The impact of Church-based parent and toddler groups

The importance of working with children in early years (aged 0-5)

There has been a large amount of academic and social policy research concluding that the single most important factor influencing a child’s intellectual and social development is the quality of parenting and care they receive and the quality of the home learning environment that this creates.

Numerous studies have been conducted, which recognise that many potential educational, social and economic problems can be averted if children have a good foundation in the early years: the first five or so years prior to starting mainstream education. Equally, parents with young children experience a lot of change and strain upon their relationships and it is important for social cohesion that there are support networks in place.

What is the church doing?

Parent and toddler groups are one of the most frequent ways in which churches engage with their communities.

Public and voluntary services both have a part to play. The state provides a policy framework with both educational and social outcome goals. However, public funding and local government organisational reach only extend so far. Therefore the Church, as a body of people committed to long-term engagement in support of social justice, has a role to play that goes well beyond engagement with people on a religious or spiritual agenda. Christians who run Church-based groups do so with a faith-based motivation, but they are looking to have a very broad range of outcomes.

Jubilee+ Impact Research

It is relatively easy to measure the effort that goes in (‘input’) to making an activity (‘output’) happen. It is more meaningful, however, to understand what change actually results from the activity undertaken: the ‘outcome’ or impact.

We consulted widely with networks who seek to offer expertise and promote the work of churches who engage with families with pre-school children. Following our interviews we created an impact model.

We then undertook a national survey to establish the extent to which these impacts were being seen by church-based parent & toddler groups. The 470 respondents, who were mostly group leaders, came from all regions of the UK and were widely spread across the denominations and types of Church.

Overall, the survey provides evidence to support the ‘intuitive’ conclusions that most experienced early years practitioners have about the impact of parent / toddler groups.

Additionally however, it provides an evidence-based framework to communicate to encourage those who currently run projects, those who are considering running projects, and the commissioners of public services.

52% of children in England access some form of parent and toddler group via churches

Up to 27,000 UK churches run early years projects

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Impact themes

Impacts can be grouped according to the degree to which they impact individuals or society as whole

Almost everyone who is part of Church-based parent and toddler groups derives enjoyment from their participation. 98% of children and parents / carers enjoy being part of the group. The evidence shows that there is no systematic theme for why either children or parent / carers should not enjoy participation. Absence of church leadership support or prayer may affect team member enjoyment.

There is a positive impact upon stress for parents / carers and group members gain long term satisfaction from being involved. 87% of team members report increased personal wellbeing through serving. 66% of parents feel less stressed as a result of being part of the group.

Community is built amongst group helpers and parents / carers, who develop long-lasting friendships that would not have happened without the group. This is observed more in larger and more long-running groups. 88% of groups reported that parents / carers get a friendship support network. 88% reported that children build friendships and 86% that they acquire social skills. 79% reported that team members build friendships with parents. Larger and more mission-focused groups may also appreciate the impact they are having more, as well as creating more impassioned leaders.

91% of groups report some positive impact upon the outward-looking and community engagement culture of their church.

82% of groups report that their church has grown numerically at least ‘a little’ as a result of the group.

88% of groups report that, to a material extent, parents / carers become part of a new friendship network.

Parents / carers are finding faith and becoming Christians through parent and toddler groups. Churches have experienced some numerical growth as a result.

Child development is enhanced by engaging in the activities provided by groups. Parents / carers get connected into new friendship / support networks, but there is little evidence that this extends to their partner relationships. Larger groups have more life skill impacts.

Children receive direct positive influences, but the extent to which parental bonds are built and parenting skills are imparted varies considerably, with a consistently higher impact reported when welcomer roles are designated, particular demographic groups are targeted or team members are appropriately trained. 84% of groups reported that children get positive family influences.

 Churches are very rarely commissioned by public authorities to provide services related to early years, yet the impact of their intervention does make some difference to the need for public service intervention. Groups that are more focused in the demographic targeting of participants tend to report that they have a greater impact upon avoiding the need for social service intervention.
Conclusions and recommendations

The group leaders who felt a lack of church leadership support also reported less impact upon children, parents and team workers. The evidence suggests that if the perceived level of support from church leaders is less than ‘somewhat’, group impact is reduced.

