

# Talking Toddlers



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We began this research when we discovered that 40% of practising Christians said that they ‘came to faith’ before the age of 5. This means that we have the greatest impact on this generation; it is a bigger impact for people coming to faith than any other age group. Yet ministry to this age group can be a hidden, and seen as a secondary or fringe activity to the main activities in churches that focus on adults. Our hope for this report is that church leaders grasp the importance of this ministry and the evangelism opportunity amongst the under 5s and what it shows us for church growth.

We wanted to explore this age bracket and how we could reach even more of the under 5s with the love of God. We are hearing more in recent times about the importance of early years for an individual’s development, so it is no surprise that this is also true for our faith and walk with God.

We asked ourselves:

- How many under 5s could we reach and help to find God at an early stage in their lives?
- What is the current reach of the church to this age bracket and their parents?
- Do the parents of under 5s want to help their children to experience God for themselves in age appropriate ways?
- How could we maximise the contact the church has with this generation and their parents?
- How could we influence the church and church leaders to prioritise their ministry to the under 5s especially those on the fringes of our churches?

The result was the Talking Toddlers research.

## How was it done?

The research was spearheaded by the Church of England, HOPE Together and the Evangelical Alliance. We enlisted Savanta ComRes, a professional research company, to carry out the research through a large online survey. We worked with them to develop the goals of the research and the questions to be asked of the survey to gain the maximum learning for the church.

The research was done in February 2020 over a few weeks before the Coronavirus hit and the UK went into lockdown. It was carried out with the parents of the under 5s answering questions about their children and themselves to discover their contact with the church and to understand their faith.



## Sample and group definitions

The sample was of 1,182 parents with children under the age of 5 from across Great Britain which was then weighted by GB totals for parents with children under the age of 5 by region, age and gender to give us a representative sample.

To analyse the data the sample was subdivided into three sub-categories:

**Practising Christian parents** – Parents who define as Christian, who engage weekly with the Bible / prayer and attend church monthly, and who attend at least one activity for children organised by a church group or taking place in a church building.

**Fringe Parents** – Parents who attended at least one activity for children organised by a church group or taking place in a church building in the last 12 months.

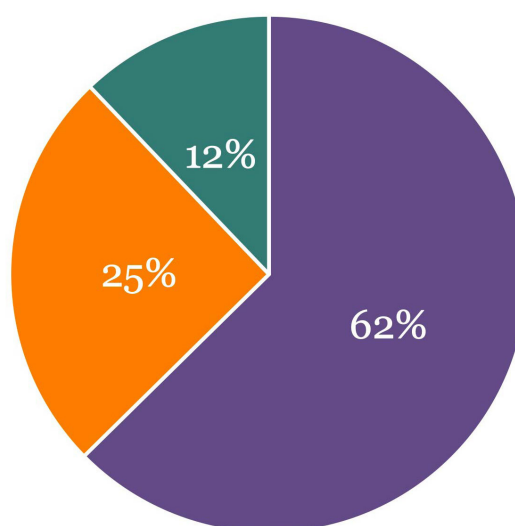
**Unreached Parents** – Parents who did not attend any activity for children organised by a church group or taking place in a church building in the last 12 months.

## Our reach?

An astonishing 12% of parents of children aged 0-4 are practising Christians. When you consider that only 6% of the whole population are practising Christians (as discovered in Mapping Practising Christians 2017) you realise the impact that the church has on this generation and their children. These practising Christian parents make a solid team to invest in for mission to other parents with children under the age of 5.

The next figure is also astonishing: 62% of all parents with children aged 0-4 are in contact with the church (Fringe parents). This shows that the church is already working hard to connect to these parents and their children. In fact, it is only one quarter, or 25% of all parents with children under the age of 5, who are not in contact with the church (Unreached parents).

When we began this research, we thought that contact with the church for this age bracket and their parents was high, but it is even higher than we imagined.



- Fringe parents
- Unreached parents
- Active Christian parents

Base: All parents (1182; weighted data)

*“Only ¼ of parents of the under 5s are not in contact with church”*

# What are the children and parents on the fringes of our churches coming along to?

There are so many ways that the church is in contact with this generation and their parents. From regular events each week like toddler groups and play school to festivals like Christmas and Easter. Some of the activities have much more Christian content, like family worship and Messy Church, others less so. It is more good news for the church when we ask the question, ‘How regular is our contact with these parents and their children?’ We discovered that 86% of these parents and their children had regular contact attending the activities that the church regularly puts on for this age bracket. Most parents and children attended more than one activity with the mean number being 2.4 activities per child in the past 12 months.

