

Who Cares about our Under 5's?

Tallaght Pre-School Services Seminar Report

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Who cares about our Under-Fives?

Seminar Report on pre-school services in Tallaght 18th May 1990

Introduction

In 1989 the Combat Poverty Agency funded research commissioned by OMEP into pre-school provision in the greater Dublin area. The research work was carried out by Dr Jo Murphy-Lawless of SUS Research and a report entitled 'Playing for Keeps' was published in the Autumn of 1989.

Much of the research work for the report had been carried out in Tallaght with parents, playgroup leaders and workers involved in the child-care field. Dr Murphy-Lawless, at the request of Barnardo's, held a workshop in St Muirín's House, Tallaght, on the research findings. From this workshop a planning group decided to highlight the report's findings through a seminar which would also raise the issue of funding for services for the Under-Five's in Tallaght.

Seminar Planning Group:

Nora Clarke:	Barnardo's – Tallaght
Jacinta Gore:	St Thomas' Community Playgroup
Anne Hogan:	Fettarcain Women's Group
Maria O'Reilly:	Barnardo's – Tallaght
Margaret Quinn:	Barnardo's – Tallaght
Angela Thornton:	Toy Library Parents Support Group
Catherine Walker:	St Thomas' Community Playgroup
Marie Ward:	Millbrook Parents Group

The seminar was chaired by Margaret Quinn – Barnardo's with Andrew Logue, Director of Child Care, Barnardo's, giving an introductory talk and a keynote address by Dr Jo Murphy-Lawless, SUS Research.

Andrew Logue opened the seminar by giving a brief history of Barnardo's work in Tallaght. Tallaght Welfare Society invited Barnardos to Tallaght to provide a community playgroup advisory service in the mid-seventies and the work of the agency developed steadily from that time. It currently offers a day-care centre, toy library service, work with adult education and women's groups, after-school and out-of school programmes for children and a community playgroup advisory service. Andrew Logue stated:

'There is a real need to organise and co-ordinate services for the under-fives in Tallaght. Pre-school education should be funded in the same way as National Schools are.'

Dr Jo Murphy-Lawless presented the findings of the report 'Playing for Keeps' to the seminar. Dr Murphy-Lawless has been involved in both academic and research work since 1970 and worked with Dave Redmond and Katrina Ungruh, all of SUS Research Ltd in researching and compiling 'Playing for Keeps.'

The Scope of the Research:

The purpose of the study was to gather information on the current position of pre-school services in the Eastern Health Board region, to identify levels of demand and to investigate needs. The study concentrated on two forms of pre-school provision – EHB funded day-care centres and community playgroups in the Tallaght area.

Approach:

Factors such as wide-scale unemployment and the growth of single parent families, often through marital breakdown have led to a decisive increase in family poverty in Ireland throughout the 1980's.

'Playing for Keeps' argues that the needs of the numbers of children now at risk of experiencing poverty, needs which should be met at the earliest possible stage through the provision of extensive pre-school facilities, are not being addressed by government childcare policies.

Child development research over several decades had indicated that pre-school programmes play a vital role in the lives of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, enabling them to develop social and learning skills that can help them overcome the multi-dimensional effects of poverty.

In-depth fieldwork amongst community playgroups and key child care staff was carried out in Tallaght which has a large child population and areas with high levels of social need.

Current population figures and projections related to pre-school children in the greater Dublin area as well as Tallaght were also utilised in assessing current and future need for such services.

Results:

Day-Care Centre Provision:

- of the 777 children attending the Centres, a third were from single parent families. Of 531 fathers whose work status was recorded, only 35% were in full-time employment.

According to the poverty data from the ESRI, children from single parent families and families where there is unemployment are most likely to be at risk of poverty.

- Of the 14 Day Care Centres which kept waiting lists, only 5 could offer a place to a child in under six months.
- In 5 Centres, children had to wait for over one year before getting a place; 8 of the centres had between 20 and 39 children on their waiting list. The survey also indicated that staffing levels were at a minimum.
- On average, there was one staff member for 6 to 10 children.

These figures indicate the level of demand for places and bear out recent EC studies which have indicated that Ireland has a very low level of provision in any form for pre-school children. 5 of the Centres no longer keep a waiting list at all because of the lack of places.

While dealing with children who are considerably more disadvantaged than children in other settings, childcare staff find their work impeded through lack of necessary resources, including staff. They are hardpressed to see to the

children's basic needs, let alone deal intensively with developmental and educational goals.

'There just aren't the facilities here to accommodate the number of young families in the socio-economic group that we have here at all . . . they could treble the service we're providing here . . . and it would only be the tip of the iceberg'. (Interviewee)

Results:

Community Playgroups

For children from economically disadvantaged families, of which Tallaght has many, low-cost community playgroups are often the only possibility for obtaining valuable pre-school experience.

Organised and run by committees of local parents, the playgroups are meeting a critical need in areas where there is no other pre-school experience available for the vast majority of children.

