

spare Rib

Women's magazine
No.17 20p

Day
Nursery
Revolution

Women's groups
and the crisis
of the individual

A working nightmare-
8 hours a day
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Could YOU do it?

Penelope Slinger's probings
into feminine phantasy



Much as we may deplore the increasing tendency of mothers of young children to work, it would be unrealistic not to count its economic yields." In case we're tempted to relax now that the government is committed to a programme of nursery education, it's worth remembering that this quote comes from the Plowden Report (1967), which is the basis for Mrs Thatcher's proposals. On this basis, all children under

three, and half the three-year-olds will be left out of the programme, and of those who do get a place, only 15% will be full-time. How did they arrive at 15%? They decided (though they don't tell us how) that 10% of mothers are incapable of looking after their children, and that of all the mothers with children between three and five, only 5% work full-time. Sheer guesswork, and hopelessly inadequate - and the research is already eight years out of date. There is one point at which Plowden and Thatcher disagree: money. Where Plowden proposes £80m, Thatcher proposes £30m - for the same programme.

But where do working mothers fit into this? Even if there were two or three times as many full-time places (and recent research suggests that this is what is needed) the hours are still 9.30 to 4.30 - which are just not long enough for the vast majority of working women. Day nurseries have long hours, but they have long waiting lists too, and in the main only cater for priority hardship cases.

In all this, nothing is said of the kind of education we can expect for our children. Clearly, the demands of women have to be stated again.

As our society is structured at the present time, a mother is generally responsible for the daily activities of her child until the age of five. Many women feel isolated and frustrated in this situation: the only training we receive for this parental role is the experience of our own lives.

Many mothers would like to work, others must for financial reasons - all are faced with the practical burden of arranging for suitable child-care. All are faced with the more intolerable emotional burden of guilt placed on them by a society which has built a myth around motherhood and dumped it on all women regardless of their individuality.

The Womens Liberation Movement has long been aware of these problems and has recognised that the child-care available in this country does not fulfil the needs of most mothers. After much discussion and argument, the demand for free 24-hour nurseries for children from 0 to 5 was formulated for the first women's demonstration in March 1971. 24 hours for women who had to work at night - nurses and cleaners, etc.

This demand proved unrealistic and unworkable.

On March 30th 1971, Camden Council in London held a meeting on Child-Care, two members of the Womens Liberation Movement attended and complained about the existing child-care facilities in Camden. Following this meeting, two women were approached by the Director of Social Services and asked for positive suggestions as to how the problem might be tackled.

With some reservations they agreed to discuss the position among themselves. Several meetings were held with members from twelve North London groups attending.

At these meetings it was decided we would ask the Council to:

A: Supply us with 12 empty short-life houses in redevelopment areas.

B: Renovate these houses.

C: Give us a grant for one full-time worker and running costs for

the house.

We in return would:

A: Organise and run 12 full-time nurseries.

B: Supply free labour on a voluntary rota basis, (in the belief that free education is the right of every child.)

We insisted that the nurseries should be free, and that we should have complete control and autonomy in the running of it and of all activities connected, with the nurseries.

The group felt that the hours the nurseries were open must suit mothers who work full-time. We must be open at least from 8.30 to 6.00pm. We were also anxious that men should be involved, believing that child-rearing is the responsibility of both men and women.

The large group of womens liberation members slowly dwindled to a small core. This group then became involved with local women not in the movement and a working group of 7 was finally formed. This group negotiated with the Council for 18 long and disheartening months. How long can a pre-school child wait?

On 11th May 1971 our proposals were accepted by the Director of Social Services and we started to look for suitable housing.

We chose the Highgate New Town area primarily as it was local to most of us, and several in the group already had contact with the local community. The community was in flux: half the residents had been moved out during the redevelopment, programme, and other homeless families moved in for short stays in condemned houses. So we particularly wanted our Centre to be a caring friendly place for people old and young.

We searched the area and gave the Council long lists of empty houses, many of which they did not know they owned.

Eventually we agreed upon a house, No. 123, Dartmouth Park Hill. We drew up plans for the conversion and had many meetings with the Council about money, organisation, and just getting things started.

At this time we realised that one of our greatest mistakes was never to get any of the Council promises in writing. This made it extremely difficult to put pressure on them as all dates and agreements were verbal - delay followed exasperating delay. Finally we became so frustrated that we wrote them a threatening letter saying that unless we were given a definite completion date we would demonstrate publicly and take our story to the media. The Council outsmarted us by releasing their own press-statement.

However, as a result of our letter we got a completion date of 12th August, also a pledge published in the Daily Mail that we should be rehoused once our house is demolished.

