need and a social network for the families that come along, they can also be a way of allowing them to find a place of 'belonging' in the wider church community. According to Cartwright in his *Appreciating the Art of Toddling* report, the toddler groups who are able to work with their church are most effective in seeing people who start at the toddler group eventually becoming a full part of the church community (CATS, 2009, p.22). That is a key assertion to bear in mind as we consider why this might not be happening as often as we would like.

## 2.4 'Mind the gap' between church and toddler group

Despite strong research which shows the importance of their place in the church and the community, many writers still assert that toddler groups remain under the radar in many churches (Burt, 2017; CATS, 2009; Hawes, 2019). They are also much neglected in research, policy, and practice (Hope Together et.al., 2020). According to Hawes, they are often referred to as 'just the toddler group' (2019, p.1).

May acknowledges this gap, asserting that toddler groups are the 'most undervalued aspect of (the) local church's ministry (May, 2023a).' She also believes in investigating the importance of a toddler group with the church leadership and wider community (May, 2023b, p. 14). Hawes is quite clear that the church needs to recognise the mission being undertaken by the toddler group and its leaders, and talks about how raising the profile of toddler groups can be done, including featuring them in mission statements and action plans, and ensuring they are part of the wider mission of the church (2019, p. 21).

Looking at the toddler group leaders' reflections in Hewitt's research, there still appears to be a disconnect between the people who understand the importance of this mission opportunity (mainly the families who access the toddler groups and the people who lead them), and the people who have yet to grasp the importance of it (perhaps the church leaders and the wider church congregation) (2016, p.10). Perhaps there is something that needs to change at the core of what the church believes about mission, or young children, or even church.

## 2.5 Chapter Summary

The previous research consistently states and agrees with each other about the importance of a church-based toddler group as a mission opportunity. They are doing this mainly by connecting with and meeting the needs of the community and as a way for all ages to start to explore faith. It has also gone some way in showing how church can better engage with their toddler groups, yet also identifies the disconnect that is perhaps stifling these efforts. There appears to be something churches have not quite grasped. This study, therefore, seeks to

probe what might be causing a disconnect between churches and toddler groups, and how it can be addressed so that toddler groups are being more fully and effectively utilised in the life of the church.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Research approach

To start addressing the research question, I chose to garner feedback from mainly toddler group leaders, and where possible, church leaders, as I had identified a lack of their voice in previous research. I used a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods, to touch on the breadth and the width of this data. This is an effective approach to research, enabling the researcher to balance out the strengths and weaknesses of both research methods in order to achieve 'triangulation' (Dawson, 2019; Iyadurai, 2023). Used in this way, both qualitative and quantitative research can 'complement each other and provide a more powerful research method than either on its own' (Mason and Dale, 2011, p. 95). Wanting to treat both qualitative and quantitative data equally, I used a convergent design to understand better how the results of both these methods compared and to look for any similarities across the data set (Iyadurai, 2023, p. 161). Whilst most of the questions were consistent across both data sets to allow for this, I did intentionally ask some different questions within the qualitative method that I thought would be a better platform for digging deeper into certain areas, understanding that this is an advantage of this research method.

Ethical approval was given for this study, as seen in Appendix A.

## 3.2 Quantitative Research

### 3.2.1 Online Survey

I used large-scale survey research to reach more people and generate statistics that would be useful to gain a wide understanding and perspective from toddler group leaders (Dawson, 2019; Iyadurai, 2023). The survey was anonymous and posted online in a Facebook group designed for those involved with toddler groups. It received quite a good response yielding a sample of 108 participants (Dawson, 2017, p. 8). The majority of the responses were given in just one day (24-hour period) from when it was first posted. Given the amount of responses within that time, I only posted it once.

I used a structured format for the survey, to help establish the reliability and validity of results (Iyadurai, 2023, p. 113). The survey used both open-ended and close-ended questions in order to capture both 'how many' and also 'what people think' aspects of the data (Dawson, 2019, p. 25). An ordinal scale, used to rank data that deals with satisfaction, was used to

measure levels of support the participants felt by the church leaders (Iyadurai, 2023, p. 121). Interval and ratio scales were used to capture data such as size of a church, based on the scale by Beasley-Murray (2008), as well as how often the toddler group runs, how many families come along, and how many toddler group families also attend Sunday services. A copy of the questions can be found in Appendix B, and a link to the Google forms survey (now closed), along with some screen shots of it, can be found in Appendix C.

As the survey was posted online, I was mindful that the participants were self-selecting, therefore may have had different reasons for participating (Dawson, 2019, p. 43). The Facebook group has 4,200 members, and is especially set up for people who are passionate about church-based toddler groups. It provides an opportunity for people to share ideas, good practice and support one another through chat and prayer. Therefore I felt confident that the people opting to take part would be a good representative sample of the people I wanted to hear from. The survey was not posted anywhere else as given the number of members in the group, the broad spread, and the specific focus it had, I felt that this would provide a good enough sample size for this research.

The details and demographics of the Facebook group are outlined below.

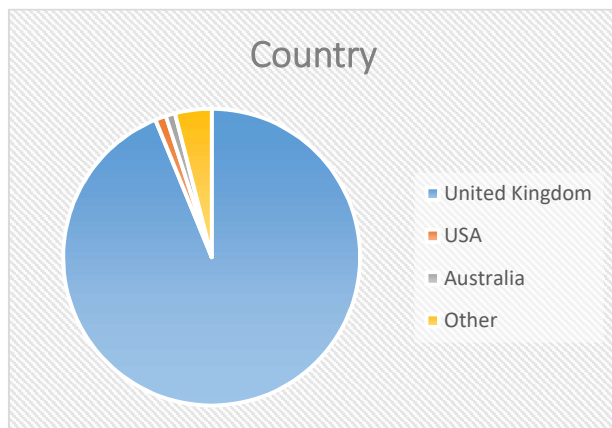


FIGURE 1

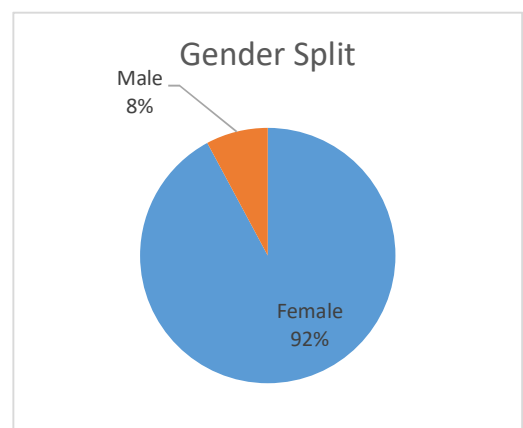


FIGURE 2

Other information worth noting about the Facebook group:

- The top 10 cities represented are in England – with London being most prominent (5%).
- 7 out of the top 10 cities represented are in Northern England.
- None of the top 10 cities are in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.
- 30% of the members are in the 35-44 age bracket, followed by 25% in the 45-54 age bracket

Understanding that the majority of the participants would be from the UK, and mindful to limit the questions posed, I chose to focus on variables within the survey which I felt were more relevant to the study in terms of the capacity of their leadership role, the size of their church, and the longevity of the toddler group. However, in future research it would also be interesting to find out the further demographic breakdown of the participants across the UK.

### 3.3 Qualitative Research

#### 3.3.1 Face to Face Interviews

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how churches are currently engaging with their toddler groups, especially linked to the spiritual development and building community aspects of the group, I thought it was important to conduct face to face interviews with toddler group leaders, and in some instances, church leaders too. This phenomenological approach looks at studying the lived experiences of people, and uses semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection (Iyadurai, 2023, p. 57). I was interested in hearing more detailed responses from each participant, and as such, I knew that this method yielded a smaller sample of participants (Dawson, 2019, p.12). However, combining this with the more widespread and broader views from the survey was part of the 'triangulation' I was looking for (Dawson, 2019; Iyadurai, 2023).

Initially I had intended to interview both the toddler group leader and church leader for every toddler group that I chose to look at, but due to time constraints and also availability, I chose to focus on four toddler group leaders, and two of their church leaders; six face to face interviews total. All gave their consent for this study, and the related documents can be found in Appendix C.

I used a semi-structured interview method to ensure that I was asking similar questions across the different toddler groups in order to compare and contrast their answers, but also left space to ask anything else of interest that might pop up during the interview related to each specific setting (Dawson, 2019, p. 23). The questions focused on the context of their toddler group, its vision and values, and the connection the toddler group has to the wider church. The questions also linked to the spiritual input of a session and the ways the group is building community. A copy of both the interview schedules that I used can be found in Appendix D.

I chose to focus on four different church-based toddler groups in the local area around a city in the South of England. This was hard to narrow down, given the amount of groups that run in this area due to its large population. I intended to choose groups that were different from

each other according to size, meeting day, location, and denomination. Half of the groups I chose I already had a connection with, which also made it easier to arrange interview and group visits with, but I also embraced the opportunity to meet new people and network as part of this research. In the end, the churches that I chose were not as diverse as they could have been, with  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them being Anglican. However, despite their similar denomination, none run in the same way, and each engage with families from different parts of the city.

Each interview was audio-recorded and done one to one in a space away from other people and distractions. Interviews lasted between fourteen minutes and twenty seven minutes, depending on the answers given and whether any follow up questions were asked. Most of the interviews were conducted following my visit to the relevant toddler group, with one interview taking place the previous night.

