Christian Education Journal

Article

Does Godly Play "Work?": A Qualitative Study Examining the Impact of Godly Play on the Spiritual Lives of Adolescents and Young Adults Who Participated in Godly Play in Early, Middle, and Late Childhood

Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry
1–15

DOI: 10.1177/07398913251358612
journals.sagepub.com/home/cej
Sage

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Abstract

"Does it work?" This is the question often posed by adults encountering Godly Play, a Montessori-inspired method of Christian religious education for children. While such a question comes from a place of care, it fails to consider the greater purpose of faith education with children. This study examined Godly Play's impact on children's spiritual lives by interviewing 13 youths and young adults about their recalled experiences of Godly Play. The participants demonstrated relational consciousness, suggesting that Godly Play can nurture children's spiritual well-being into adolescence and early adulthood.

Keywords

Godly Play, children's spirituality, relational consciousness, spiritual formation, children's religious education curriculum, adolescent and young adult spirituality

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Introduction

"Does it work?" Parents, faith leaders, and others often pose this question upon encountering the Godly Play Method®. Of course, the answer to this question depends on how we define "work." Does Godly Play lead to better church attendance? Does it help children learn Bible stories? Is Godly Play an "easy" and "flexible" curriculum? Do children look forward to attending sessions? While such questions come from a place of care and concern, they fail to consider the greater purpose of religious education, particularly the nurture of children's spiritual lives. This study examined Godly Play's impact on children's spiritual lives by interviewing 13 youths and young adults about their recalled experiences of Godly Play. Using David Hay and Rebecca Nye's theory of children's spirituality as the framework for this study, we found that the participants demonstrated relational consciousness concerning self, God, others, and the world, suggesting that Godly Play can nurture children's spiritual lives into adolescence and beyond (Hay & Nye, 2006).

The Goal of Godly Play

Godly Play is a method of Christian formation with children aged 3–12 , inspired by the work of Maria Montessori. It was originally developed by Jerome W. Berryman as a program of theological play for children in hospital settings to help them cope with the existential limits they were experiencing and to create meaning (Berryman, 2013, 1995). As Berryman moved into work in congregations, he adapted the approach for use in Sunday School settings.[1] A hallmark of the approach is a dedicated space, modeled on Montessori's prepared environment, filled with materials to explore the Christian language system (sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and silence). For example, when telling the story of Abraham and Sarah's journey across the desert, the mentor uses wooden figures that move through sand (a desert box or bag) as the story is told.

The goal of Godly Play is for children "to enter adolescence with an inner working knowledge of the Christian language system to root them deeply in the Tradition and at the same time allow them to be open to the future" (Berryman, 2009, p. 29). As the children listen, wonder, and work with these presentations, they learn to use the Christian language system to make meaning, guided by two mentors, the Storyteller and the Doorperson.

Several studies have examined Godly Play's impact on children's spiritual lives. In general, they have seen evidence that children use the language of Godly Play to make existential meaning. Howard Worsley (2004) found that the Godly Play method is effective in giving children the space and permission to explore the Bible for themselves, empowering them to use it as a vehicle to explore issues of identity, meaning, and purpose. Berryman (2009) conducted a case study to examine the impact of Godly Play. He found evidence that children were using the language to discuss their ultimate concerns, such as identity, meaning, purpose, and death (Berryman, 2009).

Brendan Hyde (2010) conducted a case study to examine the impact of the Godly Play method on children's spiritual lives. In his analysis of a child's activities during open-ended work time, he suggests that the child exhibited all four characteristics of children's spirituality he identified in his own research (Hyde, 2010).

Two studies co-conducted by Cheryl V. Minor found evidence that exposure to Godly Play does increase a child's spiritual well-being (2014) and that critically ill children exposed to the method even once used it to make meaning of their lives, thereby promoting their spiritual well-being (2016).

Defining What We Mean by "Work"

When people ask, "Does Godly Play work?" we need to consider what we mean by "work." Often, in the realm of children's spirituality, particularly in Christian settings, something is thought to "work" in the lives of children when it results in desired outcomes like good behavior, morality, and religious vigor expressed through lifelong church attendance. While such responses can be related to the spiritual nurture of children, is it possible we desire something more than improved church attendance (easy to measure or observe), entertainment value, and ease of implementing the method?

Secondly, sometimes we think methods of Christian formation "work" when they entertain or draw many children and families to the institutional church. Though Godly Play is engaging, it is not meant to entertain in the traditional sense. In fact, in a Western culture obsessed with efficiency, productivity, consumption, and noise, Godly Play is countercultural. It may seem dull or not flashy enough to observers.

