

The Playgroup Movement 1961 – 1987

Joan Conway

In the beginning was the LETTER

Whilst the activities of the Women's Liberation movement filled the headlines in the 1960s, a much quieter movement was taking place that would affect the lives of women and their families for decades to come. A letter to 'The Guardian' started it all in 1961. The writer of the letter was Belle Tutaev, a young mother living in London with her four-year old daughter, Anne. Belle was concerned at the lack of nursery provision that was the result of a government embargo imposed in 1960. The embargo had been imposed in order to meet the overwhelming demand for school places for the 'baby boomers', the children born following the Second World War, who were now entering school. School resources were stretched to the limit to cater for the unprecedented influx of children. The lack of accommodation and a shortage of teachers was putting an enormous strain on the education system. Emergency Training Colleges provided fast-track training of teachers, mostly ex-service personnel, but the provision of extra classroom facilities took much



Belle 1966

(Contact 1966)

longer. The solution was to discontinue all provision for the under-fives and use the classroom space for children over five years old. So, at a stroke, resources and provision for the under-fives in the state sector virtually disappeared and parents like Belle Tutaev looked in vain for somewhere to cater for their young toddlers.

Belle started a Campaign for Nursery Education and organised a petition collecting three and a half thousand signatures that she sent to those in authority. She wrote letters to Councillors and knocked on doors pleading for some provision to be made for the under-fives – all to no avail. So, being a trained teacher, she decided to ‘do it herself’! She hired a hall, raised funds and opened her own Nursery/Playgroup. It proved such a success that she felt sure others could do as she had done, hence her letter to ‘The Guardian’ that appeared on 25 August 1961 (see page 3).

What Belle Tutaev did not anticipate was the response her letter would produce. Letters came daily through her letterbox from parents, all asking similar questions – ‘How do I start?’ ‘Where can I buy the equipment?’ ‘How do I raise funds?’ ‘What are the regulations?’ ‘How do I recruit helpers?’. To cope with the volume of enquiries Belle taught herself to type and produced what we might now call a ‘newsletter’ duplicated on a machine borrowed from her husband. She did this on her kitchen table and sent copies out to all who had written to her. Parents all over the country seized on her advice eagerly and acted upon it. Wherever spare rooms could be found playgroups were opening – in chapel vestries, community halls, scout huts, etc. Conditions were often far from ideal. Funds had to be raised and equipment purchased. Often equipment had to be stored away at the end of each play session and unpacked at the start of the next. Improvisation was called for and incredible commitment was asked of those who worked in these early playgroups. Belle continued to receive enquiries. The demands on Belle and her helpers were more than could be catered for from Belle’s kitchen table. Some kind of structure was needed if those working in the early playgroups were to receive the help they needed.

THE GUARDIAN

Women's Page Friday August 25 1961

Do-it-yourself Nurseries

To the rescue of Margaret Hughes ("Baby at the Centre," July 28th) and other mothers desperate about the lack of facilities for children under 5, comes a newly formed organisation, with a do-it-yourself spirit, the Nursery School Campaign.

Beginning as a local effort in St Marylebone, it has now extended to anyone, mother or teacher, who is concerned about the dismal situation at present and the equally dismal future, and is steadily gaining support not only in London but in many parts of the North and Midlands.

The Campaign has two aims. One is to gather names for a large-scale national petition to be presented to the Minister of Education asking him for more nursery schools and play facilities for children under 5. The other is to encourage groups of mothers to start their own schools wherever they can find suitable premises, employing trained teachers, especially those who are married with their own small children and who want only part-time jobs.

The campaign has received considerable advice and encouragement from the Nursery Schools Association, the Save the Children Fund and the Advisory Centre on Education, and many of its members come from the Housebound Housewives Register.

Inquiries are welcomed (particularly those enclosing a stamped addressed envelope) from mothers and teachers who would like to create their own solutions to their problems.

*Yours &c.,
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To cope adequately with all the demands now being made upon Belle Tutaev and her helpers, a small committee was formed and the National Association of Pre-school Playgroups was formally constituted on 10 July 1962 and registered as a charity. The objects of the Association were to encourage the formation of local playgroups, to promote the understanding of the needs of the pre-school child and produce pamphlets and information in relation to this and to hold meetings and conferences to enable those working in playgroups to meet and exchange views and experiences. Playgroups grew rapidly all over the country and those working in them now turned to the new Association for advice and guidance. Belle herself was in great demand. She spoke at countless meetings, responding to invitations from all parts of the country. She wrote articles in numerous journals and continued to respond by letter to the many playgroup people still seeking her help. Belle's primitive newsletter now evolved into a lively monthly magazine called 'CONTACT' and this continued to be the main organ of the Association for many years.

