

Living with Playgroups

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Nostalgia, for those of us of a mature age, is something in which we inevitably indulge. Happy memories of a time in our family history, when we were ‘just mums’, come flooding back. This was a period of our lives when we did not have time to reflect or assess, we were too busy bringing up, in our case, four children and of course being involved in playgroups.

For sixteen years, playgroups became an integral part of our family living in Deganwy, Gwynedd (now Conwy). It all began when our first child, Andrew, was invited to join a playschool in the Village Church Hall (now demolished) in 1968. It was an opportunity for my son to play with other children and for myself, a mum with a toddler and a baby, to meet and socialise with other mums. Previously the highlight of the week was to visit the baby clinic.

Two years later, I became Supervisor of the Deganwy Playgroup and joined the Pre-school Playgroups Association. Our second child, Paula, joined me at the playgroup. Although trained as a secondary school teacher, it was not until I gained the experience of working in a playgroup and joined PPA that I understood fully the meaning and importance of play to a child’s development. Literature was available on every aspect of running a playgroup offering so much practical help and suggesting new ideas. In 1971, membership of PPA was £2.50 and the invaluable Playgroup News/Contact was £1.30.

I gave up the Playgroup Supervisor’s job just before the birth of my third child, James, in 1972. After a couple of years being just a mum, I became involved with playgroups again as an Area Organiser. This voluntary role, with travel expenses, meant I could take my son with me to visit groups or local meetings, during school hours. He became quite an expert on playgroups, preferring those with the most welcoming atmosphere and good facilities.

It was never too difficult to convince parents and supervisors of the importance of providing a good variety of play for pre-school children. It was not always easy to convince established organisations or groups to give all children, especially those who were disabled, the opportunity given to other children, to play with paint, sand, collage and books eg comment made 'We do not give them books, they would tear them'. This negative attitude made it clear to me how important it was to spread the message of 'learning through play'.

What other organisation provided a situation for children to learn through play, socialise, have fun with parent participation and, at the same time, provide a learning environment for parents?

In the next few years, I learnt how to organise fundraising events, support playgroups and parents, help arrange parent courses and liaise with Local Authorities. I travelled to Conferences in Exeter, Newcastle, Brighton, Edinburgh and London. I remember taking turns to carry a baby in a papoose around the centre of London for another Mum, and returning from Edinburgh driven by Cathie in the snow, the road being closed behind us. We were dedicated!

My teacher training at Secondary level proved useful when we co-operated with a local Secondary School in preparing some older pupils to take part in work experience in playgroups. The teenagers, under our supervision, prepared all the playgroup activities, painting, dough, collage, water play etc. They took part themselves in these activities. Two teenage boys asked to take home the dough and their collages made from natural materials eg leaves, shells etc. Pre-school younger relatives or friends were invited into the school playgroup the next day. The young people enjoyed it as much as the pre-school group. The Head teacher of the school, calling in later to see if all was well, was amazed to see a boy, who had experienced many difficulties in school, working so hard to clear up the devastation left by the water play.

In 1976, my fourth child, David, was born and I gave up working as Area Organiser but remained on the Caernarvonshire PPA Committee.

The co-operation and talents of the whole family were needed to support the growth of the Playgroup Movement. Without the support of

husbands, taking over childminding duties on away weekends or meetings, we could not have done any of this. As our own children grew up they too became involved.

Family weekend camps at Bala Lake were an opportunity for all the family to play together. Mums, Dads and older children helped one another to put up tents (some camping for the first time), raise the home-made PPA camp flag, organise games, eg welly throwing, supervise canoeing on the lake and a barbecue. It was great fun, play for all. One incident did cause some concern. Early one morning, all were awakened to search for a toddler from the group who had gone missing. There was great panic, we were so close to the lake. He was found safely tucked up at the bottom of his sleeping bag, still breathing!

It is amazing how the Playgroup Movement, especially in Wales, encouraged the use of all one's talents, even those we did not know we had, such as organising a National PPA Annual General Meeting and Conference for over 1600 members in Llandudno.

The memories of the Conference, organised by Wales are many. The skills and companionship of the Conference Team, chaired by Ivy Webster, supported us through two years of preparation. We could have given every hotel along Llandudno Promenade a star rating, we checked them all out making detailed records of their facilities. Each venue for a Meeting, Conference, AGM Exhibition was approved, everything was done to provide comfort for all the delegates. Each Branch/County provided a hostess for each hotel. Creative talents were used to provide a Welsh flavour to the Conference. Conference booklets and mugs were designed, sporting a Welsh Dragon and the words Wales PPA *Cymru*. Some of our members and children wore Welsh Costume, the Welsh National Anthem was printed in the Conference Newsletter. Entertainment was provided by a Welsh Harpist and a wonderful Welsh Male Voice Choir. The 1600 delegates from all regions of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and even from Germany were given a truly Welsh *Croeso*.

My family helped make a PPA flag which flew proudly outside the Conference Exhibition Centre. My teenage daughter's memory was of

preparing and helping with the crèche, making dough, etc for visiting children in the Exhibition Centre.

Memories of PPA still abound in my home, PPA mugs, bag, apron, kit, flag, lest I forget. Playgroups in North Wales have been a wonderful learning curve for my whole family and now we can put into practice all that we have learned and experienced with our five grandchildren.



PPA camp at Bala