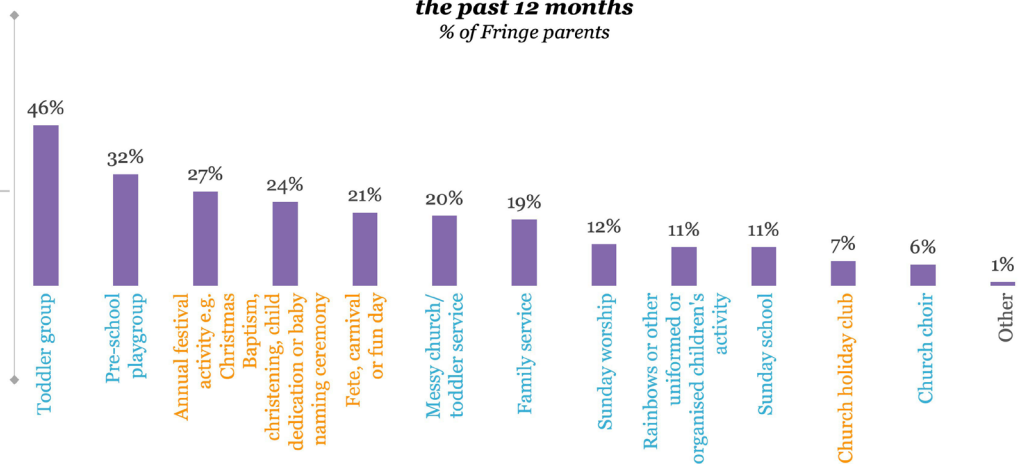
*“86% of fringe parents and their children attend the regular activities organised by the church for them”*

The most popular activities are toddler groups and play groups, but a good number of the fringe parents and children are coming to a Messy Church or toddler service and family worship. The chart below gives a full breakdown of the activities and shows that what the church does for this age bracket is well attended.

**Categories of activities attended in the past 12 months**  
% of Fringe parents

**Any regular activity** 86%  
**Any irregular/ one-off activity** 54%  
Mean number of activities attended **2.4**

**Types of activities attended by Fringe parents’ children in the past 12 months**  
% of Fringe parents



Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)

Q1. Has your child/ Have your children under 5 years old been to any of the following activities organised by a church group or that have taken place in a church in the past 12 months?

# What is the religious background of the parents at the different activities?

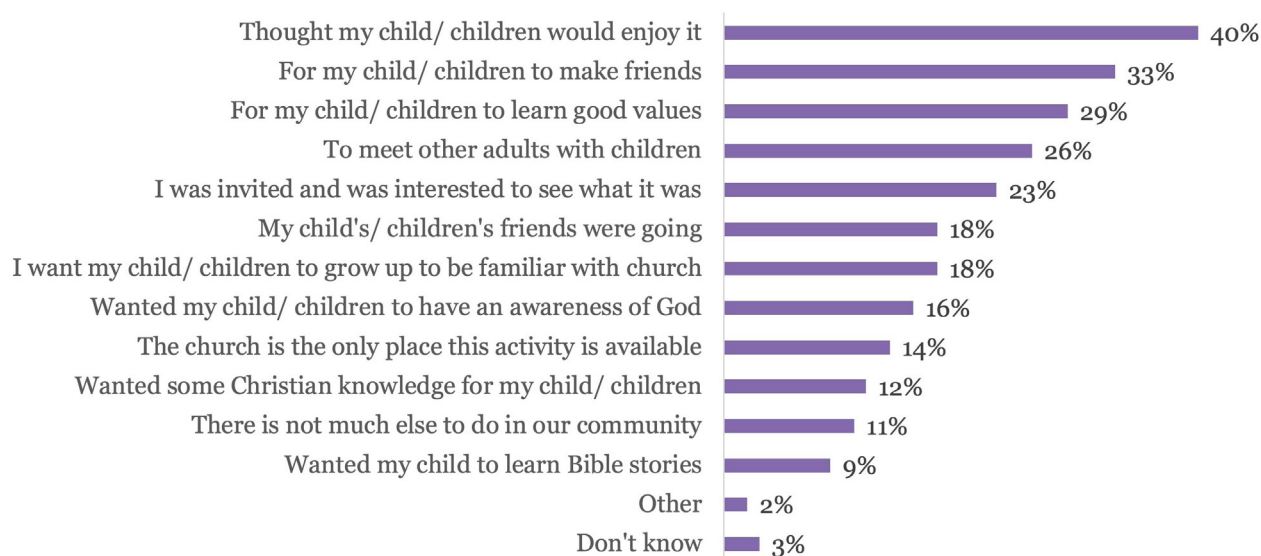
The breakdown of religious affiliation for all the parents with children under 5 is not dissimilar to the breakdown of religious affiliation amongst young adults in this country, with 40% saying they have no religion and 42% declaring that they are Christians. Amongst the fringe parents 45% of them list themselves as “no religion” and yet it is interesting that those who say they have no religion are still coming along to family services and Sunday worship. They are an incredibly warm fringe group who are happy to be amongst us even as we worship but they themselves have not as yet come to faith. This is something that the church needs to know. We should not make assumptions about people who attend our worship services with their children. What a great opportunity to help these parents and their children on their journey to faith. It is important that the church offers these parents and their children positive steps to move forwards towards faith.

