**“Will my child have their own faith?” Exploring the impact of parental beliefs on childhood faith nurture**

**Abstract**

The theological impetus and practical outworking of the beliefs and approaches held by Christian parents was investigated in ten case study families over a three-year period. The sample represented contrasting parental theological understandings of childhood faith. Each child’s faith was observed annually, using the lens of a child as a model of the Kingdom of God, reflecting Matthew 18. Analysis permitted investigation of the impact of parental theological beliefs on a child’s onward faith. The data indicated that such beliefs and persuasions significantly impact the modes of faith nurture in the home, ultimately impacting the nature of faith exhibited in the children. Many of the participants felt that sharing faith with their children was very important but they seemed minimally aware of their beliefs and theological perceptions regarding faith in childhood. Insights and recommendations are provided for nurturing children’s faith more effectively within such variety of beliefs, values and approaches.

KEYWORDS: faith nurture, child, Matthew 18, parental theology

**Introduction**

There is widespread acceptance within the Christian community that parents have a significant influence on their child’s faith journey (Powell, 2014; Turner, 2014; Mark, 2016; Hill & Frost, 2018; Barna, 2019). The implications and effects of this are likely to vary according to different Christian parenting approaches, akin to the diverse outcomes of different secular parenting styles (Harris, 1998; [Smetana](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X16301282%22%20%5Cl%20%22%21), 2017; Lavrič & Naterer, 2020), although this is an area which has been minimally investigated to date. Existing research has examined the impact of parent and grandparent religious activity on the process of faith transmission (Voas and Storm, 2011; Bengston, 2013), but consideration of specific beliefs and approaches to Christian parenting have not yet been extensively examined. Approaches to faith nurture in the home derive from deeply held convictions of parents, which are the product of a plethora of factors including church tradition, one’s own upbringing, and views sourced in contemporary society (Bengston, 2013; Turansky & Miller, 2013; Turner, 2014; Mark, 2016). Yet this research found that these influences and perceptions are often subconsciously held, with the implication that many Christian parents do not critically reflect upon their beliefs and approaches to faith nurture. Furthermore, these modes of understanding are often derived from an adult perspective and approach to faith, which necessitates cognitive elements and competencies. It is argued that where an adult viewpoint is foundational to observation, childhood faith may be overlooked and devalued since a deficit model equates to a child being unable to reach the required standards (Robinson, 1977; Berryman, 2017; Csinos, 2020). This paper therefore seeks to incorporate the voice of the child to explore the nature of faith in childhood; to consider the impact of parental beliefs and practices upon the child’s faith.

**Christian Faith in Childhood**

*Capacity for faith in childhood*

Where cognition and maturity are requirements for faith (Stuhlmueller, 1996; Vanhoozer, 1996; Aasgaard, 2008), young children are not considered capable of faith participation due to limited verbal and cognitive capabilities. Indeed, Goldman (1964) believed that faith nurture was limited by a child’s intellectual maturation and personal experience. However, others have documented the child’s spiritual dimension, and hence their capacity to operate as spiritual beings (Hoffman, 1992; Hay and Nye, 1998; Hart, 2003; Adams et al, 2008). Adopting a religious lens, Robinson (1977), Cavalletti (1983), Coles (1991), Bellous et al (2004) and Berryman (2017) observed children’s engagement and active participation in Christian faith activities. Willmer and White (2013) argued that Jesus’ action implores openness to the child, receiving them without imposing preconditions on the encounter. Similarly, Dillen (2007) suggested that viewing children as ‘not-yet-adults’ equates to a deficit model whereby the existing abilities of the child are disregarded, contrasting with the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 18 to become like little children. Jesus’ demonstration of the child as a model for the kingdom of God emphasised the richness and wealth of spiritual capability present in a young child (Becker, 1979; Csinos, 2011; Berryman, 2017; Willmer & White, 2013). This depicts children as being of positive worth and high potential, rather than requiring judgement and adjustment (Mountain, 2011).