Many of the more important social integration impacts that relate to personal friendship or community belonging have relationship at their heart, which can take some time to develop. Building trust is perceived as more important than the precise activity model, although it may well be that it takes some months after start-up for the group to develop how it operates.

Groups that specifically target areas where there appears to be need for inclusion, e.g. racial minorities or the economically disadvantaged, report higher impact. Interview evidence from groups targeting men suggested that many of the men who got involved would not otherwise have engaged with early years groups. Reported impact is also higher where parent / carers include more than a minority of church members or active Christians.

Church-based parent and toddler groups typically have a lifespan that goes well beyond government early years funding initiatives and even economic cycles. While their goals may not be geared to meeting statutory early years / nursery educational goals, they have a valuable role to play in building communities and ensuring that there is a support network for vulnerable young families. Therefore, there is value in statutory authorities and church-based groups co-originating and having good knowledge of each other’s aims and operations, even if there is no direct commissioning of service provision.

This is particularly the case for making sure that everyone feels welcome when they arrive. If groups are focused on creating impact in a particular area (e.g. imparting parenting skills) then it seems logical that team members should be trained so that they can be more effective. However, when training takes place in any of the five areas surveyed, reported impact is higher across a wide range of outcomes, not just the ones directly related to the training. Perhaps this is because trained team members are more generally confident and equipped to communicate and apply life skills into the group. This is more marked when the majority of team members are trained in a particular discipline.

Traditional group governance extends to making sure that child protection procedures are in place and we agree with that. Nevertheless, extending specific role allocation would appear to help the dynamics of the group in creating and enhancing relationship building. This is particularly the case for making sure that everyone feels welcome when they arrive. Prayer might not be considered as relevant outside of a faith-based environment, but the evidence suggests that reported impact is higher when groups, team members and churches engage in some level of public and private prayer. Without entering into any debate about the question “Does prayer work?”, at the very least, the willingness to participate in prayer is an indicator of a greater level of engagement of the people and churches involved.

Groups with very small numbers of children attending (certainly less than five) also report less impact. While some of these may be in start-up, the imperative on such groups is to grow if they want to have impact upon the people that are part of the group. The most important factors in causing parents or carers to join a group was friends or relations already in the groups or being personally invited. Therefore, if they focus on inviting people with whom they already have contact through family or friendship links they are more likely to secure larger numbers and impact.

There is no strong evidence of a perfect activity model, but unsurprisingly faith impacts were enhanced by including Bible stories and prayer times. More subtle effects, such as improved parental bonding and engagement with the child, were noted when water / sand play was involved. Interview evidence also suggested value in some ‘messy’ activities such as painting and arts and crafts being provided by groups, due to them being much more difficult for parents and carers to undertake in a home environment.

Real expertise in parent / toddler groups lies with the network partner organisations that this research engaged with. We noted many examples of rich wisdom and experience and we can thoroughly recommend that groups access and use the materials and resources available.
A quarter of survey respondents took the time to add free text responses sharing their stories and telling us in more depth about how the ways in which they ‘Go the extra mile’ and see lives transformed.

“Isolated mums found out they live in the same area and were able to form friendships outside the group where they have supported each other. Some people have found Christian faith and ‘Toddlers Inn’ has been part of that journey.”

“I came to faith through attending our toddler group. I was encouraged to attend a START course and then Alpha. I have been employed by the church for their children and families work for the last two years... All through Toddlers!”

“One of our most exciting stories has been that a family who attended our group received a CD we produced with a bible story, prayer and song we recorded on it for a Christmas present. The parent said her older child has listened to it and asked who God was? And wondered if we did any courses to help her answer her daughter. She came on an alpha course then brought her husband both became Christians and the whole family now attend church.”

“Possibly one of the most amazing stories is of a mum who is now a Christian and now a volunteer with our group. ... We have seen three other families attend church regularly through her and others patience and listening ear. ... Trust is such an important and possibly overlooked issue in toddler groups - families won’t just come to church at the drop of a hat - we need to build up relationships with people, share our faith when we can and be patient.”

References
2. 1277.org.uk