

NEXUS

Researching the spiritual flourishing
of the youngest children



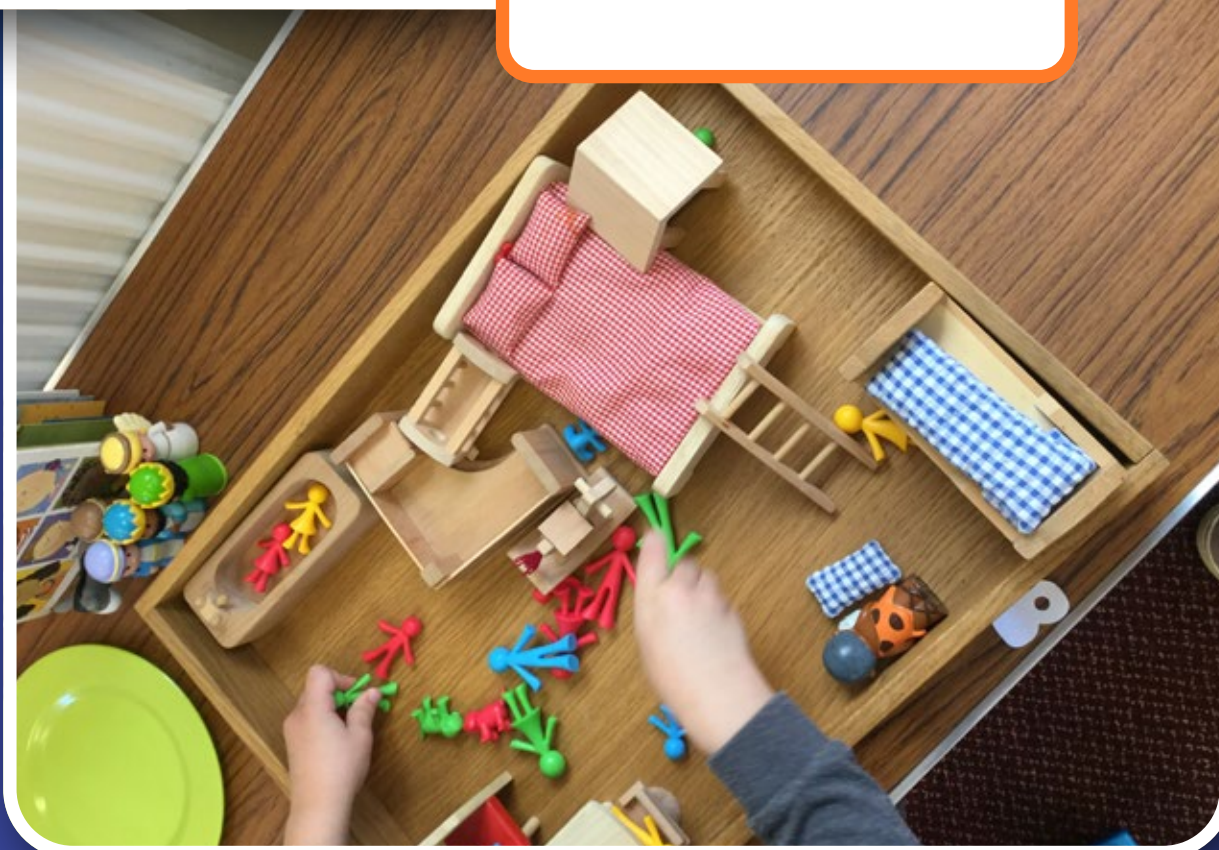
**OPPORTUNITIES TO
NURTURE CHILDREN'S
SPIRITUALITY**

Small World Play



Some children named the figures as they played with them - daddy, mummy, doggy, baby - or gave them family names.

They might also narrate the play e.g., "what's baby doing in there?".