### 3.3.2 Thematic Analysis

To analyze the data from the interviews I used thematic analysis. After transcribing each interview, I began to code the data, listening to each one in turn to capture key ideas, words and phrases that were emerging that linked to the research question. I then started to develop candidate themes across the interview dataset based on patterns and commonalities that were being revealed (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.89). I tweaked and re-developed the candidate themes, based on the following key considerations suggested by Braun and Clarke in this re-visioning process (2022, p.99):

- Identifiable boundaries around each theme
- Sizeable, meaningful data to evidence the theme
- Theme that conveys something important

I then took time to name and define the key themes that had emerged.

### 3.3.3 Observations

As part of my research, I also took time to visit and therefore observe each of the toddler groups to gain a better understanding of their setting. Salway, Harriss and Chowbey refer to this as 'rapid appraisal' which is a form of 'fast ethnography' (Mason and Dale, 2011, p. 20). The true ethnographic approach collects information about specific behaviours and practices through participant observation over a longer period of time, helping to generate understanding about the way of life of others (Dawson, 2019; Iyadurai, 2023). With limited time to gather this type of data, I instead conducted this 'rapid appraisal' to add an extra layer to my qualitative research. This experience allowed me to visualize and understand better what each toddler group leader was referring to in the face to face interviews, and



therefore some of my follow on questions were impacted by these observations. It also helped when analyzing the interview data as it created more meaning to the emerging themes. It would have been interesting to spend more time with each of the groups, but it was not the focus of this study.

### 3.4 Ethical Considerations

It was important that I gave ethical consideration to all the participants involved across both research methods. Iyadurai talks about research ethics being the principles that govern how participants, the data, and works of others are treated by researchers (2023, p. 16). I gave careful consideration to how the participants were treated and how the data was managed to minimize causing any harm to the people involved. I followed key principles based on those recommended by Iyadurai (2023, p. 16):

- protecting anonymity and confidentiality
- informing the participants about the nature and purpose of the research to obtain informed consent
- giving participants the right to withdraw from the research by a certain date
- giving participants the right to decline to answer any question
- not disrupting the participants' activities while doing any observation
- not sharing raw recordings of the data with anyone else

To protect anonymity within the qualitative research, I used pseudonyms for both the toddler groups and the toddler group and church leaders. For the quantitative research, it was an anonymous survey which did not therefore capture any identifiable information. When quoting anything from the survey's open-ended questions they will be identified as P1 etc.

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

The mixed methods approach was a valid way of carrying out this research as it was used in other studies (Hewitt, 2016). Using some of the same questions across both data sets was done to achieve 'triangulation', allowing me to compare broader views with more in-depth responses. However, slightly different questions were also used across the data sets depending on where I thought I might gather deeper insights. The downside to this is that it restricted the comparison on certain topics, which therefore might have an impact of some of its reliability.

The online survey was self-selecting, therefore mitigating any bias I had towards the people taking part in the survey. With the survey being titled 'Toddler Group Leader Survey' there

was also the option for those not in that relevant position to opt out of the survey, however this did rely on the participants choosing to identify as 'leader' or not. Providing a description of this would have been helped them in this decision.

With regards to the qualitative research, I am aware that my own bias as a toddler group leader might have impacted on both the questions I chose to ask, how I asked them, and even how I responded to the answers given. However, I did try to remain neutral and not express my own views or let them get in the way of allowing the interviewees to share their own thoughts and opinions. Rather than feel that this might have negatively impacted this part of the research, however, I am mindful of what Braun and Clarke say about embracing our own subjectivity, and taking the time to interrogate it (2022, p. 13).

I am aware that the people I chose to interview might also reflect some of my bias. The participants were all of White British ethnicity. Though I did not intend for this to be the case, I did not come across any multicultural toddler groups in my city; perhaps something to bear in mind for future research. All of the toddler group leaders were female and both church leaders were male. This gender split is not a surprise to me as the survey data suggests that females dominate toddler group leadership roles. However, I did not actively seek out toddler groups that might be led by men, or churches that might be led by women. These observations about cultural and gender diversity raise interesting questions such as how different cultures and denominations view, run and utilize toddler groups and about the gender divide within toddler group and church leaders. These observations are beyond the scope and limits of this research paper, but are worth mentioning for future consideration.

### 3.6 Other intended research

I had wanted to bring a broader insight from church leaders within this research, given the lack of their voice in previous studies, but was limited with my larger focus on toddler group leaders. It would be useful in future research to get a more rounded view point from a larger pool of church leaders on how they feel the church is engaging with their toddler groups.

I had also considered surveying parents/carers that attended the toddler groups that I visited, which could have provided further perspective and 'triangulation' to the research. However, I was mindful that previous research had already surveyed parents/carers and was not convinced that it would create any new insights specific to my research question, so I decided to focus on toddler group leaders and where I could, church leaders.

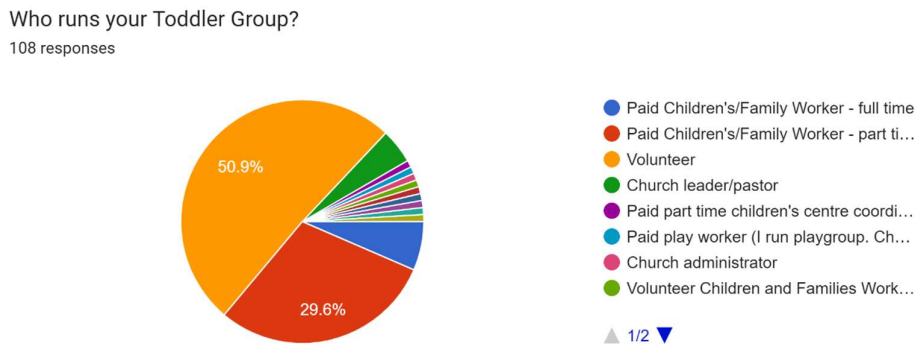
# Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

## 4.1 Quantitative data

An online survey was used to garner wide-scale quantitative data, and received 108 anonymous responses. The data is presented in graph or table form, and where appropriate, backed up by comments from the participants, identified as P1 etc.

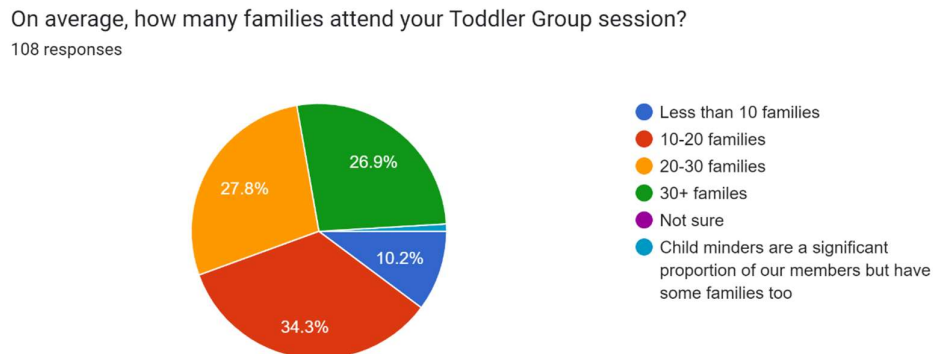
### 4.1.1 Context of toddler groups

Of those surveyed, just over half run the toddler groups in a volunteer capacity, as seen in figure 3.



**FIGURE 3**

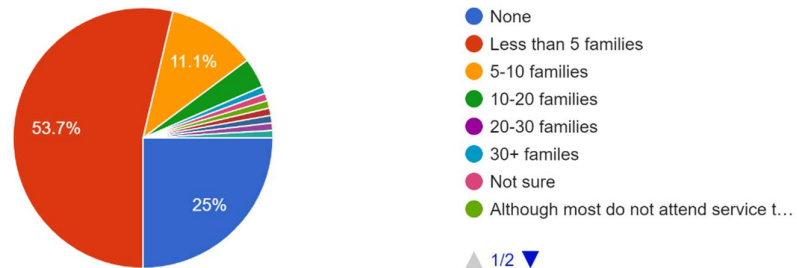
There are a good amount of families attending the toddler group sessions, as seen in figure 4. It is worth noting that a 'family' could consist of at least one adult and one child, so therefore the numbers become even more significant when considering 20 families or more could equate to at least 40 people at the group at a time.



**FIGURE 4**

As seen in figure 5, 25% of churches don't have any cross over between toddler group families and their Sunday services.