## Why do parents come or not come along with their children?

It is important to understand why fringe parents come along with their children. The main reason that they chose was 'because they thought their children would enjoy it'. This should shape all that we do to work with this group. They need to be sure that their very young children will enjoy everything we want them to attend. Wanting their children to learn good values was much higher than wanting their children to learn knowledge about the Christian faith, showing that although they are coming along, many of them have a journey towards deeper engagement and faith.

### Drivers of attendance

% of Fringe parents who attended activities with their children



Base: Fringe parents who attended any activity with their children (982; unweighted data) Q6a+Q6b. Why did you go along to this activity/ any of these activities originally?

Fringe parents whose children attended only one activity in the past 12 months were also asked what would motivate them to come along to *another activity* and, once again, the enjoyment that their children would get from the activity was the biggest driver. This includes activities like Sunday worship and family services. To help more parents and children come to anything, the enjoyment of the children is essential, especially as not all those who come are Christians, either practising or nominal.



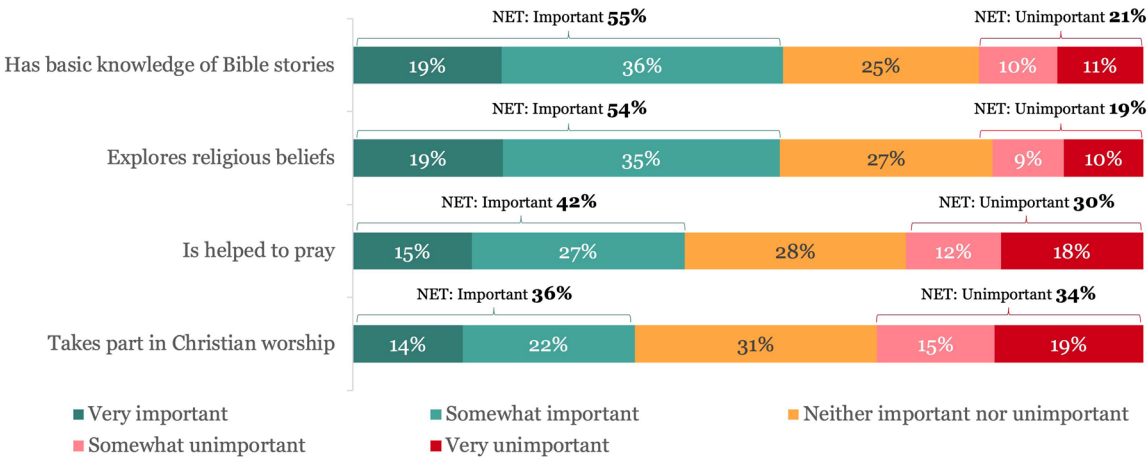
There was one age difference among the reasons fringe parents chose as to whether they would come along to another activity with their children. Fringe parents aged 18-28 said it would help if ‘they could see what their child would be coming to’. In the digital age being able to watch and know what something is like before attending is likely to be more important for a digital generation.

*“A short film about Sunday worship for all the family, or about the family service and what to expect, could help more young parents come along.”*

Another key factor in parents coming along to more activities was the timing of the activity. In fact, this was important in more than one context. Some fringe parents who already attend some activities with their children said that they would attend more if they were at a convenient time. The time factor was key in why some of the unreached parents did not attend any activity. A third of unreached parents had been invited along to something and, of these parents, the main reason they could not come was because it was at an inconvenient time. The time factor will be heavily influenced by the fact that 76% of all the parents of under 5s are employed; that’s 3 out of 4 parents who are employed both full and part-time. Only 15% of the parents of the under 5s are stay-at-home parents. The time at which groups, services and other activities happen is key and any church wanting to grow their reach with this age group would need to find out from unreached parents about the best times to put things on.

This does not mean that faith development isn’t a part of what fringe parents want for their children; in fact, 55% wanted their children to have a knowledge of basic Bible stories and 54% want them to explore religious beliefs. For just over half of these fringe parents, explicitly Christian content is important in what they are attending. What an opportunity for the church to be distinctively Christian and provide this for these children – developing their faith at a young age, whilst remembering that the key driver for these parents is their child’s enjoyment.