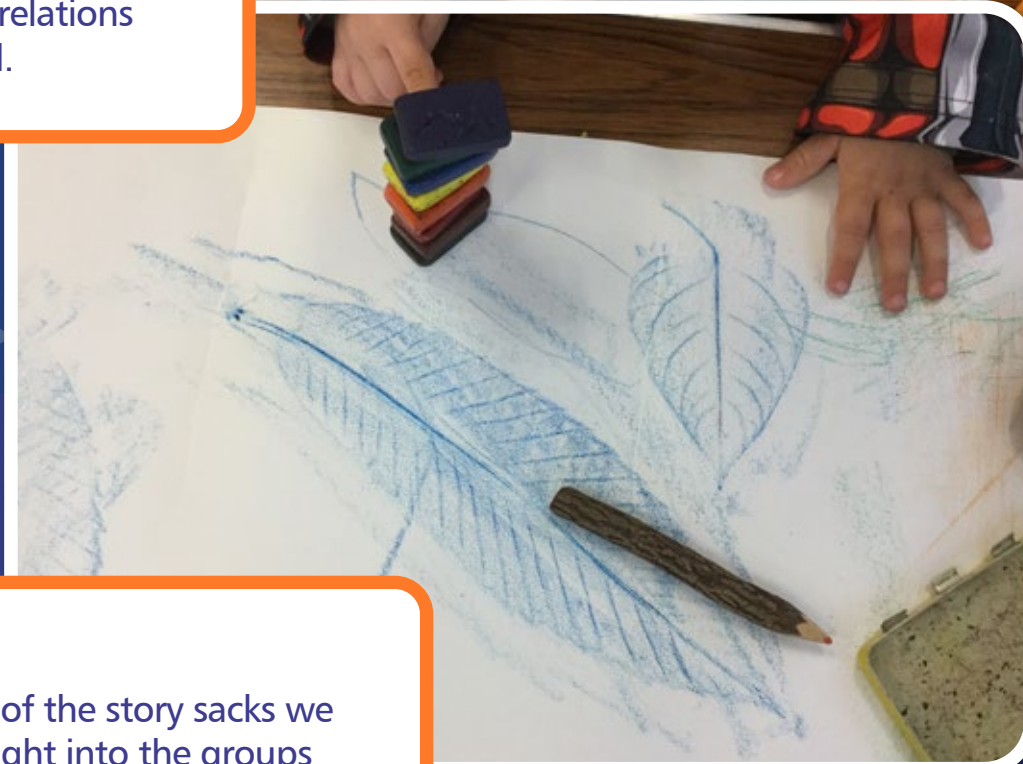


Small play items such as wooden toys, bowls, pebbles, and shells offered opportunities for sensory experience and exploration.

Younger children might sit quietly sorting and stacking items at the table, or older children might carry them into the room to be loaded onto a truck for imaginary 'small world' play.

Nature story sacks

Story sacks offer opportunities for shared activity as a basis for observation, interaction, or shared experience. They offer a medium through which children can express and experience relations with their world.



One of the story sacks we brought into the groups was focussed on nature. The sack contained a story book about nature, some bowls, leaves, stones, crayons, and paper.

Activities such as leaf rubbing particularly drew children and carers to engage in activity together and for adults to talk about changing seasons, recall childhood memories, and through this, relations with the world.



One three-year-old boy looked for the leaf under the paper stating, "where gone". There is a small moment of wonder when its image appears on the paper, and Mum shares her memory of doing this activity as a child as she helps him.

These resources could have been used many other ways, as props in a circle time, link songs to the activity focus, or use in a small group with planned questions or prompts. Such activity bags could also form a take-home resource with prompt questions for parents or carers and a scrap book to record play experiences at home.

Celebrations



The wooden birthday cakes were played with all morning by various children who decorated cakes, shared slices and counted candles. One little girl made a birthday card which she filled with kisses and her mum said "Nanny will love that".

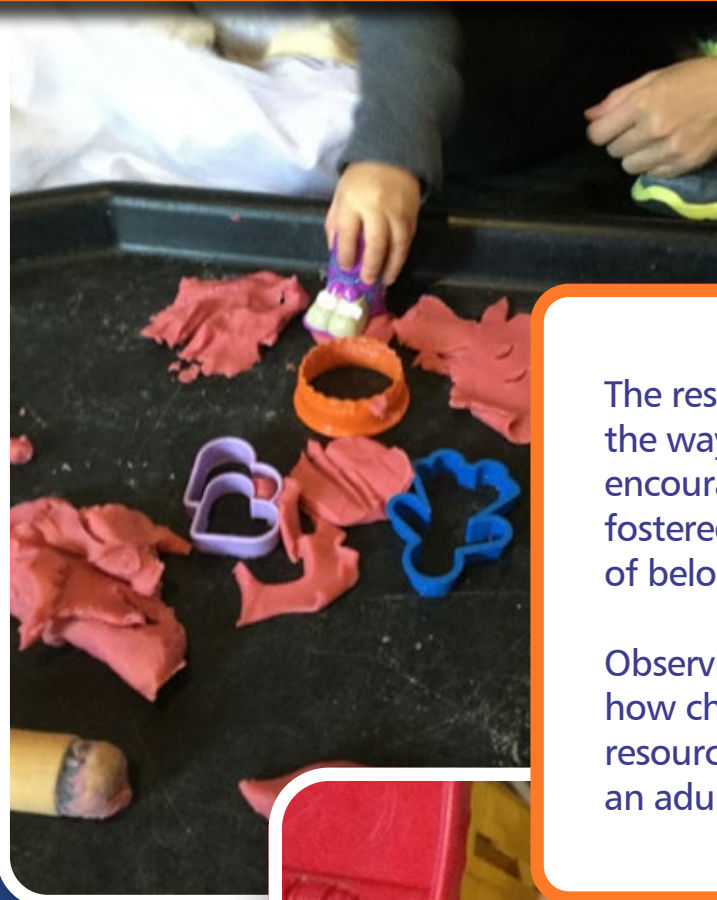
Another little girl held up fingers to say how old she was and how old she will be next month. The research team could see a celebration of time and sense of self within this.