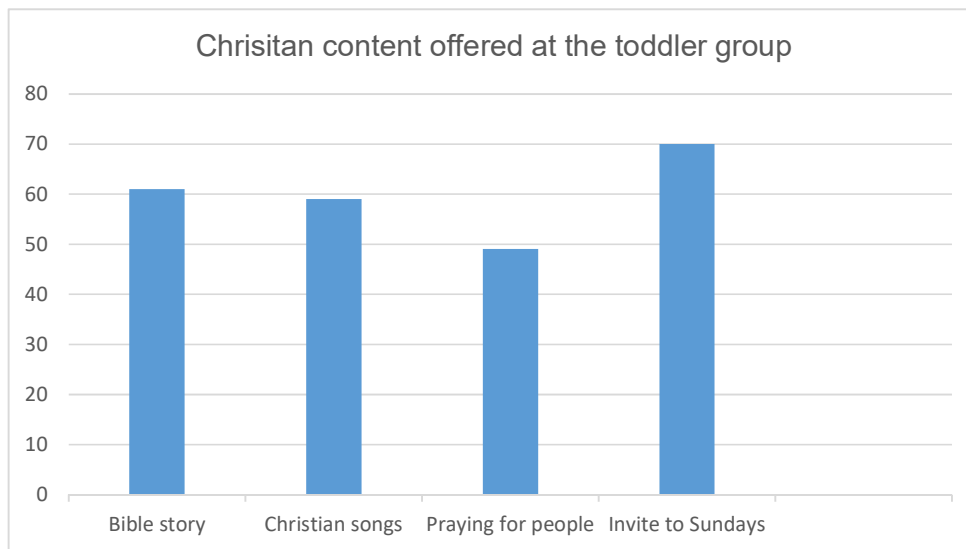
How many families attend the Toddler Group AND also come along to your Sunday church services?  
108 responses



**FIGURE 5**

#### 4.1.2 Opportunities for spiritual development

82% of the toddler groups are offering some sort of overt Christian content within it, mainly in the ways identified in figure 6.

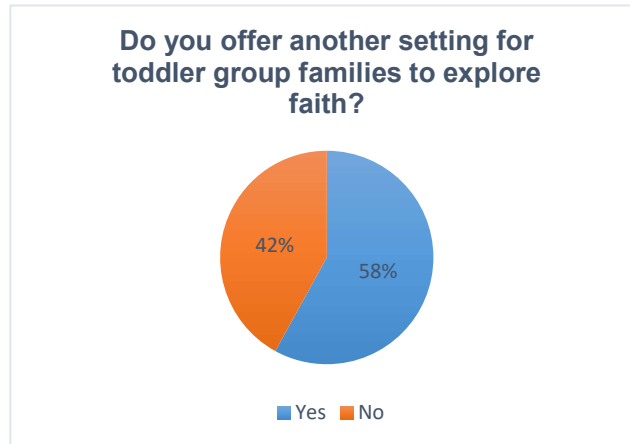


**FIGURE 6**

Most toddler groups include more than one of these Christian elements within it. Other references were made about including Bible-based craft, a grace, invitations to other church events, offering a prayer box, a blessing, a secular story with Biblical connection, and a Bible 'thought'. Responses that indicated covert Christian content included building connections

with people and treating them in a loving, Christ-like way, as well as people knowing the group is run by the church.

Participants were also asked if there was another setting, outside of the Sunday services, for the toddler group families to explore faith, as seen in figure 7.



**FIGURE 7**

The 58% that said yes are trying different things such as Messy Church, Alpha courses, special family events, different types of church services such as café church, social events, lunches for toddler group families, and parenting courses, to name a few that were cited.

For those that do not currently offer another setting, the main reason cited is lack of volunteers, time and resources.

- No, just don't have the resources to run anything else currently. (P65)
- We don't at the moment due to not having the volunteers/time to offer it. (P50)

Some others had not thought about offering something to the families outside of the toddler group itself.

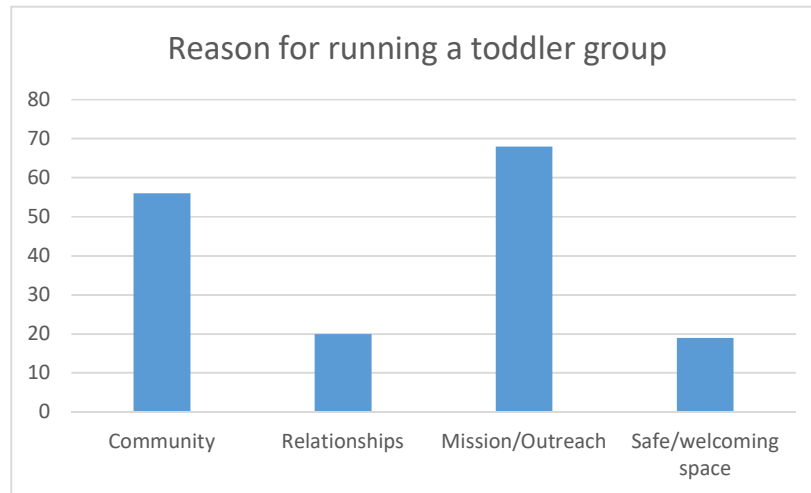
- No. Hadn't thought of offering another. Good idea, got me thinking now! (P106)
- No, not thought of that. (P86)

Others are not offering anything currently, but would like to think about doing something.

- No, would love to, not sure what. (P46)
- We would like to work towards this but not sure what shape it should take, or what would work. (P88)

### 4.1.3 Why run a toddler group?

Participants were asked to state the reason for running a toddler group. This was an open-ended question so some coding around key words and phrases was used to pick up on the most common themes and threads, as presented in figure 8. The themes that emerged were not often in isolation of each other, but many times overlapped.



**FIGURE 8**

#### ***Mission/Outreach***

The biggest theme to emerge for why churches are running toddler groups is based around the mission or outreach aspect. I grouped any answers together that mentioned these words or about sharing the good news or love of Jesus with those who come along. This theme was picked up in 61% of the responses given and was mentioned in a variety of ways, with some examples below:

- To introduce families to the Bible and the church. (P55)
- It is missional. (P67)
- Sharing God's love with the community, outreach mission. (P30)

#### ***Community***

Another key theme was community, which was referred to in 52% of the responses given. I found the responses were quite nuanced, so I grouped them into the following sub-themes based on my own interpretation, with some examples from the participants to back these up:

Being a presence: 'We (the church) wanted to be more present in the community and perhaps have a way to introduce families to the church who otherwise wouldn't know about it' (P84)

Responding to a need: 'There is a need in the community for the carers of preschool children' (P97)

Providing a service: 'To provide a service to the community in order to engage with them' (P107)

Community connection: 'To connect with our community and use God given opportunities to pray with parents/listen/support/signpost/share faith' (P38)

### ***Relationships***

The desire to build relationships, also referred to as connections, with those who come along to the toddler group was seen as an important reason for running the group. This theme was referred to in 18.5% of the responses:

- 'To give families a safe and fun place to go, to form relationships and ultimately tell them about Jesus!' (P14)
- 'Building connections for faith sharing and offering an important service to parents and children locally.' (P46)

### ***Safe/Welcoming space***

The idea of offering a certain type of 'space' was also a theme that emerged as a reason for running a toddler group, seen in 18% of the responses. I noticed that 'safe' could refer to the physical place the group meets (concerned with the aesthetics and practicalities that are especially set up and managed for young children), but it could also relate to the atmosphere of 'feeling safe' and 'welcoming' to share life with others.

Some examples of these responses are:

- 'To provide a safe space for families to come along, to interact and get to know one another and experience an outreach of the church' (P11)
- 'To provide a safe space for them to come to that shows them Jesus' love' (P15)
- 'To provide a safe and engaging space for toddlers and their carers to be themselves and to receive that love of Christ' (P42)

## **4.1.4 Importance of outreach to the community**

98% of the participants agreed that the toddler group is an important outreach to the community, not a surprising result given that these are the people running the groups. When asked why they felt it was important, 31% identified that a toddler group was a first step, and perhaps only way, to experience church:

- Yes- it's the most amount of non-church families we see in the building each week. (P14)
- Yes, the families we meet often don't feel church is for them, we want to show them the love of Jesus doesn't depend on them coming to church on a Sunday morning. (P31)
- Yes we offer first contact with church and a nurturing environment where seeds of the Gospel are sown and Christian values are promoted. (P48)
- Absolutely. We reach people nobody else in church could interact with. (P68)

#### 4.1.5 Toddler groups as a priority?

The participants were asked if they felt that their toddler group was a priority for their church. Encouragingly, 57% of those surveyed indicated that it was, however 20% said it was not, and 23% were unsure. As seen in the responses below, there are a couple of reasons I identified for these presented inconsistencies:

##### ***No from wider church congregation***

- Not to the congregation as it's not on a Sunday- it's not proper church in their minds (P3)
- In the main church, not particularly. (P22)

##### ***Gap between what is said and what is felt***

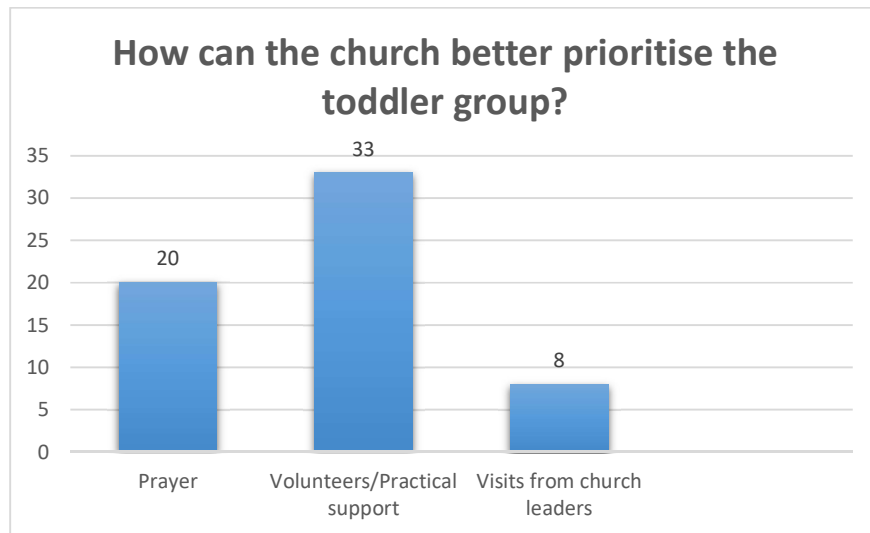
- Feel the church likes to have the group and say that it's important but don't actually value it. Would be great to have more staff present to chat to parents. It's our largest outreach with the smallest team. (P59)
- It's spoken about as a priority but it doesn't feel that way with lack of a visible leadership presence. (P81)
- The leadership say yes because they hear how well attended it is, but they don't promote it, or get involved at all, unless it's for sharing figures for the AGM! (P47)

