

Life in PPA - Looking Back - Looking Forward

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Read any document from the Welsh Assembly Government, and you will see featured highly themes of public participation and involvement. Parents in schools, patients in hospitals, users of social services, the public and the police, citizens of local authorities, teenagers and the youth services – the list is endless. In PPA, we were lucky enough to do it without having to bother about names for the process which fashioned the lives of our families as our children grew from being under-five to leaving us for their over-five lives in the formal education structure.

I was an older mother, sitting at the breakfast table, and reading ‘The Guardian’. The famous Belle Tutaev letter, which started it all in August 1961 was the spur for me to mention the possibility of starting a playgroup in Garden Village, near Wrexham, while at a birthday party in a friend’s house nearby. It happened that one of us was a trained Nursery Teacher, so she gave us some professional advice. We called a meeting of all the mums living on one drive. So many came that we had to send out for a supply of picnic chairs. Many still recall the sight of that drive on that summer evening, as the seating was returned home.

Our first task was to find premises. It was not easy. The Community Centre Committee needed persuasion that, if we were to do the job properly, we would need to have sand and water play. Perish the thought that their floor could be used in such a way!! But we persisted, and used some political strategies to help. The father of one of our number was a well-respected Labour Peer and he opened our first big fundraising effort. No grants were known about, we just had to do it ourselves.

The Playgroup opened in September, with equipment made, donated or

borrowed, and the budget set on the basis of the number of children attending. From the beginning we held regular parents' meetings, took part in village events and supported other areas to do their own thing to provide pre-school education for their children.

Soon Wrexham had a Branch of PPA, and it helped form the County (Denbighshire) Branch, with a fair input to bringing Wales PPA into being.

So how was this achieved by groups of mothers in a continually evolving structure to meet the needs of under-fives?

First, it was the age-old commitment of parents to do their very best for their children and to be willing to learn what that best was. We certainly were persuaded that playing was learning, and we knew that all the activities should be arranged to that end. There were no targets for the children to achieve – our target was to get all the mothers to play a part in the Playgroup. We soon realised that the mothers were learning as well, and we arranged training courses, sponsored by the WEA and by enlightened Education Authorities.

Second, it was the realisation that we could only make progress if we worked together. We did not know it, but we were using classic Community Development tactics. So we came to know and learn about other parts of our town, county and country. Wrexham had a very early Hospital Playgroup, laying the foundation for the present welcome to parents in wards. By the way, our meeting to form that Playgroup had as its speaker the Consultant Paediatrician from the Wrexham Maelor Hospital, who gave his unequivocal support to the venture.

Third, we always, but always, sought professional advice. Teachers, Health Visitors, Social Workers, Adult Education Practitioners, Lawyers, Architects, Planners, Uncle Tom Cobley and all were asked for, and readily gave their advice. Some, of course, were parents themselves, but in my experience, none could resist the appeal of earnest volunteers working to enrich the community through the early education of its children.

Fourth, we were willing to travel beyond our areas. Chester, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol and many University Campuses were places where we went to learn the range of skills needed to sustain the efforts which earned PPA a place in the network of services for children.

Fifth, we were supported by our families. Our husbands, partners, parents were wise enough to realise that giving mothers opportunity to be involved in action for their under-fives was a way of nurturing, at the very deepest level, a commitment to responsibility for society as a whole.

And what happened? Well, apart from building a network of pre-school groups throughout Wales, it gave a whole generation of mothers the confidence to support the community in all sorts of ways. There are many who would quote their experience in PPA as the basis of their achievements in many fields.

We were privileged to be part of the Playgroup Movement in Wales and I hope our children will have similar experiences. Come to M & S on a Saturday morning in Wrexham and I guarantee that there will be one conversation between PPA girls (!) talking about – not clothes or the weather or even football – but about their children.