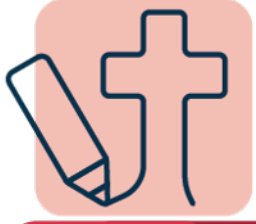




GET SET!

Playing With Purpose



5.1 Activities: Play with Purpose and Routines

Playing with purpose means being intentional about everything that is offered. This approach can be communicated to everyone, for example through posters, invitations and info sheets. Each activity, interaction and moment contributes to a wider goal: supporting children's development, nurturing relationships and reflecting God's love.

When these elements come together, the group becomes more than just a place to play - it becomes a space where families can grow, connect and feel truly valued.

5.1.1 Create a welcoming, faith-filled environment

At the heart of every parent and toddler group should be a sense of warmth, welcome and belonging. Each session is an opportunity to reflect God's love in a practical way, helping everyone feel that they are part of the big family of God. Creating this kind of environment doesn't happen by accident; it grows through thoughtful planning, consistent routines and meaningful interaction.

5.1.2 Building structure and routine

A strong sense of structure plays an important role in helping families feel secure. Just like within any family, clear routines and gentle boundaries give children confidence and help them understand what to expect.

A session that follows a familiar rhythm - perhaps moving from free play to snack time, then story, singing and finally tidy-up - builds this sense of stability. When children and adults know what comes next, they are able to relax and fully engage. A visual timetable with pictures or symbols can be very helpful for everyone. **See Section 4.1.4**



Help with school readiness

Parent and toddler groups support young children's preparedness for school by helping them develop social, emotional and communication skills in a safe and supportive environment. Through play, routines, group activities and interaction with other children and adults, children learn to share, take turns, follow simple instructions and build confidence away from home. These early experiences help ease the transition into a school setting, fostering independence, curiosity and a positive attitude towards learning.

Useful link

- **12 top tips for school readiness** (notjustaparentandtoddler.group)

5.1.3 Communication

Communication is another key element of purposeful play. Families learn and engage in different ways, so it's important to share messages in a variety of forms.

Visual displays, simple signage, songs with actions and spoken reminders all work together to reinforce the same ideas. When the same message is seen, heard and experienced in multiple ways, it becomes more meaningful and easier to understand.

Useful links

- **Disability and Inclusion** (OurHub)
- **The Makaton Charity** (makaton.org)
- **Widget communication tool** (widgitonline.com)

5.1.4 Know your group

Getting to know the children and families who attend is essential for creating sessions that feel relevant and enjoyable. Every group is different, and activities should reflect the interests and needs of those who come. If children are drawn to creative play, it makes sense to provide more opportunities for crafts. If they prefer active or imaginative play, then those areas should be developed while still offering a balanced play experience.

See Section 5.1.5



A role for one of the team from time to time might include stepping back for a couple of minutes and really noticing/observing what is happening in the room and feeding back at the end of the session.

Purposeful play is not about filling time but about offering meaningful experiences that engage the group.

5.1.5 Offering a balanced play experience

A well-balanced environment should offer a range of play opportunities to meet the needs of all children. While some children may enjoy active, energetic play, others may prefer quieter areas where they can read, explore books or engage in other calm activities. But it is also important to encourage children to engage with many different types of activities. Providing this balance helps ensure that every child feels comfortable, valued and included - while broadening their experiences in a safe and supportive environment.

5.1.6 Essential toys and equipment

See Section 3.2.2

Starting a group doesn't require huge amounts of expensive equipment, but it does benefit from a thoughtful selection that supports different types of play and development - active, creative, imaginative and quiet. A smaller, well-used selection of toys is far more effective than a large, overwhelming one.

Physical play and ride-ons

To support movement, coordination and confidence:

- Push-along toys and cars
- Ride-on bikes and scooters depending on space available (no pedals for younger children)
- Soft play shapes (blocks, wedges, tunnels)
- Play mats or foam flooring

Building and construction

To help develop fine motor skills and problem-solving:

- Duplo or large building blocks
- Wooden blocks
- Stackable cups or rings



Imaginative play

To encourage creativity, language and social interaction:

- Toy kitchen, food, and utensils
- Dolls and accessories
- Dressing-up clothes (simple and easy to put on)
- Small world toys (people, animals, cars, farms)

Creative activities

To allow for self-expression and creativity:

- Crayons, washable pens, chalk
- Paper, colouring sheets
- Glue sticks and simple craft materials (stickers, foam shapes)
- Play-dough and tools

Books and quiet area

To provide a calming space and support early literacy:

- Board books and picture books
- Soft cushions, rugs or a small book corner

Helpful extras

To add variety and excitement to sessions:

- Baby sensory toys (soft rattles, mirrors, textured toys)
- Ball pit or pop-up tunnel
- Outdoor toys (balls, bubbles, ride-ons)
- Seasonal or themed resources (eg Christmas Nativity toys)

5.1.7 Sensory play

Sensory play provides rich opportunities for learning, and it doesn't need to be messy or complicated to be effective. The key is providing opportunities for exploration, interaction and conversation. This will support brain and language development, fine and gross motor skills and provide opportunities for interaction; it will also bring a calm, purposeful balance to your group. A few simple, well-chosen resources can go a long way.

Tactile (touch-based) materials

- Dry rice, pasta or lentils
- Sand



- Shaving foam or foam soap
- Play-dough
- Trays or shallow containers
- Scoops, cups, spoons and funnels
- Different textures (furry, smooth, bubbly)

Water play

- Plastic tubs or bowls
- Cups, jugs and pouring toys
- Floating toys (boats, ducks)
- Sponges
- Ice blocks (small toy frozen inside or part frozen)

Visual stimulation

- Coloured scarves or fabric
- Bubble tubes or lava lamps (if available)
- Light-up toys
- Mirrors (unbreakable)

Sound and music

- Shakers, bells, tambourines
- Homemade instruments (rice in bottles, tins)
- Musical toys

Natural materials

- Leaves, pine cones, sticks
- Flowers or herbs (lavender, mint for smell)
- Smooth stones

Practical set-up items

- Wipeable mats or table covers
- Aprons or old shirts
- Baby wipes and towels
- Clearly defined area (to try and contain any mess!)



5.1.8 Encourage parent-child interaction and shared responsibility

Parents and carers play a vital role in the session; encouraging them to engage with their children can make a lasting difference. Not all parents will feel confident in playing or interacting, especially if they have not experienced positive examples themselves. By modelling simple ways of engaging - sitting alongside a child, joining in a game, or offering encouragement - team members can help build confidence and strengthen these relationships.

The session should also include shared responsibility. Inviting children and parents to help tidy away toys at the end not only teaches practical skills but also creates a clear sense of transition. This simple act helps signal that one part of the session has ended, reinforcing the routine and bringing a sense of order.

5.1.9 Sharing faith through play

See Section 5.3.2

Within the group, sharing the Christian faith should feel natural and woven into the session rather than added on. Simple Bible stories, songs and activities can all point towards God's love through Jesus.

When these elements connect, perhaps a story that links to a craft or a song, it helps children and carers engage with the message in a deeper, more memorable way. The aim is to gently and consistently reflect faith throughout everything that happens. **See Section 5.4**

To help create engaging, shared moments and reinforce Christian teaching, you may need:

- Use of IT equipment, song sheets, visual prompts
- Musical instruments (shakers, tambourines, bells)
- Bible story books (age-appropriate)
- Simple props for storytelling (soft toys, puppets)
- Parachute for group play

As they leave, give attendees a sheet with a story you shared together and some craft or activity ideas, so they can remember the story and continue to engage with it, if they want to, when they are home.





GET SET!

Playing With Purpose



5.2 Hospitality and Snack Time

See Section 4

Good hospitality is vital at a parent and toddler group because it creates a warm, safe and welcoming environment where both children and adults feel valued and comfortable. This encourages families to return, helps build trust and supportive relationships, and allows parents - many of whom may feel isolated - to connect with others. Ultimately, good hospitality helps the group become a caring community where everyone can flourish.

5.2.1 Hospitality

Hospitality is about creating a culture where every family is noticed, welcomed, supported and invited to belong. Here are some key areas to consider.

A good welcome

Hospitality begins at the door. Families will have gone through many challenges just to get to the parent and toddler group! So make sure that they are made welcome when they arrive. Have a volunteer ready to introduce new families to those who attend regularly.