##### ***Not viewed as an effective outreach***

- No- seen as something a few mums just do. (P5)
- No just not seen as a priority or real church. (P13)
- No because we do not put 'bums on seats' and the leadership do not see the value of offering support to families. (P53)



When asked how the church could better prioritize the toddler group, I identified the following main themes indicated in figure 9:



**FIGURE 9**

### ***Volunteers/Practical Support***

The biggest theme emerging in how toddler groups could feel more prioritized by the wider church community is through practical support:

- More Sunday members to attend for being available to listen and get to know our families. (P97)
- More physical support with setting up, tidying up and running of the group. (P17)

### ***Prayer***

Being prayed for, and even having the opportunity to share prayer points with the wider church, was also seen as important:

- Pray for me as the leader and the families who attend. (P52)
- Include prayer for the group into services. (P86)
- Nobody ever asks me how it's going, is that because people aren't praying for us? If the prayer team had us as a focus every few months that would be good. (P68)

### ***Visits from church leaders***

How church leaders supported the toddler group would make a difference to how prioritized the group felt:

- The clergy could be more visible and come along and chat with parents rather than leave it to the volunteers. (P82)

- Support with deacons/minister presence, support with pastoral care for families included with the churches pastoral care, not segregated and seen as the group leaders problem. (P81)

This kind of engagement from church leaders really matters to those who already feel supported:

- I feel really supported when the leadership drop in every so often. It really encourages me and helps it to feel like part of the main church activities. (P78)
- It helps that leaders visit your group, talk to families, become a presence. Show they care and are human! (P26)

## 4.2 Qualitative data

Face to face interviews were carried out with four toddler group leaders and two church leaders. The toddler groups and participants are identified with pseudonyms as laid out in table 1.

**TABLE 1 – INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Toddler Group</b>	<b>People</b>	<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Size of church*</b>	<b>Day it runs</b>	<b>Approx. # of families attending p/w</b>
Group T	Cara – group leader  Thomas – church leader	Anglican	Residential area North West of the city	Small	Friday morning	10-15 families
Group L	Beth – group leader  Alan – church leader	Anglican	Urban area West of the city	Large	Wednesday morning	40-50 families
Group P	Veronica – group leader	Baptist	Rural village North West of the city	Small	Wednesday morning	20 -25 families
Group B	Lena – group leader	Anglican	Residential Area North of the city	Medium	Thursday morning	20 families

\*(Beasley-Murray, 2008)

A few key themes/sub-themes started to emerge from the thematic analysis and there was a fair amount of tweaking, re-developing and refining these to end up with the three detailed below. An extract from this coding process can be seen in Appendix E.

### 4.2.1 Mission Opportunity

Key themes around the missional opportunity toddler groups offer started to emerge, and were developed as follows:

1. **Relationships as a foundation for spiritual development** – understanding the importance that building relationships with families in toddler groups has on their spiritual journey. Without a relationship, any attempt to provide a ‘next step’ on a faith journey will be ineffective. There is also a sense that this is both a reason for running a toddler group (an aim), but also the result of one as well (a result).

When coding the interview dataset, this theme was picked up by several participants. Lena refers to a mum who has been coming along to the toddler group and then been open to coming to a mum’s Bible study, saying ‘she has just started coming recently regularly to church because of the relationships she’s established here.’

Veronica talks about the importance of building relationships in giving them confidence and also the impact it has on journeying with them, saying ‘so then when we offer a parenting course it’s not cold, it’s not just a poster, we’ve actually got a relationship with them where we can then say we’re doing this and we think this would be helpful to you, whatever it is that we’re running next.’

Thomas also picks up on this theme, saying ‘I think (it) has to do with relationship building and the great thing about the toddler group is it’s a nice safe friendly space to build relationship but can then lead onto something like Alpha or church on Sunday - something like that.’

2. **Prioritizing the toddler group as a mission outpost of the church** – there is a need to acknowledge that toddler groups are an important extension of the church, offering a first experience of the faith community. There were subthemes emerging to include the overall ‘feel’ of a group in terms of welcome and space; a first experience of church; and the choice to include Christian content or not. All the participants also indicated that the toddler group was an important, and for some even the biggest, outreach for their church.

### ***Safe and Welcoming Space***

Beth identifies the importance of this, saying:

‘I’ve tracked with a few families and that’s kind of broken down their perception about what church should be, or is in their mind, and so I think once they feel safe here, and once their children feel safe here, they’re a lot more open to the idea of coming along and trying other things.’

### ***First experience of church***

Alan says, 'There's an element of low bar entry into a church where people would have just thought that's the last place I could go in the past...'

Thomas also picks up on this idea of toddler groups providing an easy entry point to church, and the opportunity it offers, saying, 'It's back to this idea of it being an easy win, having people coming into your church. So often we need to go out the church to share the gospel, but actually with this, people are coming in, it's like a captive audience. It's great to build community and they're wanting to come here, you're not having to twist their arm, 'oh please come to the toddler group', they want to be here; they're going to rock up.'

### ***Christian content***

Whilst some groups are including overt Christian content like Bible stories and songs, some participants indicated that even just the way in which people were treated at the group shows something of the love of Jesus. Veronica says 'I think it models living out our faith in real time, in real world in everyday' and Lena says 'we don't want it to be too in your face, I mean people know we are a church and we're not shy about telling people that we're part of a church, we invite them regularly to anything that the church is doing.'

- 3. The need to be intentional and creative in 'what's next' for toddler group families** – understanding that in order to keep journeying with the families, there needs to be other opportunities outside of the toddler group to continue to build relationships and point people to Jesus. This is not about getting everyone to attend Sunday church services; it involves thinking about how to meet people where they are at (in terms of schedules and non-church culture) and being flexible, creative and adaptable to meeting those needs; putting in place the opportunities for spiritual development as part of a longer journey. Each of the interview participants pointed to different activities that they were experimenting with to encourage that 'next step' with toddler group families, including family events, parenting courses, Bible studies, and Messy Church, with some examples from the dataset below.

Alan: 'I could really see us running a Group L church on a Sunday in the future, and saying look it will be similar to what we do on a Wednesday like with some songs about God and to him, eating together and a then chance to pray and I think it would

be really popular and I've seen other churches do that and that would be a bit of thing I could really see us doing but only when we have the right resources in the future.'

Thomas: '...it requires a bit more ingenuity, a bit more thinking, a lot of prayer, to think about actually how we can be meeting people where they're at and helping them onto the...next stage, whether that's an Alpha course, meet up to discuss something, or a particular course or something, or a social event, or another service or conference or something like that.'

Veronica: '...trying to sort of create that balance is always difficult but we wanted something as a kind of next step for inviting the toddler families and others that we come into contact with which is why we started the Messy Church. So we chose a Saturday morning cause we particularly wanted it to be for the whole family and that's been really successful.'

#### 4.2.2 Disconnect between church and toddler group

The interview participants all indicated a lack of support from the wider church, mainly in the form of volunteers. Veronica picks up on the right type of volunteers needed, when asked if the wider church are supportive: 'Yes in as far as they are excited about what's going on, not so much when it comes to hands on and getting dirty and doing it, but that goes across the board with family work I think.'

The impact of low support means it limits what else the toddler group can do, impacting on its effectiveness, as Thomas indicates: 'I think how willing the church family are to get engaged because it's not on a Sunday and you are limited because a lot of people will be at work so you know certain connections that can't happen.'

Alan agrees: 'I think there's probably not enough of us volunteers...availability from probably our Sunday church congregation during the week to build relationship.'

#### 4.2.3 Church in its own right?

A topic solely explored within the interviews was of others' opinions on Withers' statement about a toddler group being 'church in its own right' (2006, p.77). Most of those interviewed disagreed that a toddler group could be church in its own right, mainly based on certain elements missing such as Biblical teaching and connection with the wider church body.

'I would say it's not church in its own right because we're not teaching the Bible..., it is outreach rather than church in its own right... I don't think it's got the things that you need to call something a church.' (Lena)

'I think it's a shame if people see it as church without the rest of the people never connecting with other members of the church because I think they're missing out and the church is missing out if they're not connecting...I wouldn't say it's church in its own right but it is a very important part of the church.' (Cara)

However, Veronica did think that a toddler group could be church, depending on what the definition of 'church' actually is:

'I think it absolutely can be. Again it depends how you define church, doesn't it. What is church? What do we mean by church? I think it can be an expression of church, yes.'

## 4.3 Chapter Summary

Here is a short summary of the key findings of the quantitative and qualitative research, which will be synthesized in the following chapter.

### 4.3.1 Key findings from the quantitative research

There is much to extract from the survey results, but I have identified the following as key findings that relate to the proposed research question:

1. Highlights the important missional aspects of a toddler group and shows a need for the groups to be greater prioritized.
2. Acknowledges the importance of building relationships with the families that attend toddler groups.
3. Identifies ways in which toddler groups might be better supported.
4. Identifies a disconnect between families that attend the toddler group and engagement with the wider church.