Furthermore, rather than a condition to be overcome, childhood may be a living sacrament of heaven (Maas, 2000), and indeed adults may learn from children (Weber, 1979). Rahner (1971) viewed childhood as not only a preparation for ‘real, adult life’, but as valuable in itself, concurring with the concept of children having an ‘owned faith’ from the beginning, and hence being valued now rather than for what they might become (Frambach, 2005; Berryman, 2013). Developing this, Ratcliff and May (2004) suggested that a child has two immediate functions: ‘to be’ and ‘to become’, indicating that a bi-directional process of development may be operational during childhood. Viewing a child’s faith through the lens of Matthew 18 therefore requires a shift in the way of observing faith which does not utilise the adult as a starting point, in order that their spiritual encounters are not dismissed or misunderstood (Hart, 2003).

*Theological interpretation of childhood*

Perceptions about a child’s spiritual capacity undoubtedly connect with diversity in theological interpretations of a child. The theological debate surrounding the inherent innocent or sinful nature of children is outside the confines of this paper. However, it is important to be aware that differing understandings are present amongst contemporary Christian parents and will inevitably influence their approach (Hooton, 2014). For example, if children are viewed as sinful beings, the role of parents is to guide and instruct children, seeking to change the essence of their status (Bunge, 2008). Whereas if there is a focus on God’s grace implanted from birth, the role of parents would be to draw children into a divine relationship (Wesley, 1984, Lawson, 2006). In contrast, where children of Christian parents are seen as recipients of God’s grace, and hence members of God’s covenant community (Sisemore, 2000), there may be a question of whether faith nurture is indeed required at all. Further considerations involve the age of accountability (Stortz, 2001; Traina, 2001). This range of theological interpretations will inevitably influence contemporary approaches to Christian nurture.

*Nurturing a child’s faith*

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlighted the many and varied influences upon an individual, but emphasised that the family is of primary influence as part of the child’s microsystem. The ideas of the family as the ‘forming centre’ (Thompson, 1996) and early environments being of prime influence (Yust, 2004) concur with the concept of ‘life scripts’ which are implanted into an individual from an early age; primarily by the immediate family (Berne, 1972). The value of nurturing a child’s faith in the family context has been widely documented (Bushnell, 1861; Westerhoff, 1976; Thompson, 1996; Yust, 2004; Stonehouse, 2006; Turner, 2014; Mark, 2016; Barna, 2019). Indeed, faith nurture occurring naturally as part of daily life, as instructed to the Israelite people in Deuteronomy 6, coincides with Wangerin (1986) perceiving the inherent nature of a child’s relationship with God as a natural part of their continual growth and development. This reflects the assertion that a child should grow up a Christian, and never know themselves to be otherwise (Bushnell, 1861). Such a suggestion may raise ethical concerns of indoctrination, whereby habits or dispositions are instilled without the child’s active powers of participation (Spiecker, 1991), or if the aim was for the child to believe without questioning or exploring the associated reasoning (White, 1967; Martin, 1970). To this end care must be taken as to whether the process increases or decreases rationality (Wilson, 1972), and enables the child to evaluate underlying evidence (Snook, 1972). Indeed, Boyatzis (2004) observed that a pervading feature of Christian nurture may be unidirectional parent-to-child transmission of beliefs and practices, whereas reciprocal styles of communication and more active participation of the child are preferable, aligning with a collaborative approach to theological meaning-making (Csinos, 2020).

**Methodology**

Ten case study families were selected from those who responded to a research invitation distributed by churches in North-West England, representing a range of church denominations and theological perception of childhood faith (see figure 1). For analysis purposes, the families were grouped into categories according to their approach to faith nurture: decision-focused (DF), faith-affirming (FA) and uncertain (UC).

The families were visited in their home context annually for three years, in order that parents and children could be interviewed regarding their faith practices, beliefs and lived experiences over that time. Informed consent was obtained from both parents and children (an image-based consent form was designed for the children), and anonymity and confidentiality of the participants has been ensured using pseudonym names and limited inclusion of personal or identifiable content. The researcher was aware of the potential of power relations due to the researcher being previously unknown to the participants, so the interview approach and activities were adapted, in addition to parents being present as observers.