Yet interview data indicate that the same problems of lack of staff and resources which affect the Day Care centres are daily realities and are even being compounded in the community setting:

- Community playgroups which had begun to establish themselves in Tallaght were drastically limited by the effects of government cutbacks in 1985.
- In 1988, the Tallaght Community Playgroup Co-operative pointed out that a mere 300 places were available for the under-4s in the whole of Tallaght, in community playgroups.
- With no grant aid whatsoever available to them, playgroup organisers must meet the basic running costs of rent, insurance, heating, lighting, and equipment.

In addition to fundraising, they have to cope with the problem of limited options for training and uncertainty from year to year about premises.

They also have to try, and by no means always successfully, to keep the weekly cost of playgroups low enough so that parents can continue to afford to bring their children along.

Community Playgroups: 'They have gone to school at four, four and a half and I've had no problems with them settling down in school . . . that upheaval children who don't have pre-school care tend to sort of have . . . you could pick the children out who haven't had any interaction with other children'. (Interviewee)

Needs:

The research findings from this study indicate the absolute inadequacy of current pre-school provision in relation to:

- **the entire population of under-5s in the Tallaght area – 9,517 in 1986; projected 9,679 in 2001.**
- **the special needs of children who are at risk of poverty in the Tallaght area.**

To realise the potential of pre-school provision as an intervention strategy to combat poverty, parents and childcare workers involved in organising and providing pre-school provision have identified the following needs:

- Grant-aid for running costs including rent and insurance
- Training and Support Measures with back-up expertise from professionals to assist playleaders in establishing pre-school as an ongoing community resource and in acquiring skills they have identified as relevant to their needs.
- Income Support for Children-measures to incorporate additional child support for parents dependent on social welfare and those in low pay are vital so that parents can meet all basic needs, including pre-school provision.

'If you were to say to yourself' I have this 2.50 for the playgroup or I have 2.50 for a loaf of bread and three pints of milk' I can bet you the loaf of bread and three pints of milk will win hands down and it should'. (Interviewee)

Conclusions from 'Playing for Keeps'

There are a number of urgent issues which need to be tackled immediately in relation to pre-school intervention. These include:

Policy Measures

- formally establishing within the framework of state childcare policy, the necessity of providing pre-school facilities for the 0-4s;
- within such a framework, immediately allocating finance and resources to make pre-school experience a reality for the majority of children;
- making pre-school provision *a priority* for children subject to the multiple effects of poverty;
- addressing the needs and training requirements of parents who become involved in pre-school work at community level.

Community Participation

- groups and organisations already providing services for pre-school children within local areas should investigate what the priorities and needs are at local level;
- they should then identify appropriate forms of provision that need to be expanded for the pre-school population in their area;

A Consultative Process and Ongoing Work

A comprehensive debate should be taking place on the needs of pre-school children and ways to address those needs. That debate should be part of a consultative process in which:

- at the policy-making level, a working party is established where representatives of the groups already active, most especially including community groups, should draw up a strategy to meet the needs of pre-school children;
- at the community level, current pre-school provision in the form of community playgroups, mother and toddler groups and the related work of Day Care Centres should be given an immediate allocation of interim funding to carry on and extend their work while a policy document is in process of being drawn up.

Seminar Discussion

Dr Murphy-Lawless' presentations was followed by a discussion on the report findings by participants at the seminar. The atmosphere was heated as the group shared their experiences of struggling to meet the needs of pre-school children. The child-care bill was referred to several times in the discussions.

'One of the implications of the Child Care Bill is the *money* that's involved. It is a big issue. The Child Care Bill has been going back and forward for ten years now. Women's work is undervalued. Child-care is an issue for women, whether they work within or outside the home'.

'All children have two parents. I think it is appalling that there are only three men present at this seminar today'.

'The Child Care Bill has been read but a lot of it has to be looked at again. Men should also be lobbying. Why is it just the women?

The issue of precisely who is responsible for child-care policy and funding was raised by participants as were the issues of non-resourcing, under-resourcing and lack of support services and training.

Participants felt strongly that only by lobbying and other forms of political action would the issue of pre-school services be placed on the political agenda.

'Mothers do a lot of work under extreme circumstances. It's essential to have a break from children regularly. Middle-class parents can get this break as they have the money to pay for it. There are many who don't have the resources. Everybody has a vote – it's time to use it to get what you want.'

'Elect public representatives who are seen to be meeting our needs, not just giving us lip-service.'

'Decent resources and social policy go hand in hand. From the Exchequer we got South Fork Garda Station and a prison in Clondalkin that cost £43 million. Great! Criminals will be locked up – but what about our children. Society is changing and women and children are being left behind. Why should we be the martyrs? It is time for change!'

Conclusion

Almost one hundred people attended the seminar and a group of fifteen representing the various agencies, community groups and parents groups present decided to form the Tallaght Under-Five's Action Group. Broadly speaking the group has the key objectives. Firstly to develop awareness at community and statutory levels of the needs of pre-school children and secondly to campaign for a comprehensive range of services appropriately funded to meet these needs. The action group will bring forward work on the issues identified on the document 'Playing for Keeps.'

Barnardo's – Tallaght
September 1990.