### 4.3.2 Key findings from the qualitative research

The key themes that I saw emerging and wanted to develop in relation to the research question were:

1. Reinforces the missional opportunity of toddler groups, focused on three key areas:
  - a. Relationships as a foundation for spiritual exploration

- b. Prioritizing and acknowledging the toddler group as a mission outpost of the church
  - c. The need to be intentional and creative in 'what's next' for toddler group families
- 2. Identifies a disconnect between the toddler group and wider church.
- 3. Starts to explore what 'church' is.



## Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This discussion will analyse and synthesize the data from across the mixed methods data set in order to arrive at results that are all-inclusive, and situate them within the larger body of literature and previous research, along with theory and theology (Iyadurai, 2023, p.157). I admit there were many strands to this research, but I developed some converging key themes across the data sets. These themes help to explore how church can more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group:

- a. Toddler groups as a missional outreach
- b. A disconnect between toddler group and church
- c. The need for 'next steps' for toddler group families
- d. Defining 'church'

### 5.1 Toddler groups as a missional outreach

When asked why they run a toddler group, an overarching theme emerging from participants across both data sets is that they offer an important missional outreach opportunity. In the survey, it was most often referred to as 'mission/outreach.' The results from the interviews were slightly more nuanced but all referred to 'reaching the community' in some way, which I linked to 'outreach'. These results were not surprising to me as they reinforce previous research and literature, however it does take a next step in underlining the missional opportunity that toddler groups offer the church (Burt, 2017; CATS, 2009; Church Times, 2015; Cray, 2004; Hawes, 2019; Hewitt, 2017; Hope Together et.al, 2020; Lear, 2009; May, 2023b; Withers, 2006).

Toddler groups are being missional in various ways, which were identified as recurring sub-themes across the data sets. These themes serve as what I have termed key 'missional aspects' of a toddler group, as seen in figure 10.



**FIGURE 10**

These aspects link to the ‘marks of mission’ that I referred to in Chapter 1, which were: to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom; to teach, baptise and nurture new believers; and to respond to human need by loving service (Churches Together in England, 2024). Church-based toddler groups are doing all of these things through their missional aspects. Although these are not significant new findings, it further demonstrates the effectiveness of a toddler group, showing its multi-dimensional opportunity for mission, and provides an opportunity to build on them and strengthen them.

### 5.1.1 Reaching out to the community

This is a really strong and recurring theme that I noticed across both data sets, and also ties into what previous research says about ‘belonging’ and being in community (Cray, 2004; Drake and Drake, 2021; Reed, 2013; Smith, 2020). From the online survey, 52% of responses mentioned community in some way, indicating that it remains a key aspect of a toddler group. I grouped these survey answers into four further sub-themes, which to me also demonstrated the broadness of the term ‘community’ across the data. These were: having a presence, responding to a need, providing a service, and making connections. The interview data agrees with these sub-themes when mentioning community. They made comments such as ‘Initially it was just one of the most obvious ways to reach out to the community’ (Alan) and ‘to be known in the community that’s a place to be open and welcoming...we just saw a bit of a need’ (Beth) and ‘also we want to serve the community, provide a safe space for families’ (Lena).

A consistent reference to a ‘safe’ and ‘welcoming’ space felt in a toddler group is also a key theme emerging from across both sets. I put this under the umbrella of community outreach as it seems to link with how the community is being served. This language of ‘safe’ and

'welcome' concurs with what others say about the warmth and consistency of settings like toddler groups which give parents a sense of being cared for and empathized with (CATS, 2009; Withers, 2000).

### 5.1.2 First point of contact with church

From the survey, 31% identified that a toddler group was a first step to experiencing church. This was echoed in the interviews, and terms such as 'low bar' entry or an 'easy win' were used to reinforce the easiness of getting families to take that first step. The families coming to the toddler group want to be there and previous research backs this up by revealing how popular toddler groups are (Burt, 2017; Church Times, 2015; Hope Together et. al., 2020). Of course families are not coming to toddler groups to experience church in the first instance, which is why understanding how to serve the community is a crucial part of this. There has to be a genuine desire to support families and provide a service that meets a real need, as there could be a danger in 'ticking a box' to get people into the church building. There are echoes of Jesus' own ministry in this, thinking about the different times where he provided a need first, for example the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:1-14). People were hungry and he gave them something to eat before he started teaching them. Toddler groups operate in similar ways (especially when there are tea and cake on offer!)

However, once families are coming along to a toddler group and experiencing genuine community, there is a chance to offer a 'bridge' to the wider church; something both the survey and interview data also refer to. First, there needs to be an acknowledgement that what is done in the toddler group will have an impact on families' views of connecting with the wider church, so what is done within the group matters. It might also be the only place the church will connect with these families, as Sunday morning church might feel a step too far. De-mystifying what their perceptions are about Christians and the church space therefore is something that some toddler groups are doing really well, as was highlighted in the research, but there are opportunities to be more intentional with this. This observation agrees with previous literature, that this setting outside the usual Sunday morning church service is a good place to start as it offers a different way of witnessing and bringing the gospel to meet people where they are at first (Cray, 2004; Withers, 2006).

### 5.1.3 Building relationships

Perhaps a natural by-product of creating a community setting like a toddler group, this aspect sees building relationships as more than that. Emerging across both data sets, building relationships is not just seen as a reason for running a toddler group, but seems to be an important, if not crucial, foundation for helping toddler group families explore faith.

Other writers agree that building relationship with those who are interested in faith is the first step, and then meeting them where they are at with the gospel is imperative if it is going to enter and affect their lives (Cray, 2004, Nye, 2009). This opportunity to build lasting relationships with young families also echoes the ties of loyalty and faithfulness through Christ, which is not found in many other places (Cray, 2004, p. 7).

Previous literature identifies the importance of building relationships, but they are not featured prominently, apart from something interesting that is pointed out in the *Impact of Church-Based Toddler Groups*. This report highlights that 79% of the parents built friendships with the toddler group team members, and to me that is the key part of this missional aspect (Church Times, 2015, n.p.). It is not the relationships between parents/carers that will be most effective in nurturing faith journeys, unless I suppose they are Christians. The onus is on building relationships between the Christians on the toddler group team and the families, and intentionally journeying these beyond the group. This means that greater thought and effort needs to go into building the team. Toddler groups are only for a season, so when this naturally comes to an end for families, either because they go back to work or their child starts school, there needs to be an opportunity to continue to build these relationships. Toddler groups need to be mindful and intentional with the relationships they are building both for now, whilst at toddler group, and for later, thinking about what is going to help sustain the relationships beyond the toddler group; key for discipleship. This priority takes the lens off looking at the 'toddler group' as a means to an end, but instead sees it as a starting point for taking people on a longer journey of exploring faith.

Whilst not a completely a new finding, it strongly reinforces that without a relationship, any attempt to take toddler group families on a faith journey will be ineffective. This is really important when thinking about how to effectively engage with a toddler group, especially when thinking about what to prioritize.

#### 5.1.4 Telling people about Jesus

As referred to in previous research and literature, toddler groups also provide a way to tell others about Jesus and can offer that first point of spiritual development (Beckwith, 2004; Casson et. al., 2023; Hawes, 2019; Lear, 2009; May, 2023b; Yust, 2003). Of course, previously mentioned, the effectiveness of this is best done within genuine relationship. In my research, I found that toddler groups are doing this in both spoken and unspoken ways. 82% of those surveyed indicated that they are including Christian content in some way and the interview data also showed that some are making an effort to include these things. In this way they are openly sharing that they are a Christian group.

There are also groups that indicated more covert Christian content, which includes meeting a need, building connections with people and treating them in a loving, Christ-like way. The results also mention that simply running the group in a church means families are aware that it is led by Christians. I agree with this to some extent, but there is a danger of becoming too complacent with that.

Whilst there may be a sense that there is no right or wrong way of doing this, and should be tailored to each toddler group depending on its community, I think there has to be intentionality in however this looks. The 'Great Commission' given to us in Matthew 28:19-20 is a clear mandate to 'go and make disciples' and 'teach them to obey everything I have commanded you.' I am also drawn to seeing loving people being an echo of discipleship, that through loving each other then everyone will know that we are Jesus' disciples, as highlighted in John 13:34-35. I do think they need to go hand in hand to have the greatest impact.

## 5.2 A disconnect between toddler group and church

Despite the missional opportunity that is clearly reinforced in this study, my research question assumes that churches are not fully and effectively grasping this. I wondered if this was down to the disconnect between toddler groups and church that previous research has identified (Hawes, 2019; Hewitt, 2016; May, 2023a). The results from this study reinforce that there is a disconnect in the way the church is supporting the toddler group, and identifies a lack of crossover it has with toddler group families themselves.

### 5.2.1 Addressing the 'gap' between toddler groups and church

Further evidence of a 'gap' between toddler groups and churches was seen across the data sets, mainly in the form of lack of support and engagement. I was, however, surprised to find out where this was coming from. I originally hypothesized that the disconnect might be due to the lack of support that mainly church leaders give to toddler groups; inference based on what I had previously read. A key question referring to this in both the survey and interviews asked 'Do you feel supported by your church leader?' The answer to that question from most participants across the data sets is 'yes.' In fact, the lack of support they reported is *from the wider church*; a key finding for me. In the survey results, this desire for wider church support is even expressed by those who already feel support from their church leaders, and in the interviews, church leaders themselves wonder how there could be better engagement from the wider church congregation.