The empirical research was in two parts. Firstly, parents were interviewed regarding their attitudes, aims, motivation, theological perspectives and practices of faith nurture. Thematic analysis was carried out on the parental interview data to ascertain emerging themes and patterns. The second part of the research comprised interviewing both children and their parents separately to investigate the extent to which the child’s faith was influenced by their parent’s beliefs and approaches. From the parental interview data already gathered, the case study families were divided into categories according to their nurturing approaches: decision-focused (DF), describing their theological understanding of a personal decision for Christ being critical and a significant aim of Christian nurture; faith-affirming (FA), describing their perception that faith during the childhood years is valuable and to be affirmed; and uncertain (UC), describing those who were unsure of their perception and approach to childhood faith and Christian nurture (figure 1).

The children were interviewed using play-based techniques to stimulate the child’s discussion on relevant topics (Holmes, 2019). In line with viewing faith through the lens of the child, both existing and emerging characteristics of faith were observed and documented by adopting Ratcliff and May’s notion (2004) of a child’s simultaneous functions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’. Consequently, seventeen elements of the child’s faith were explored during the interviews (figure 2), categorised as ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ traits. The ‘being’ characteristics were described using descending numerical values (4 to 1), reflecting the idea of them often being inherently present and decreasing as the child grows and develops. Conversely, the ‘becoming’ characteristics were documented using ascending numerical values (1 to 4) as these characteristics are not usually natural but tend to increase over time, as a result of Christian nurture. The sum of the two columns in figure 2 produced the ‘being and becoming’ values, which provided a snapshot description of the child’s faith at that moment in time, including both their ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ elements of faith. These numerical descriptors enabled the child’s faith to be analysed alongside their family faith nurture practices and considered alongside the other families. Hence, these numerical indicators enabled exploration of the effects of different parental approaches, according to the case study categories.

**Research Findings**

*Parental Approaches*

Within the DF sample, Tony’s mother explained that her aim was to teach him about faith, so that during adolescence she could talk to him about having a personal relationship with Jesus. She believed that “children naturally question things and are open to answers”, although she felt that her children did not have faith until they have made a decision to have a personal relationship with Jesus. The mother of John communicated that it is “in the family’s identity that they are a Christian family”. Whilst the children “always knew they could choose how to live, it didn’t change the fact that they were part of a Christian family”. John’s mother could see some spiritual aspects in her child, but asserted that “without a profession of faith, these elements were meaningless,” since childhood was a stage of preparation for future faith which would follow a declaration of faith. Jane’s parents placed high expectations on themselves as Christian parents and although they didn’t find it easy, they trusted for God to “fill the gaps”. They aimed to equip their child to have independent faith, by enabling exploration of it for themselves. Neither parent had a Christian upbringing, so were intentional and fervent to instil the Bible and Christian principles in their children. Tracy’s mother reported her own upbringing had been ‘intensely Christian’. She therefore desired to be more relaxed with her own children and permit them to make faith decisions freely. Faith was part of family life but was not imposed and was “in the background”.

Amongst the FA parents, the desire of Sue’s parents was to “protect her innocence rather than let her grow up too quickly”, and sought “an active faith that is growing with our daughter, so that it is genuine and she can’t grow out of it”. They deemed faith as an innate gift from God, and viewed their role as nurturing this gift. They did not mention a particular moment or decision being important in the faith of a child or adolescent. Mary’s parents described themselves as ‘laid back’, and a ‘happy medium between boundaries and letting them have space to do what they want’. This coincided with collaborative family dynamics, so that the children felt their opinions were valued as part of family decisions. Their children were encouraged to have their ‘own faith’, rather than a ‘regurgitated adult faith’, and with this in mind they did not pressurise or enforce a direction that their faith must take. Faith discussions were a significant part of Paul’s family life, and his Grandparents were key in sharing stories of faith. The Bible was incorporated into conversations, and there was a sense of exploring faith together as a family. Helen’s mother desired a deeply loving and accepting atmosphere within the family home, where God was always part of their family conversations and decision making, and the children “grow up knowing God independently”. Exploration was fostered so that the children could “reach their own conclusions.” Helen’s parents believed that children have a capacity for faith from birth, so that “the younger they are, the more faith they have”, in terms of their ability to trust in their parents or God.