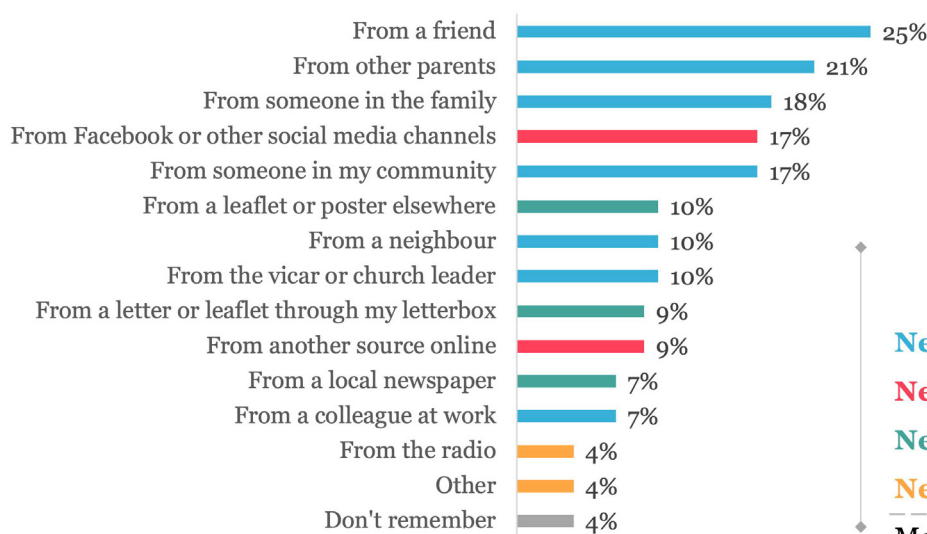
**Importance of knowledge of religious practices**  
% Fringe parents



Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)  
Q33. How important or unimportant do you think it is that your child ...

# How do parents find out about church activities?

**Channels of information about activities**  
% of Fringe parents



**Categories of channels**  
% of Fringe parents

<b>Net: Word of mouth</b>	<b>73%</b>
<b>Net: Online</b>	<b>24%</b>
<b>Net: Print</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Net: Other</b>	<b>8%</b>
Mean number of media	<b>1.7</b>

Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)  
Q8a-Q8d. How did you hear about this activity/ these activities?

In line with our other research, the most effective method of invitation and promotion of our church activities is word of mouth. 73% of fringe parents who came along said it was because someone had told them about it. The invitation had mostly come from someone they knew well: a friend, other parents or a family member. What is more, amongst the unreached parents who don't currently attend anything, 35% of them would welcome an invitation. They would like to receive this invitation from someone close to them: a friend or family member. Although an invitation from a friend was the biggest preference there was still a real openness to a printed invitation through the letterbox or an invite from a neighbour or someone in the community.

24% of the fringe parents and children had come to the events because they had found out about them online. This is not to be underestimated, and the reach goes up amongst those of other faiths to 34%. Amongst the unreached parents 24% of them would also welcome an invitation through Facebook or other social media channels. It is more important for these groups and therefore essential to mission that we carry on using the internet to let a wider group of people know about our church activities for this age group and their parents. 22% of fringe parents heard about the activity through a printed medium, and again this is not as significant as word of mouth but appears to reach a different demographic, in particular those of other faiths (33%), and should therefore be considered even more important if there is a large community of people of other faiths in a church's neighbourhood. The internet and printed media should not be abandoned but used in conjunction with the strongest invitation, word of mouth.

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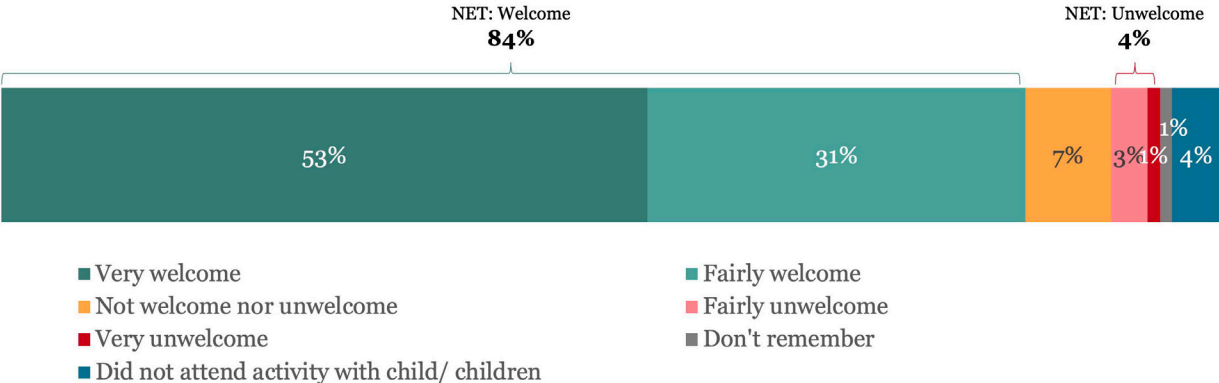
*“The power of personal invitation cannot be underestimated for church growth”*

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# Experience of church?