In my interview with Veronica, she highlights the impact that lack of practical support is having, saying 'We are very limited in our volunteer pool that are getting older and now don't have the energy for family work, that's the bottom line really, that's where our struggle is, the opportunities are huge, but we don't have the people to be involved with it.' The lack of wider church support seems to be impacting how effective a toddler group can be with its mission. Of course it does not minimise the impact that church leaders can have on the group, as was referred to across these results and previous findings. The church leader has an important role to play in standing in the 'gap' between church and the toddler group; advocating for it, communicating about it, praying for it and where possible, physically attending the groups to reinforce support for it.

Jesus identifies this problem that perhaps churches know all too well, in Matthew 9:37, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.' Perhaps there is something that needs to shift within the culture of the church about what mission is in order to mobilise people.

Kahn's theory of employee engagement can apply to this, as he talks about three psychological conditions that impact whether people engage or disengage with work: meaningfulness, safety and availability (1990, p. 703). This can be applied to volunteers at church, as it does involve some sort of work or service especially with the theme of 'meaningfulness.' According to Kahn, people experienced meaningfulness when they felt valuable, useful and worthwhile; the more people understand the benefit of their work, the more involved they are in the process (1990, p. 704). If the work at the toddler group doesn't feel meaningful, either in terms of being effective overall for the church or on a personal level for the worker, then perhaps that is the source of disengagement with it. This leads to exploring what a 'meaningful' or perhaps even an 'effective' ministry looks like; and perhaps there is disagreement on this between the church and the toddler group.

### 5.2.2. Lack of crossover between toddler groups and Sunday services

The survey revealed that 25% of churches see no toddler group families attending on a Sunday morning, revealing a significant lack of crossover with the wider church congregation. Given how many families attend toddler groups each week, this might feel deflating. According to the survey results, this is not just affecting small churches, there are medium and big churches also not seeing a crossover.

These findings show that toddler groups are not being seen as an effective way to get people into church on Sunday mornings. Some of the participants in the survey picked up on this, as seen in these comments:

'...we do not put 'bums on seats' and the leadership do not see the value of offering support to families' (P53) and 'Although the group is very well attended, very few parents accept our invitation to church, so it's not seen as particularly "productive" for evangelism' (P28).

Similar responses were given in the interviews, as is highlighted in this comment from Thomas: 'We're banging heads, how can we get more people to church, actually we've got 18 non church families in church on Friday morning and I think part of the challenge is helping people here to see what can church look like and actually outreach is here ready for the taking.'

There is something being communicated here that expresses a lack of understanding about what the toddler group is for, and what its aims are. If the understanding is that toddler groups should be a source for producing families that attend church on Sunday, and they are not being effective in that, perhaps this is impacting the lack of engagement from the wider church as indicated above.

Referring to Sue Stout's research, one of the distinguishing features which show families coming to faith through toddler groups is through 'clarity of aims and objectives' (Burt, 2017, n.p.). Perhaps the toddler groups aims need to be agreed on and understood by the church leaders, the wider congregation and the toddler group leaders.

This agrees with Colin Wright's comment about the way churches work with their toddler groups; if they can do this well they are most effective in seeing people who start at the toddler group eventually becoming a full part of the church community (CATS, 2009, p.22). If the church community means Sunday morning congregation, however, then the toddler group will continue to be rendered ineffective. There appears to be a need to think more broadly and creatively both about 'church' and what the journey with toddler group families looks like beyond the group.

### 5.3 The need for 'next steps' for toddler group families

A concept I had not considered too important before the study, the need for 'next steps' seemed to emerge as a key theme across the data sets as I went through the research. I asked both survey and interview participants if they offered any other opportunities for faith exploration, but only, I thought, to give a slightly wider view and perhaps for my own interest. 58% of those surveyed are offering another setting to explore faith, which is also outside of Sunday mornings. Of those interviewed, all of them have tried offering another opportunity with toddler group families in mind, including a mum's Bible study, a Messy Church, a Parenting Course or even family-centred events around special times of the year, i.e.

Christmas. The main reason given for not running something was lack of volunteers, which links back to that gap identified between the toddler group and the church.

Encouraged by the variety and creativity in the responses from both the survey and interviews, it reinforced the need for taking people on a journey that was not just about a Sunday morning service. I had acknowledged that there was a need to go deeper with people who attend the toddler group, and had even explored this in my own church setting. I also knew that building longer lasting relationships were important, as seen in the themes already mentioned. However, I had not linked its significance in how church can more effectively engage with its toddler group. It dawned on me that there needs to be a change of perspective, from just thinking of the toddler 'group' (perhaps a short-sighted view), to the 'people' who come along instead.

Previous research does touch on the need for 'nurturing faith journeys', and offering 'enquirer's courses' which show acknowledgment of a needed next step, but most seem to focus on how to influence the toddler group itself (Burt, 2017; CATS, 2009; Hewitt, 2016). Yes a toddler group is a mission opportunity in itself, but to really have an impact on the families that come along, there needs to be a more intentional focus on this long term view. Some toddler groups are getting this, but to be its most effective, the wider church needs to understand it and engage with it too.

## 5.4 Defining 'church'

Additionally, there was this theme developing about how we are defining 'church'. I only broached this topic in the interviews, which limits the results I have to analyse. My original aim with it was to explore what the church could learn from a toddler group that might make church more effective perhaps in building community, forging relationships and being missional. I wondered if this might then encourage church to engage more fully and effectively with the toddler group.

With this in mind, I asked the interview participants for their opinion on Withers' statement about a toddler group being 'church in its own right' (2006, p.77). I went into this question open-minded, but with quiet assumption that others would agree. If a toddler group is church in its own right, then of course it is not accurate to measure a toddler group's effectiveness by how many families also attend a Sunday service. If toddler groups themselves are effective in reaching the community, building relationships with people, introducing them to faith, and being a Christian witness, as previous research had indicated, I was under the impression that this model was something that the wider church needed to embrace (Beckwith, 2004; Casson et. al., 2023; Hawes, 2019; Lear, 2009; May, 2023b; Yust, 2003).



However, my own thoughts on this were challenged as many of the participants disagreed with the statement. They pointed to key elements that a toddler group does not include that are crucial to our Christian faith; one of those things being connecting with the wider congregation, the body of Christ. It seemed ironic when I reflected on this; given the lengths I had gone to address the disconnect between the toddler group and the church, it seemed as if I had unintentionally tried to disconnect them again!

As part of this theme, I was also challenged to think in broader terms about what 'church' looks like, especially following the interview with Veronica. She was one that agreed that a toddler group could be church in its own right, but is very dependent on our definition of it. She brings up a great point that if we define 'church' as only what we do on a Sunday, then a toddler group is not church; but if 'church' is something else, then perhaps it could be. It is beyond the scope of this study to further develop this, but it shows there is a need to explore and question what 'church' is in 2024, to better understand how it can be effective in its mission both within the boundaries of any one gathering like a toddler group, and beyond. There are aspects of 'church' that toddler groups are doing well which I do think the wider church can learn from, and recognising these could have an impact on defining 'church' in future.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to address the question: How might church more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group? To do this I used a mixed methods approach, using an online survey and face to face interviews to garner feedback from mainly toddler group leaders both locally and beyond, as well as speaking to a few local church leaders.

### 6.1 Key Findings

From the research, some key themes emerged across the data sets that addressed the research question and aims of this study. These are:

- a. Toddler groups as a missional outreach
- b. A disconnect between toddler group and church
- c. The need for 'next steps' for toddler group families
- d. Defining 'church'

Some of the themes reinforced previous research and literature, which was encouraging to see, even in my small-scale study. The main concepts that were reinforced were that toddler groups remain an important mission opportunity for churches, and my study made steps to further illuminate these missional aspects:

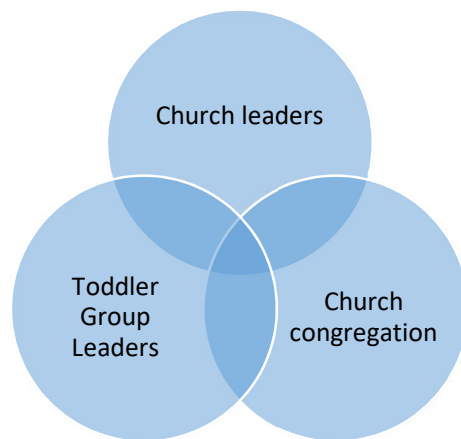
1. Reaching out to the community
2. Providing a first contact with church
3. Building relationships
4. Telling others about Jesus

A key learning for me from this theme was that building genuine relationships within the toddler groups, especially between the team and parents/carers, lays a foundation for further spiritual development. Prioritising the building and sustaining of these relationships beyond the toddler group is essential if we want to see people continuing on a faith journey; ultimately what the mission of toddler groups is all about.

