

## BARTON PLAYGROUP

(Notes on the first term)

### Composition of group

All children in the group were referred by Child Care Officers in Oxford City Children's Department because of serious family problems. They all live on the Barton estate. Seventeen children have attended regularly and there have been no drop-outs - only a few "non starters". Of the seventeen, five are from one family: there is one threesome; three pairs and three 'singles'. We have not yet studied intensively the effect of these sibling 'sub-systems' on the group as a whole. Certainly there has been a tendency for some siblings to stick together closely. The age range is between 11 and 5, which, linked with differences in children's physical size and emotional maturity, poses some problems for organisation of activities. There have also been problems about the admission of 'friends' but this has now been controlled and a 'waiting list' policy evolved.\*

### Accommodation

Barton Community Centre has made available three rooms: a large hall, the gym and a small 'committee' room. At first the small room was not used but latterly it has become the 'crafts' room. It is generally agreed that since the three rooms have been used, the atmosphere has improved. At first the large hall was used for a mixture of craft and activities other than the very boisterous games, football etc. It seems that the use of the smaller room for crafts encourages concentration and separates those who wish to get on with a specific task. The separations are not lasting or firm - there is a constant toing and froing between rooms with the majority of children participating in various forms of activity. A few do not move readily to and fro.\* The small room may be of value, not simply because it separates but because it is small. How much are children, especially the 'little uns' helped by the walls being closer and the noise less?

### Food

This has not been without its problems. We were interested in the amount of tension 'feeding time' created and the problems of control arising from it - "a massive assault mounted" on the kitchen etc. It seems that moving the time from middle or towards the end to the beginning was successful. Ideas of locking the kitchen were not followed up. We wondered whether some children were in reality hungry - not having had their 'tea' - as well as the emotional reactions the giving of food rouses in deprived children.

### Coming and Going

This also raises problems. Children are waiting when students arrive and thus sometimes an irritant to the Warden and the Centre. Some are most reluctant to go. (Only one family is brought and taken home by car). Early discussion focussed on this problem frequently. A suggestion was made that the two male students, on whom control and discipline at first rested, should be seen to go - an interesting acknowledgement of the 'playing up' element in this. But eventually all students agreed to meet me in a pub rather than at the Centre so that the group was seen to be clearly 'over' by the children. This has worked (?)

The Development of the Group

### The Development of the Group

I thought of dividing this into two sections - the 'students' and the "children's group". But in fact the interaction between the two is so complex that I cannot begin by doing so.

Chronologically, the enterprise reacted the depths of despair in the fifth and sixth and seventh weeks. The problems of control and discipline were central in discussions up to this point and overshadowed everything else. Clashes of opinion were recorded: all agreed on the necessity of control, but how? What sanctions can there be? Physical control? Banning attendance for a time? Not having seen the children I imagined them to be huge. The earlier impressions were of a hoard of wild children, those who were "individualised" tended to be so largely because of their nuisance value, the quieter ones fading into a sort of pale deprived blob. Students were uncertain whether the children saw them as individuals or just as objects, though even in the early days there were notes made of some special attachments to particular students. It was recognised that attachments could be expressed negatively as well as positively. Despair, which I think would have been experienced in any case, was increased by two occurrences: my missing one group meeting at a critical phase: and the mistake which caused playmaterials to be locked up and unavailable at one meeting. By the end of term (strongly confirmed by the first meeting of this term), it seemed that problems of control and discipline were receding. It is still not entirely clear to me how much quieter or more controlled the children are in reality and if so whether this implies that the students have found effective means of maintaining control. Or whether the element of panic in the students has receded and a greater tolerance is possible. (Of course the children themselves would get calmer as students panic receded).

Lying behind the presenting problem of control was reaction to the potentially overwhelming demands of such children who could not easily be thought of as "a group" in any ordinary sense. Their deprivations led them to demand one to one relationships and their co-operative activity was - and still is - pretty minimal, where it existed it often seemed to be negative - a ganging up, or spread of infection of naughtiness. This led to disappointment amongst the students about the difficulty of organised activity: to anxiety about the degree of physical contact some children required and even extorted, with occasional undertones of sexuality (not always undertones: "P....rushed up and 'kneaded' my breast with a dirty chuckle') and frequently of aggression: and to searching questions about the benefit of such a limited experience of relationship even where it appeared possible - so short and so transitory. The inevitable question - "is it better to have begun to love and then to lose, than never to have loved at all" jostled apparently illogically, with reiterated queries as to whether the students meant anything to the children at all.

I think that by the end of term, some of these questions were beginning to be answered by the actuality of experience, not reassurance. A student records of the last one:

"This playgroup was an achievement - tea was quiet - there was some interaction between children and they did play without the joining in of an adult". Contrast with:

14.11.67 "General feelings of despair.....Feeling of being unable to control them by humane means and wanting to use violence..... Several members lost their temper and administered violent punishment". Underlying discussion of control therefore was the question of students' own self control and fear of their own violent impulses.

Despite all this, individual comments by students about children show wealth of detailed observation from which to construct a profile of their behaviour and development in the group. Perhaps now we will be able to do this more systematically.

