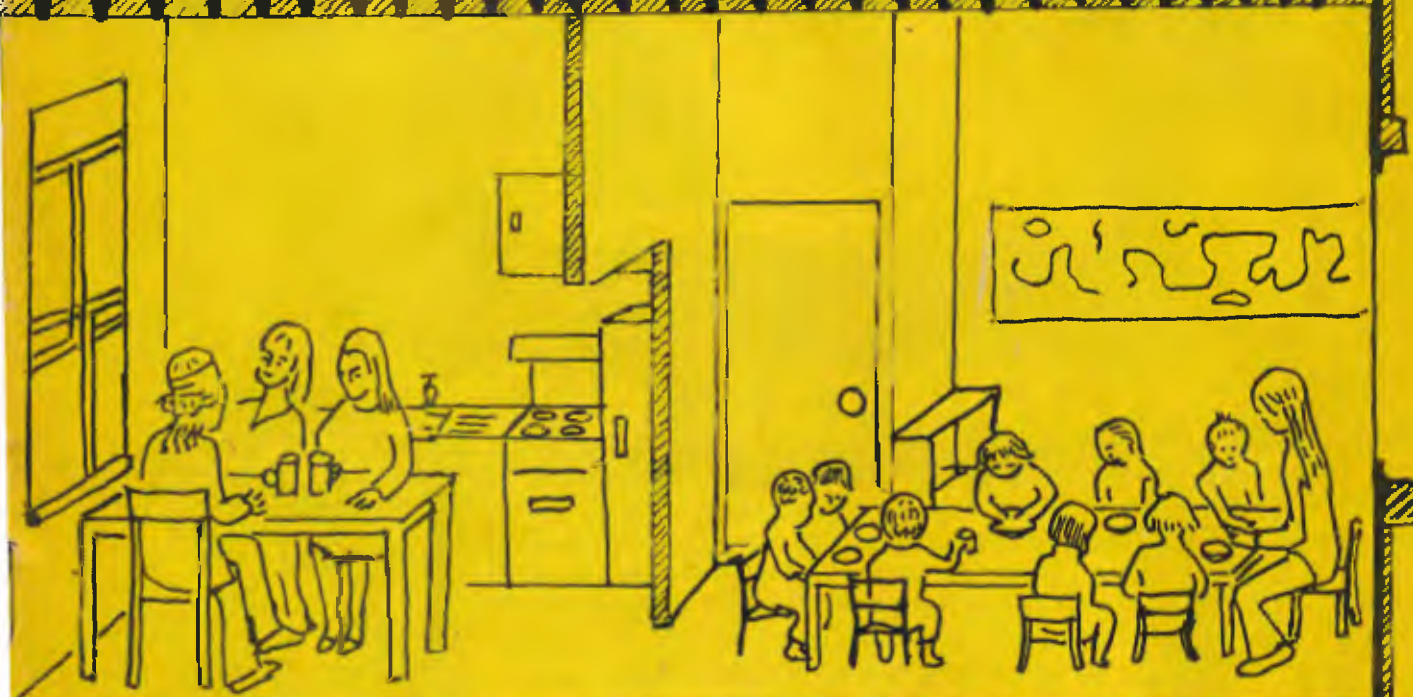


CHILDRENS COMMUNITY CENTRE

our experiences of collective child care



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DARTMOUTH
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ORGANISE NOW



REMEMBER : There isn't a single council in the country providing enough day-care facilities at the moment. Government plans for expansion are hopelessly inadequate. Parental control is minimal or non-existent. Don't be put off by promises of future provision - your kids will be too old by the time it's ready.
GET AT YOUR COUNCIL NOW.



- 1) Try to meet regularly, otherwise you can lose momentum.
- 2) Take notes of everything that is decided.
- 3) Keep copies of all the letters you send to the council etc.
- 4) Always get a written statement from the council - 11 as words over the telephone can always be 'forgotten' or denied.
- 5) When you meet council officers or councillors don't go alone. Mutual support is essential, will provide witnesses if necessary, and helps when it comes to assessing the value of the meeting afterwards.
- 6) If you are getting nowhere, change tactics : take your story to the press, sit in with all the kids at the Town Hall, squat a house etc.

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Introduction



The Children's Community Centre is now in its second year, and the euphoria we experienced at actually opening the place in December 1972 has been replaced by a growing awareness of real contradictions in a scheme such as ours.

We are a parent-controlled nursery financed by a local council grant which has to be applied for annually. We are open from 8.30.am to 6.p.m five days a week and we provide free day-care for eighteen children full- and part-time. Although we employ one person full-time and another part-time to work with the children, the majority of workers, usually parents, are unpaid. Our scheme was cheap enough to be supported by a local council and not without advantage to ourselves.

