

Mother and Toddler Groups

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My first involvement with a Mother and Toddler Group was in 1973 when I helped to set up a group in Benllech, Anglesey. The group was part of a Pre-school Playgroup. They met on a Monday afternoon at the Church Room for a two-hour session. As the children approached the age of three they were integrated into the Playgroup, which made the transition much easier for them.

Everyone enjoyed relaxing with their own and other people's children in the warm, happy atmosphere. There was lots to do – chairs, rugs, cushions, toys, books to be set out, Mums to welcome, tea to be made and outings to be discussed.

As there were a lot of Mums new to the village this was a great place to make new friends, share experiences and problems while the children watched and played alongside the other children and adults, exploring the various toys and activities, happy knowing that Mum was nearby. Helping the group to grow was really exciting.

The adults remained responsible for the children they had brought. A small charge was made to cover the cost of running the group. Fees were collected each week to cover refreshments, toilet rolls, tissues, rent, heating, etc and extra money was raised by fundraising with the Playgroup. The group was covered by the PPA Playgroup Insurance and PPA Membership. Mums from the group were also on the Playgroup Committee.

The group shared suitable equipment with the Playgroup, they borrowed other toys and jigsaws from the Anglesey PPA Branch Jigsaw and Toy Library. Other items such as paint and paper were obtained from the Anglesey PPA Branch Bulk Buy Scheme and books were obtained from the Library van, which called once a term.

In 1973 Mother and Toddler groups were few and far between but as people began to realise their tremendous value as a community facility there was a great increase all over the country.

In 1977 I attended a Conference at the Canton Hall, London – *Focus on the Under Threes* – with other members from Wales. The Conference related to the great increase in Mother-Toddler Groups. The speaker was Dr Penelope Leach, an acknowledged expert on this particular age group. I was particularly impressed with the enthusiasm and commitment so many people had for the under threes. I came away feeling very inspired and with much food for thought.

Back in 1972 National PPA had carried out a survey about the work of Area Organisers and there was not one mention of work with Mother-Toddler Groups, but some eight years on a further survey was done and a very different picture emerged.

In 1979 a PPA National Sub-committee for Mother-Toddler Groups was formed to spread information, act as a voice and publicist and also to act as a central resource for Mother-Toddler Groups. This Sub-committee consisted of representatives from each Region in England and Wales. I was elected to represent Wales PPA. The meetings were held regularly in London and this meant an early start from Bangor and sometimes I travelled on an overnight sleeper from Holyhead if the meeting was scheduled for a very early start. During the following year the Sub-committee spent much of its time making and strengthening the links with Mother-Toddler people throughout the Regions, supporting and encouraging them in whatever way it could.

In 1981 the Sub-committee took a recommendation to PPA's AGM in Newcastle that:

Mother-Toddler Groups are given the same consideration as Playgroups by National, Regional and local PPA and that this support is reflected in their budgeting and forward planning.

The resolution was passed convincingly.

In 1983 the National Sub-committee organised three Conference Days – in Peterborough, Manchester and Bristol. These days provided an opportunity for those who were then currently engaged in work which supported Mother-Toddler Groups to meet together and share experiences.

Following these days, which members from Wales attended, Wales PPA Training Committee organised a training day in Shrewsbury for Counties, Branches, Fieldworkers and Tutors and anyone involved in supporting Mother-Toddler Groups. Encouragement and ideas were given to organise evening or day events for Mother-Toddler people in their local area.

A Wales Regional Mother-Toddler Committee had now been formed and a number of Mother-Toddler Days were set up by the Committee and organised by Wales PPA people locally with support and financial backing from Wales Regional Training Committee. These days were held in Newtown, Caerphilly, Swansea, Llandudno, Brecon and Dolgellau. Counties then organised days at various locations within their areas. These days were important as they gave everyone the opportunity to share experiences, ideas, problems and for them to gain encouragement from each other. There was something of interest for everyone, whether they were about to start a group, were running one or they just wanted to know about the sort of things that happened at a Mother-Toddler group.

As time went on, it became more and more apparent that not only mums with their babies and young children attended but also fathers were becoming a far more familiar sight as well as grandparents and childminders. Teenagers from local schools and colleges were also regular helpers in a number of groups.

The greatest strength of Mother-Toddler Groups, whether called Pram Clubs, 1 o'clock Clubs or Mums and Tots, has always been that they were flexible, spontaneous and developed in any way that the group chose and that the group was meeting the needs of those attending at that time. Informality was important and as a group established itself it took on a life of its own.

It has always been difficult to set any specific guidelines. What worked in one place did not work in another. There was no easy answer. Each group found out for themselves what worked best for them as everyone had different needs. The type of premises, the sort of area where they were based, who initiated them, attended and supported them gave each group an individual character.

1973 seems a long time ago, but now in 2005 I feel I have come full circle. I have just had my first grandchild, Iwan, and am looking forward to my second

grandchild next year. No doubt I will be attending a Mother-Toddler Group in the role of 'Nain'. It will be my turn to help and tell stories.

I would like to think that those early days of Wales PPA and the impact it had on my own life will carry on for generations to come.



Photo HTC

A Mother and Toddler Session