

The impact of Church-based parent and toddler groups



Research Report
June 2015

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.

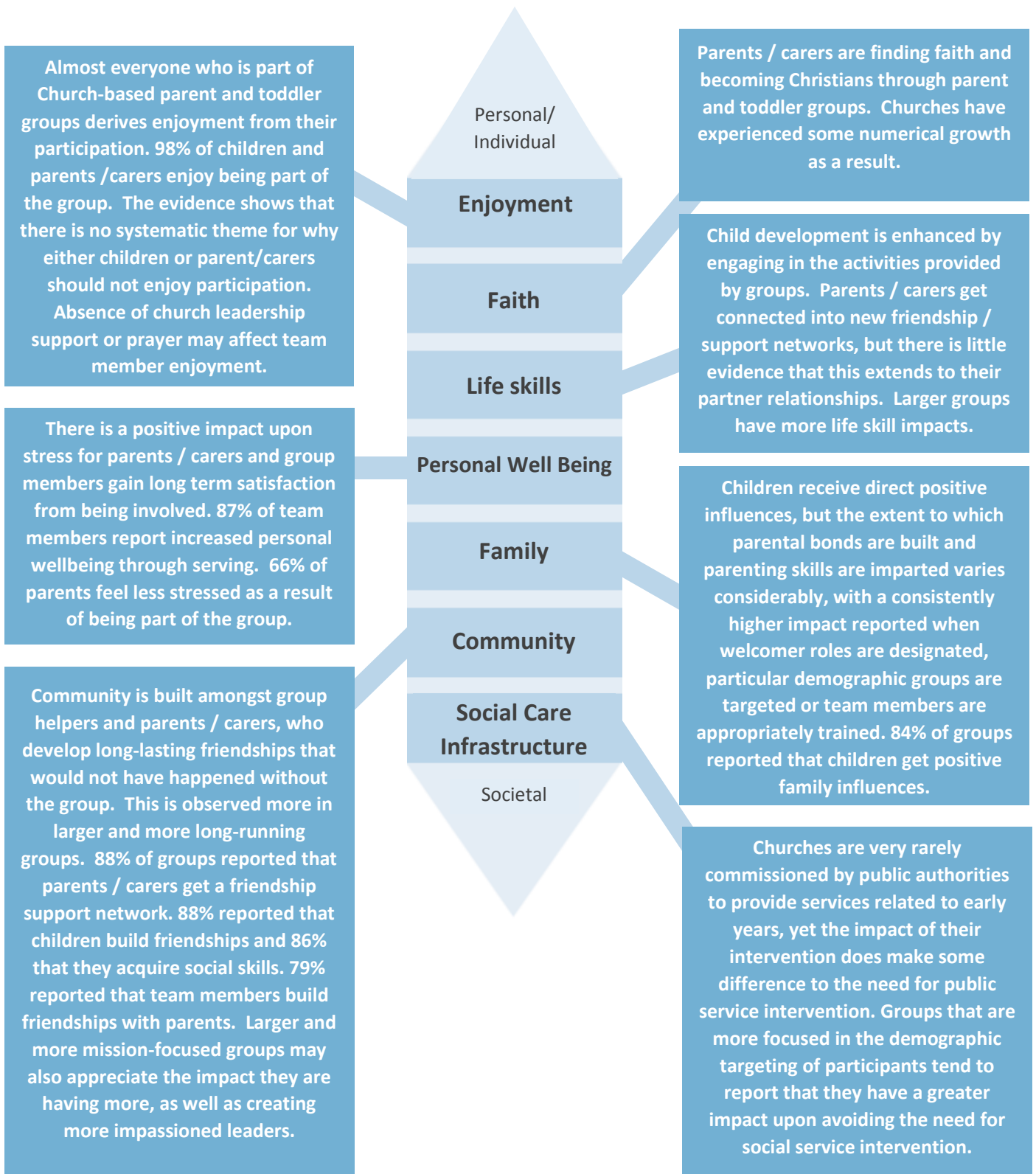
52%
of children in England access some form of parent and toddler group via churches¹

Up to 27,000 UK churches run early years projects²

"It is family background, parental education, good parenting, and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money, in determining whether their potential is reached in later life"³

Impact themes

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



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

Conclusions and recommendations

Church leadership should make sure that groups feel at least somewhat supported by them

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.

Groups should persevere through their first year and not expect too much impact too soon

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.

Churches should set up groups that deliberately target sections of their communities, but make sure that there is a good mix of Christians or church members

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.

Local statutory authorities should build a long-term connection with Church-based parent and toddler group provision

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.

Groups should designate specific roles to team members, particularly in making someone responsible for welcoming adults and children

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

Groups should train the majority of team members in relevant disciplines

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.

Groups with greater prayer support report greater impact

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 should seek to grow beyond a handful of children attending, recognising that friends and relations are the most likely people who will come if invited

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.

Groups should not be too concerned about the precise activity model they use, but there are some specific goals that may be helped by specific activities

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.

Church-based parent and toddler groups should connect up and use the resources and expertise of specialist networks

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.

In summary, churches that want to make an impact in their communities through engaging with families with young children should establish where there is the most need and then deliberately set up a long-term group with a properly trained, resourced and well organised team. Church leaders need not be directly involved, but should make sure that the group feels supported and that the church's mission and vision aligns with the group's goals.

Churches that do so can expect growth in the capability and outward focus of its people, as well as in the scope for making connection within their community and increasing the opportunity to connect people with other worthwhile activities that the church undertakes. Such impact might not be numerically spectacular, but is likely to be of immense value to specific individuals.

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."

"X, a local neighbourhood mum came along to Mums of Little Ones weekly playgroup because she noticed our buggy park while walking past the church. Her curiosity started a journey discovering her own faith. It has been very exciting to be a part of walking with X throughout her journey and now seeing her and her family/children become integrated into the greater church community"

"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

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2. 1277.org.uk
3. Field, F. (2010). The foundation years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances. London:

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