Many characteristics of groups have been illustrated; for example, during the phase of special difficulty, a certain child was singled out as "the problem" and suggestions were made to exclude him. The natural health and insight of the group asserted itself quickly, however, and the suggestion was, by tacit consent, dropped. In the allocation of roles between students,

diffidence about leadership in a group with no imposed structure has been evident; at one time there was a tendency to place the two males in a somewhat 'policeman-like' role. It is my impression that this has diminished though I suppose it is to some extent inevitable. It seems that other roles have developed on the basis of inclination and talent and that although these are not rigid they are functional and on the whole consistent.

### Activities

There have been a range of what might loosely be called 'crafts', involving individual children in activity beside each other but not 'in co-operation'. It is my impression that these have been successful in the sense of satisfying certain children at certain times in very important ways. (N. "loved the glitter and how it shone under the street lamps"). But students have to learn the limited concentration span and limited potential of some children in actual terms. The important thing is the achievement in the children's terms, not the students.

There have also been the boisterous games in the gyms for older boys, the degree of whose capacity to play as a team varies very considerably. I am not clear how much this has improved or changed during the term with individuals or sub groups.

There are thirdly the 'in-between' games which range from fairly structured activities like cards or 'the hanky game' to activities which arise spontaneously from the children - being 'tied up' by students, given piggy-backs, or sometimes a game on their own such as 'playing houses'. (Q. Is this increasing?) We are now ready, I think, to analyse these activities in terms of what they give, or don't give, the children in relation to their personalities, on which students have gathered invaluable material. We are also beginning to think about the use of verbal communication - apparently casual - in the course of activity, which so far has been noted but not used.

### Relationship with the outside

The Warden of the Centre is well disposed and patient - but did express anxiety to me about discipline, especially about minor thieving. He is subject to pressures from 'outside' - a local Vicar and certain neighbours who complain of noise and (fairly minor) destructiveness. Relationships with the 'committee' of the Community Centre are therefore important.

An important area of indirect learning here concerns the relationships of a fairly close knit community on a housing estate. Caseworkers are rarely aware of the subtle interplay that goes on. Envy and ambivalence about such ventures as our playgroups are built into the problem of running them. (See "Stress and Release in an Urban Estate", Spencer. Chapters on Adolescent Clubs).

Our students ran into a particularly dramatic and amusing illustration of this when a powerful grandmother harangued us for a good half hour; the central accusation was that our students had wrongly accused her grandson (in the playgroup) of stealing. But in the course of this, the sense of persecution and victimisation by the whole estate was apparent.

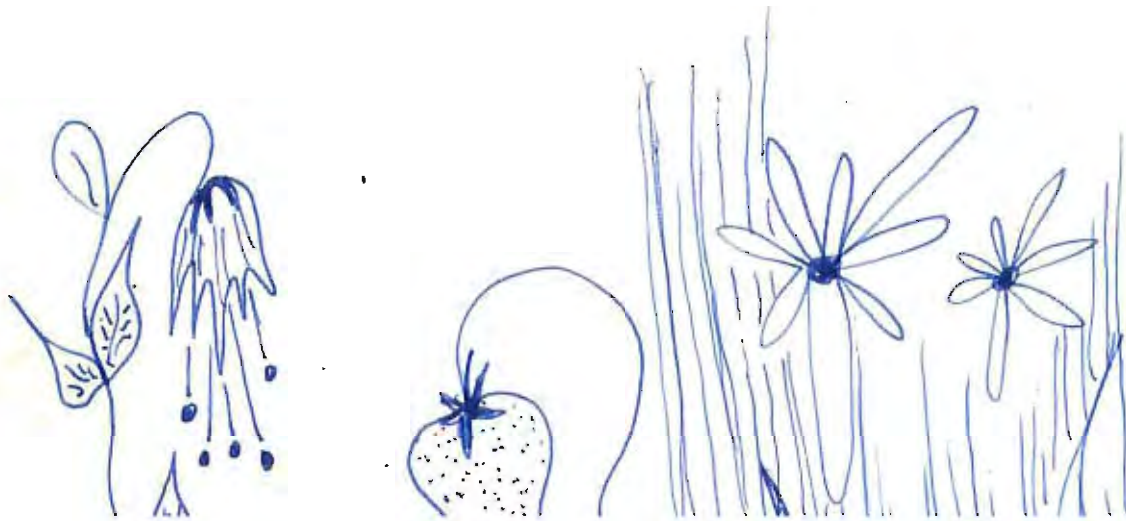
Conclusion

What are we doing and where are we going? Is the original statement of the aims of the group high-falutin' and unrealistic?

One thing is obvious: the children want the group's attendance has been remarkably good. What is it they get? What is enjoyment? All children enjoy play and base much physical, intellectual and emotional benefit from it. Am I right in thinking that there has been a sense of urgency<sup>and</sup> in a few cases of desperation in many of these children's demands for play. Babies begin by playing with their parents and move in childhood to playing with each other. Can students offer a 'token' experience of that which in some cases was missed? Where current family tension is intense, what of the relief of just getting away from it? Can some be helped to relate more effectively with their peers?

So to phase 2.

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