Remember to greet the adults as well as the children - and try to use names; this comes with practice, but name stickers can be helpful too. Organise a calm, welcoming entrance with clear areas to store coats and prams or buggies, easy access to the *Session registration* form and clear signage on where to go next. A calm, welcoming beginning is a good start to a session!



Practical kindness

Help families with simple acts of kindness like carrying bags, holding doors open or helping with their child. Offering drinks and snacks and other types of practical care help people feel noticed and valued.

Time to chat

Create opportunities for conversation and take the time to get to know people; remembering names and details from previous conversations helps to build rapport.

Notice the small things

Try and notice the small things. Who seems withdrawn, overwhelmed or shows a change in behaviour? Who would benefit from some gentle encouragement or support?

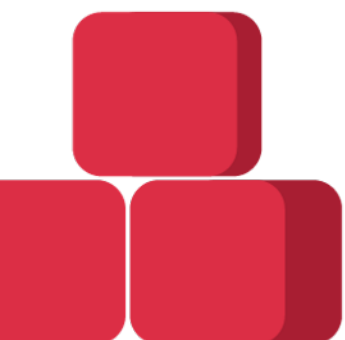
Equally, take time to celebrate small positive things too, like a child proudly bringing a toy or an adult with a new hairstyle. Small, sincere compliments and genuine interest show people that they are seen and valued.

Saying goodbye

Saying farewell is important, as this might be the last interaction they might have with you till the next group. A gentle, friendly goodbye, a thanks-for-coming, a hope-to-see-you-next-time, and a reminder of upcoming events, all help to reinforce the positive experiences of being part of the group.

5.2.2 Why snack time matters

Snack time is an important part of the session, providing opportunities for children and adults to enjoy fellowship, develop social skills and practise sharing and turn-taking. Aim to create a welcoming and inclusive environment where everyone is respected and considered, asking families to help ensure snacks are shared fairly, dietary needs are respected, and all children are supported to participate safely and confidently.



5.2.3 Safety first

See Sections 3.5 and 4.2.2

Safety must underpin every aspect of snack provision.

Allergies and dietary needs

Keep an up-to-date, accessible record of allergies for both children and parents and ensure all leaders and helpers are aware of these.

Common considerations include:

- Dairy intolerance
- Gluten sensitivity or coeliac disease
- Fruit allergies (eg strawberries are a common trigger)
- Peanuts and tree-nuts
- Vegan/vegetarian requirements

Ensure to avoid cross-contamination (eg separate preparation areas or utensils if needed).

Remember that in some cases allergies can be life-threatening. Remind parents not to give food to other children without parental consent

5.2.4 Choosing suitable snacks

Keep it simple, inclusive and budget-friendly.

Fruit and fresh options

- Bananas, satsumas, blueberries, raspberries
- Tomatoes and cucumber
- Grapes (always sliced lengthways)

Dry/package snacks

- Mini biscuits (chocolate and plain options)
- Rice cakes, breadsticks
- Plain crisps (eg Pom Bears, Skips)
- Veggie snack sticks

Hot options (where possible)

- Toast, crumpets, pancakes



It is good practice always to offer vegan/vegetarian options as standard and to use small portion sizes (eg mini packs) to reduce waste.

5.2.5 Drinks

Cold drinks

- Provide water, milk, or diluted juice
- Use beakers or feeder cups for very young children
- Only half-fill open-top cups to help reduce inevitable spills

Hot drinks (adults)

- Provide coffee, tea, hot chocolate, fruit teas - remember some people need decaffeinated options
- Use lidded cups or flasks, or create a designated safe area away from the children to prevent spills, scalds and burns

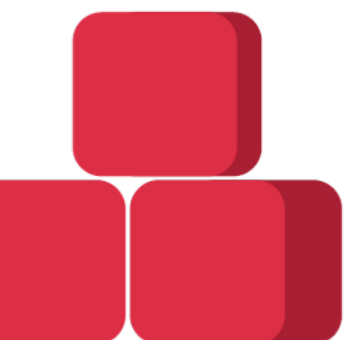
5.2.6 Managing snack time practically

If you don't have sufficient team members to prepare the snacks and drinks, you can set up a rota and request parents and carers to help.

If families bring snacks for sharing, then use a sign-up list for voluntary contributions. Have a clear list of items you are asking for. This is a good way to encourage shared ownership within the group.

