

How safe is your church?

What young people told me about keeping safe in their churches and youth groups

We all want to feel safe: at home, in school, on the street, wherever we are. And that includes in our churches and youth groups. People in churches across England have been working hard to make sure that they are safe places for children and young people. A lot of what happens in church, however, gets decided by adults; even what happens for children and young people. In order to help make sure our churches are good, safe places for everyone, I wanted to hear what young people themselves had to say.



So, what did I do?

I spoke with young people in church youth groups in Coventry and Warwickshire to find out what they thought about keeping safe. A group of young people from a church in Luton helped me plan this and make sense of what I had been told. 32 young people aged 9 to 19 years took part.

This booklet explains what these young people told me.

Before taking part, all the young people chose a nickname. All the quotes in this leaflet use those nicknames, not the real names of those who took part.

And what did I learn?



Turn the page to find out...

Young people want to feel welcome and able to join in

In all of the groups I visited, the young people appeared to feel comfortable and at home. Food and drink, games, and time to relax were all important. Young people liked to be able to choose what to join in with and not be forced to participate if they didn't want to.

Make sure that everyone there feels safe and welcome and not feel like they feel forced to do anything they don't want to do.
(Maisie, 11, they/them)

*Things to make you comfortable, like food and drink and chairs
(Mary, 14, she/her)*

Young people also liked having some structure and knowing what to expect. They wanted to help out with things and get involved.

Church and youth groups are good places for children to catch up with friends and make new ones. Smaller groups can help with this. Having children the same age as you can help, but a bigger age range can also be good as older children can set an example for younger ones.

*You get to see a bunch of friends, you get to make new ones and you get to play games and eat food.
(Dennis, 10, he/him)*

*You build confidence as well by being able to speak to anyone of any age
(Dylan, 17, he/him)*



What makes a good leader?

All the youth group leaders I met were enthusiastic and engaged with their groups. The young people identified several characteristics of leaders that helped them feel safe in their youth groups.

Engaged and enthusiastic

They go round, like chatting to everybody and having conversations.
(Darwin, 13, he/him)

Relaxed, not strict

Like here it's pretty chill and not very disciplinary.
(Mary, 14, she/her)

I think it always is better when it feels like the leader wants to be there and explaining things and teaching things and talking about things to you as well.
(Tim, 16, he/him)



Friendly

Approachable

Joining in

What's good about our leaders is they don't, if you do something wrong, they don't go ahead and tell you off, but they actually listen to why you're doing it or what's actually going on with you.
(Amy, 14, she/her)

A lot of the leaders are like quite helpful if you have a problem or all that. They're quite approachable to come to you and talk to you about which I find quite nice if you're in an issue on that, it's nice to talk to them 'cause they have wisdom on how to help you sometimes.
(Charlie, 18, he/him)

Young people want to be respected and included

The young people I met were really clear that they wanted to be accepted and respected for who they are. Some of the young people felt that other people in church could be negative or judgemental and this could put them off going to church. Diversity and inclusion were important to these young people, including around gender, sexuality, race and disability.

You can be who you want here and be yourself
(Amy, 14, she/her)

The young people wanted their leaders to make sure other young people in the group were also respectful and inclusive. They wanted their leaders to step in if someone was being disrespectful.

So, one thing I like about the youth group is that you can be who you are like. You can be yourself without being criticized and everyone respects who you are.
(Dylan, 17, he/him)

Confidentiality was an important part of respect. If someone shares something with a leader, that should be dealt with sensitively. Where there are situations (such as child abuse) which need to be shared more widely, this should involve the young person.

Not to make a big fuss about it ... not to draw too much attention to it, 'cause that can just make them feel more overwhelmed or upset.
(Jack, 13, he/him)



Young people want a safe and secure environment

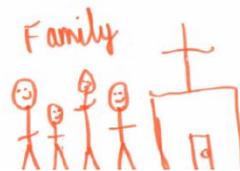


The young people who took part in this project were very clear that they wanted to feel safe and secure in their churches and youth groups. For some of the younger children and those whose churches were in rougher areas of town, this was mostly about physical security.

For some groups, like, if it's in the middle of a really kind of heavy zone, they need to focus on making sure the building is safe
(Roger, 16, he/him)

And get these security guards and get more cameras, so if there's people robbing you know and you can show the security guard
(Billy Bob, 10, he/him)

But feeling safe was about much more than surveillance cameras and security guards. What is most important to young people is an environment that feels familiar – like their homes. Being with family, friends and other familiar people helps young people feel comfortable; they know they are with people they can trust.



Things that make me feel safe, Dennis (10, he/him)



The leader's friendly dog was a regular member of one church youth group and helped the young people in that group feel secure and comfortable.

Bullying and intimidation

Bullying and intimidation by other children was a really important issue. This can make young people feel uncomfortable and unsafe.

[School is] definitely not safe because there's a lot of bullying and I've been told a lot of things at school that don't make me feel safe at all
(Maisie, 11, they/them)

Year 10 to 11 boys ... just hang in these groups and ... they laugh when you walk by and I just feel like I'm being judged.
(Lizzie, 12, she/her)

The young people spoke about this a lot and wanted to know that their leaders would deal with any bullying or intimidation quickly.



Young people also wanted to know that they wouldn't be pressured or forced to believe or behave in a particular way. They wanted to be free to explore their own faith, to ask questions, or to express different points of view.

You should be allowed to say what you think about it without feeling like you're gonna be attacked for that.
(Tim, 16, he/him)

If you believed in something and then ... you came to the church and then they said this is wrong, then that would make you feel unsafe.
(Rufus, 14, he/him)

Keeping children safe in church

All the churches I visited had clear safeguarding procedures and the leaders all knew what to do if they had any concerns. Some of the older young people knew a bit about these safeguarding procedures, but all of them said that even if they didn't know the details of the procedures, they would know what to do if they had a problem. They trusted their leaders and they trusted the procedures.



What makes me feel safe,
Eleanor (10, she/her)

I think we, like if we knew something was a problem we probably would, even if we don't know the ins and outs of like the safeguarding, we'd probably all be able to go and say something.
(Berry, 14, she/her)

I think for me personally that like specifically in this youth group, I feel quite safe, but then it's just I don't know what the safeguarding procedure is ... I trust that it probably is a good one.
(Mary, 14, she/her)

Three of the groups discussed what should happen if a young person was upset or told a leader about being abused. The most important thing was to give the young person space to talk about their concerns in a safe and supported atmosphere. It was also really important that any concerns were treated with respect and kept confidential.

They recognised that sometimes things can't be kept confidential, but need to be told to people in authority. In those situations, it is really important that the young person is kept informed and involved in what is happening.

I think if you want to like, reassure someone about safety you need to ... have a conversation saying, you know, like we're here to keep safe and stuff like that, just to reassure the person that you know they're in capable hands.
(Derek, 15, he/him)

About this research

This focus group research with young people was part of a bigger research project looking at safeguarding children in the Church of England. The research formed part of a doctoral thesis in theology through the University of Manchester. Ethical approval for the focus group research was given by the Luther King Centre Research Ethics Committee.

Who am I?



My name is Peter Sidebotham, I am an emeritus professor of child health at the University of Warwick. Although I am retired now, I worked for many years as a children's doctor, specialising in child protection work. As a Christian, I seek to apply my faith to every area of my life and work.

I am extremely grateful to all the young people who took part in this research, and particularly to the four amazing young people who made up the steering group and helped me make sense of what I was learning. I am grateful, too, to all the youth group leaders, parents and others who helped arrange these focus groups and trusted me in talking with the young people.

