

# The Pre-school Playgroups Association – How it Influenced my Life, my Family and my Thinking

Anne John

Little did I think, in April 1976, when starting our youngest child in the local playgroup in Menai Bridge, Anglesey, that a whole new chapter in my life was about to open up.

Susie is the youngest of our five children and the only one to attend a playgroup, the others having attended the nursery unit attached to the primary school, which they would then attend. I had no idea how much the family would become involved in the lives of under 5s by becoming part of this local group. I had no idea then that this group had any links with any other, let alone be a member of a National Association, which at that time covered England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

No sooner had ‘we’ joined the Playgroup than we were involved in helping out with the parent rota, fundraising, carnivals, (oh the floats we have dressed, sometimes in pouring rain, with crepe paper, dye running fast and furious all around), play days in the summer encouraging the whole community to come along and see what we were about – but what fun and what friendships were made and remain to this day.

As this became a way of life for our family I began to realise that this was not only a social experience for young children – this was a profession in its own right. It gave women opportunities to express their views, to change thinking in society at large and, at the same time, give children the best start in life.

I soon became a committee person; being a member of the playgroup committee, the local Branch, then the County, oh what a huge step that was. We were responsible for negotiating the grant from the local authority to help pay the very meagre wages of the fieldworkers who supported the playgroups in our area and to secure some money to pay for training.

Because my experience of playgroup was in Anglesey we had the added dimension of the Welsh language to take on board. It took quite some time for me to accept this; my thinking in those days was very much ‘everyone speaks English don’t they so what is all the fuss about?’. Oh how ignorance can breed arrogance. Thanks to those who were longer in the tooth and had a greater compassion than I, I soon came to respect the need and the right of Welsh speakers to be able to use their language and to make provision for their children through the medium of Welsh. I learned to work alongside our ‘sister’ Playgroup, which operated through the medium of Welsh, with children attending both the Welsh and English Playgroups. I learned to respect and endorse the need for those whose first language was Welsh to be able to use this in their daily lives and to introduce it to those of us not born with this ability.

By the time Susie was leaving playgroup to go to school I had decided that I too would leave playgroup and the committees on which I was involved and have some time to think and choose my path for my future. A phone call from the playgroup secretary put an end to that and I found myself back in playgroup some six weeks after Susie had left, this time as an assistant. This was a whole new ball game for me. Having five children of your own and working with the children of others was not the same and I had a lot of learning to do to ensure that the children in my care had the opportunity to learn through play, as Susie had.

Training became a real interest and I joined the local Training Committee. At this time there was no recognised training or qualification for those working in the Playgroup Movement. We were, in the main, mothers giving our time and commitment to the benefit of our children and others. Only in time was the work we did valued. Through designing and providing appropriate training we began to raise the status of the Playgroup Movement and, of course, to meet the needs of young children

to enable them to develop and learn in a positive, stimulating and caring environment.

It seems impossible now to think that some thirty years ago no qualifications were required for anyone working in the voluntary sector with our young children. However, thanks to the hard work, commitment and belief in the cause, training became a basic requirement for all working in playgroups. We gave a presentation to the Directors of Social Services in Wales, who at that time were responsible for registering playgroups, ensuring the minimum standards were being attained. These Directors endorsed our efforts and it was recognised that all those working with young children had to achieve certain standards. However, these standards were not being met across the whole of Wales although good progress was being made.

Through interest in training my belief in the Playgroup Movement grew and grew. I became passionate about the benefits to the children and to the growth of the parents, mostly mothers at that time. It was such a privilege to watch shy and sometimes very young mums coming into playgroup, staying to help and sharing their skills with the group as a whole, and children leaving to go to school with the confidence and knowledge they had gained through playgroup. Indeed there were times when some school teachers were heard to say ‘well he has been in playgroup’ and not always meaning that as a compliment, because these were not shy, retiring, scared little people. The children were used to going to play with their friends in a social environment without Mum and to learning a whole range of skills through play. Playgroup was definitely the start of moving into another world for many women, giving them friendship and confidence to try new avenues.

The Playgroup Movement was paving the way in raising the status of the youngest members of our society. Learning to value our babies and young children as people in their own right – with specific needs, which had to be met – and the best way to do this was through PLAY. What a vital four-letter word it is.

There were many opportunities to learn more about children learning through play and about the Playgroup Movement. Many conferences were



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Parents' Workshop on Play

held and attended. Speakers of high calibre shared their knowledge and expertise with us: Professor Jerome Bruner, Lesley Webb, Brenda Crowe, Maude Henderson to name but a few. This was a very exciting time for all working in this field.

In 1983 I had the very real honour of being elected Chairman of the Wales Region of the Pre-school Playgroups Association. This was a real challenge and one which I was not at all confident I could meet. However, as is always the case with PPA, colleagues, who became friends, supported and advised me and I was fortunate to hold this position for five years. During this time the Wales Region of PPA became an independent organisation and Wales PPA was born, Scotland and Northern Ireland having taken the road to independence before Wales.

One of my first jobs as Chairman was to present our grant request to key civil servants at the Welsh Office. This was done with other colleagues, but no less a fearful time for that. I well recall not eating for two days

before this meeting, really worrying that these people had the power to give us no money and if I said something out of turn or did not answer a question correctly it would be my fault. Oh the joy and relief when the grant was forthcoming.

I hope I have never forgotten that in these early days I did not have the confidence in myself to speak knowledgeably about our work and the benefits to children and families from being involved. I think it is pretty much the same for parents today – it is part of the learning process, which we were very fortunate to be part of at that special time in our society.

I still have a passionate belief that the ‘needs of the child are paramount’ and that if we want the best for our children then we must invest in the best possible start. The Playgroup Movement is a very different one today from that of the 60s, 70s and 80s, as is our society. It must change to meet the needs of families, but it must retain its belief that children must be valued in their own right and that they learn best through exciting and stimulating PLAY opportunities – that must never be lost.

It gives me great joy that my children who have children of their own, either are, have been or will become, part of their local Playgroup. The issues they talk about are not much different from those we talked about 20 to 30 years ago, but the needs of the families are not quite the same, so the challenges for them are different.

For as long as parents believe in the benefits of play for young children playgroups will survive. Perhaps the benefits for mothers in particular are not, and in the future will not be, as great as they have been in the past but the opportunities for development are still there.

I feel truly privileged to have been part of a Movement which has made such a contribution to our society as a whole and cannot imagine the route my life would have taken had we not become part of the Playgroup at Menai Bridge all those years ago.

A few highlights of what I feel I have learned/gained from being part of PPA in Wales:

- The geography of Wales.
- The cultural differences of the people.
- The learning opportunities.
- Opportunities to contribute to the development of this organisation.
- Learning that we were/are the experts in the world of under-fives and their families.
- The friends made, too many to list or mention. Not keeping in touch the way I would wish but the bond is always there.
- The sadness at the loss of a friend and colleague's untimely death, the strength of the friendships made at playgroup.
- The opportunities to meet and learn from such a wide range of people.
- Fun, friendship, laughter, tears, learning, development, confidence, knowledge, compassion, respect for people's differences.