Through kindness, patience and consideration for others, we can make snack time a positive experience for everyone by ensuring the following:

- Snacks are shared fairly, so that every child has the opportunity to enjoy them.
- Parents and carers should supervise their children closely.
- Try to encourage children to wait their turn, say 'please' and 'thank you' and practise good table manners appropriate to their age.
- Be mindful that some children may be shy, younger or need extra support. Help them to access snacks and feel included.
- As already outlined, respect the different needs of families, including allergies, dietary requirements, cultural practices and personal preferences.
- Food should not be taken from another child's plate or shared between children without parental agreement, helping to reduce allergy risks.
- Encourage children to sit while eating and drinking to promote safety.



- Encourage families to help with simple tasks such as tidying away cups and plates, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and community.
- Remember snack time is an opportunity for conversation, relationship-building and modelling positive behaviour.
- If snack supplies are limited, encourage everyone to take a moderate amount initially so that all children can be served before seconds are offered.
- A spirit of kindness, patience and generosity should underpin all interactions during snack time.

5.2.7 Special occasions and celebrations

See Section 5.3

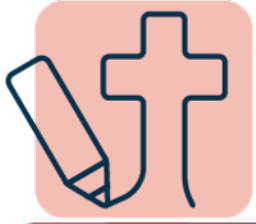
When celebrating special occasions, snack times can be expanded, eg birthdays, Christmas, Easter, Eid, Hannukah, end-of-term parties. Where needed, provide a suggested food list for parents using a sign-up sheet to avoid duplication. The group can then fill in any gaps rather than supplying everything.





GET SET!

Playing With Purpose



5.3 Celebrations

For a parent and toddler group, celebrating special occasions and milestones helps build community. It marks important moments in children's and family's lives, and creates opportunities to share faith and culture. This will help to support families, strengthen relationships and nurture a sense of belonging within the group. They can often open the door for more personal conversations and connection and can help create lasting memories and affirm the value of every child and family.

There are many ways the group can celebrate - through activities, stories, food (see Section 5.2.7) or by giving treats and gifts. There is no requirement as to when and how special occasions are celebrated - it is completely up to the group to decide. However, here are some special events you might like to consider.

5.3.1 Birthdays and anniversaries

Birthdays

This can be done for children and adults.

- Sing a birthday song during the session.
- Give a birthday sticker, badge, card or certificate.
- Include a special prayer of thanks for them and their family.
- Allow the child to choose a favourite song, story or activity.
- Create a birthday crown for them to wear.

Group anniversaries

- Celebrate the anniversary of the group with a special party.
- Display photos and memories from previous years.
- Invite former families to join the celebration.
- Thank volunteers and leaders publicly.
- Share stories of how the group has supported families over time.



5.3.2 Christian festivals

See Section 5.1.9

As a treat, giving party bags at Christmas or Easter can be an ideal time to include a faith-based gift like a Bible story or sticker book. Or for adults a Bible verse gift like pens, bookmarks, coasters or fridge magnets.

Christmas

- Explore the Nativity through storytelling or role play.
- Offer Christmas crafts and carol singing.
- Advent activities and countdowns.
- Collect gifts or donations for local charities.

Easter

- Tell the Easter story in age-appropriate ways.
- Create an Easter garden and plan Resurrection-themed crafts.
- Set up Easter egg hunts.
- Sing celebratory songs about new life and hope.

Harvest

- Collect food donations for a food bank.
- Discuss thankfulness and God's provision.
- Provide Harvest-themed crafts and songs.

Pentecost and other festivals

- Set up activities involving colour, wind and flames.
- Give simple teachings about the Holy Spirit.
- Offer prayer and celebration of the church family.

Useful link

Jump IN! resources are available to help with celebrating all the Christian Festivals and some other national holidays.

- **Jump IN!** (Salvationist.org.uk)



5.3.3 National and international holidays

These can provide opportunities to celebrate community, diversity and awareness of important causes.

Examples include:

- St George's Day, St David's Day, St Patrick's Day and St Andrew's Day.
- Remembrance Day with simple acts of remembrance and peace-themed activities.
- Mother's Day and Father's Day with a small gift or craft activity - while being sensitive to different family circumstances.
- Valentine's Day with a small gift or treat for parents.
- World Book Day with dressing up and storytelling.
- International Day of Play, Children's Day, Day of the Family or Earth Day with themed activities.
- Local community celebrations and civic events.