Simon and his parents were recorded within the ‘uncertain’ sample because although his father had an active faith and attended church regularly with the children, his mother stated that she did not see faith as part of her identity. His father often prayed with the children at bedtime, but otherwise there was limited faith activity as part of family life. If the children raised “difficult questions”, the parents reported “changing the conversation” because they were unsure of the answers. The mother did not know whether her children had genuine spirituality or faith, although she described faith as being important to access heaven. She hoped that they would automatically be in God’s kingdom if they died as children. The overriding desire of her Anne’s parents was for their children to be happy, be “good people” and “not go off the rails”. The function of faith for them was a moral guide, since they wanted their children to grow up with “Christian values, but not necessarily belief.” The family occasionally said grace before meals, if it was instigated by the children. If the children raised “tricky questions”, they would “send them to the vicar.” Both parents questioned the relevance of faith to modern life but thought attending church was a good upbringing for their children, alongside attending a Church school. However, they reported that the father attended church much more regularly than the mother, who stated that she did not have time for church. Both parents nevertheless perceived that this would “put faith in them”, so that they could decide for themselves, because they did not think faith was inherent. Anne’s mother deemed that Anne had an active and alive faith but had questioned faith recently and seemed to be losing interest in God.

*Parental role*

Figure 3 shows that half of the participants aimed to pass on their faith to their children. Other aims included for their child to be happy, to recognise and meet their child’s individual needs, facilitate their independence and future career, and many sought to stop their child ‘growing up too fast’. Responses about faith nurture were varied regarding importance. In some cases, anxiety about death was reported, with many stating that faith was important to ensure that their child would go to heaven when they died. The majority (8 families) considered their child’s faith of high importance and four didn’t rate it as important, commenting that “it would be nice if they had a faith of their own, but if they choose not to, that’s ok with me”. Within these families, the value of a Christian upbringing was to ensure their child developed a sense of morals and was a ‘good person’ when they grow up, and ‘doesn’t go off the rails’. Some of the parents spoke about permitting their child to explore and develop faith in a personalised manner.

In terms of parenting styles within this sample, two parents described themselves as strict, one described themselves as laid back and seven viewed themselves as striving for a ‘middle ground’. Nine families mentioned negotiation between family members as important and a few explained that they ‘chose their battles’. Many parents either explicitly or indirectly spoke of their ‘family culture’, with ten parents labelling themselves as a ‘Christian’ family, which was part of the family’s identity. Interestingly five of these families did not regularly partake in faith activities at home, but did strongly define themselves as fundamentally ‘Christian’. The other five families were very active in faith activities within the family context.

The children were also asked about faith in their family. Mary explained that God was very important in her family and that “I love sharing God in my family”. Sue described role models of faith within her family, “My Grandpa was a Christian and he read the whole entire Bible”, and described her Mum and Dad praying “all the time”, and her older brother’s involvement in the worship group at church. John, Jane, Paul and Helen also described observing their parents pray, which seemed to be highly significant for them. This contrasts with some who explained that their peers at school and some extended family members “do not believe in God.”

*Parental Theological Perceptions*

The interviews revealed a range of opinions regarding theology of childhood (see figure 4). Three of the parents stated that they did not know and declined to respond. Five of the parents believed that children were in the kingdom of God until a certain age, whilst two stated that they were in God’s kingdom unless they chose to opt out. Over half of the parents believed that children must make a personal choice at some stage, but none of the parents clarified when that decision would be required or appropriate. Three of the parents stated that God was just and fair and would consider a child’s lack of understanding of faith. Without exception, the parents agreed that there were innate aspects of spirituality within a child, some parents suggesting that God ‘puts something in each person to seek him’. Many parents confirmed that these aspects require nurturing. Most of the parents admired childlike faith, saying that they envied their child’s innocence and ease of trust. Parents frequently reported that in contrast to their own childhoods, they do not wish to ‘force’ faith onto their child. Three of the families reported that friends or family had accused them of ‘brainwashing’ their children, or forcing faith on them, and they had found this very difficult.

