

THE PLAYGROUP MOVEMENT

Brenda Crowe

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By

BRENDA CROWE

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Foreword by
Mia Kellmer Pringle



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Foreword

It is time that this excellent book about the pre-school playgroup movement should be revised during the year of its twenty-first birthday. To my mind, it is a record of one of the most remarkable success stories. No other development in services for children and their mothers—either in the educational or social services fields—can rival it in scope or in rapid yet sustained growth. There are now over 12,000 local groups catering for over 500,000 under-fives. Another unique feature is that it not only started as a grass-roots movement but has continued to be a predominantly self-help organization. Furthermore, it has remained flexible, being able and willing to respond to change and to newly emerging needs.

Among those presenting new needs are first-generation homeowners, families living in high-rise flats, people in racially mixed areas and single-parent families. Playgroups are available too in socially disadvantaged areas, as well as for families suffering from a multiplicity of deprivations. Children who have special needs—such as those who are fostered, handicapped or in hospital—are also catered for. The particular needs and difficulties of all these groups are recognized and are met by adapting what is provided and how it is provided.

It can now be seen that the rapid growth in this country of parental self-help movements during the past twenty-five years has heralded the start of an important new trend. It originated from the dissatisfaction of parents of handicapped children: the lack of sufficient educational and treatment provision (in some cases none at all) made them band together, determined to improve matters. And so the Spastics Society, the Royal Society for Mentally Handicapped Children and Adults, and many others came into being. The demonstrable success of the combined strength of such minority groups encouraged the growth of self-help movements among parents generally. Among these, the most outstanding example is the Pre-school Playgroups Association.

The basic significance of self-help movements seems to me to be twofold. First, sooner or later all of them turn to professional workers for advice, guidance and support. But when they do so it is within the context of a redefined relationship of self-confidence and partnership. The determination to help themselves has remained their strength and driving force, inspired by the aim to

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improve the standards of care, education and treatment in the services available to their children.

Second, self-help movements may well spearhead a return to community care. This has become a fashionable slogan to which at present much lip-service is paid by official voices. In fact, however, the community has always shouldered the main burden of caring for children, for the handicapped, the sick and the old; or, rather, the task has fallen to women in the community. Hitherto they have been taken for granted, simply being expected to do this while sacrificing their chance of marriage or a career, without proper financial recompense, and without adequate professional or even home help support. Moreover, the burden of low income, bad housing and insufficient food always bears heaviest on women who put the needs of their children before their own.

In generating self-help movements, mobilizing young people as volunteers and, in future, harnessing to a greater extent the energies of the retired, redundant and unemployed, a renewed sense of mutual involvement in the welfare of one's neighbourhood could be created. Above all, this involvement must include giving practical help of all kinds to care-giving women so as to lighten their load of unremitting responsibility for immature, aged or infirm dependants. In this way a true spirit of community care will be fostered, rooted in and springing from individuals who value self-reliance, practical action and a measure of independence from authority and from professional expertise. In the process many may discover or rediscover that the 'gift relationship' enriches not only the recipient but also the giver.

That this book—first published nearly ten years ago—requires a fourth and revised edition is a tribute to its comprehensiveness and enduring quality. The author has succeeded in combining with unusual skill what at first thought may seem very different aims: first, to describe the philosophy underlying the pre-school playgroup movement and how this is given practical expression in diverse ways to meet different local needs and differing family needs; second, after a brief but comprehensive review of the various provisions available for under-fives, to offer concrete and detailed guidance which will be invaluable to anyone intending to start a group; and third, to take both a backward and a forward look at the movement, providing a brief historical account of how it all began and then discussing in much greater detail how it has developed over the years. Equally remarkable is the fact the the style is throughout very readable, that the views expressed are clearly based on wide and deep experience, and that

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a compassionate understanding of the problems which many families and children suffer is combined with a determination to achieve the highest possible standards in all areas of work undertaken by PPA.

Indeed, its name is now almost misleading by being too narrow. Might it not more accurately be called the Pre-schoolers and Parents Association? After all, it caters for toddlers as well as older under-fives; and it encourages mothers (and fathers) not only to contribute to the planning, organizing and running of groups, but also to participate in work at branch, county, regional and national level; moreover, training opportunities are available for those wishing to remain involved after their own children have moved into the formal education system. Indeed, the gaining of self-confidence and the discovery of hitherto unsuspected talents through being part of PPA leads many a mother to seek further and higher education for herself.

