

The Children Left Playgroup But I Didn't

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My involvement with Wales PPA started when my daughter Nia joined the local Playgroup at Goytre in Monmouthshire. Little did I think that my involvement with the Playgroup Movement would last over twenty years.

I had no idea about the size of the organisation behind our local playgroup. Quickly being encouraged onto the playgroup committee I found myself with a group of Mums who just wanted the very best for their children. We thought that the playgroup staff ran the whole thing and our job was to raise the money to keep the group going. Of course, as I got more involved I realised the importance of voluntary management committees and the chance of 'growing' within the organisation.

My son, Owen followed Nia into playgroup two years later by which time I was involved at Branch, County and Wales level or Regional level as it was then. My children joined and left playgroup but I was hooked by this time and I stayed on.

I had soon found, when I joined the playgroup committee, that I had things to think about other than nappies and I welcomed the paperwork that came with the committee work. The invitation to attend PPA Branch meetings came with the idea that there was 'bulk buy' there that I would no doubt find interesting. I thought this was rather a bizarre idea as to me 'bulk buy' meant large numbers of cans of carrots and baked beans. The mystery was cleared up at my first Branch meeting when I discovered it was supplies of paint and paper for playgroups belonging to the Branch to which the term 'bulk buy' related.

I became responsible for buying paper and paint from County Supplies for the Abergavenny Branch committee to take to Branch open meetings

for playgroups to buy at reduced prices. I remember taking Owen with me to collect the supplies from Cwmbran and it happened to be a particularly large load. We had a mini estate car at the time and I loaded everything in, carefully leaving room behind my seat for Owen to stand. On the road from Cwmbran Owen said, ‘Mum, I am getting rather squashed!’ ‘You will be alright,’ I replied, not realising that the paper had all moved forward holding Owen very closely to the back of my seat.

Owen, who is now 28, had no idea that there was life outside my playgroup involvement as he had only just been born when Nia and I joined playgroup. The Development Officers at the time did lots of things over and above the call of duty to help volunteers attend meetings. I remember having to attend a meeting during the day but my mother-in-law was busy, my husband too busy at work to help out and so Janet McAllister, the Gwent Development Officer, came to my rescue. She came to baby-sit for me when I had an afternoon meeting. I had made sure downstairs was tidy and had cleaned through the house. Owen of course had other ideas about the house! Janet had picked him up from playgroup and as soon as they got home he decided Janet needed to have a tour of the house. Starting with upstairs he showed her his room, Nia’s room and Mum and Dad’s room (they had to share he explained). Downstairs, after lunch, Janet was busy knitting while he had his head in a storybook listening to a tape, which beeped when he had to turn over a page, his favourite pastime. He looked up at her knitting and explained that his Mum was too old to knit!

During my time on the playgroup committee we had a severe snowstorm and the roof on one of the demountables fell in due to the weight of the snow. The County Council owned the property but had no inclination to re-build. This started lots of correspondence with the Council who eventually came out to visit the playgroup. The negotiations took several years during which the committee rebuilt the playgroup roof and joined the two demountables together. During the 25th year anniversary of PPA our Playgroup committee raised over £1000 during playweek to rebuild our Playgroup.

Meanwhile I became very involved with Abergavenny Branch and enjoyed helping others organise speakers and workshops for open meetings for groups. During this time I became involved with helping as a steward at the PPA AGM and National Conference at Llandudno. Margaret Jenkins, the Gwent Development Officer at the time had arranged a Gwent meeting in Cwmbran in order for everyone to be given their jobs at the conference. All the Gwent Branches were brought together, Abergavenny, Torfaen, Newport and South Gwent and the arrangements made for travelling together and the jobs allocated. My job was to help look after the stallholders and the stands at the exhibition. I had little idea what this meant but I just agreed to help.

The stands at the Conference were amazing! Stall after stall of people selling wares for playgroups including a Wales PPA stall selling Welsh goods. I had been given some money to buy goods for Goytre Playgroup and also the Abergavenny Branch. There was an amazing wooden rocking-horse type animal on one stand and I bought two red dragons, one for the Branch toy library and one for playgroup. These were gorgeous, red and shiny and the children loved them. Bit of a tight fit, once again, getting them home in the car, together with a whole pile of Lego offers I had been asked to get for people in the playgroup.

I saw very little of the Conference and the AGM as I was so keen to carry out my role on the exhibitions. I went to bed early as I knew so few people and little did I know, till years later, what fun was had in the evening with the Male Voice Choir and everything. I was there but I did not have a clue what was happening around me!

During my time on Abergavenny Branch I began to learn about the Resource Centre in Pentonville, Newport which housed an amazing array of leaflets and books about good practice. The PPA Resource Centre also employed people who could make simple leaflets that were needed in playgroup. They would type them up, add pictures and run off loads of copies on the Roneo machine! Yvonne Hern was the Resource Centre Administrator and Maggie Rigler was her trusty assistant. The Resource Centre had a voluntary management committee and I soon became the Abergavenny Branch representative on the committee and then the Chair.

The Resource Centre and the Regional Office in Wrexham provided the administrative support for the Region but the Resource Centre also provided typing services for Counties, Branches and Playgroups. It was during this period that I began to meet other people from across Wales who represented their counties on various regional committees. As the Chair of the Resource Centre committee I also attended Personnel and Finance Committees, Joint Office meetings and Regional Council. Although many of the volunteers on these committees were different, others were the same and I developed some wonderful friendships. I also attended Wales Training Committee as a Gwent representative as somewhere along the line I became a member of the Gwent County committee. I was enjoying myself attending the various committees and learned lots of new things along the way. It was like running a small company I used to tell people who asked why did I give so much time for nothing. I was learning so many life skills!

At this time Wales was one of the eleven Regions, which made up the Pre-school Playgroups Association and representatives from Wales attended National meetings in London. There was a vacancy for the Wales representative on the National Executive Committee (NEC) of PPA and I was asked to be that representative. These meetings were held in London and I managed to attend them with two young children because of the tremendous support of my mother-in-law, my husband and the fact that living in South Wales the train access to London was very good. The Regional meetings were held in Shrewsbury, where all the trains met.

As it turned out I was the last NEC representative for Wales as Wales PPA became independent in 1987.