The first idea for the Centre came from a group of women in the Women's Liberation Movement, some of whom had worked unsuccessfully on the campaign for 24-hour nurseries and who realised that the only way they would get nursery provision before their own children went to school would be to start their own nursery. This group was joined by other women similarly stimulated by their own need, and an interest in the ideas and possibilities of a parent-controlled children's centre. It took us twenty months negotiating with the council before the Centre was finally opened. Just before opening, a pamphlet was produced describing the experiences of those twenty months.

Our aims then were :

- 1) We wanted a lot of parent-controlled day-care centres for pre-school children that were not too large, so that :
 - a) families were within walking distance
 - b) children were in a 'home' size environment
 - c) there would be easy communication between all workers on the policies and running of the Centres.
- 2) We hoped to involve the immediate neighbourhood, from old age pensioners to teenagers at school, and to provide a meeting-place for parents and others in the neighbourhood.
- 3) We wanted the responsibility of running the Centre both practically and ideologically to be shared among all workers and parents.
- 4) We hoped eventually that all workers including parents would be paid.
- 5) We wanted to break down the stereotype of sex-roles for both adults and children by :
 - a) involving fathers and other men
 - b) providing situations and activities that question what boys and girls have traditionally been expected to do.

And finally we were concerned with the quality of day-care we would provide for pre-school children. We hoped to give them the opportunity to question, to make choices and to learn to live and share with others.

Now, however, we feel the need to describe what we have actually worked through, both the problems and the delights. We found this, as a collective, very difficult, mainly because we were having to work out through endless discussions what we really did think, and we kept holding back from writing until we felt more sure, but of course that time never really comes so we've written it anyway!

As we have been brought together through our children's nursery we don't necessarily start off by having much in common, but working together with all our combined class and political differences is a consciousness-raising process for all of us. The cross-section of political and non-political attitudes, though fraught at times, raises unpredictable and important dimensions of the problems we discuss.

The pamphlet consists of descriptive sections of how we actually function and sections which broadly discuss our developing policy. Different people volunteered to write on each area, and each piece was collectively edited. We have in addition a section of individual personal experiences of the Centre. We conclude with some of the problems and a practical guide to setting up a Centre.

It has always been our aim to encourage in any way we could the establishment of places similar to ours, but there are many points where groups could go adrift and end up taking on work that is the social responsibility of the local council. Therefore the sharing of experience is crucial and we have written this pamphlet in the hope that our experiences can be useful to others with similar projects.

The Area



The Centre is in Highgate New Town, once a sizeable and stable working class community in North London. Now, however, it is a redevelopment area. The northern half has been demolished, and new flats are more than half-completed. The rest suffers from the decay that always goes with large-scale redevelopment: small shopkeepers leave as the population dwindles; the building sites spread mud and rubble all over the roads, making street-cleaning at times impossible; pavements are removed or broken by heavy lorries - and left unrepaired because the process will go on for years. Many houses are boarded up, some are left gaping, and the ones that are still lived in are sadly neglected: leaking roofs, rising damp, rotting boards and ill-fitting doors and windows are all common.

Some houses are occupied by squatters, some by homeless families officially placed in temporary accommodation, and the rest by the original tenants and owner-occupiers, many of whom have lived here all their lives. To Camden council, however, everyone is regarded as temporary, since they expect everyone to be out in three years or so. This means they don't consider the houses worth the expense of repair, so they ignore their duty to repair them - which for many people means suffering a redevelopment process lasting anything up to ten years in rotting houses, a hundred years old and declared legally unfit to live in. At the same time, over that period, their neighbourhood crumbles as the old community is broken up, friends leave and newcomers - squatters and homeless families - arrive who are a generation younger and have a completely different way of life.

It is into this context that the Centre came, and not surprisingly got a very mixed reception. For the older residents there were two immediate causes of resentment: their families had nearly all grown up and gone away, so they had no need for child-care. Secondly, in providing this unnecessary facility, the council had spent about £5,000 on a short-life house while it was refusing to spend a penny on essential repairs for their homes.

In addition, we later discovered, many were furious that the Centre was free. There were several reasons for this: older people who raised their families just after the war had had to pay for any child-care they got, and saw no reason why others should get it for nothing. Moreover the Centre takes families markedly different from the 'original' New Town people: squatters (whose kids are paid for by other people's rates), families on social security (who ought to be out at work), unsupported mothers (who ought to know better) and middle class families (who could afford to pay anyway). To cap it all, many people felt that the area was more than adequately provided for already by the nearby council day-nursery, and being accustomed to uniformed staff, were horrified by the informal dress of most parents and workers.

Relations with older residents are still not generally good. Our offer of assistance with pressing for repairs was turned down, as well as our invitation to come and see what the Centre is really like. The proportion of kids from the immediate area has risen substantially since we opened, but this - another early complaint - has made little difference to their attitude. This friction means a real contradiction for us, in that we are alienated from the more 'stable' part of the neighbourhood, while those for whom we provide an essential service - the young families in temporary accommodation - have no long-term stake in the area.