When celebrating these occasions, ensure activities are inclusive and appropriate for all families.

5.3.4 Other religious festivals

Many parent and toddler groups welcome families from different faith backgrounds. Recognising other religious festivals demonstrates hospitality, respect and inclusion.

Examples:

- Diwali
- Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha
- Hanukkah
- Vaisakhi
- Chinese New Year / Lunar New Year

Some simple ways to celebrate can be to:

- Share stories, foods, music or crafts connected with the festival.
- Invite families to explain how they celebrate at home.
- Display greetings and decorations.
- Emphasise respect, friendship and learning from one another.

As a Christian group, it may be helpful to explain that recognising these festivals is about welcoming and valuing all families rather than adopting the religious practices themselves.



5.3.5 Moving on

See Section 4.4.8

Moving on to nursery or school is a significant milestone for both children and parents.

Ideas to celebrate this may include:

- Hold a special 'graduation' celebration at the end of the summer term.
- Present children with certificates, a Bible story book, lunchbox or school bag.
- Create memory books or photo displays.
- Pray for the children as they begin school.
- Invite children to wear their new school uniforms.
- Give parents a card with encouraging words and a blessing.
- Mark the occasion with a special snack or party.
- Maintain connections by inviting families back to special events. **See Section 4.4.**
- Invite families to a 'back to school with God' Sunday at the corps; to wear school uniform and celebrate with other children at the corps.

If a family is moving away from the area and will no longer be able to attend, consider celebrating their time with you with some of the ideas above.

5.3.6 God loves celebrations

As a Christian parent and toddler group, celebrations should reflect God's love, faithfulness and care for all people. By ensuring that celebrations are welcoming, inclusive and sensitive to the needs of those attending, it can foster a community where families feel supported, respected and encouraged. Through the giving of gifts and treats we model that God is always generous in his giving to us.

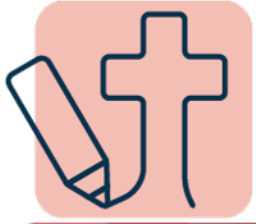
The thoughtful celebration of milestones can become an important part of the group's ministry, helping children and adults alike to experience joy, gratitude, friendship and a deeper sense of connection with one another, with the corps and with God.





GET SET!

Playing With Purpose



5.4 Toddler Church: Sharing Faith Through Story, Song and Activities

For many leaders, including Christian content in a parent and toddler group can feel like one of the trickiest things to get right. You want to be welcoming and inclusive, you want families to feel comfortable - and yet at the same time, your group is rooted in faith.

The encouraging truth is that many families already expect an opportunity to discover faith to be part of the offer. After all, they have chosen to step into a church building. For some, this group may even become ‘their church’ - a place of belonging and gentle exploration of faith. **See Section 1.1.5**

Research reflects this too, showing that attending Toddler Church often prompts parents to begin exploring their own beliefs. That’s a powerful reminder that what you offer matters - even in small, simple ways.

Toddler Church within a parent and toddler group is one way of creating space for this faith expression in a way that feels natural, accessible and appropriate for both children and their parents/carers.

Useful link

- **Talking toddlers** (hopetogether.co.uk)

5.4.1 A gentle approach to sharing faith

At its heart, Toddler Church is not about doing something complicated or formal. It is about being intentional - creating moments where children and adults can encounter something of God through story, song and shared experience.

It’s important to be open about who you are as a church group. Clear communication helps families feel at ease and gives them the opportunity to



choose what feels right for them. When expectations are understood, people are far more likely to feel relaxed and receptive.

The aim is not to overwhelm, but to weave faith naturally into what you already do. A simple song, a short story or a quiet moment of prayer can speak volumes. And if you're just starting out, that is more than enough. Starting small and building confidence over time is often the best way forward.

5.4.2 What Toddler Church might look like

Every group is different, and that's something to embrace. What works beautifully in one setting may not feel right in another. You know your families, your space and your team - and that insight is invaluable.

For some groups, Toddler Church may be a slightly adapted version of what already happens, perhaps once a month. For others, it may be a more defined part of each session, or even a separate event.