More recently still, PPA has started to involve teenagers and the retired. A further new development might be to enlist the interest of the redundant and the unemployed to the benefit both of those made to feel unwanted by society and of young children most of whom see far too little of male figures in their every day life.

Thus the Association continues to promote the principles of mutual support and self-help for the benefit not only of pre-schoolers but of their parents and the wider community. This fosters the morale, self-confidence and the general capacity to cope among a much wider age range than the movement's name would suggest. At the same time it demonstrates to professional workers and statutory services as well as to local and national politicians that self-help is a viable concept in today's highly complex, bureaucratized and fragmented society. In partnership with them, PPA strives to improve the quality of life of all concerned and offers new dimensions to involvement and caring.

MIA KELLMER PRINGLE

Preface

I approached the task of updating *The Playgroup Movement* with trepidation, but have been encouraged throughout by Brenda Crowe's very generous support and advice. It is a tribute to her work that the first eight chapters needed so little revision—only updating. It is equally a measure of the rapid growth of the Pre-school Playgroups Association that so much work needed to be done on Chapters 9 and 10 to bring them up to date. The organization of PPA has expanded to encompass the wider interests and work of the movement. Playgroup courses have also developed considerably so Chapter 11 is largely revised, although Chapter 12 remains intact. Chapter 13 (PPA and the social services) and Chapter 14 (Financial aspects of PPA) are new and Chapter 15 (The way ahead) updated.

I am deeply grateful to the many people in PPA, SPPA, NIPPA, and IPPA who helped me and to Peter Leek of Allen & Unwin who provided invaluable encouragement.

I hope that the book will continue to be a worthwhile record of one of the most dynamic movements in the UK in the last twenty years, although I am conscious that the best testimony to the playgroup movement is the enthusiasm of its members, who through their involvement have found confidence to work for their own and other people's families.

MEG BURFORD

Introduction

The benefits to the children of all good playgroups are these:

Play opportunities are offered that few would have at home, partly because money is lacking for a full range of activities and equipment, but chiefly because parents are unaware of the types of play experience that children need.

Children can learn to communicate with each other, and with adults; and within this framework of warm friendliness speech is stimulated and the use of language can be developed.

The separation from mother can come about slowly and naturally, so that the eventual transition from home to a full day at school will not be accompanied by the physical and emotional exhaustion that many parents have noted in children denied this interim period of preparation.

The transition from a small family unit to a rather larger unit helps the children to grow accustomed to a greater level of noise and movement; it also enables them to learn to cooperate with other children and other adults.

The doses of exposure to all these new experiences can be graded to suit each individual child; two weekly periods of two hours each may be enough for some children at first, and the transition to four or five sessions a week can be as gradual as the child's reaction dictates—providing the extra sessions are available and the house-keeping money stretches this far. The playgroup can be so flexible that many of the children's differing needs can be met individually.

But there is one type of playgroup that stands out by virtue of the many benefits it confers upon all those who come within its orbit. The good community playgroup, firmly rooted in its own locality, offers all the above benefits to the children but also provides stimulation, happiness, and an avenue of growth for the following people.

Mothers (who also happen to be people)

There is a very real need for mothers to go off duty for a couple of hours occasionally. Who else is on the job for twenty-four consecutive hours, seven days a week, without even a break for meals?

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There may well be younger children at home, but one child less for two hours twice or three times a week is still a welcome relief, leading to happier reunions.

When their turn for rota duty at the playgroup comes around they find that being with children may be a real joy; they can relax with nothing else to claim their attention, and many begin to 'see' children for the first time. They can watch other adults handle their own and other people's children, and often learn new insights into old problems. They begin to understand the wide range of growth, temperament and ability in children of three to four years—all of which fall well within the normal limit. They can make friends with other adults in this happy proximity that breaks down what seems to be universal shyness. Those who left school and work with a feeling of failure have the opportunity to discover that they can start learning and growing all over again.

'Just mothers' become rota mothers; rota mothers can become helpers; helpers can become playgroup leaders. The way ahead is free for them to sit on committees, be in charge of milk money or fund-raising, go on to become area organizers or to contribute on courses. Many go on to train as teachers, NNEBs or social workers, even though it sometimes means tackling GCE O and A levels first. Others deliberately go into jobs where the mother-child relationship comes under stress. Such a person feels deeply involved in a children's shoe department, and rejoices when parents and children deliberately seek her out time after time.