Our long-term goal remains a base in the new Highgate New Town, where there will be many new permanent residents with young children.



The House



123 Dartmouth Park Hill is a three-storey-plus-basement terrace house on a main road with adjoining shops. It is due to be pulled down towards the end of 1975 as part of the Highgate New Town redevelopment area (See previous section). It had been neglected and unoccupied for some time. The council did it up structurally, ready for us to decorate, installing toilet facilities, electric storage heating and a kitchen. However, there is no damp course, which has caused trouble in the basement play area : the walls, despite some treatment we had done, are constantly crumbling, and the vinyl-tiled floor is coming up in humps as a result of the damp.

Camden council gave us the house rent-free, and after we had made a formal application, gave us a total rate rebate. Formally we have a Licence to Let the house, and no written guarantee of re-housing. We have instead a public pledge made by the Director of Social Services.

We have found having a dwelling house a great advantage for this age-group of two to five years, because in size and design it is like a home, and being familiar to the children, avoids the feeling of being institutionalised. Having different kinds of activities on three floors gives more variety to the day, and offers the children more choice at any one time. There are different areas where they can be lively or restful, messy or clean, quiet or noisy.

The basement floor has an art room and an open area for building, climbing, water and sand and other more expansive activities. It also has four toilets and two wash-basins for the children. It opens on to a very small yard which has been ing-

enuously equipped to make the most of the space with climbing structures, sand, a slide and a kind of swinging 'horse'. The yard was designed by an Architectural Association student, who carried out the work with the help of her friends and some parents and workers at the Centre. But the small dimensions of the basement and yard mean that some of the larger equipment has to be stored - but is available on request. When the weather is bad the space is restricting for the full liveliness of energetic four-year-olds. Any piece of apparatus we have has to be on the small side - for example only three children can really play together at the water or sand tray. We have had to limit the use of tricycles to certain areas because they interfere so much with children wanting to paint or use clay.

The ground floor has the kitchen at the back, opening on to the front room where we have snacks and lunch. At other times the tables are used for small games - lego, jigsaws, playdough etc. An adult who is preparing food in the kitchen, with or without help from the kids, is within easy talking distance of the tables. The free flow between kitchen and front room means that making meals is not, as in an institution, an isolated activity which produces food as if by magic : it's part of the life of the Centre and at best involves the kids in sharing work with adults and doing something for each other. The bathroom is on this floor, and is used by the kids mainly for teeth-cleaning after lunch.

The red room, called after its plushy red carpet, is the front room on the first floor and houses the children's library and (on one wall) the 'office'. There is a big mirror at floor level. Here are music activities, dancing and movement and of course story-telling and reading. There are always stories after lunch for the children who want them, and they can choose their own book from the shelves. The floor of this room has soft carpet and large cushions to sit on, providing another atmosphere in contrast to the ground floor kitchen/dining area with a wooden floor, and the basement with its big black and white floor tiles and black walls covered with the children's work. The red room is used for meetings, especially the weekly Sunday one when we discuss every aspect of running our Centre (See section on the Meeting, p. 19.) It has also been used on occasion to put up mothers and children who need refuge from their home scene for a few nights. The top floor was converted into a flat for a mother and child to live in.

We are now looking for a new place for our Centre when this building has to be pulled down. We want a larger house with more outside space and larger rooms, preferably with more rooms on each floor. We want more space for other needs that have become apparent during our time here - a place for parents and children under two to use during the day, and more accommodation for overnight stays for parents needing refuge.

The Children



Numbers and ages

There is a maximum of fifteen children at the Centre at any one time because of limitations in space, but eighteen children come to the Centre during the week as some attend only part-time. Twelve children come full-time, others come mornings or afternoons and possibly two or three full days, depending on what the parents need. There are always at least three adults with the kids and often four, so we are able to split informally into small groups in different parts of the house, although there is a free flow from group to group. The age range is from two to five years and spans a wide range of different needs and stages of development. The younger ones sometimes interfere with things the older ones are doing, perhaps by spreading glue everywhere in the art-room or (unintentionally?) destroying things they have carefully made. The older ones also interfere with the little kids, but in a different way. They tend to intimidate them with too much noise and physical activity and frighten them in very convincing monster games. In order to give both groups more freedom we sometimes separate the kids according to age/development, and older ones might go out on a trip - for instance to the library, or swimming - and leave the younger ones with free range at the Centre. However we don't like being rigid about who does what as we end up regimenting the kids all the time.

