

# How can church/school partnership help the spiritual development of children?

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## How can church/school partnership help the spiritual development of children?

We were commissioned by the Growing Faith Foundation to conduct this piece of research, which consisted of:

- A survey completed by a member of staff (usually Head, Deputy, RE lead or Collective Worship coordinator) we received responses from 28 schools (34% of church primary schools in our diocese)
- A survey completed by a group of children from the school (usually the school council or faith/worship group) we received responses from 25 schools (30% of church primary schools in our diocese)
- Three focus groups involving church and school representatives from 9 partnerships to dig into the details behind the headlines.

## To what extent do these recommendations apply to churches working with community, independent or other types of school?



We identified a number of parishes who seemed to have a positive partnership with a local community or independent school. We invited a representative from each of these churches to attend a focus group where we shared the findings of our research with them and asked two questions for each section:

- Does this ring true for you in your context?
- Does anything in our findings feel uncomfortable for use in your context?

Seven churches sent representatives to one of two focus groups. These churches were working with a range of schools. We had representatives from those working with independent schools, small village schools and multicultural schools in an urban setting.



## Partnership

**Children's spiritual development is enhanced by a strong partnership between church and school.**

This research has confirmed that children's spiritual development flourishes where both school and church work together in partnership, both recognising the unique roles that they and the other play and finding where the overlaps are. It takes commitment from both, along with mutual trust and understanding to make this work.



## Where do you start?

**Strong church/school partnerships start with a strong, positive relationship of mutual trust between the church leader and school leader**

There must be a willingness and an openness from both the school leader and the church leader to invest the time needed for such a partnership to develop. Each needs to see the other as a partner in leadership within the community and be committed to developing a relationship of mutual trust, care and respect for the benefit of all within the community.



## Where do you start?

**In partnerships with other types of school this key relationship was not necessarily between the church and school leaders.**

Our research showed that the joint working always began with a relationship between two individuals one from the school and one from the church. A commitment to working with the school was more important than the person's role in the parish. From this initial relationship it was important to build trust with the Headteacher and the RE lead was often a good person to work with to facilitate visits and assemblies.



## And beyond that?

**The positive effect of a close church/school partnership is further amplified if the incumbent of the church to which the school is linked is generous in encouraging and enabling lots of different Christian denominations and organisations to engage with the school.**

*“It is powerful for the children to see different members of the community leading from different churches but the messages and values are coherent.”*

An attitude that says ‘this is my patch’ is counter-productive.



## Get involved

The greater the involvement from the church in the school, both in terms of the number of people involved and in terms of frequency of contact, the greater the contribution to the spiritual development of the children.

However, it is worth noting that even the smallest amount of engagement from the church has some impact.



## Comments from children about visitors from the church

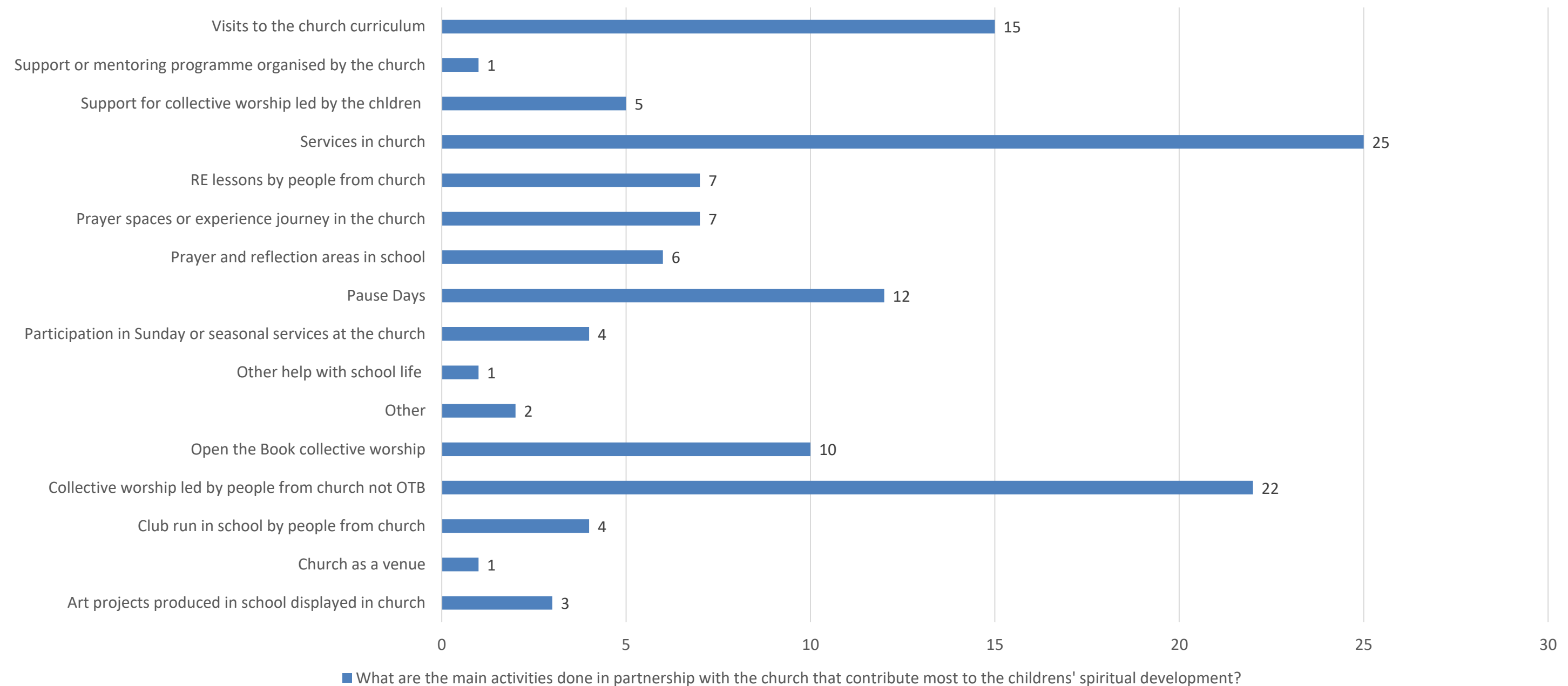
*“They tell stories from their own life which helps you make connections”*