The Godly Play® Method seeks to nurture the innate spirituality of children through play with the Christian tradition to help them navigate the four universal existential limits of humanity: death, freedom, aloneness, and the need for meaning (Berryman, 1995; Yalom, 1980). Drawing on psychiatrist Irvin Yalom, Berryman argues that all people, including children from a very young age, struggle with and are forced to face certain ubiquitous issues (Yalom, 1980).

The first of these issues is the reality of death. Children learn of death soon after their birth, often through the demise of a pet or loved one or something they hear about on television. Children, just like adults, struggle with how to live, knowing that the fate of each of us is death. Second, children experience the existential limit of freedom. According to Yalom, humans both long for and fear freedom. Freedom enables possibility and creativity, but it also comes with considerable responsibility and the making of choices that have long-range impact.

The third existential limit experienced by children and adults is that of aloneness. Humans enter the world alone and leave it in the same way. Even if a person has a twin, no two humans share the same experiences; therefore, another person cannot truly understand another's unique and specific embodied reality. Finally, children must grapple with their need for meaning by asking questions like "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose?"

Other scholars in religious education and children's spirituality have tried to measure whether something "works" based on stages, e.g., Fowler (1995) . They look for evidence that a child is moving through predetermined stages of a maturing faith.

More recently, scholars such as Hay and Nye (2006) have pushed against stage or developmental theories, arguing that, from birth, children have an innate capacity and desire to be in a relationship with God, self, others, and the world. To bring the works of Berryman (1995) and Hay and Nye (2006) together, it seems that our understanding of "work" in relation to pedagogies and methods regarding children's religious education must be defined by children's ability to use their religious system to navigate being in relationship with others. More simply, in Christian theological terms, children's religious education "works" when it encourages children to intertwine the story of God, the world, and others with the child's life to promote life-giving and sustaining relationships.

Therefore, this study focused on listening for evidence of *relational consciousness* among adolescents and young adults who participated in Godly Play during childhood.

Theoretical Framework: Hay and Nye's Relational Consciousness

The theoretical framework used for this study was David Hay and Rebecca Nye's theory of children's spirituality (Hay & Nye, 2006). Hay and Nye identified what they considered a core category of spirituality called relational consciousness, an evolved human capacity for an awareness of connections with self, others, the world, and a transcendent power (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 109). They proposed that relational consciousness allows individuals of all ages to reflect on their spiritual experiences, develop identity and a feeling of worth, and find meaning and purpose in life. Their research further revealed that many individuals repress or discard relational consciousness altogether as they encounter cultural pressures that devalue it, especially in the West.

Hay and Nye (2006, p. 149) proposed that adults can foster relational consciousness by helping children keep an open mind, encouraging children to explore multiple ways of making sense of particular experiences or situations, and encouraging personal awareness. Hay and Nye described the typical approach to spiritual formation as a "poorly executed, externalized study of various dimensions of religious activity (ritual, mythology, doctrine, ethics, social practice) whilst keeping them at a distance from the personal life of the child" (2006, p. 159), which does nothing to nurture relational consciousness, and in fact, may undermine it. Nye (2009, p. 69), a proponent of Godly Play, suggested six conditions (present in the Godly Play method) that can promote relational consciousness: space, process, imagination, relationship, intimacy, and trust.

A Brief Review of the Literature Supporting Hay and Nye's Theory

In a qualitative study of children aged 7–8 years in Christian settings, Reimer and Furrow (2001) conducted a study to further the understanding of relational

consciousness and how it functions in the lives of children. Semistructured interviews were conducted with each child, focused first on the child's internal self and second on the child's sociocultural context. Reimer and Furrow (2001) concluded that relational consciousness was readily identifiable in the transcripts of the interviews.

Though Elaine Champagne (2003) did not directly test Hay and Nye's theory, unlike Reimer and Furrow, her phenomenological research project focused on the daily life experience of preschoolers aged 3–6 years old to "draw a spiritual portrait" of a preschooler. Her analysis of the collected data revealed modes of the children's being: sensitive, relational, and existential (Champagne, 2003), which connect to relational consciousness as defined by Hay and Nye (2006).