We got the keys in September and were shocked at the state in which the contractors had left the place. Foolishly, we had said we would do the decorating, hoping to get local people involved in this work, so that they would really feel that it was their Centre. The amount of work left for us to do was staggering, and as time was so short and everyone fed up we felt unable to ask for local help.

There followed desperate weeks of carpentry, plumbing, plastering and painting.

We also learnt at this stage that we would not be allowed to accommodate babies.

This was a blow as we felt strongly that mothers of very young children desperately need a few hours to themselves during the week. ▶

NOT SO MUCH A DAY NURSERY..

The first child-care centre funded by a local council was set up in no.123 Dartmouth Park Hill, London. Here the group explain how they negotiated with the council, the difficulties they surmounted, and the day to day running of the centre.

More weeks of ordering, organising and buying equipment followed. Finally, on December 4th 1972, we opened.

The Centre is run in a 4-storey house with a flat at the top occupied by a mother and child. We have discovered several good things about having a Centre for children in a house rather than a church-hall or a purpose-built nursery school. First the children can relate to the size of the rooms and it is more like their own homes. Secondly it is flexible. We can change things around if we like, paint it how we (and the kids) want it, use it in the evenings and weekends and what's more, both of us - kids and grown-ups - feel that it's OUR Centre, it doesn't belong to the church or the education authority.

We have separate rooms for different activities, namely an art room (paint, clay, water-play, cutting and pasting), imaginative play room (house corner, dressing up, building materials), "quiet" activities room and eating room (books, table toys), sleeping room and office.

We were given £15000 initially to equip the Centre throughout, and managed to get several things second-hand or free; and we get £3000 a year running costs, to include salaries of the paid workers. We have one qualified full-time worker and one part-time worker, both having experience with pre-school children, and a cleaner worker in the evenings, all of them having been chosen by us.

There is a rota of people who work at the Centre consisting of paid workers, parents who are able to give time and volunteers who do not have children at the Centre but who want to work there. We have actively encouraged men to work on the rota if they can and there are now four who do. We have found that they are capable of doing more than just mending the toys, but they have often felt unsure of themselves, and it's been hard for them entering a world where to date, women are a majority and have more experience.

The children are being cared for by, and are learning from, a group of people, not just a single parent or teacher, in a stimulating and loving environment. This allows a much greater range of experiences and relationships for the child than the often stifling and exclusive mother-child bond, and enables us to care for our children together in a supportive situation where problems can be shared. It also means that we have more time of our own to work if we want or have to, and to develop ourselves in other ways. Both the children and the grown-ups are benefiting from the collective care of our children.

There is a journal written daily in which the events, progress and problems of the day are recorded, plus any other information or

questions one wants to pass on to others. This means that parents who usually work at the Centre once a week can read it and find out what has been happening on other days. It is also very useful as a record of the children and the Centre, and we have been able to trace changes and developments since we began. Anyone who wants to can write in it, and writing in it makes you really think about what has happened.

There are 21 children who come to the Centre, but only 15 at any one time because of space limitations. Some are at the Centre all day, some only in the morning or the afternoon, and the age range is two to five years. Six of the children who come are those of the original organisers, but our priority now is to take children from the immediate neighbourhood.

We are open from 8.30 until 6pm to meet the needs of those parents who have full-time jobs and therefore cannot work on the rota. Some of the parents have part-time jobs and others work at home (housework and care of babies). Both of the latter are expected to work on the rota. There is always a wholesome meal midday plus morning and afternoon snacks, and the younger children sleep in the afternoon if they want to.

Many of us are trying to work out different ways of relating to children. We don't want to be authorities always telling them what to do and commenting on whether they are good or bad. We want to recognise them as human beings and to treat them as such. There are many ways in which we have been attempting to turn these ideas into practice and to translate the theory into something more than words and hot air. We encourage the children to be independent and to do as much for themselves as they can and we have been continually surprised at how capable they are. The lunch time procedure is a good example of this. They serve themselves from central bowls on the table, pour their own drinks (and wipe up the spills!), clear away their own dishes and collect their own dessert from the kitchen. In the beginning we all had to restrain ourselves from always doing things for them, although it may be quicker and cleaner to do so in the short term. It took a great deal of thought, trial and error before things ran anything like smoothly and we are still learning. We had to buy jugs that they could handle easily, bowls that they could see into, and we are trying to get child size brooms that really work so that they can sweep up afterwards and not just 'play' at sweeping in the house corner.