*“it's like you're right next to God, because God is what he's talking about”*

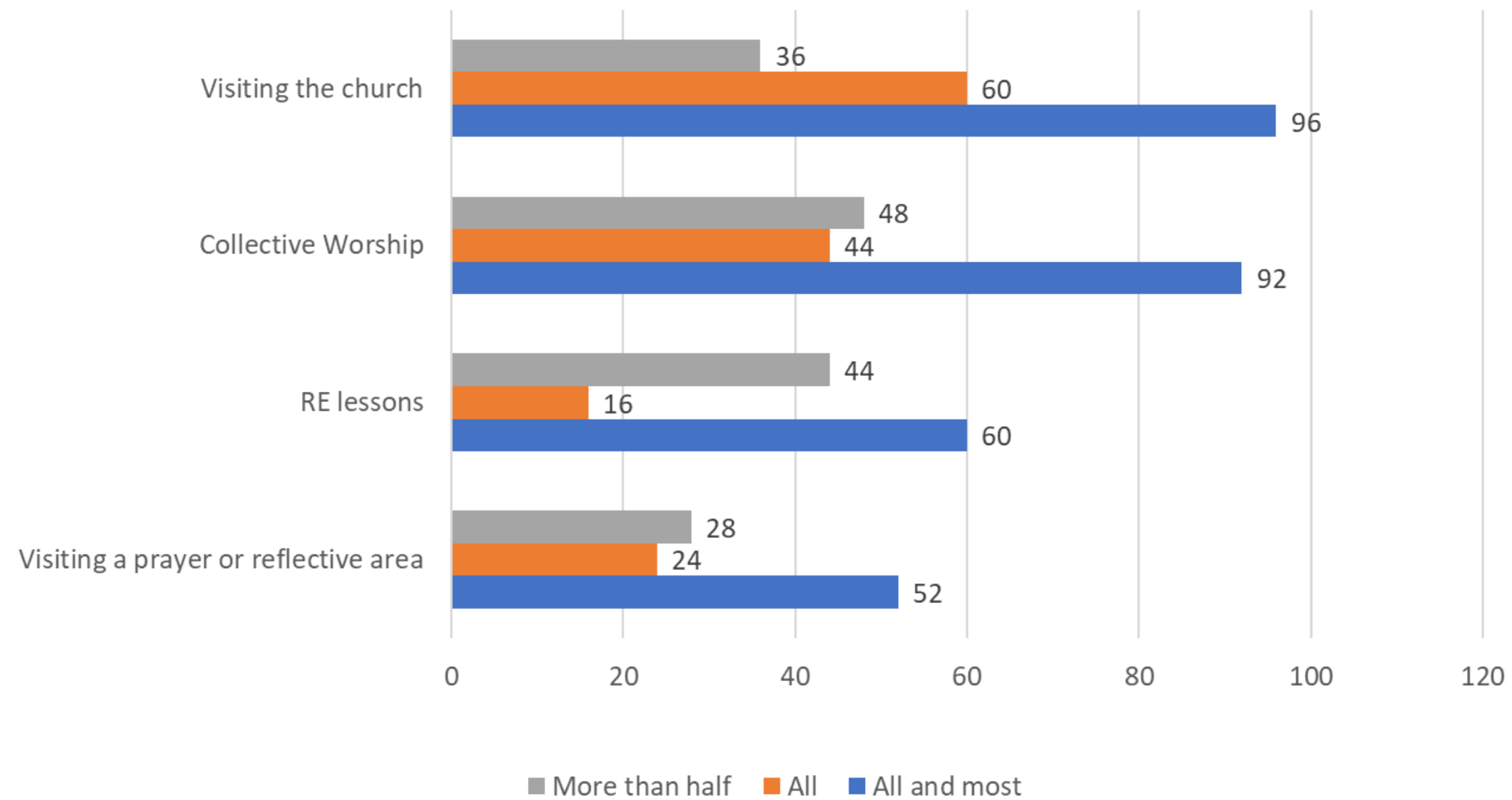
*“Their commitment to their faith helps us understand more”*