Tobin Hart and Pearce (2003) developed their theory of children's spirituality that closely resembles Hay and Nye's theory (2006) and lends additional support to the theory that relational consciousness is at the core of children's spirituality. Defining spirituality as an intimate and direct influence of the divine in our lives, Hart and Pearce (2003) interviewed children and youth about their spiritual experiences. He collected written accounts from adults recollecting childhood spiritual experiences. An analysis of the interviews with children and the written accounts from adults recollecting childhood experiences led him to conclusions about the nature of children's spirituality that are almost identical to those of Hay and Nye.

Brendan Hyde (2008) conducted a qualitative study with elementary-aged children in Australian Catholic schools, whose goal was to identify the characteristics of children's spirituality. Hyde's analysis yielded four characteristics of spirituality in the children: the felt sense, integrating awareness, weaving the threads of meaning, and spiritual questing. They closely resemble much of what Hay and Nye (2006) found in their study of similarly aged children in the United Kingdom. Hyde suggested they are in "close accord" with Hay and Nye's core category of relational consciousness (2008, p. 93).

Method

Researchers sent out a general survey asking Godly Play practitioners about their experiences using Godly Play with children in early, middle, and late childhood. Using the commonly employed "snowball" method for collecting data, we asked respondents if they could put us in touch with adolescents or young adults from their program so we could interview them about their experience. In addition, researchers reached out to the network of Godly Play Trainers in the United States to ask if they could help us identify potential interviewees who had been through programs they were involved in or even their own children. Thirteen youths and adults (aged 13–30) agreed to be interviewed. The required parental permissions for those under 18 and informed consent were collected.

The participants were located across the United States. Seven of the 13 participants had parents who were either Godly Play storytellers, doorpersons, or Licensed Godly Play Trainers. Most of the sample came from families who attended Episcopal Churches (part of the Anglican Communion) in the United States and were white.

The exceptions were one child attending Quaker meetings and two from bi-racial and multicultural families.

Researchers conducted one semistructured interview with each of the 13 participants using Zoom. The interviews asked open-ended questions about their childhood experiences of Godly Play in relation to their current lives and spirituality. Questions included inquiries such as "What do you remember most about Godly Play?" "What did you like least about Godly Play when you were young?" and "Did you or do you now think about Godly Play outside of the Godly Play Room?"

After transcribing the recorded Zoom interviews, researchers inductively coded the data. They then used deductive thematic analysis to sort the codes into the core four relations identified by Hay and Nye's theory: God, self, other, and world.

Findings

An analysis of the interviews with the 13 youths and young adults who experienced Godly Play as children in early, middle, and late childhood revealed how the Godly Play method nurtured relational consciousness—an awareness of their relationships with God, others, the world, and themselves. Interviewees shared memories of this from their time in the program and how their time in Godly Play supported their awareness of and reflection on these relationships as they moved into adolescence and beyond.

God

Throughout the interviews, the youth mentioned God as a character in the stories they heard and with whom they had a relationship. For example, one young man spoke of feeling close to God, even using a direct quote from some of the Sacred Stories in the curriculum. He said,

> I see that Godly Play has influenced me immensely in the way of thinking about relationships with God. It's more of a connection … someone *coming so close to God and God coming so close.*

That language about God coming close is used in many of the lessons from the Old Testament in the curriculum. Important people such as Noah, Abraham, and Moses often came close to God and, in those moments, knew what they should do (Berryman et al., 2017 , Lessons 5, 6, 7, and 8). This young man connected to that feeling of closeness in his own life. He also spoke of this as an important way to understand other people of faith. He said,

> I just remember something that comes up a lot: they talk about how Moses comes close to God, and God comes so close to him. And that's just something I remember over and over. I think about that when describing someone else who is divinely inspired and their relationship with God.

Another young man reflected on the parable of the Good Shepherd (Berryman et al., 2017, Lesson 9), which he worked with in early, middle, and late childhood and later as an adult storyteller in a program. He spoke of how it was a source of comfort for him as a child and still as an adult. He said,

> That one [the Parable of the Good Shepherd] has always stuck with me. It's always right there on the surface for me to dip back into … even when I was young, it was always something that I felt like I was able to really dig into and reflect on … it was something that I really could see a lot of my own experience in, especially with my struggles with ADHD. And just thinking about the bad places in my life, like high school and relationships, and social interactions and moments where I may feel, you know, uncomfortable or scared … that like God was there … meeting us where we are in the good places in the bad places and in the in-between ones. It helped me see God in my life.