The overwhelming response from the fringe parents was that they felt welcome when they came to the church - 84% said they felt welcomed. This is great news. The church is doing a fantastic job of receiving these children and parents.

## How did they feel at the activity? % of Fringe parents

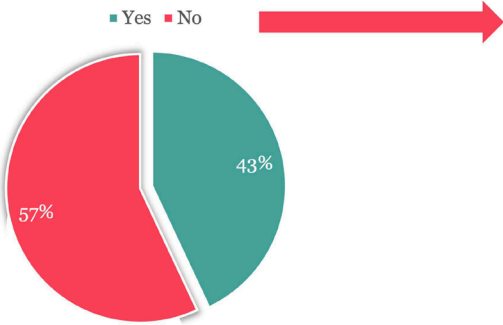


Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)  
Q9a+Q9b. How welcome or unwelcome have you felt at the activity/ felt overall when attending these activities?

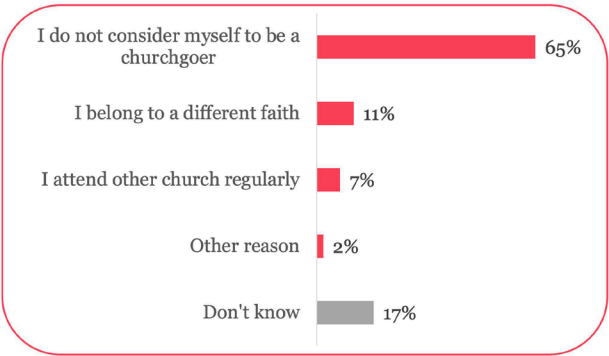
We asked fringe parents about both their children’s attendance and their own to see how often we reached both generations. There was good parent attendance with their children at Messy Church, family services and Sunday worship. The two most attended activities by fringe parents were toddler groups and pre-school playgroups; 69% of fringe parents said that they regularly attended these with their children. So when we reach out to the under 5s we are also reaching their parents’ generation as well.

When asked, 43% of the fringe parents said that they considered the church where they attended these activities as *their* church. 57% did not think of it as church, saying they did not consider themselves to be a church-goer. For some, there is a disconnect between these activities and belonging to a church. We could look for ways to develop a greater sense of their being part of the wider church family. For the 43%, who do see these activities as making them part of the church, this is an exciting opportunity to help them explore what else this could mean for them and their children, creating pathways into deeper church community and faith development.

## Do they consider this to be their church? % of Fringe parents



## Why do they not consider it their church? % of Fringe parents who do not consider this to be their church



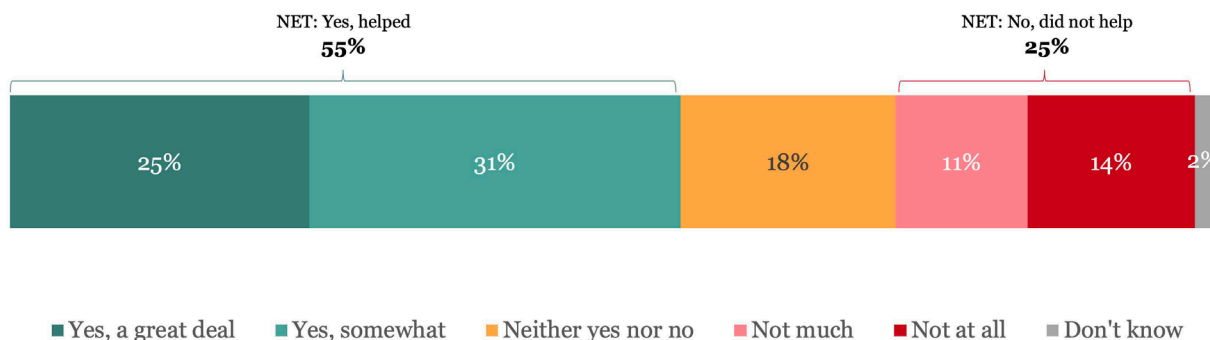
Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)  
Q12. Now, thinking about the church whose activities you and your child/ children under 5 years old / you/ your child have engaged with the most in the last 12 months. Do you consider this to be your church?

Base: Fringe parents who do not consider this to be their church (586)  
Q13. Why do you not consider this to be your church?