The children’s perceptions of this were explored in the interviews. Mary said that “God is really close to us. God likes all ages of people. Everyone can hear Him. Some kids take longer to find out more about God, but if you want to know more you can read the Bible and pray more.” Similarly, Sue said that “being a small child it can be hard to understand some things but God can help you understand. God speaks to children and grown-ups. No-one is best.” Mary said that her favourite Bible story was Samuel because “I like to find out about God speaking to a child”. When asked if God had ever spoken to her, she quickly replied “yes, sometimes when I pray”. She said that “God helps me and gives my courage.” When asked what God thinks about children, Tony stated that “God likes children. He loves adults and kids the same. God can help children. Children need to learn all they can about God.” John stated that “adults hear God the best because they know most about God”, and although he spoke passionately about his desire to care for and pray for others, he said that he never prayed because “mum does it for me.”

*Parent approaches to faith nurture*

Figure 5 displays the family faith activities reported in the interviews. Prayer at bedtime was the most commonly occurring activity, closely followed by bedtime Bible reading. Bible reading was frequently Bible story books, or books about prayer or other ‘special’ religious books. Parents frequently explained that they did bedtime prayer and Bible reading in a 1:1 situation, rather than as a whole family. Faith discussion as part of everyday life was frequently mentioned. Usually the child instigated this discussion, raising questions and queries that had been birthed by their experiences and interactions with others. Six of the parents stated that they prayed together with their children in response to issues that arise in daily living. Other faith activities that were reported in low numbers by participants were ‘viewing faith as part of the family’s identity’, viewing Bible-based DVDs, one parent was teaching her daughter about the concept of tithing and one parent reported annual family attendance at a Christian camp. A commonly occurring statement from parents was “we should do that more”, as they explained that in an ideal world they would increase the frequency of faith activities.

Children were asked about their experiences of family faith activities. In the first two years of the project Mary fondly reported that “I read my Bible with my Dad every night”. In year three her response had developed, reporting reading the Bible at church and at home and she was keen to show off two different Bibles. She said that her mum and Dad prayed a lot, and she did also. John reported a more individual experience, that “My mum reads her Bible every single morning. I sometimes look in mine, but hardly ever. I just forget.” Tony showed keen interest in discussing the Bible but when asked about faith at home, he replied that “you find out about God at church, not really at home. Well you kind of do at home, but more at church. We read the Bible and pray at church….I don’t do praying on my own, just with other people.”

It became evident that the parent’s own upbringing was significantly influential, whether positively or negatively, on the approach that the parents adopted in their own parenting. However, many appeared not to have reflected upon this consciously until the time of the interview. Some admired the way that they were raised, so had adopted a similar stance themselves. Some found it difficult to recall and to reflect upon the impact of their own upbringing. However, most parents vividly recalled events and experiences from their own childhood that they disliked, and so they sought to ensure that they did not adopt these practices. The most commonly occurring example was that faith in their childhood had been too heavily imposed. Thus, many parents sought to be more open and flexible with their own children.

*The Impact of Parental Nurturing Approaches (Over a Three-Year Period)*

Figure 6 shows the total ‘being and becoming’ values of childhood faith aspects observed for each child. The first graph (6a) presents the results in ascending order according to observations of children’s faith in year one, and figure 6b presents observations in the third-year. The range in year one is 32 to 58, with an average of 49. In year three, the range increased to 37 to 66, with an average of 49. In both graphs, the ‘UC’ families are towards the lower end of the spectrum, denoting that the effect of uncertainty may be to reduce both the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ aspects of faith during childhood. This is confirmed in figures 7e and 7f, which show that both the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ aspects of faith in these two families are slightly lower than the rest of the sample. It is evident that there is not much fluctuation or change over the three years in these UC families, which contrasts considerably to the remainder of the case study children. The very slight increase in the ‘becoming’ indicators suggests that these children are benefitting from some form of input, which may well be church contacts since the parents stated in the interviews that it wasn’t occurring in the home environment.

In figure 6a there is no obvious trend to reflect any difference between FA and DF families, and both groups spread across the range. However, in figure 6b there is a slight distinction between the two groups, with the three children revealing the highest values all being FA families, suggesting that there could be a positive effect upon children’s faith when their parents affirm their faith. Furthermore, both Jane and John who exhibited the highest values in year one reduced markedly in their faith attributes two years later, indicating that decision-focused nurture has a detrimental effect as the child grows.