He went on to say even more, reflecting on how God (the Good Shepherd) is always there in comparison to "ordinary shepherds." He said,

> In this day and age, there are endless numbers of ordinary shepherds that people are following in their lives. But in the face of true adversity, those ordinary shepherds flee. Whether we accept God or not, God is always there. But in those difficult moments, those kinds of false ideas of a shepherd aren't there. You're not looking in the right direction for safety, inspiration, identity, fulfillment, or meaning. You know, like your work or career could be like an ordinary Shepherd, or a relationship could be an ordinary Shepherd. That's not to say that these are bad things, but those things won't be there for you when you really need them … like the Good Shepherd.

The young people interviewed were also keenly aware of how others related to God. One young person observed,

> I think oftentimes people kind of look at Bible stories in the context of, like, okay, it has to be backed up. Like they want to know if it actually happened. And I think from a young age, that [the story of the Exodus] was a story that it didn't matter for me … I always like that the messaging behind it, of God doing what was necessary to lead his people to the promised land, kind of stuck with me.

This awareness continued as they grew older, and their circle expanded to people beyond the church. One young man said that whenever he talks to his peers about Godly Play, he always focuses on wondering. He mentions that they are always surprised to hear about it since they have this idea in their heads that Sunday School was just a bunch of adults telling children how to think and feel about God. He said, "It [wondering] is just astounding … and that it just makes me happy to think of it happening in circles worldwide."

One of the young women also reflected on the wondering in comparison to what she heard friends outside of her church saying. She said,

> That kind of questioning [wondering] and making sure that your faith has room for doubt was really important. I heard a lot of my friends who attended different churches or different religions complaining about church. They said there wasn't really any room to ask questions because everyone around them seemed to just believe it all. I think if you have so much doubt about what you are learning, your faith isn't going to get stronger … unless you resolve it or discuss it openly like we did in Godly Play.

Others

The theme of relationship and connection was woven throughout the interviews. The importance of the Godly Play mentor's consistent presence was mentioned often, as well as the way in which the mentor led the session. Some key things seemed to be the ability to create a feeling of safety, where everyone was valued, and every idea was valued. Here are some of the things they said:

- I remember most having a safe spot [in the circle with the mentor and familiar peers] for an hour every week.
- I just liked building a relationship with whoever was teaching, whoever was in the classroom, or whoever was in the room with us. I liked sitting down and talking and having everything you say taken seriously.

Those feelings of safety and connection carried over to their memories of their peers in the circle as well. Of particular value were the long-term relationships created over the years.

- As I grew older, I still enjoyed the stories, but I also enjoyed being able to talk to other people and make new friends.
- I had friends who knew the stories like me, so it was as if we all spoke the same language.

One remembered how sitting in the circle was sometimes hard as a little child, but when he got older, he found himself mentoring the other children in the circle. He said, "I would tell the little kids, if they would like blurt something out, I'd be like, she's going to give you time for questions at the end, you just have to be patient."

Some spoke of how the skills they learned in the Godly Play Room helped them form relationships with others as they moved into late childhood and into high school. One young man said,

> I think it [Godly Play] made me a really much better team project worker, especially in high school, because I was just much better at being still than a lot of my classmates and waiting

> for other people to catch up. I feel like my teacher would pair me with a lot of kids who were having a difficult time because they would know that I would just not do the work for them. But I would try to talk to them, and I feel like that was a Godly Play thing.

The World

In addition to speaking about God and others, the participants also reflected on the world both with regard to the environment that supported the work of Godly Play and beyond. The Godly Play room was of a high value for many. Here are some of the things they said:

> - The thing I probably just picture the most is sitting in the circle and just kind of the setup that was the same way and that brought consistency to it every time.
> - … even though the teachers and students might be a little different [in a Godly Play room], everything would be there. It meant there was less to figure out.

As mentioned above, most of the participants had a family member who helped with the program as a storyteller or doorperson, and some had parents who were Licensed Godly Play Trainers, so they were even more involved in the program. This often had a huge impact on their home environment. One person said,

> I think I grew up in a family that, because we had a common Godly Play vocabulary for a lot of things, could talk about when people died, when friends got divorced, or when people in our family got sick. It didn't feel like the world was ending because we had these talks a lot … like we had big, serious talks, and we had small, serious talks. Every night, we would wonder together about our days, saying things like, "I wonder how your day was? I wonder what could have gone better?"

Finally, some of the participants reflected on the opportunity to connect the stories of Godly Play to the events of the larger world. One person said,

> As I got older, it wasn't just about understanding the stories at that point it was about, like, you know, how do we look for analogies … or can this story be an analogy for a problem or an issue that I'm having, you know, in my world my life, whatever.