Parent-led Activities



In one of the CTGs a music and song session led by parents and carers with the children was a powerful way to bring the CTG session to a close. Both children and the adults enjoyed themselves as it gave them a sense of coming together as a community.

Spaces for shared play



The research team observed that the way in which CTGs were set up encouraged shared play. Such play fostered interactive role play and sense of belonging to the social group.

Observing these activities highlighted how children can choose to use resources in ways that were different to an adult envisaged intention.



Shared table



Each CTG visited set time aside for children to have a drink and a snack. One toddler group used this shared time to set out a buffet style table with a variety of snacks, including fruit. The children were then given a small bowl and were able to choose what went into their bowl before bringing it back to a shared table.

Not only did this offer the children choice, but also led to conversations with their peers about what each had in their bowl, why they had made their choice and sometimes developed into sharing amongst each other, the content of the bowls.

WHAT DO CHILDREN'S SPIRITUAL MOMENTS LOOK LIKE?

Spiritual moments are nourished through opportunities for children to be still, be alone and engage in the here and now.



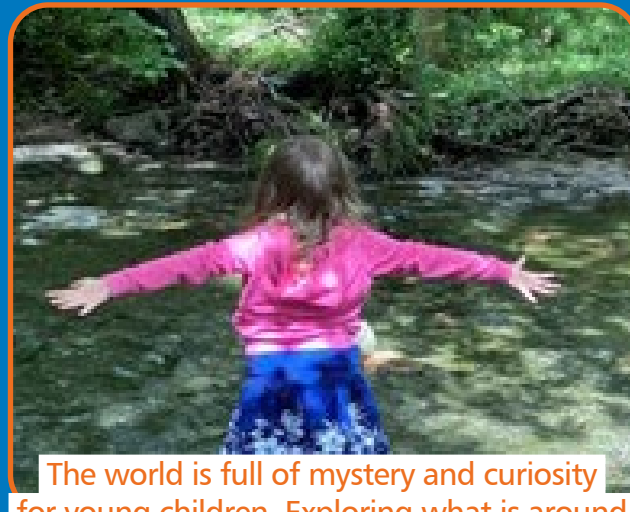
When children are immersed in the here and now, they are completely aware and engaged in what they are doing.

A little girl was lying outside on her back, and she was totally in a place of calmness and stillness while things were going on around her. She was there for about 20 minutes, just in her own space. She wasn't asleep. She was completely calm.

(Sonia Mainstone-Cotton, 2021, online meeting)

"Be still and know that I am God"
(Psalm 46:10)

Spiritual moments are often created when children spend time in nature.



The world is full of mystery and curiosity for young children. Exploring what is around them gives them a sense of awe and wonder. They love to question as they encounter the world.

One Spring day, while in the outdoor playground, a small boy came up to me with a big grin of delight across his face. He slowly opened his hand and showed me his prize. It was a long, wet, curly worm.

(Schein, 2018, p.7)

"The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders" (Psalm 65:8)

Honour children's emotions. Help children name them and let them feel the emotion...

(Schein, 2018, p.53)



When children share with others, and care for others they are developing values that will help them build loving relationships

When a baby cries it is not uncommon to see another child move to be closer to the crying child. If you look closely at the child's face, you can see that the child is coming forward to support and encourage his friend. These are wonderful moments of empathy.

(Schein, 2018, p. 122)

"Love one another as I have loved you"
(John 13:34)

ABOUT NICER

The National Institute for Christian Education Research

NICER is a University Research Centre at Canterbury Christ Church University. It undertakes research to inform the contribution of faith to the public understanding of education, to aid the mission of church schools, universities and Christian education in communities, to develop and improve religion and worldview education, and to support the work of Christians in education and leaders in education. It uses qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research approaches in that work, and has developed novel approaches to investigating school ethos, character and curriculum in Christian schooling.

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Schein, 2018, *Inspiring Wonder, Awe and Empathy*, Redleaf Press



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