All the toys and most of the art materials are on open shelves at child height so that the kids can always help themselves to things they want to use and they are encouraged to put things back when they have finished with them. The basic activities mentioned earlier are always available, but in addition we plan special activities around a weekly theme, in order to increase the number of different experiences we can offer the children. Examples of themes include living things, colour, how things work, shape and size, the senses,



'We are looking for alternatives to traditional day care of young children. We want to bring up our children to be self-sufficient but caring people who can relate to each other co-operatively not competitively. We want our children of both sexes to grow up with equal opportunities and not to be stereotyped into sex roles.'



'As Sue says, 'Sometimes I think we're working with a group of beautiful, lively, extroverted, sensitive children. I just hope they'll find school and the rest of the world as exciting after they leave here.'

printing etc. Whenever possible we go out with the children to try and link what they experience at the Centre with the world outside. The same local park can illustrate colour one week and plants the next. Having a theme helps to bring continuity from one day to another and it also makes us feel more secure when we work at the Centre if we know there are activities planned. One day the kids painted the leaves of the runner beans we were growing in the yard, bright red and yellow, and were terrifically pleased with the result. A few weeks later they saw that the leaves died because the sun and air couldn't get to them. They learnt something, but even so they will probably do it again!

Whenever possible we try to involve the children in everything that happens at the Centre. They help to shop for the food, they go to the laundrette to do washing, they help in preparation of food (cutting up fruit, grating cheese, making rice pudding or jelly) they put out chairs and set the tables. It does not always run smoothly. They don't always want to do it. But on the whole they respond to responsibility and appear to thrive on it. Grown ups are always available to help them, to talk to them, to cuddle and love them and very often they comfort and hug each other. They are encouraged to help and care for one another and to be aware of each other's needs. This can be done in many small but important ways e.g. asking them to help each other on and off with coats, pointing out when another child is crying and asking them why they think she is crying, noticing when children are away and discussing where they might be. It isn't happening overnight, but we do believe things are changing and the kids are growing more sensitive to one another and are better able to work together, asking each other for help rather than always asking the adults. Like the adults they are learning that things get easier when they are shared.

We believe that girls and boys should have the same opportunities. We do not want the girls to be always in the house corner with the dolls preparing for motherhood while the boys are enjoying rough and tumble games in the yard. We interest the boys in doing traditionally female things like cooking and setting tables and encourage girls to hammer nails and saw wood, although no-one is forced to do anything.

We don't want our children to be channelled into very rigid roles according to their sex which would limit their choices now and continue to do so all their lives.

One of the central problems of education is contact between home and school. In one sense, we have no problem - the workers are employed by the parents, and are hardly likely to exclude them. But how to relate what goes on in the Centre to what goes on in the home? The weekly Sunday meeting provides an essential link. As a rule, one or two children are discussed each week - people are notified beforehand, and the discussion only takes place if the parent or parents of the child are there.



Here parents can voice any anxieties or suggestions they may have about their children - not, as it were, to a group of 'professionals', but to a group made up largely of other parents, who know their children and work with them, and whose children in turn are known to all. So discussion is based, not on asking the advice of experts, but on the exchange of experience and common problems. How does the child relate to other children in the Centre? Or to brothers, sisters or parents? What happens in the home or out shopping? Has the child changed since coming to the Centre, or do the parents have difficulty in relating their behaviour there to their behaviour in the home?

Not all parents are used to handling a lot of children at once, and many of us feel the need to discuss some of the problems we encounter. In the meeting there's the opportunity to learn from each other as a group - from successes and failures - and of basing our learning on our practice, and vice versa.

The meeting, in fact, is fundamental to the organisation of the Centre. In a situation where most parents work, there is no other regular opportunity for all to get together. It's not just a question of 'participating' in the running of the Centre - the parents run it, and the meeting is the place where the policies and daily routines are worked out.

Subjects for discussion include children's books, and the almost insoluble problem of finding ones which don't cast children into the old stereotypes. Or aggression among the children: should they be left to fight it out, or should we intervene? And if so, at what stage? And what do the children expect of us? Or again, the problem of sex-roles: if a girl *wants* to do the washing up and help with the food, why shouldn't she? But if she monopolises these activities, will she be preventing a boy from learning? On other occasions we've used films - i.e. other people's ideas about child-care - to stimulate our own discussions.

We don't want to make it sound as if we don't have problems: we do. There are personal and political differences between people, as in all groups, and we can't claim that everyone in the neighbourhood looks favourably on us. Many older residents, who were forced to bring up their children without free facilities of any kind, are understandably resentful.