Self

Awareness of their own needs or identity was also often lifted up. The young man who was part of a Quaker meeting voiced a strong connection to Quakerism but spoke about how Godly Play was a very important counterbalance to the tradition. He said,

> I think the most important part of Godly Play for me was the foundation that it gave me for the stories that are in the Bible. [In Quaker worship] we don't do Bible readings. We don't do

> sermons. And I think that maybe the lack of that [sermons and Bible readings] for Quaker kids today is what leads to having kids who are like atheists, but that's just not how I view religion. And I think the credit for that goes to having those Godly Play stories. I think it proved, I think it produced, an incredibly important foundation for me as a young religious kid. It gave me a purpose for being at Meeting each week.

Several spoke about how important the interactive aspect of Godly Play was for them as young people. They had a strong self-awareness that they needed the tactile aspects of the approach for various reasons. For some, it was just the fact that it made the experience interesting. Here are some of the things they said:

> - As a young kid, Godly Play was much more enticing; it was just far more engaging. It was like you felt listened to and important. Now, as an adult, I can identify that the fact that there's a big emphasis on open-ended questions is part of the reason that it is successful.
> - When I read the stories of Jesus in the New Testament, I picture the parables; I picture different boxes. I picture the image of the mustard seed story and how it sprouts and grows, you know?

Another young person named the fact that as a child with ADHD, the approach seemed especially helpful. He said,

> I really enjoyed sitting on the floor, and it was, I think, especially being the little rambunctious, ADHD kid that I was, I think that it helped me center my attention and kept me from feeling kind of jittery.

One participant described the experience as "inwardly focused" and commented that she did not think she was finding that anywhere else, certainly at that point in her life. This same person reflected on how she remembered being annoyed at the repetition of some of the stories, but she now believes that was a very important part of the process. She said,

> I know now there is a point, doing them [hearing the stories] over and over again. There was a point, you know, where I hadn't yet gotten to, let's reframe this or think of this creatively. I wouldn't get rid of those things. I think my understanding of consciousness is that it arises from repetition.

Another person named the repetition as one of her favorite parts of the method. She spoke of hearing the story of the birth of Jesus every year, saying,

> Maybe just the way it was told, and the regularity of it being told every year and kind of knowing what was coming, like every year I knew that the mother Mary would want to get off the donkey and then go back off because it is hard to ride on a donkey when you

> are expecting a baby. I think just the excitement of knowing it was coming and knowing that I knew it was coming. I really looked forward to it.

Another young woman spoke of how important the stability of Godly Play was for her, especially when her family moved. She said,

> We moved when I was eight … but we kept going to Godly Play. I think it helped because I was like, "I don't know the patterns at my school. I don't have friends, necessarily. But I know these patterns."

The openness of the approach was of high value for almost all the participants. They realized that having their own ideas about the story without judgment from the teacher was an important part of the process and continues to be important now. Here are some of the things they mentioned:

> - I could draw my own conclusions from the story. And that has been something that has carried through with me in my adult life … I choose how I want to interact and understand my world and my life, the, you know, there's not necessarily a right way of understanding the story.
> - I knew, probably from Godly Play, that I enjoy having my education come from conversations and being able to talk through stuff. That was probably something that I thought about a lot outside of Godly Play, not really even realizing it, but just knowing who I am and how I learned. It's such a huge part of my identity. I wouldn't be me without Godly Play. It's within me … making it a huge part of who I am.

One participant who was expecting a child spoke of wanting to give that same experience to her own child. She said,

> We might not be able to find a Godly Play option where I live, but my husband and I did find a school that empowers kids to wonder, ask questions, and be intentional with their thoughts. You treat them like smart people, a sort of Godly Play that feels like it can connect to our family.

Discussion

Evidence of a Robust Relational Consciousness

An analysis of the transcripts of interviews with the young adults who experienced Godly Play reveals that the approach helped foster a robust relational consciousness that continues into adulthood. Participants consistently spoke about their awareness of others—not only those in the program with them (peers, mentors) but also family members and those outside of the church. They expressed awareness that people

have their own ideas and struggles and wanted to mentor those younger than them and help others by lending a listening ear.

The participants also exhibited a strong awareness of their relationship with the world, starting with the importance of the environment in which Godly Play was held, the community of faith that supported the program, and beyond.