Those who feel frustrated in the maternal role can accept it more easily if they have an outlet for their other abilities, and contact with a wide range of people.

There is already evidence that parents are not only learning about the under-fives, but are enjoying a continuing and extending parental role.

Fathers (who also happen to be people)

Their financial commitment is heavy, and stretches ahead into the far distant future. On their own they may feel they could have 'made it' by changing jobs, starting up on their own, going abroad. But family responsibilities weigh heavily, and rather than jeopardize present security many men curb their ambitions. Hope is deferred, and can fade.

Not all men take to fatherhood like ducks to water. If their wives aggravate this by giving them the impression that only women know how to handle, feed, and look after babies then the man suffers a double loss as the husband-wife relationship loses

out to a baby who does not offer a compensating pleasure.

Many a man who rejoices in fatherhood can still find it disappointing to come home to a wife who is depressed, over-tired or bad-tempered. His own day may well have been difficult, and he finds it hard to see what can have been so dreadful about spending all day in the home that he only has a chance to enjoy at weekends.

The father and the mother may disagree about the upbringing of their child; the father may be too firm as he tries to correct what he believes to be his wife's over-indulgence, and he can then find himself with both his wife and child against him. Since mother and child are together all day he can begin to feel an outsider.

The wife may continue to keep up the highest standards for their home, the children and her own personal appearance—but a sensitive husband may be aware that the strain is great. Mechanical or human help, or a holiday, may be out of the question financially and he feels helpless too.

Anything that improves the mother's health and happiness has a profound effect upon her husband and children. The child gains twice over: he grows physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually through his playgroup experience, and comes home to continue growing in a happier, fuller home life than before. This wave of improvement flows yet again, for as the parents see their child developing in so many ways their pleasure and interest grow both in him and in their shared experience as parents, and they feel that they are making out creditably.

Fathers sit on playgroup committees, work together to improve playgroup buildings and equipment, carry heavy equipment out of sheds and into the playgroup before going to work, organize fund-raising events, and offer encouragement and support to their wives. Many areas have a flourishing social life that brings the playgroup husbands and wives together, both with and without their children. The sharing of baby-sitting is often highly organized on a voucher system.

Men need this mixed company; all too often they have broken with 'the boys' who were so much part of their bachelor existence, and their lives are narrowed down to home and work. This new social life can be rewarding.

Teenagers

The interaction between teenagers and playgroups works its own magic of healing and growth.

These young adolescents need to play in their own right, and in some areas workshops have been set up to give them a chance to

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make good some of their missing stages of growing up. This personal play is the springboard for their curiosity and interest when they later find themselves in a playgroup. Play becomes the common bond across the mini-generation gap, for many older children are so sick of looking after younger brothers and sisters that it is some time before they are prepared to say of the children, 'It's funny, but I really like being with them here.'

Young people are also learning by absorption that it is possible for neighbourhood parents to enjoy their children, and to have time to play and talk with them.

Many, particularly from various institutions, long for a way to express tenderness in a relationship where it can't rebound and hurt: in a playgroup affection can be both given and received between children and adults of all ages.

Backward readers can justify the reading of 'baby books' and the listening children's wrapt attention is balm to wounded pride. Nothing succeeds like success, especially after years of failure.

The natural conversation which often flows between the younger and older children can be a salutary reminder to listening adults that interest, relationship and communication can be deadened by artificial conversations directed to the end of acquisition and development of language.

We must now be very, very careful not to crush all this happiness, human growth and development under the weight of written work, projects and all the paraphernalia devised to bring about the sort of learning that is already happening through practical experience and discussions in happy neighbourhood relationships.

Mothers and toddlers

By three it is already too late to help some children and their parents, and many playgroups run special sessions for under-threes *and* their accompanying mother. This is not only for the children's sake, but because many mothers feel that they are 'failures' at this point: they long to dump and run rather than to stay and risk being shown up by their antisocial offspring. It is only by staying that they are able to discover how universal their problems are, and to experience how the group gathers round newcomers with warm support and good humour, and to see how other people cope with energetic, tyrannical, apathetic, clumsy, mercurial, tempestuous, exhausting and enchanting toddlers.