It's not always easy for new parents coming into the Centre to



Discussion about whether to allow the kids who are putting water in their food - and everyone else's - at mealtimes to continue, or whether to take away their water, or everybody's, or what. Some wanted to observe behaviour to see whether kids were expressing creative or emotional needs, others saw it as playing up and wanted a few simple rules. Discussing the water in the food issue we discovered that behaviour upset almost every adult whose reasons varied from: 'Well then I can't finish his lunch for him' to 'Food is not a toy' to 'Instinctively it annoys me but then I think my reaction is a little overstated. It's his food after all.'



One of the aims has been to get men involved. They'll never get involved by our telling them they ought to be, but if we start organising our own lives so that we give each other strength, so that raising kids becomes more exciting, so that relationships are warmer, men will want to become involved. And that will be the beginning of a new society.'

realise that its not only their Centre, but their responsibility to run. In the meetings, some people talk a lot, and some hardly at all. It's important that we're sensitive to everyone, and don't allow one group to dominate. Perhaps more important, however, is the inability or unwillingness of some parents to come to the meeting at all. We've argued a lot about this, but we've finally come to the conclusion that in an organisation in which responsibilities should be shared by all, we should insist that parents come to at least one meeting a month.

Transport, too, is a problem: several of us have vans or cars, but we regard outings as an essential part of the learning process, and we need to find ways of getting hold of the money for a mini-bus.

We have had many discussions about publicising the work and aims of the Centre. Some members of the group feel that work in this field diverts much-needed energies from the practical business of running the Centre. This is a very real problem, as all are pressed for time.

Others feel that it is of vital importance that we make our information and experience available to others trying to organise in similar ways, and that we should try to spread our ideas in the hope of showing people what is possible.

All feel, however, that any publicity given to the Centre should be controlled by us. Those in the Women's Movement have good reason to be wary of the media. In general we try to relate our publicity to some activity.

Naturally we did our best to make the opening known, particularly in the immediate neighbourhood, and on March 5th this year we held a press conference. The response from the members of the press who turned up was sympathetic.

Later we held a public meeting for groups and individuals interested in setting up centres in their own areas. This meeting was very successful, and gave us all a great sense of solidarity and achievement. The opportunity to discuss the Centre with new interested people was especially rewarding and hopeful.

A film is being made about the centre with the object of showing it to people as a basis for discussion.

We do not want to remain an isolated experiment, but to become part of a much wider movement of local collective action■

All photograph captions are taken from Carol Dix's original article on Dartmouth Park Hill Children's Community Centre which the group rejected.

I AM MARY DUNNE

Brian Moore

A woman's dilemma. With each of her three husbands, Mary had assumed a different identity. One day she forgot her name altogether.

NOW IN PENGUINS 30p



A Letter to Jane

JPG: Neither *L'Express* nor the American militant have made the distinction between Jane Fonda speaking, asking questions and Jane Fonda listening.

JLG: For the Vietnamese, in the present historical stage of their struggle, the most important fact about this picture is that Jane Fonda is in it. And in our opinion, it doesn't matter much for them whether she is speaking or listening because the silence is just as effective. The important thing is that she is there. But here the most important thing is not necessarily the same. 'We couldn't help observing that the text beneath the picture was lying when it said that the actress was speaking to the inhabitants of Hanoi since the picture plainly showed that the militant was listening. And since we need the contradictory truth of this picture and not its eternal truth, it's also important for us to make the observation that *L'Express* is lying on every level. But we must also add that if the magazine is able to lie, it is because the picture makes it possible. Actually, *L'Express* takes advantage of, profits by, the implicit authorisation of the picture to hide the fact that the militant is listening. By saying that she is speaking about peace in Vietnam, *L'Express* is able to avoid saying, what peace, leaving this up to the picture alone; as if the picture said precisely what sort of peace was involved. We have proved however that this is not the case. But if *L'Express* can do this, it is probably because the American actress does not express a struggle as a militant by saying anything other than, 'Peace in Vietnam', and because she doesn't ask herself exactly what peace and particularly what peace in America. And if she doesn't ask herself this yet or is not able to, it is not because she still acts as an actress and not as a militant. But, on the contrary, because as a militant she doesn't ask herself questions yet about what new approach or style might be applied to her function as an actress both technically and socially. In other words, she doesn't consider militant activity as an actress even though the North Vietnamese invited her precisely as a militant-actress.

And one must say as an American: 'I'll keep my mouth shut because I admit I have got nothing to say about this. The Vietnamese must say it. I have to listen then, to whatever they have to say because I am not a part of South East Asia.' The rest is just a masquerade■

BITCHING IS TOUGH AND VICIOUS. READ IT.

BITCHING by Marion Meade £2.95

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Garnstone Press