## Exploring faith

**Did this activity help you explore your beliefs?**  
% of Fringe parents



*Base: All Fringe parents (1020; unweighted data)  
Q11a-Q11d. Has attending this activity/ these activities with your child/ children under 5 years old helped you explore your own beliefs? / Has this activity/ Have these activities helped you explore your own beliefs?*

We discovered that 55% of all the fringe parents have explored their own beliefs because they attended with their children. This is a clear signal for us to look at more ways to help this happen. We need to develop pathways for parents to explore their faith and ways for them to help their children. How can we help parents and their children move from the fringe to a journey into faith and deeper discipleship?

*“The church has a huge opportunity to be distinctively Christian and to offer our faith unashamedly to those who come to these activities.”*

The research showed that there were groups amongst the fringe parents who were more likely to explore their faith: the younger parents, those aged 18-28. This reflects patterns\* seen amongst the younger generation of openness to explore faith. There was also more openness in Wales and England compared with Scotland. Those who had 0-1 year olds were more open than those with 1-4 year olds, maybe reflecting questions that have arisen after the miracle of birth? Another factor that impacted faith exploration was their identification with the Christian faith – those who identified as Christian were more open to exploring that faith.

When we look at this with the statistics about the parents wanting their children to learn Bible stories, explore religious belief and other faith development activities, we can see that the church has a huge opportunity to be distinctively Christian and to offer our faith unashamedly to those who come to these activities, especially giving clear help for fringe families to grow in faith.

\* In the Talking Jesus research, we found that 18-34 year olds were more open than other generations to a further conversation about Jesus with someone they knew who was a practising Christian. We also discovered that more 18-34 year olds knew a practising Christian, and that more of them had had a conversation about Jesus with that practising Christian who was mostly in their peer group. The latest Tearfund research (<https://comresglobal.com/polls/tearfund-covid-19-prayer-public-omnibus-research/>) on religious behaviour during lockdown, has shown that 24% of the population have watched an online service and that this grows to 34% of those aged 18-34.

## Reaching the unreached parents and children

In an earlier section it was seen that 35% of unreached parents would welcome an invitation to something that the church put on for them and their children, from a friend, a family member or someone from their community. Yet 79% of all unreached parents say they have never received such an invitation and there is a problem, in that 72% of them say that they don't know any parents who regularly attend a church. They are not in contact with our practising Christian parents.

Unreached Christian parents who wanted an invitation were concerned about whether they would really be welcome to a church activity; in fact it was a concern for 44% of them. Although this research shows the overwhelming majority of fringe parents report that they were welcomed, the unreached parents did not perceive this. This is something for us to emphasise when we do invite and build bridges to unreached parents and their children.

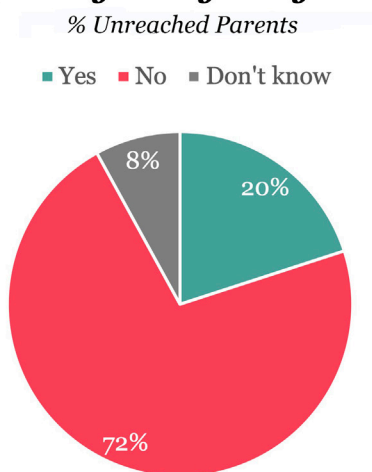
The unreached parents have some significant demographic differences to the practising Christian parents, which might be why they have never been invited to a church activity; they appear to be in different demographic worlds.

- 31% of the unreached parents are stay-at-home parents, whereas just 9% of our practising Christian parents are stay-at-home parents.
- 42% of the unreached parents have tertiary education as opposed to 72% of the practising Christian parents.
- 62% of the unreached parents are employed, verses 85% of the practising Christian parents.
- 48% of the unreached parents are married and 70% of the practising Christian parents are married.
- 36% of unreached parents live in an urban setting whereas 51% of practising Christians live in an urban setting.

These differences begin to show that the natural friendship circles of the practising Christian parents and the unreached Christian parents could be different. To reach the unreached, the church needs to work with the practising Christian parents to find ways to enlarge their friendship circles to those who they might not naturally get to know.

Finally, there are more women (76%) than men (24%) in the unreached parent group and more unreached parents are white (85%) than the ethnically diverse (15%) backgrounds of practising Christians parents. To reach the unreached parents, churches need to be intentional and build new relationships across various groups in society so that invitations could be extended to unreached groups.

### Do they know a parent with under 5s who goes regularly to church?



Base: Unreached parents (309; unweighted data)  
Q21. Among your family, friends or acquaintances, do you know someone with a child/ children under 5 years old who goes regularly to church?