This study also started to reveal the source of the disconnect between church and toddler group, which had been identified in previous research. This 'gap' I felt was a contributing factor to toddler groups being under-utilised and under-supported. I was surprised to note that lack of support was not mainly coming from church leaders, but rather the wider church congregation. Paired with this, it was revealed that there is a lack of crossover between

toddler group families and Sunday morning church services. I believe that these two findings feed into each other, which suggests a mismatch on what 'effective' or even 'meaningful' mission looks like. To better address this I think models of engagement, such as Kahn's model, could be helpful to explore how a joined-up, church-wide approach to mission could encourage greater engagement with toddler groups (1990, p. 703). There is also an opportunity for church leaders to increase their support for toddler group leaders, and be more intentional about bridging the 'gap' between the toddler group and the wider church congregation.

An effective way of engaging with the toddler group is demonstrated with this diagram in figure 11; the key and central overlap being between church, church leaders and toddler group leaders. This is not to suggest the whole church needs to be included in this, but it is a theory and will need some refining and testing. However, I do wonder if addressing this 'gap' would boost the missional effectiveness of the toddler group:



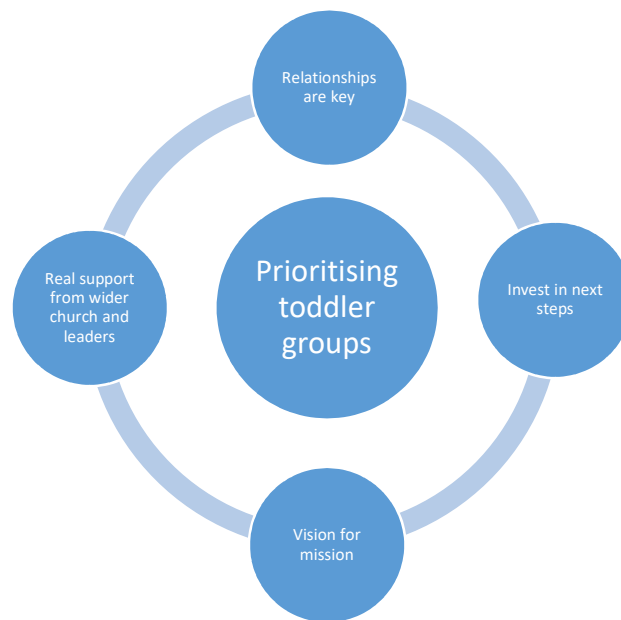
**FIGURE 11**

Another key finding is the need to think beyond the toddler group. Hawes had referred to it in an intentionally droll way, as 'just the toddler group,' to portray the way toddler groups feel in relation to the church (2019, p1). There is a sense that toddler group leaders also need to dispel this idea and have a longer term view of how to keep journeying with the families that they are building relationships with. This involves intentionally thinking about what 'next steps' for families look like both running alongside the current group with parenting or Alpha courses, Bible studies etc. but also steps for later, when families naturally move on from the group such as family events, other expressions of church etc.

This was a shift in my own mind that was important to acknowledge, especially with this ‘next steps’ theme, and that was the need to not just focus on the toddler group itself, but to look instead at the *families*, the people coming along.

This is the real crux of how to effectively engage with the toddler group – to engage with the *families*; to see the group as an important starting point to explore faith in some aspect, invest in the relationships, and journey with them beyond it. There are echoes here of Jesus’ own ministry, from many different examples in the New Testament, in the way he developed relationship and met the needs of people, showed them what God was like, and saw the need to journey with people as they experienced elements of Christian life and explored their need for personal faith.

Figure 12 helps to sum up some of these findings, and show how best to prioritise the toddler group. I think this offers a strong model for how church can more fully and effectively engage with it:



**FIGURE 12**

## 6.2 Reflection

In this study, I was seeking to better understand how a church can more fully and effectively engage with its toddler group. Considering my research sample was much smaller than others’ I referred to throughout this paper, I felt this study made further steps to better understand the role of toddler groups, and how they can be better utilised. It has certainly

challenged me as a toddler group leader, and it has widened my own thoughts and views on many aspects of both toddler groups and church. I hope it challenges others to think differently about their toddler group, including church leaders and the wider church congregation.

However, I am aware that in my enthusiasm to further research this area, I tried to do too much. I set my sights high on how I would conduct the research and who I would speak to, and therefore generated a high volume of data. This was helpful in some ways as it gave me a lot of breadth and depth, helped by the mixed methods approach, but I had a lot of data to sift through to discern which key themes to focus on relevant to the research question. As I went through the data analysis and tried to converge the results across the data sets, I also identified some holes in my data which I could have better addressed earlier on. Some of these holes were from where I asked different questions across the survey and interviews, leaving some topic areas with thin data to evaluate. In the survey, I also asked some questions which I realised seemed too repetitive and I could have done better at tightening them up and making sure it was clear what each question was asking.

Despite things I could have or should have done better, overall I have been encouraged with the findings from this study. It has been exciting and informative and reveals the need to further invest and research this area. I think the findings can be applied to a broad spread of churches, and even if most of it reinforces previous research, it offers a great encouragement to the work that is going on in toddler groups across the country.

### 6.3 Areas for further study

Due to the amount of data this study generated, there is much more that could be explored and further developed which are beyond the limits of this paper. I identified other factors which could potentially impact on a church's engagement with its toddler group, and it would be interesting to look at different areas of the country, different size churches, and if it makes a difference to the toddler group if it is led by a paid worker or a volunteer.

I had also wanted to hear from more church leaders, and think that surveying them in the way I did with toddler group leaders anonymously online could provide some more robust and broader results to compare with this study.

A really interesting theme that emerged from this study, which I did not have capacity within this paper to develop more fully, was the question of how we are defining 'church.' There is a need to further research what church looks like in 2024, and how open, creative, adaptive, and intentional we are in our mission and expression of it.

This study gives a snapshot of where toddler groups are at in 2024, and builds on the latest research which was done in 2020. However, within this time-gap, toddler groups were majorly affected by the Covid-10 pandemic. This was not a factor I focused on in this study, but it would be interesting to do some further specific research on the impact that might have had too.

**Word count – 15,675**

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All Bible references were taken from the NIV

# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Ethical Approval Certificate

# CERTIFICATE OF RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL

How might church engage more fully and effectively with its Toddler Group?

**Student Number: 2104981**



**Birmingham  
Newman  
University**

Module: CYM701

This is to certify that this project has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of Birmingham Newman University



Chair of the Research Ethics Committee

\_\_\_\_\_

Date: November 23, 2023

# Appendix B

## Online survey questions

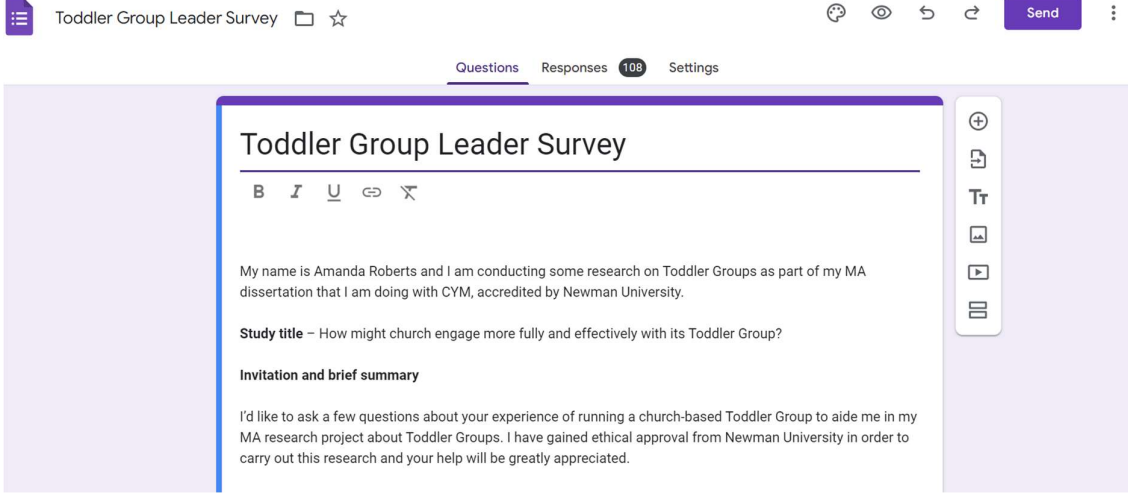
### **B1: Online survey questions for Toddler Group Leaders**

1. How long has the Toddler Group been running? (less than a year, 2-5 years, 5-10 years, 10+ years)
2. What size is your church? (less than 50 members, 50-150, 150-350, 350+)
3. How often does your Toddler Group run? (weekly, fortnightly, monthly, other)
4. What is your main reason for running the Toddler Group? (open answer or select all that apply)
5. Do you offer Christian input as part of the Toddler Group? (tick all that apply - Bible story, Christian songs, offer to pray, other, none of these)
6. Who runs the Toddler Group (paid employee full time, paid employee part time, volunteer, other)
7. How many people, on average, come along to the group?
8. How many people, on average, coming along regularly?
9. Do you have any families that attend the Toddler Group that also come along to Sunday services?
10. Do you offer another opportunity for toddler group families to explore faith, besides a Sunday morning service? If so, describe a bit more about the reasons for running this and how it's going.
11. Do you feel that the Toddler Group is a priority in your church? (not at all, sometimes, most of the time, yes always)
12. Would you consider the Toddler Group to be your church's biggest outreach to the local community? (yes, no, other) Why/Why not?
13. Does your church offer other outreach activities (excluding Sunday mornings)?
14. Do you feel supported in your role as Toddler Group Leader?
15. How could you be better supported?