CONTACT proved to be an appropriate name for the Association's magazine as it soon became clear that 'contact' was what playgroup people most wanted – contact with others working in similar circumstances and facing similar problems. The Association recognised this need and encouraged members to form small Branches of the Association in their area in order to hold meetings where members could get together to share their ideas and experiences. In this way members could expand their understanding of the needs of their pre-school children and raise the quality of provision in their playgroups. Soon Branch Volunteers emerged (later called Area Organisers) who understood local needs and had local contacts and were willing to devote time to helping members in numerous ways as well as organising meetings and workshops in the Branches. Later on Branches came together to form County Associations, which expanded the opportunities for contact still further. As this expansion progressed the movement was developing what was to become its main feature – Parental Involvement.

As parents came together to start playgroups for their children they found that they, too, were gaining from the experience. Like their children, they

also were meeting and making friends, often at a time when many were feeling rather isolated coping with young families. Some parents helped actively in the play sessions, learning about the needs of their children, about the value of play and how to provide it. In doing so they often found a new confidence in themselves as parents. Other parents involved themselves more in the management side of the playgroups, working on committees, taking on the responsibility for buying equipment or negotiating with statutory authorities on behalf of the playgroups. Some parents became chairmen, secretaries or treasurers, getting to grips with the complexities of constitutions, agendas, balance sheets, fundraising, insurance and publicity, etc. In doing this many discovered skills they never knew they had. Often skills gained in this way later gave them the incentive to work in other fields of childcare or to embark on further training. The degree of parental involvement inevitably varied greatly from group to group. In some it was minimal, in others it was total. So what had started out as a pressure group for Nursery Education had developed in just five years into a parent-run educational movement in its own right with aims that were much broader than those envisaged by Belle Tutaev.

Moving Forward

The value of the Playgroup Movement was recognised in 1966 when a Government grant was received to pay the salary of a full time National Adviser. Brenda Crowe, a former Nursery School Teacher, NNEB Tutor in Education and remedial teacher with a Child Guidance Clinic, was appointed and her influence on the Playgroup Movement was immense. Her commitment was total and she travelled all over the British Isles



Brenda

(Contact 1977)

meeting people and children, speaking to numerous audiences about the Playgroup Movement and promoting the role of parents. In between her many engagements she found time to write numerous books and articles that became standard references for many playgroup people. One of her books was entitled 'Play is a Feeling' which reflected the importance now being attached to the value of play in early learning. This topic was now a major focus of most playgroup training courses. One of the first leaflets produced by the Association of Pre-school Playgroups was 'Playing is Learning for Living' which summed up this approach to pre-school education.



In 1967 CONTACT invited members to suggest a design for a logo that would convey without words the two major features of the rapidly developing Movement – the involvement of parents and the importance of play. Ex-art teacher, Jane Trevitt, designed the winning logo in between packing up to move house from Tunbridge Wells to Cambridge. Her logo showed a playleader, children and parents linked together in play and this soon began to appear everywhere – on T shirts, toys and tea-towels, on mugs, pinafores and keys rings and on folders, diaries and paper weights. There was hardly a playgroup household in the country that did not have some object in their possession with the playgroup logo on it! Also, in 1967 the name of the Association was changed from ‘National Association of Pre-school Playgroups’ to ‘Pre-school Playgroups Association’. The abbreviation of this name – PPA – was adopted immediately and appeared everywhere alongside the now familiar logo.

The Seventies

By the Seventies playgroups had become a recognised form of pre-school provision. The Movement had a new confidence and at its Annual General Meeting in 1974 the Aims of the Association were radically revised. The ‘involvement of parents’ was clearly specified in these new Aims, as was ‘rich and stimulating play provision’. The Aims were very detailed but a shortened summary of them was drafted and this appeared in every copy of CONTACT for many years and in other PPA literature. This was the summary:

PPA exists to help parents to understand and provide for the needs of their young children. It aims to provide community situations in which parents can, with growing enjoyment and confidence, make the best of their own knowledge and resources in the development of their children.

In the Seventies, training courses of all kinds were developing rapidly. Training was vital if the quality of provision was to be maintained. Courses

were being provided for PPA staff at all levels with topics covering every aspect of playgroup work. In 1975 the first full PPA Foundation Course syllabus was designed and many playgroup people followed this and were awarded their PPA Certificates. PPA was now focussing more and more on the whole family and on relations in the community. Mother and toddler groups were emerging (later called Parent and Toddler Groups) to cater for parents with babies or children under playgroup age providing a place for them to meet, if only once weekly. Some mother and toddler groups were organised by playgroups, others were set up independently and PPA supported them all in numerous ways.



