

How it all Started, Playgroups in the 60s

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When I first started thinking playgroups in the early 60s, I had no idea that Belle Tutaev had already written the letter that would change the face of Britain.

At that time, 1963, I was living in a new development on the outskirts of Aberystwyth. Most of my neighbours were young families and almost all of them were employed in the University College of Wales or in the neighbouring Agricultural Research Institute. We wives met in each other's houses for morning coffee and our children played together. We all belonged to the College Women's Club, which held evening lectures and ran summer trips. There were various sub-groups for those of us who wanted to play bridge, or learn how to arrange flowers, or read and discuss books, or fundraise for charities. At one meeting I suggested tentatively that we could run playtime meetings for our children. Other members expressed an interest in this idea and we talked it through. We eventually decided to expand the original idea somewhat, to run play sessions in a hall, to have a 'qualified supervisor' (whatever that might mean) and to offer a welcome to anyone who wished to come, not just fellow members of the College Women's Club.

Matters moved quickly. We found a hall and booked it then and there. There were no regulations that we knew of that had to be consulted. We found a 'qualified supervisor' – she was a qualified teacher who said that she liked small children. We begged and borrowed some toys. We were ready for the off

Someone said to me 'Shouldn't you have a chat with the Local Education Authority about your plans?' I went along to the Office. I was asked, 'What age are these children?' and, on my reply 'Under five years, under school age', I was told, 'Go ahead, it is no concern of ours'.

Someone else said to me 'If you are raising money and charging fees wouldn't

it be sensible to open a special bank account, because otherwise the Income Tax people might get onto you?’

Someone else said to me ‘Do you think you should have some sort of insurance in case there was an accident to one of the children?’ I went along to see the chap who insured our family car. He was a bit surprised, but he arranged a policy. It was rather expensive.

At no time did we even think to look for information or professional support outside of our own resources.

In the spring of 1964, we were ready to start. My small daughter started school and so was denied, forever, the privilege of being a ‘playgroup child’. At the very last moment our ‘qualified supervisor’ moved away as her husband had got a job abroad, we scabbled around and found a replacement supervisor. This one was an experienced infant teacher and, to our utter amazement, she refused to work alone! ‘Suppose’ she said ‘there was an emergency, a fire, a flood or a child hurt, or taken ill, while I was alone in the hall with all those children, what would I be supposed to do? I couldn’t go looking for help, or even try to find a phone, because I could not leave the children!’

We reluctantly agreed that she probably knew what she was talking about and decided that we would have to raise the extra money to pay for an assistant.

Our first term was a success, but in the autumn troubles arose. The heating system in the hall was diabolical. It consisted of low-level electric bars. They had to be walled off from the children with a row of chairs. Then they began to give trouble. They fused; burnt out periodically and eventually as the coldest part of the year approached they died totally. We had to move.

After a frantic search and many unsatisfactory conversations with hall owners and hall management committees, we found, we thought, the perfect place. Unfortunately, we had not yet learnt to be properly business-like and when we thought that everything was sorted out about our tenancy we discovered that we were not being offered the use of the big airy room that we expected, but a much smaller, dark rather unsatisfactory room. Once again we started hall hunting.

Eventually we did find a new big hall, which was prepared to offer us houseroom because the owners were trying to re-coup their building costs and there we stayed for many, many years, in fact for the whole duration of the

Aberystwyth Playgroup. It was a great venue with loads of space, a number of rooms, a kitchen and a good outdoor play space. From time to time we fell foul of our landlords, the Sea Cadets, as we did not operate to the same standards of Naval discipline that they did. Sand in the wrong place was always a problem – but then isn't it the same for every playgroup?

Looking back, I am amazed that such an amateurish start resulted in a thriving Playgroup committee in Aberystwyth, which grew in the 1960's, 70's and 80's with an increasing number of Playgroups, Mother and Toddler groups, a strong local Branch offering training sessions, and Regional meetings. There was an excellent Area Organiser in post, and a number of our members held important committee positions at Branch, County, Wales Region and National PPA level.

Like the playgroup movement throughout Britain we 'just grewed'.



'Thirsty work'