When evaluating the separate ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ values (figure 7), there was some oscillation across the three years in graphs a, c and d, although graph b levels remained fairly stable. Within the DF families, the average *being* values reduced from 25.5 in year one to 21.5 in year 3. Within the FA families, this value rose from 29 to 30, despite them being characteristics of faith which might be expected to reduce with increased age. The *being* values tended to be lower in DF families than FA ones, possibly reflecting the fact that these characteristics were not being encouraged or valued. This suggests that if these traits were not encouraged by the DF families, they diminished.

The ‘becoming’ characteristics would be expected to increase with increased age, yet in the DF families, despite considerable oscillation, the average remained as 25 in both years one and three. However, figure 7d shows that in the FA families, the average “becoming” values rose from 25 in year one to 29 in year three. This suggests both the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ characteristics of faith flourish more effectively within the FA approach rather than the DF one.

**Discussion**

*Parental Beliefs*

This study indicated that underlying parental attitudes, beliefs and understandings may be largely subconscious, since parents were unaware of them until the researcher raised the subject and they began to reflect during the interview upon their own experiences and understandings. The extent to which it seemed conscious, was that parents stated that they had learned from their mistakes with older siblings and had adjusted their approach with subsequent children. It is recommended that churches could facilitate parents in discussing the experiences and influences that have been upon them, perhaps in their own upbringing or their early parenting experiences and to provide opportunities for parents to reflect upon how these influences may impact upon their own parenting style. Through these discussions, it is recommended that parents within a variety of theological groups are encouraged to recognise the value of faith and spiritual experiences during the childhood years, in order that their child’s faith may be respected and encouraged. This connects with the need for parents to also balance heart-felt and embodied faith responses with verbalised expressions, in their evaluation of authenticity and validity of faith experiences. This does not contradict the ability for a child to make a personal decision at some point, but it may ensure that the child is in a more open and receptive frame of mind to make their own decision (Hay & Nye, 2003; Boyatzis, 2004; Hooton, 2014). Equally, it would enable parents to not miss opportunities to mould and shape their child’s faith during regular family life, as in Deuteronomy 6 (Wangerin, 1986; Powell, 2014; Mark, 2016). A ‘head in the sand’ mentally or over reliance upon God’s grace for their child’s salvation (Bunge, 2008) is also a topic which could be addressed within churches, in order to encourage parents to be less ambivalent and more pro-active in supporting their child’s faith.

*Parental Role in Faith Nurture*

Most of the parent participants viewed their child’s faith as a priority, although a small number did not. Many spoke of the family’s identity or culture being intertwined with faith, so that it was an underlying feature of family life. The child’s faith seemed to benefit from having the ability to observe their parents’ faith activity, and children spoke very positively of times when faith activities occurred with the parent. A range of faith activities were reported, although many parents stated that they wished they were more active in carrying out faith activities in their home context. Children tended to primarily report Bible reading and prayer as the family faith activities, and rarely spoke about faith discussions which happened more informally. This indicates that they feel like a natural part of daily life to the child, so that they are possibly less conscious of them.

Whilst it is acknowledged that several factors could influence the child’s faith in addition to the parent’s approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Harris, 1998*;* Hay & Nye, 1998; Hart, 2003; Ratcliff, 2004; Berryman, 2013), and that this is a small data set, this study does suggest that parental beliefs and attitudes may have an impact upon their faith nurturing style. The suggestion is that if parental understanding is that childhood is a stage to be passed through as preparation for adulthood, with ‘adult’ faith being the ultimate target, the parents often did not appear to value their child’s present faith (for example Tony, John, Jane and Tracey). These parents also conveyed that verbalising of faith was more valuable than experiences of faith, or that a ‘decision for Christ’ was required at some stage, which impacted the way that they nurtured their child’s faith, such as a pressure to ‘learn more about God’. In contrast, the AF sample expressed a love and acceptance of God for their child from an early age, which resulted in them ‘treasuring’ the spiritual aspects of their child’s life, and seemingly enjoying them more in the present, rather than feeling a pressure to develop and advance in faith.