### **B2: Link to the online survey**

<https://forms.gle/2nPU5cFfQCBYeF9r6> - it is not taking any more responses



## B3: Screen shots of the survey as seen by participants



Toddler Group Leader Survey

Questions Responses **108** Settings

### Toddler Group Leader Survey

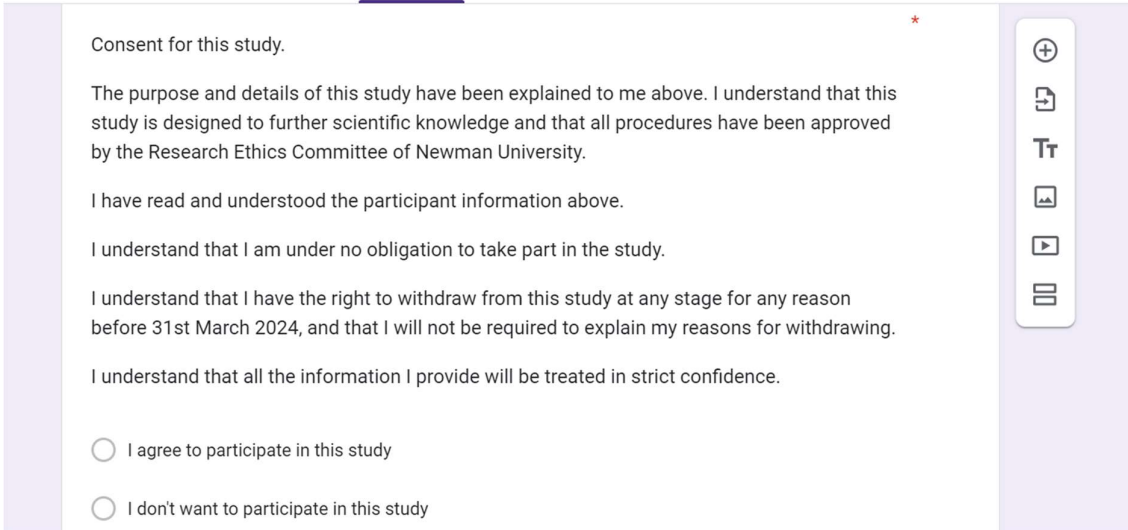
**B I U**  

My name is Amanda Roberts and I am conducting some research on Toddler Groups as part of my MA dissertation that I am doing with CYM, accredited by Newman University.

**Study title** – How might church engage more fully and effectively with its Toddler Group?

**Invitation and brief summary**

I'd like to ask a few questions about your experience of running a church-based Toddler Group to aide me in my MA research project about Toddler Groups. I have gained ethical approval from Newman University in order to carry out this research and your help will be greatly appreciated.



Questions Responses **108** Settings

Consent for this study. \*

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me above. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Newman University.

I have read and understood the participant information above.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason before 31st March 2024, and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence.

I agree to participate in this study

I don't want to participate in this study

# Appendix C

## Consent and Participation Information Documents for Interviews

### Participant information sheet (long interview – Toddler Group/Church Leaders)

**Study title** – How might church engage more fully and effectively with its Toddler Group?

#### Invitation and brief summary

I'd like to visit the Toddler Group in action and ask a few questions about your church's Toddler Group to aide me in my MA research project on Toddler Groups. I have gained ethical approval from Newman University in order to carry out this research and your help will be greatly appreciated.

#### What's involved?

Taking part in this research involves allowing me to visit and interact with those coming along to the Toddler Group as well as asking you as the Toddler Group or Church leader to participate in a recorded, face-to-face interview which will last no longer than an hour. I will keep your information anonymous and no real names will be used in my research going forwards. If I do refer to the church, the group, or the leaders, then I will change the names so they will not be recognisable. I will use the answers to your questions to help me think about the type of community that Toddler Groups offer to those who come, and if any changes could be made that would benefit the group and the church they are part of.

#### What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There might be positive changes to the group and how it's viewed by the church based on this research that will benefit all that attend.

#### What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

I don't for-see any disadvantages or risks to taking part in this research.

#### Further supporting information

This research is being carried out by Amanda Roberts for my MA dissertation. This is an anonymous interview so does not require any personal data or information to be shared. I will use information from these questionnaires to help me in my research project which is due May 2024. Your information, and the recording, will be kept confidential at all times, stored in a private folder, and you have the right to withdraw from the research at any time before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024.

#### Privacy Statement

At Newman University we respect the dignity and worth of each individual and this includes the way we treat personal information collected for research purposes. We encourage you to read the 'Privacy Notice for Research Participants' (Available from: <https://www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/privacy-notice-for-researchparticipants/> ).

#### Contact Details

Student: Amanda Roberts – [ROBE452@newman.ac.uk](mailto:ROBE452@newman.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Robin Smith - [robin.smith@cym.ac.uk](mailto:robin.smith@cym.ac.uk) Telephone number: 07912 160323

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Name of investigator – Amanda Roberts**

**Title of research project** - How might church engage more fully and effectively with its Toddler Group?

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Newman University.

I have read and understood the participant information sheet and this consent form.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I am under no obligation to take part in the study.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this study at any stage for any reason before 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, and that I will not be required to explain my reasons for withdrawing.

I understand that all the information I provide will be treated in strict confidence.

I agree to participate in this study.

**Name of participant:**

**Signature of participant:**

**Signature of investigator:**

**Date:**

## Appendix D

### Interview schedules for face to face interviews

#### **D1: Toddler Group Leaders**

##### **Contextual questions**

1. How long has the Toddler Group been running?
2. How often does your Toddler Group run? How/why did you make this decision?
3. Who runs the Toddler Group? (paid/unpaid)
4. How many people, on average, come along to the group?
5. How many people, on average, come along regularly?

##### **Vision and values of the Toddler Group**

6. What is your main reason for running the Toddler Group? Do you have a vision statement for the group?
7. Do you think the Toddler Group accurately reflects the values/vision of your church? How/Why/Why not?
8. Do you offer Christian input as part of the Toddler Group? Why/Why not? If yes, what does this look like?
9. Would you say that the Toddler Group is a popular outreach to the local families? Why/why not? How does it compare to other outreach activities that your church runs? (is it the main outreach, or part of many others)
10. Do you offer another opportunity for toddler group families to explore faith, besides a Sunday morning service? If so, tell me a bit more about the reasons for running this and how it's going. If not, had they considered this? Why/why not? What are the barriers?

##### **How the Toddler Group connects to the wider church**

11. Do you have any families that attend the Toddler Group that also come along to Sunday services? If so, why do they think this is the case? If not, why do you think this is the case? What barriers do you think there are to them coming along to the church services?
12. Do you feel that the Toddler Group is a priority in your church? Why/Why not?
13. Do you feel supported in your role as the Toddler Group leader by the church/church leader? Why/Why not? How could you feel better supported?
14. Do you think there is anything the church could learn from the Toddler Group? (think about sense of community and belonging)
15. Some people have said that a Toddler Group is 'church' in its own right? What are your thoughts on that?

## **D2: Church Leaders**

1. How many people regularly attend your church on Sunday?
2. Why would you say that your church runs a Toddler Group?
3. Would you consider the Toddler Group as an important outreach/ministry area for your church? Why/why not?
4. What priority does your church give to the Toddler Group? How would you say this is this reflected in the running and resourcing of it?
5. Do you feel that you have a good awareness about what happens at the Toddler Group?
6. How often do you visit the Toddler Group? Do you feel it's important for you/other church leaders/staff to be present at the Toddler Group? Why/Why not?
7. What would you say are the strengths/weaknesses of building community through a Toddler Group?
8. What would you say are the strengths/weaknesses of building Christian faith through a Toddler Group?
9. Do you think it's important to try and get Toddler Group families to come to Sunday morning service/s? Why/why not?
10. Some people have said that a Toddler Group is 'church' in its own right? What are your thoughts on that?



# Appendix E

## Coding for Thematic Analysis

Reach out to community	Building relationships	Opportunities for Spiritual development	Lack of volunteers /support	First step to faith/ entry to church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meeting a need</li> <li>- Welcoming space</li> <li>- Safe space</li> <li>- Easy win</li> <li>- Mission focused</li> <li>- Most popular outreach for the church</li> <li>- Popular activity amongst families</li> <li>- <u>Non Christians</u> in the church building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helps people to take next step to connecting</li> <li>- Also meeting a need</li> <li>- For community/belonging</li> <li>- Earning trust</li> <li>- Glimpse of Jesus in the way we interact with others</li> <li>- Relationships that transcend the toddler group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intentional</li> <li>- Feed /connect to wider church activities</li> <li>- Need for adaptability, evolving, creativity, flexibility</li> <li>- Bridge to church</li> <li>- Use familiarity of toddler group to speak about faith in other expressions of church</li> <li>- Sunday mornings aren't working for people</li> <li>- Goal is not Sunday attendance</li> <li>- Meet them where they are at (cross over theme)</li> <li>- Something for the whole family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Need the right type of volunteers</li> <li>- Impacts on the follow-on work that the church can do</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experience church in a <u>non threatening</u> way</li> <li>- Experience welcome</li> <li>- Safe space (overlaps with community)</li> <li>- Demonstrate love of Jesus even if covert</li> <li>- Low bar entry to church</li> <li>- Points to other things in church life</li> <li>- Demystifying church</li> <li>- Change people's perspectives of church</li> <li>- Toddler group models everyday real faith</li> </ul>