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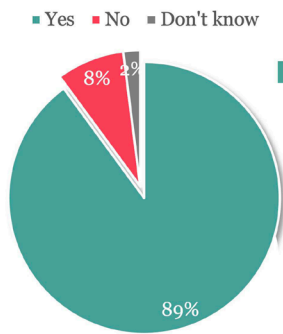
*“Knowing that there are unreached parents who would value and invitation should be incentive enough for us to try different things to build bridges.”*

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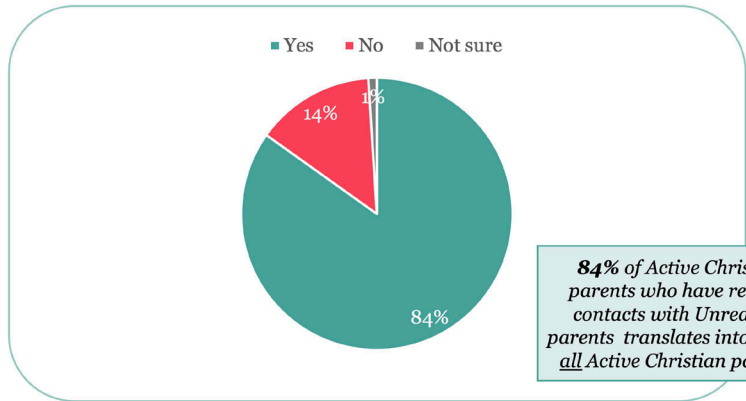
## The willing team of practising Christian parents

89% of practising Christian parents report that they know unreached parents who never attend anything church-based. 75% of the practising Christian parents say they have invited unreached parents and their children along to something at the church across a whole range of invitations from a one-off event to more regular Sunday worship.

**Regular contacts with Unreached parents**  
% Active Christian parents



**Have they invited Unreached parents to activities**  
% Active Christian parents who have regular contacts with unreached parents



**84%** of Active Christian parents who have regular contacts with Unreached parents translates into **75%** of all Active Christian parents.

Base: All Active Christian parents (202; unweighted data)  
Q22. Do you have regular contact with non-Christian parents of children under 5 years old who as far as you are aware do not attend any activities organised by a church group or taking place in a church?

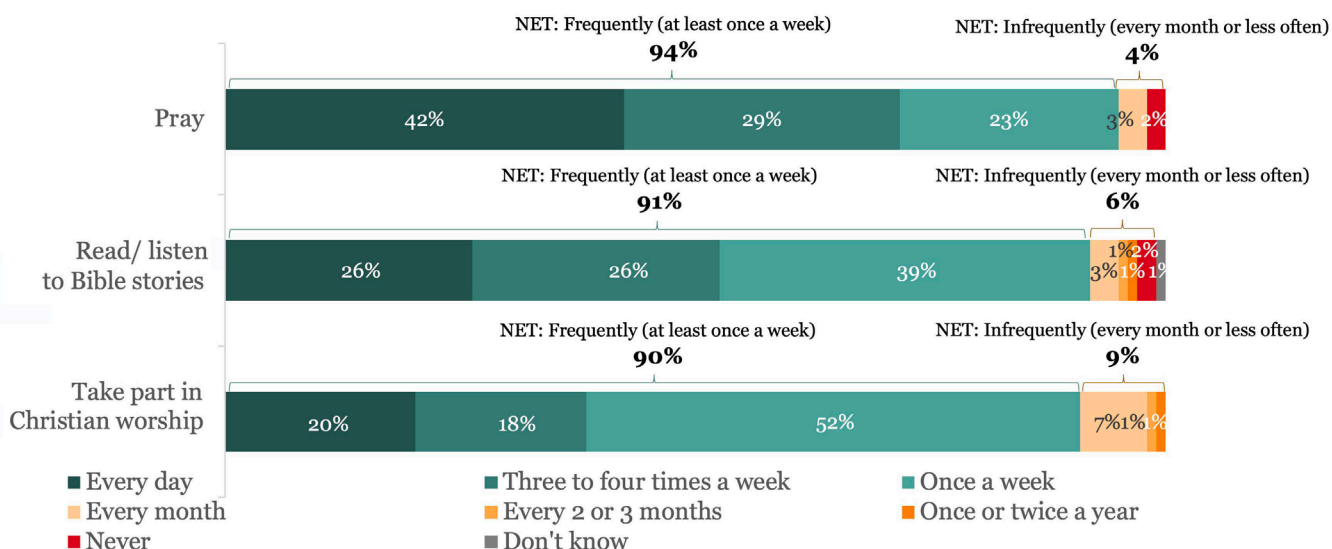
Base: Active Christian parents who have regular contacts with non-Christian parents (180); unweighted data  
Q23. Have you ever invited any of these non-Christian parents and their child/ children under 5 years old along to activities organised by a church group or taking place in a church?

They have also picked up what to emphasise in their invitations, that it will be fun for the children, there will be food and drink and other incentives. It would be good to remind practising Christian parents that unreached parents think that they might not really be welcome, as only 4% said that they emphasised feeling welcome.