However it takes shape, the key ingredients tend to remain the same:

- Bible stories with time to wonder
- Christian songs (often with actions or musical instruments)
- Prayer
- Creative or sensory activities that connect with the theme

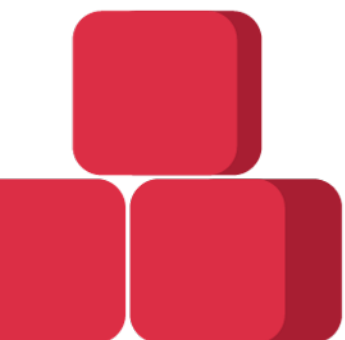
Children - and adults too! - respond well to repetition and routine, so keeping things familiar and predictable helps everyone feel comfortable and able to join in.

5.4.3 Finding a rhythm that works

As you think about shaping Toddler Church in your setting, it can help to gently reflect on a few practical things.

Consider who might lead this time, someone who can connect warmly with both children and adults and who feels able to communicate simply and clearly.

Think about where it might take place. A slightly quieter, more defined space can help children focus, even if it's just a cleared area of the room.



And timing matters too. Some groups find it works well at the beginning as a welcoming moment, others in the middle of the session, and some at the end, allowing families to stay or step out if they prefer.

There is no single 'right' way - only what works best for your community.

5.4.4 A sample session

It can be helpful to picture how this might look in practice. Here is one example of a gentle, toddler-friendly flow:

Arrival

The session begins with everyone arriving and a few simple toys, giving everyone time to settle in. Before long, a welcome song gathers the group together - something cheerful and familiar, perhaps even greeting each child and adult by name.

Bible story

A short Bible story follows. The key here is simplicity: keeping it brief, engaging and interactive enough to hold the attention of both toddlers and grown-ups. A song linked to the theme, and a short, accessible prayer, can help bring the story to life.

Craft activity

From there, a craft activity offers a hands-on way to explore what's been heard, before everyone moves naturally into snack time.

Free play

Later, free play gives space to relax and chat, before coming back together again for songs - favourite nursery rhymes alongside a gentle goodbye - marking the end of the session.

It's simple, but it is enough.

5.4.5 Supporting your journey

Good news - there are lots of resources to help you; you don't need to come up with everything from scratch. There is a wealth of creative and thoughtful material already available.



Family Ministries resources

- **Jump IN!** (salvationist.org.uk)
A flexible, Bible-based curriculum.
- **Get OWT!** (salvationist.org.uk)
A family-focused programme using nature-based activities.
- **Baby Song** (salvationist.org.uk)
An exciting opportunity to connect with parents, carers and their little ones through music and movement.
- **Dance Fit Tots** (salvationist.org.uk)
A parent and toddler resource incorporating movement, music and worship.

Facebook communities

These online communities offer ideas, encouragement and peer support. Sharing ideas, successes, and even challenges, reminds us that we are not doing this alone.

- **Family Ministries** ([facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/familyministries))
Building relationships, carrying out research and provide resources to support frontline expressions of Family Ministry.
- **SA P and T groups UKI** ([facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/sapandtgroups))
A group to empower, equip and enable mission and ministry within SA parent and toddler groups.
- **Scramblers Network** ([facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/scramblersnetwork))
A network for leaders of church-led toddler groups or any family/under-fives groups.
- **1277 - Make Them Count!** ([facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/1277makethemcount))
For people who are passionate about church-based toddler groups and provides the opportunity for people to share ideas, good practice and support.

For support and guidance and for help to train your team with Toddler Church email: familyministries@salvationarmy.org.uk

5.4.6 Creating space for everyone

Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that Toddler Church is for parents and carers as much as it is for children.

While little ones are listening, singing and crafting, adults are often watching, reflecting and quietly taking things in. A familiar song, a simple prayer or a moment of stillness can resonate more deeply than we realise.



Over time, these small moments can open the door to meaningful conversations and growing curiosity about faith.

5.4.7 A final encouragement

Toddler Church doesn't need to be perfect. It doesn't need to be polished or elaborate. What matters most is the heart behind it, a desire to:

- welcome families;
- share something of God's love; and
- create a space where faith can be explored gently and joyfully.

In the laughter, the songs, the snacks, and the stories of God at work - it's often in the smallest moments that the biggest seeds are planted.

For further help or training around Toddler Church, please contact Family Ministries outreach mission partner at familyministries@salvationarmy.org.uk

