

ESTHER

Joan Conway

‘No-one knows how much Playgroup meant to me – it changed my life.’

This is not a slightly over-the-top comment from a grateful parent but it is a very genuine remark made by Esther who was a Playgroup Helper in Aberystwyth for over a decade. In many ways Playgroup did change her life. Her story is worth telling.

Esther was born in 1934 suffering from a physical disorder, which meant her growth was very severely stunted. Her final height was well under four feet. She was short-limbed which gave her a slightly awkward gait. Unlike some people with restricted growth who still develop normally in spite of their size, Esther suffered from numerous health problems all her life and trips to the hospital were frequent and sometimes lengthy. Consequently, unlike her older sister, her childhood did not go smoothly and her attendance at school was erratic. In the nineteen-thirties support for children with disabilities was severely lacking and social attitudes were different from today. Disability was often seen as a social stigma. Her parents were ordinary working-class people who found it difficult to cope with having a disabled daughter. Her mother was partly over-protective and partly embarrassed by Esther’s condition to the point of ‘hiding’ her away. Esther said that when anyone came to the house her mother would hurry her into the kitchen or into her bedroom until the visitor left. As a small child she did not understand why her mother did not want her to be seen.

Her school days were not happy. She suffered from teasing and bullying. Other children imitated her, making fun of her. She was often the butt of unkind comments and, as she once said, ‘not only from the children’. As a result she grew up lacking confidence and any feeling of self-worth. Her hopes of gaining employment in those days were minimal and her life on leaving school was spent mainly in her bedroom except for being taken by her father to Chapel and Sunday school each Sunday. When she was eighteen she made

friends at Chapel with someone she described as 'a fine Christian girl' who invited her to her home to read the scriptures. Esther became a true convert and her Christian beliefs proved to be a comfort to her throughout her life. Her day-to-day life however was dull and very lonely. A friendly G.P who visited her regularly would often chivvy her into 'getting out' but Esther failed to respond. Then one day he said, 'They're starting a Playgroup for small children down at the Sea Cadet Hall, why don't you go to see if you can help?' It is fairly certain that Esther would not have had the confidence to do this on her own but fortunately the G.P. dropped a hint to a member of the Playgroup committee who contacted Esther, visited her at her home and invited her to help at Playgroup. So began the new phase that was to 'change her life'.

Esther helped at Playgroup every morning for five days each week becoming a fully committed member of the Playgroup team. She worked well with the Supervisors, the other Helpers, with parents on Rota and the Playgroup committee. She coped with all the rough and tumble of Playgroup without turning a hair. She loved every minute and once said that when she returned home at the end of the morning she 'couldn't wait' to be going back the next day. Esther had a lively personality and a bright sense of humour and she loved the companionship of children and staff. She took part in all Playgroup events. When the children were taken to the beach, to the woods or to a farm Esther went too. She shared in children's birthday celebrations, Christmas parties and in Playgroup fund-raising efforts. She took part in committee meetings where she enjoyed the discussions on Playgroup matters as well as the chat and gossip. She was never patronised or pitied but was accepted as an equal. And, of course, the children loved her. She was small enough to fit into the Wendy House, as it was then called, and join in the make-believe play and she was comfortable sitting round the small tables sharing the jig-saws, Lego or playdough. She chatted happily to the children and listened to them. As far as the children were concerned Esther was simply a friend who they looked out for every day. Often a toddler would arrive at Playgroup in the morning and run swiftly into the hall saying, 'Where's Esther?' She cherished the unconditional friendship of the children and the companionship of all who worked alongside her. It is no wonder that she said that 'Playgroup changed her life.' Others noticed this change especially her father with whom she lived, her sister having moved

away and her mother having died. Esther described how, shortly after she started at Playgroup, her father said to her, 'I don't know what goes on down at that hall but I've never seen you look so happy!'

In later years, long after she had left Playgroup, she would talk about the children as if she had been with them only yesterday. She remembered their names and was eager to hear news of them – where they were working,



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whether they had got married and she was touched by the one or two that took the trouble to drop her a line and occasionally call on her. Because of failing health she became permanently housebound and, whilst she received all the assistance the statutory authorities could provide, it was through the daily care and commitment of her friend and neighbour, Brenda, that she was able to end her days in her own home. She loved to have visitors, especially those with Playgroup connections. To one of those she once described what Playgroup had meant to her as follows: 'Before I helped at

Playgroup my life was dark. When I started at Playgroup it was like someone switching on a huge bright light.' Those were her very words.

Esther died just before Christmas in 2004.