# Practising Christian parents and the faith development of their children

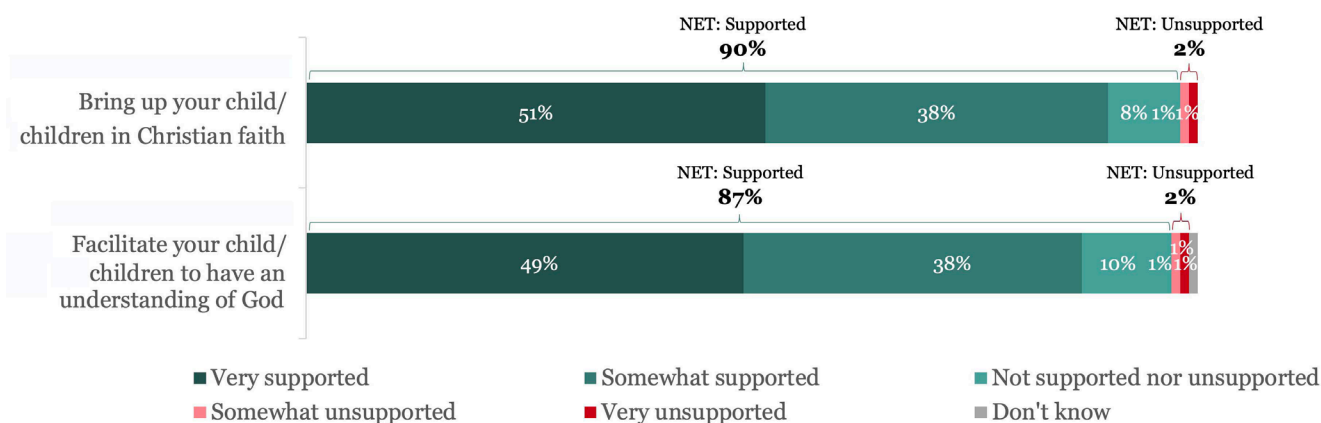
**Frequency of religious practices with their children under 5**  
% Active Christian parents



Base: All Active Christian parents (202; unweighted data)  
Q34. Approximately how often, if at all, do you do each of the following with your child or children under 5 years old?

At least 90% of practising Christian parents pray, read the Bible and take part in Christian worship with their children at least once a week. Also they are nearly all keen for their very young children to develop their own spiritual practices, wanting their children to take part in Christian worship themselves. This is important for church leaders when considering the life of the church and the emphasis that they place on the ministry with and to the under 5s.

**Support from their local church to help**  
% Active Christian parents



Base: All Active Christian parents (202; unweighted data)  
Q32. How supported or unsupported do you feel by your local church to help ...

88% of the practising Christian parents said they were either very confident or quite confident to bring their children up in the Christian faith. The church should be encouraged that most practising Christian parents felt supported by their church to bring up their children in the Christian faith.

When it comes to sharing their faith 60% of practising Christian parents said they found it easy to share their faith, which accounts for the high level of invitations to church activities and worship that they offer to fringe and unreached parents.

## Conclusion

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*“This report is good news for the church.”*

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There is an amazing team of practising Christian parents of the under 5s in Great Britain. They invite others to church activities and worship that is suitable for other parents with under 5s. They are confident in bringing their children up in the faith and feel supported by their churches. There are more practising Christians(12%) in this segment of society than in the population as a whole, meaning that they will have an even bigger impact amongst their peers. An amazing additional 62% of all parents with under 5s are connected to us in the fringe of our churches through our activities for their children. Most of them are in regular contact with us, feel welcome, and many have explored their own beliefs because of these activities.

This means that a vast number of the under 5s in Great Britain are growing up influenced by our faith, in contact with the church family, and we have an opportunity to help a vast percentage of the under 5s to grow up in relationship with God.

There are still more of the unreached parents of the under 5s who would like to come along if someone invited them and if they could be certain of a warm welcome. There are some bridges that need to be built across diverse demographic barriers to reach these open unreached parents; bridges that would reap an even bigger harvest among the under 5s and their parents.

What the church provides for this age group is welcoming and enjoyable for those who attend. The opportunities to help more of these parents explore their own beliefs and support them to help their children develop their own faith are wide open.

Our hope and prayer for this report is that a generation of under 5s will be reached with the love and message of Jesus in even more ways that we are doing now; that new bridges will be built to those currently furthest away and that stronger more obvious steps will be developed to help those who are already in contact with us to come closer and be disciplined into a real, strong, practising faith.

We hope that churches will read this and recognise the opportunity, turning a strategic eye on their work with the under 5s giving it more of a priority and greater resources, so that every under 5 has the opportunity to grow up knowing God. We are praying for lasting church growth that begins amongst the under 5s and their parents.

