

Playgroup Supervisors and their Development

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This is my personal brief account of my involvement with PPA from a fading memory – 1965 to 1970!

Nurse Lees was a Health Visitor at Mercier House Clinic in Rhyl. I had met her in 1959 in Flint after my son Huw was born. We met again in Rhyl during 1965 when I had my third child Mai. She asked me if I was interested in starting a Wives' Group at the clinic. After thinking about it I agreed and prompted by the now famous Guardian letter/article on Playgroups included that as a project for such a group.

The clinic was offered free as a Playgroup venue with some reservations from the caretaker on sand and water play. A candlewick bedspread was seen as ideal to collect spilt sand and prevent it spreading!

This Wives' Group raised money for toys by holding Christmas Fairs, a Summer Strawberry Fair and an Easter Bonnet Parade (hats supplied by Pierce's Hat Shop) and it snowed! People gave toys, my son has never forgotten that I borrowed his punch ball and that it was stolen during a break-in at Mercier House.

We also ran a summer holiday group in the changing rooms and grounds of the Marsh Road Playing Fields. Later when we opened Vale Road Playgroup we held a large jumble sale. I remember this being a learning curve for me when we saw clothes being stolen from under our noses!

In the early days training courses were few and far between. Cathie Barrett, one of the first appointed and paid supervisors at Mercier House Group, and I travelled to Crewe every Friday to the College of Further Education to gain, after several weeks, a Certificate of Attendance. We covered some Child Development and Play, and spent a lot of time discussing the plight or otherwise of living in Glasgow tenements. The

support from PPA and the first visit to the County by Brenda Crowe, National Adviser PPA, helped mould our practice. Nursery or NNEB trained helpers were hard to find. Secondary school trained teachers were qualified but were not always in tune with, or sympathetic to, the aims of playgroup and the desire to incorporate parents. Indeed, in the beginning some primary schools found playgroup children disruptive when they joined main school education. Closer liaison helped iron out these difficulties in part if not always completely.

The then Director of Education of Flintshire was helpful and gave us the support of Miss Glenys Edwards, Nursery Adviser, who came to my home. We held many meetings around our kitchen tables in those days. She gave us practical ideas, suggested topics and encouraged us. I think we visited a local nursery.

The WEA funded training days and evening courses. I recall one weekend event at Kelsterton College. The Library agreed to loan books for children and adults. At national level the AGMs which grew from day events to whole weekends provided workshops, and the opportunity to glean information from others.

Local firms were helpful, e.g. a milk float from the Co-op Dairy was turned into a Magic Roundabout by Jack Griffiths, Sheila's husband, to advertise our movement in the local carnival. Galt Toys gave displays and discounted equipment.

As the movement grew transport to meetings was not always easy but we borrowed family cars and shared journeys.

At some point I became an Area Organiser. I believe Joan Hand who ran the local Rhyl Nursery was our first AO. Training meetings for AOs were held in London. I remember well the topic 'Water Play'. On returning to our areas we demonstrated to others. This was to inform Playgroup Supervisors and also parents who helped, not only how to present various types of play, but why. When boats were in the water bath, Richard Scary's pictures of numerous kinds of boat provided the opportunity to add to a child's vocabulary. For me this was great fun and deeply satisfying.

The Plowden Report and Keith Joseph's 'Cycle of Deprivation' had an impact. The desire to enable others, in less affluent areas, to experience

playgroup for their children and themselves resulted in the summer play schemes and Vale Road Playgroup.

The sequence of events is unclear now but by becoming an AO I became involved in helping set up County organisations, knocking on the doors of Health and of Education in Anglesey and Caernarvon requesting support to hold a meeting of interested people to share our experiences. I think it was John Watson, Chairman of PPA, who spoke at Anglesey. Looking back I sometimes think it was ‘fools rushing in where angels fear to tread’.

Health and Education were keen to have a County Committee with which to work rather than with individual groups. Health gave us two workers who had previously worked in the field of TB to advise on regulations, registration and standards.

To raise money for a County organisation a Dinner Dance was held in Northop Hall Hotel and Brenda Crowe came as our after dinner speaker. I had several sleepless nights as I worried about the costs and rewards of such an event!

The statutory bodies were, in my memory, very helpful as was Joan Hand in Rhyl. Again they helped when a North Wales Association was founded. Shire Hall in Mold was available for meetings. I know I chaired meetings at all levels but which and when I don't recall.

The Wives' Group at Mercier House formed a Mother and Toddler Group and toys from Playgroup were shared. This did not always run smoothly when toys were broken or not stored to each group's satisfaction.

As a result of my involvement with PPA I became a Social Worker. The topic for my chosen piece of research was ‘Playgroup Supervisors and their Subsequent Development’. It was fascinating to learn just how many people, after experiencing the ‘Playgroup Movement’ went on to further education having gained confidence and skills within playgroups. A copy of my dissertation was placed with the National PPA.

Approximately four years ago Mai returned to live in Wales with her three, soon to be four, children and her husband. She enrolled Taliesin in the local Ysgol Feithrin, becoming chairperson shortly afterwards.