## We asked the staff: What are the main activities done in partnership with the church that contribute most to the children's spiritual development?



We asked the groups of children: What helps you feel closer to God?





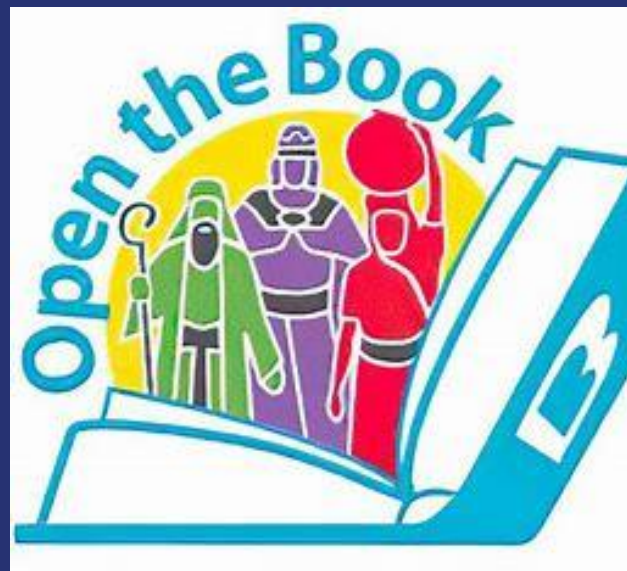
## Being in church buildings seems to be important to the spiritual development of children.

From focus group:

Children find being in the church building very meaningful. The building itself communicates a sense of awe and wonder. Those hosting visits to the church have a role to play in helping children to feel comfortable and at home in the space. Hospitality is an important part of this.

*Church is like Granny's front room ... you look after it but you feel at home.*

**Collective worship or assemblies, and in particular Open the Book, seem effective in encouraging the spiritual development of children.**



On the staff survey of those that had a particular type of engagement, those activities that were rated as contributing most to the spiritual development of children were:

School services held at the church	96%
Open the Book	91%
Other assemblies or collective worship	85%
Lunch or after school clubs	80%
Prayer or reflection spaces	67%
School visits to the church to fulfil the curriculum	65%
Pause days	60%
Mentoring programmes	50%
Church supporting children to lead collective worship	50%



## Collective Worship and Assemblies

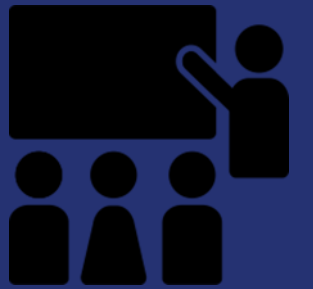
**Effective collective worship or assembly is welcoming and inclusive, creates safe spaces where children can explore big thoughts and questions and enables children to be involved.**

**Effective Collective worship or assembly helps children's spiritual development because it encourages the children to think differently or do something new rather than changing the way they behave or act.**



## For those who lead Assemblies in Community Schools

Schools often want to use assemblies to reinforce their school values and this tends to lead to assemblies that are a moral lesson. It is important to encourage children to think outside the box. Starting with a Bible story and pulling the values out of that can be helpful. Using wondering questions can be a good way to enable children to reflect on the story. It is helpful to leave space during assemblies for invitational prayer and reflection.