Most compelling, perhaps, was the strong sense of identity the participants voiced or their relationship with themselves. This included a sense of how the Godly Play method met their needs or did not meet their needs as a learner or person of faith. Some spoke about learning skills that helped them be better leaders in their daily lives and gave them important abilities to navigate life's challenges, including careers, relationships, and more.

Many named their favorite stories and looked forward to hearing stories as the seasons of the church turned. The older the participants, the more they would reflect on how Godly Play continues to inform their lives as they grow, including reflections on how they hope to parent due to this experience. Finally, a common theme was how the experience impacted their ongoing relationship with God and the Bible, which they continue to work to make sense of as they grow and change using the skills they learned in Godly Play (wonder, openness, scanning for meaning, and deeper understanding).

Parental Influence

It is significant that many of those in this sample had a family member (mothers across the board) who led the program. Further research is needed to understand the significance of homes steeped in the ethos of Godly Play.

Their mothers modeled for them a love for the stories from the Bible and an openness to many ways of thinking about the stories, which was highly valued. One can imagine that the training these mothers received as Godly Play mentors and Licensed Godly Play Trainers greatly impacted how they parented, particularly how they approached issues of faith at home. Parental influence potentially amplified the impact of Godly Play on the participants. This is unsurprising as previous studies have found that tending to the faith caregivers and parents positively supports children (Mahoney, 2021, p. 49).

Church Involvement

It is noteworthy that half of those interviewed were not actively participating in a faith community but were still thinking deeply about their relationship with God and religion. Some of this was a function of their time in life. Several were either in college or recent graduates, which is often a time in life when participation in a church diminishes (Smith & Snell, 2009). It would be important to follow up with this group as they settle into their adult lives to find out if they reach again for a Christian community of some sort.

Limitations and Areas of Further Research

This study was not reviewed by a formal IRB. However, risks to participants were mitigated by using best practices for research with children. Parental permission was obtained for participants under 18, and participants older than 18 signed informed consent forms. All interviewers are current and certified in IRB research with human subjects protocols.

We acknowledge that all those who worked on this study are proponents of the Godly Play method and are employed by the Godly Play Foundation. This may have impacted the way the interviewers asked their questions and the analyses of the texts. However, the team approach (the two authors and three outside readers) mitigated this by working together to examine the participants' reflections honestly.

Furthermore, parental influence (e.g., a parent who is a trainer or a storyteller) could have amplified the effect since more conversation and sharing could occur in the home than most children would experience.

Future research could expand on the initial findings by conducting a study that involves children whose parents have not been trained in Godly Play. This would help determine whether the benefits observed in the participants were because the parents were trained in the method or because of the Godly Play method. Additionally, a second study focusing on families where parents are specifically trained in Godly Play would shed light on how these parents influence their children's spiritual lives and development. Understanding these dynamics could provide valuable insights into the role of parental involvement in spiritual education and the efficacy of Godly Play as a pedagogical tool.

Conclusion

The question of whether Godly Play works is asked in the context of the continued decline in church membership. Church leaders are scrambling to address the decline and searching frantically for answers. At the same time, resources (money and people) are disappearing, making a program that requires both materials and strong leadership, such as Godly Play, feel out of reach for many. If a community is going to invest in this program, they want to know that "it works."

If our primary goal in caring for children's faith lives is desperation to try to save the Western Christian congregations from decline, we have misunderstood the task of faithful adults and possess a severely misguided theology of childhood. Our study does not show that children who experience Godly Play attend church as adults at higher rates; in fact, some of the participants indicated they do not regularly participate in the life of a local church. Yet, despite their lack of allegiance to institutional Christianity, the participants, in the words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, demonstrated an awareness that life is "charged by the grandeur of God" or what we might call relational consciousness.

Godly Play is not necessarily the answer to church decline. Anecdotally, some programs seem to be having a positive impact on family involvement. At the same time,

we do not always see a strong correlation between a vibrant program and attendance. For example, Cheryl Minor's program is arguably one of the best examples of Godly Play in the world (beautiful and well-resourced classrooms, trained Godly Play mentors). However, the number of active children has declined during her time at the church (27 years), mirroring the decline in church attendance in North America.

What we see in this study is that Godly Play is "working" in that it fosters a robust relational consciousness in the children who participate both while active in the program and into adulthood. Their relational consciousness is deeply rooted because of the experience of Godly Play and is independent of religious rituals or even programs that happen inside the church walls.

Note

1. Godly Play is most popular among mainline churches around the globe, but shows promise for gaining traction among Evangelicals, particularly in the U.K. (Barfield, 2022).

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