A visit to Playgroup by the Police

PPA was also involved in many other initiatives for the under-fives, with play in hospitals, with playbuses, toy libraries and holiday play schemes. Importantly PPA was also now concerned with children with special needs and how these children could be integrated into playgroups and mother and toddler groups. Families from different ethnic groups also were now seeking

places for their children in PPA groups. To cater for the needs of the children, play provision was expanded to include books, games, toys and many other activities that reflected the cultural needs of these families.

Links with schools and colleges were growing and teenagers and students were often regular visitors. So in numerous ways PPA groups were now demonstrating an awareness of the need to reflect the community in which they were set. Children enjoyed visits from familiar people in their area such as the local nurse, policeman or maybe a musician or artist who could share their expertise, knowledge or enthusiasm with the little ones. Visits to places of interest, outside the playgroups, were always popular. A trip to the local



Playgroup visits The Fire Station

fire station, railway station or to a nearby farm provided a new dimension to a playgroup session. All these special events required careful planning and preparation by playgroup staff. Parents frequently helped with this and often provided the additional supervision and assistance that was required. All these new initiatives featured regularly as topics on PPA courses.

Whilst many exciting developments were taking place in playgroups, on a more mundane level groups were still struggling to raise the necessary funding to finance their work. Except for some playgroups which received occasional grants or other support, most continued to be self-supporting. Fundraising was often a major headache and jumble sales, raffles and sponsored events were the order of the day. Many of these efforts peaked during National Playgroup Week, which was by now an annual event. The continued growth of PPA in the Seventies led to two major changes. In 1973 members in Scotland voted to become independent and formed the Scottish Pre-school Playgroups Association (SPPA) adopting their own constitution and managing their own finances. In 1977 Northern Ireland also went independent to become NIPPA.

It would be ten years before Wales would follow suit.

Wales

In Wales the growth of the Playgroup Movement had followed the same pattern as in the rest of Britain. Parents in Wales had also read Belle Tutaev's letter to 'The Guardian' and had responded to it. As elsewhere, playgroups had grown rapidly in the Sixties and had flourished and diversified in the Seventies. Branches were formed and later County Associations. At one period there was also a North Wales Association and a South Wales Association, which enabled members to meet together for talks and discussions. For the time being, however, Wales remained a Region of the National PPA (England & Wales).

In 1973 the Region was boosted by a financial grant from the Welsh Office, which funded the appointment of a National Adviser for Wales, and Myfanwy Edwards was appointed. However, it was under her successor, Marjorie Dykins that Wales really forged ahead. Marjorie took up her appointment as National Adviser with vigour and enthusiasm. Her vitality and strong personality became known throughout Wales. She travelled the length and breadth of the Principality meeting playgroup people, parents and children and creating many useful links with local authorities. As a

Welsh speaker she was also able to create a fruitful relationship between PPA and the Welsh Nursery Schools' Movement, Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin.

Marjorie became a key figure in developing a real structure for PPA in Wales. She encouraged the formation of Branches and County Associations and a Wales Regional Council was formed consisting of volunteers from all the Welsh Counties. This became the major decision-making body for PPA in the Wales Region. Later, sub-committees were formed to deal with areas such as training and special needs. Marjorie encouraged the development of training at all levels, working with tutors to design courses appropriate to the needs of their students and she oversaw the setting up of the first Foundation Course in Wales. Whilst all this hard work was taking place to promote playgroups in Wales, Marjorie and other members of the Regional Council continued to contribute to the National PPA (England & Wales), serving on the National Executive Committee at meetings in London and participating in PPA work nationally.

The Eighties

In 1982 PPA celebrated its 21st birthday at its Annual Conference and Belle Tutaev returned to join in the celebrations. One wonders what her thoughts were as she was greeted by the hundreds of delegates at that Conference. She must have marvelled at what her letter to 'The Guardian' in 1961 had produced. Also in 1982 PPA was honoured when the Princess of Wales agreed to become its Royal Patron.

In June 1984 the Association had been rocked by a financial crisis when it was discovered that a Finance Officer had defrauded PPA out of £60,000. The officer responsible was prosecuted and jailed for two years. However, as he was declared bankrupt the Association's losses were never recovered. PPA pressed on with renewed determination and celebrated its Silver Jubilee in 1986.

