

Another North Wales Experience

Sheila Griffiths

Living in an area with no small children in the neighbourhood having given up teaching and with two small boys under the age of two years.....

I read in The Guardian one day a letter by Mrs Belle Tutaev about playgroups for pre-school children – had never heard about this movement in North Wales but decided it was just what was needed in our area. Went to see the Health Visitor who operated from the clinic in Mercier House (which had once housed a private school) and asked whether we could start a playgroup in her clinic. Miss Lees was quite interested and said another mother had also mentioned the possibility to her. She said she would be agreeable but only if we established a Mothers' Group first. I then got in touch with Mrs Barbara Thomas (who had trained as a beautician but now had two school-age children and one daughter coming up to two years of age). I subsequently learnt that Barbara had heard of the Playgroup Movement through a talk Mrs Tutaev had given on the radio. Although Barbara and I never became close friends we found it very easy to work together and straight away established a Mothers' Group and organised speakers for our weekly meetings and got the members enthused about the project of a Playgroup.

We went straight into fundraising mode and I think our first event was a fair in the Church House for which all of the Mothers' Group were given materials and suggestions of what to make with them to sell at the fair. We also wrote begging letters to local organisations and in a very short time were able to buy enough equipment to open the Playgroup. I think it ran on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings from 9.30 – midday.

Before we opened we had been in touch with the head office of the

Playgroup Association and followed all their guidelines (although this did mean my son could not start as he was not two and a half years old at this time). Parents were expected to join the rota and serve regularly as assistants. Barbara and I both attended all the sessions. Once we were established and running smoothly we advertised for a paid supervisor in the local paper and, after Mrs Cathie Barrett applied for the post, we jointly decided (after interviewing other applicants) that she would be ideal for the job and we never had cause to regret this decision!

Miss Lees' insistence that we start a Mothers' Group before going on to a Playgroup had been an excellent decision as mothers had met and socialised once a week without having small children around so that when the Playgroup opened we were on friendly terms and I know some of the friendships have lasted to this day – nearly forty years later.

Once the Arcville Playgroup was up and running we were asked to open one on the other side of the railway line, this we did in an old school building and we appointed an ex-grammar school teacher as the supervisor – Mrs Grace Owen – who also proved to be the ideal person for the job. Soon after the opening of the Arcville Playgroup the need was felt for a Toddlers' Group so the playgroup mothers hired the local Scout Hut. We raised money for equipment and started the Toddlers' Group, meeting twice a week with all the parents staying with their children.

Soon after this I was enticed back to teaching in an infants' school on a mornings-only basis so my two sons both had to go to a nearby private nursery school – without having the benefit of the playgroup experience! Most of the children I taught came from a council estate and many were lacking in the sort of experiences on which learning is based. I remembered a talk, which an experienced child psychologist had given to the Mothers' Group, when he said that many children who were referred to him could not recognise the picture of a bus as a bus as they were not used to looking at books. I also could see that children who had had nursery school experience were much more easily able to adjust to the demands of school than those who had not had this experience.

I then got in touch with Barbara Phillips and we decided to try a new and experimental playgroup on the council estate for the summer holidays.

We decided that the only possible building was the changing room on the estate's playing fields. We then set off to meet the Superintendent of Parks to request his permission. We were both primed with all the arguments to put forward to support a playgroup in the area but we were knocked breathless when he said, 'A great idea – go ahead!' He then told us to go and see the man whose immediate responsibility was the upkeep of the changing rooms but his reaction was quite different, as he thought children should be at home with their mothers! However, he did agree that we could go ahead with the scheme. Towards the end of August when this scheme was coming to a close he was big enough to admit that, since the scheme had been running, vandalism to the changing rooms had become much less of a problem than previously.

Whilst the children were being looked after in the Playgroup their mothers were invited to meet in another changing room and given tea and biscuits whilst they listened to invited speakers – social workers, child psychologists, teachers, further education lecturers, etc and were given the opportunity to ask questions. These sessions were successful because of the extreme informality of the setting. The mothers also held a successful jumble sale whilst the Playgroup was in session. To fund this Playgroup venture we had been given a one-off donation from the Save the Children Fund and also a grant from the Flintshire Health Committee.

Other fund-raising efforts were a Strawberry Fair and a Coffee Morning opened by Eddie Calvert (The Man with the Golden Trumpet). The opening of a wishing well in the Town Hall entrance raised over £400 for overseas aid for children.

The next playgroup to open was in Prestatyn at the home of Mrs. Myra Cuffin. Later an inaugural meeting of the Flintshire Playgroups Association was held in the Connah's Quay Civic Centre with a speaker from London. Mrs. Cuffin was appointed Press Officer. Other playgroups followed. One was established in Dyserth which was an initiative of Mrs Jean Worthy and a playgroup was opened at Rhuddlan with Mrs. Cathie Barrett in charge.

Some of the benefits of Playgroup were that fathers were involved in making equipment and parents gained experience from committee work. A number of mothers went on to gain professional qualifications.