## Engaging with staff helps the spiritual development of the children.

### Pastoral support for staff is highly valued.

*Incumbent “being there”, “approachable and available”*

*“The incumbent’s pastoral support to staff has been significant. They are part of the staff WhatsApp group”*

### **There is an opportunity to support school staff around the language of spirituality and to help them be confident in their own spiritual journeys.**

This enables staff to bring a spiritual dimension into all areas of the curriculum and to engage with the children on big questions. Acts of service (helping others, raising money for charity, caring for the environment) can be framed for children as spiritual acts.





## Providing children with time, space and encouragement to be quiet, to reflect and to pray helps them feel close to God

Junior age children enjoyed being quiet and reflective, drawing and colouring .

The under7s preferred listening to Bible stories, saying prayers and singing when they wanted to feel close to God.

## We asked the children: Is there anything else that helps you feel closer to God at school?





## Space for quiet, reflection and prayer in community schools

It must always be made very clear that prayer in any context is invitational.

The language used around this needs to be considered very carefully. It may be more helpful to talk about reflection time or a place to pause.

Helpful phrases might be:

Christianity teaches that ...

Christians believe ...

I invite you to join in ...

Close your eyes and think about ...

I am going to pray and if you want to join in you can say 'Amen' at the end ...



## Leadership experiences are helpful for the spiritual development of children

Especially planning and leading Collective Worship for their class or year group.  
However, this can be difficult for a school to consistently organise and this might be an area where the church can offer support.

## What children say about leadership experiences



*“Because it makes us all work in unity, which makes me feel closer to God.”*

*“I like saying prayers to everybody because it's like you are talking to God and He's right next to you.”*

*“Whenever I get called to lead the prayer, I feel nervous, but God whispers in my ear to tell me what say and I feel happy”*

*“Sharing your experiences can make you feel closer to God.”*



## Extending the Partnership

Where school and church work in close partnership there is opportunity to draw in parents and engage households.

Examples:

- Parents drop into church to see children's art.

- Drop-in café at church after school drop-off or pick up.

- After school service for children and their families with contributions from children prepared at school.

- School newsletter used to advertise church services and events.



## Recommendations for churches to consider

1. Give time to cultivating a good relationship and building trust with the local school(s) leader(s). Invest in the RE lead or collective worship coordinator.
2. Safely recruit teams to engage with your local school(s) rather than it only being the incumbent or employed worker who is involved.
3. Be as involved as possible in the life of your local school. Talk with the school leadership and ask where the church can help and think creatively around what can be offered.
4. For church schools, be generous in enabling and inviting other churches, denominations and Christian organisations to be involved with the school.





## Recommendations for churches to consider

5. Regularly offer the school services (e.g. Harvest) held in church and invite the school into your building and church yard for curriculum and other use.
6. Engage with staff as well as the children as this is an effective way to help the spiritual development of the children.
7. Consider running a lunchtime or after school club with a Christian focus.
8. Look for ways to use the relationships you build with the school community to engage with parents and households.





## Recommendations for churches to consider

9. When running activities for children note that children appreciate having time, space and encouragement to be quiet, to reflect and to pray. Ensure that prayer is always invitational.
10. Look for creative ways of bringing prayers from the children at the school into church.
11. Aim to lead effective collective worship that does not focus on behaviour or moral lessons but rather encourages the children to deep thinking and inspires them to grow.
12. Consider using Open the Book as this seems to be a particularly effective way of leading Collective Worship.



## Recommendations for schools to consider

1. The relationship between a church and a school begins with a good relationship between the church and the school leader. School governors should value this relationship and encourage/ (release)the Headteacher to invest the time this requires.
2. Following conversation with the incumbent schools could invite a wider group of members of the local Christian community of all denominations into the school.



## Recommendations for schools to consider

3. Schools should make use of the church building and church members to support the living out of the school vision. This will encompass the spiritual life of the school, the curriculum and possibly joint courageous advocacy projects.
4. Schools could think more widely about where the local church community and the school could work together to support the children and families in the local area.
5. Schools should look for opportunities for the pupils to experience worship and reflection in the church building.



## Recommendations for schools to consider

6. Schools should give consideration to how best to facilitate pastoral support for the school staff from the church.
7. Those leading school worship should ensure that it does not focus on behaviour or moral lessons but rather encourages the children to deep thinking, to explore their own thoughts and questions about God and inspires them to grow and challenge themselves in new directions.
8. Schools should consider how they can involve pupils in planning, leading and evaluating worship in an age-appropriate way. They may find the church is able to help.



## Questions for discussion

[www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation](http://www.churchofengland.org/about/education-and-schools/growing-faith-foundation)

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