PPA in Conference

A major event on the PPA calendar was always the Annual General Meeting and Conference which was attended by members from all over the British Isles. The Conference took place over a whole weekend and was located in a different venue each year. Members in the area where the Conference was sited took on the responsibility for the whole event. This was a major task for all those involved. A full programme of events was planned, speakers booked, accommodation found for delegates, exhibitors arranged and Conference booklets designed and printed.

In 1983 the Wales Region of PPA volunteered to host the Conference. This was an ambitious undertaking. A Conference Committee was set up, chaired by Ivy Webster and this Committee worked very hard for over a year planning all the Conference details, seeking sponsors, booking speakers and exhibitors, etc. The chosen venue for the Conference was Llandudno on the North Wales coast.

The Aberconwy Conference Centre on the promenade was the main focus and gathering point for the delegates. There a fully equipped exhibition hall provided space for nearly fifty commercial exhibitors displaying toys, books and play equipment. These exhibitions were always a magnet at every Conference as delegates arrived with lists and cheque books to buy supplies for their groups. In another area of the Centre PPA stalls from other Regions mounted their displays and other voluntary organisations also had space to promote their work. The Arcadia Theatre adjoining the Conference Centre provided accommodation for talks and lectures, for showing films on playgroup-related topics and for the Gala Concert, which was a high point of the weekend.

A major task for the Wales Conference Committee was to arrange accommodation for delegates. Sixteen seafront hotels were selected and booked. These were all within easy reach of the Conference Centre. In addition, the large Astra Theatre in the centre of town was hired to accommodate the opening ceremony on the Friday evening and the Annual General Meeting on the Saturday.

A number of notable speakers contributed to the Conference over the weekend. The most eminent guest was undoubtedly Professor Jerome

Bruner, a distinguished Educational Psychologist who presented the Opening Address. Professor Bruner had been Professor of Psychology at Harvard and later at Oxford. He had led the Oxford Pre-school Research Project into early education and six major books had been published as a result of this Project. Through these and many other works Professor Bruner had made a major contribution in the field of Early Education. His Opening Address provided the Conference with an excellent start.

The weekend that followed went splendidly with the delegates enjoying all the Conference facilities on offer. The Gala Concert on the Saturday evening was provided by the Rhosllanerchrugog Male Voice Choir, a suitable choice for the first Conference to be held in Wales. Many years later Juliet Baxter, who had been the Chairman of the PPA National Executive in 1983, said that the memory of that Choir had remained with her long after she had left by train on the Monday morning to return to London.

The success of the 1983 Conference, which had been attended by 1600 delegates, gave a great boost to the work of PPA in Wales and this undoubtedly provided some of the impetus that led, four years later, to an independent Wales PPA. This was officially inaugurated in Aberystwyth in July 1987. From then on PPA in Wales operated under its own constitution.

The PPA Spirit

Perhaps the main feature that distinguished the Playgroup Movement from other forms of pre-school education was the voluntary nature of the Movement. The vast majority of those working in the organisation were volunteers. There was only a handful of salaried staff. This voluntary aspect led to great flexibility in the way groups operated. Each group, whilst adhering to the statutory requirement laid down by Social Services, had the freedom to plan and operate in ways that met the specific needs of the families for whom they were catering. They were free to decide on hours and days of opening, to recruit staff, fix fees, raise funds, order equipment and, importantly, to plan the play sessions to meet the needs of their children. Involvement of parents was invaluable both on playgroup committees and in the play sessions.

Full parent participation was by no means universal however. In some groups input from parents was limited to contributions to fundraising or by token appearances at committee meetings. In many groups, however, there was an active partnership between parents and playgroup. Parents wanted to be involved, taking part in the decision-making as well as in the practical day-to-day running of the play sessions. They contributed ideas and a range of expertise, which enriched the work of the groups and the value of playgroup life for their children. The participation of parents in this way had spin-offs, not only for the children and the playgroups but also for the parents themselves. A team spirit was engendered that was unique to PPA. Friendships were formed that sometimes continued long after children and parents had moved on.

21 Years On

This PPA spirit surfaced in April 2004 when twenty former members of Wales PPA met for lunch at the Metropole Hotel, Llandrindod Wells. This get-together was the idea of Ivy Webster who had chaired the Conference Committee of 1983. She felt it would be fun to hold a reunion for some of those who had been involved in the 1983 Conference, twenty-one years earlier. As these members met, some for the first time in twenty-one years, the old PPA spirit emerged. Memories were revived, anecdotes exchanged and there was much laughter. All agreed that there had been something special about their years in PPA.

Someone said, 'We could write a book!'

So here it is.