This data also indicates that the approaches adopted by parents for faith nurturing impact upon the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ aspects of their child’s faith. In this dataset, where children felt their faith was not valued so they needed to ‘grow up’ and be more ‘adult-like’, they tended to lose interest and become ‘bored’ with the Christian faith, or feel that their faith was not ‘good enough,’ resulting in reduced levels of ‘being and becoming’ aspects. This was particularly evident in Tony, Simon and Anne. Indeed, Cavalletti (1983), Dillen (2007) and Berryman (2013) highlight the need for valuing a child’s young faith. In contrast, where parents viewed faith as intrinsic and valuable from birth, there was an indication that the child’s faith exhibited more elements of both ‘being' and ‘becoming’ characteristics than were present in the other case studies (for example Sue, Mary, Paul and Helen). This concurs with the notions of Hay and Nye (1998), Hart (2003) and Yust (2004) who all emphasised the importance of creating an environment where children feel that their spiritual dimension is respected and valued. Indeed, Turner (2014) emphasised that the influence of parents is foundational for a child’s onward living, regardless of whether it is intentional or not. Similarly, Mark (2016) stated that “no child enters adolescence and adulthood unaffected by the overarching story that they learn in the home”, reiterating the notion of life scripts (Berne, 1972). The implication of this is that the environment has the potential for negative effects as well as positive.

In the case studies, it was notable that the two families in the ‘uncertain’ category had parents who were divided in their beliefs. Voas and Crockett (2005) found that where there is only one religious parent, the probability of the child following suit is 22%, compared with 50% if both parents are. In this sample, ambivalence of parents regarding their child’s faith seemed concurrent with the notion that children were in God’s kingdom as a result of their parent’s faith or God’s grace (for example Anne and Simons mothers), and resulted in minimal activity to develop the child’s faith. In these cases, maintaining faith seemed the priority with no visible desire or active attempt for the child’s faith to develop as they grew, resulting in these children displaying minimal change in their faith overtime, other than a very slight growth their ‘becoming’ aspects of faith due to external inputs. Indeed, Hart (2003) warned of the ‘taboo’ effect, whereby children mimic limited attention to their spiritual lives if that is what they observe in adults around them. This concurs with the participant children appearing to be aware of this as they spoke of children in school or extended family members who “do not believe in God.” To this end, Powell (2014) called for families to develop intentional plans and strategies for faith formation in the home, to model faith more effectively. This sense of visibility and intentionality was expressed as desirable by some of the participant parents, particularly Sue, Mary and Helen.

These tentative findings need to be researched more extensively, possibly through a longitudinal study or larger sample size to fully support the claim, but there does seem to be an indication that it is beneficial when parental perceptions are of inherent worth and value in young faith, and seek to then address the individual faith needs of their child. This reflects Boyatzis (2004) and Turner (2014) who advocated for faith nurture to be a collaborative venture between parent and child. This flows from parents being attentive to their child’s ever-changing and unique abilities, competencies and experiences (Gurian, 2002), in order that they may be affirmed whilst also being challenged and stimulated for growth. Indeed, imposing pre-conditions on a child’s faith should be avoided (Willmer and White, 2013) in order to enable the child’s personal and unique faith to flourish, but also to avoid forced and counterfeit faith (Hart, 2003; Berryman, 2017; Csinos, 2020).

**Conclusion**

It is acknowledged that these can only be tentative findings since they represent observations of case studies. Equally, only the lived experiences of children raised in Christian homes has been investigated here, and not children raised in non-Christian homes. Nevertheless, this data revealed that these parents had minimal awareness of their own deeply held convictions regarding their own theology of childhood and associated beliefs and practices. Yet their beliefs about childhood faith seem to have impacted the methods of faith nurture adopted, and consequently influenced the nature of faith exhibited in their children. Therefore, it is proposed that Church communities have a role to play in fostering critical discussion and reflection amongst parents; exploring their personal beliefs about childhood faith and more consciously choosing their approaches moving forward. Furthermore, it is critical that emerging strategies within this sector promote acceptance, valuing and collaboration regarding faith in childhood so that the child’s faith is not overlooked but can flourish.

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