We are not allowed to take any children under two years as the staffing and premises requirements are different. Most playgroups and nursery classes in schools don't take children until they are three, but two-year-olds seem to need more than parents can offer at home and enjoy being with other kids. In addition the mothers of two-year-

olds need a break from constant child-care, and this need is very rarely considered. The situation is even worse for women with children under two. Council day nurseries take babies, but you have to be a real 'priority case' to get your child in. Several women have come to us with children under two, desperate for a place to leave their child, and we've had to turn them away without offering any suitable possibilities. A woman's place is still in the home with her young children, unless of course she is regarded as an 'unfit mother', a category which includes single mothers, ex-mental patients and ex-prisoners. In these cases women are pressured to work and then get easy access to day-nurseries.

How we choose the children

One of the Centre's main aims was to organise child-care collectively, with parents caring for each other's children on a rota basis. Since there was to be only one paid full-time worker and one part-time, the Centre would depend on the labour of parents and this meant that the majority of places had to be given on the condition that the parents - mother, father or both - could give time. It was decided that a maximum of five full-time places could be given to children whose parents were unable to work on the rota, and that they would be serviced by those who could.

Originally we decided to take nine children full-time and the rest part-time, partly because of lack of space for lunches, but also because this meant more children (than if they all came full-time) and therefore more parental labour. Seven of the places (three of those full-time) went to the children of women who started the Centre and the rest were allotted rather randomly: some to families in the local neighbourhood who had been contacted before the Centre opened, and some as a result of successful pressure from articulate middle class women.

It was only later, when the Centre finally opened and became a reality rather than a promise, that people started pouring in and asking for places for their children, and it was then that we had to start thinking what our priorities were. We discussed this at length in our meetings, and since one of the original aims was that the Centre should have strong links with the local neighbourhood, it became obvious that priority for places should be given to families within the immediate area - a matter of about half-a-dozen streets.

The conditions in these streets, as we've said, (See section on the Area) were poor, with many families in crowded rooms, unable to escape the mice. Having narrowed down the families to this area we still had to decide which of these were priorities when places became free as a result of families moving out of the area or older children leaving to go to school. How could we decide who most needed the place? What criteria could we use?

All these children needed a place and of course there should be places for anyone and everyone who wants one, and here we were faced with the problem of 'selecting' children. It's an awful position to be in, and degrading for parents who have to beg in competition with one another for scarce facilities - and it's inevitable until there is universal free day-care. We visited some of the people on the waiting list to try and decide how desperate they were, and also contacted the local health visitor as she knew the families better than we did. We discussed everything in the meetings : we never laid down rigid criteria for taking children as each time we had a free place our own situation at the Centre was different. Sometimes the age of the child might be important (eg. if we had several two-year-olds at the time, we'd have taken an older child if possible), and at other times, if the parents' rota was thin in numbers it was important whether or not the parents could give time. It is the second of these situations which has always tied our hands.

It has become increasingly apparent that in an area such as ours, with so many unsupported mothers and families with both parents out at work, that the majority of people living in this neighbourhood cannot put in time on the rota. They need a service which will take care of their children for them during their working hours and not make constant demands on their very scarce time. We now have twelve children who come full-time (as opposed to the original nine) and have been forced to increase the numbers because of the very real needs of families. Consequently we have much less parental labour and the rota is often stretched to its limits. This puts additional strain on those people who do put in time. Clearly the only answer is to take on more paid workers. We must force the council to provide more money for the payment of staff.

Collectivity

We do not want to reproduce the social relationships present in society at large, and are trying to develop different ways for children to relate to each other and to adults. We want to work against the competition and individualism that Capitalism encourages and thrives on, and to break down hierarchies and challenge authority figures. We hope to work against the notion of the survival of the fittest and the domination of the weak by the strong, in particular because girls tend to come off worse in physical fights (See section on Sex Roles). We refuse to believe that competition, individualism, hierarchies and authorities are all part of 'human nature', and believe that it is possible to rear different kinds of people : people who can work together (at school they call it 'cheating'), who support and care for each other and who are sensitive to each other's needs. How do we do it? How can we begin to change things?



It's hard when all the forces of society are working against you and when a lot of kids have radically different Home/Centre experiences. The family is an incredibly strong socialising force, particularly with very young children, and when the home ideas are very different from some of the Centre ones, then the contradictions 'dilute' any changes we may try to make. In addition not all the people who work at the Centre on the rota share the beliefs outlined above, and so not everyone is working consistently to challenge the existing order. This again can only weaken the possibilities of changing anything.

Even so, it's not impossible to make a start. We encourage the children to turn to each other for help in doing something (eg. doing up buckles, moving tables) rather than to the adult authority figure, and we point out when children are missing from the group and discuss where they might be (sick, on holiday etc) as a way of making them more aware of each other :

Even after long absences children are welcomed back with enthusiasm and affection. Recently we've had a very moving example of this when a child had not only been away from the Centre for several weeks but had also been separated from her mother, with whom she lives alone. The children showed spontaneous delight at her return, leaving her in no doubt about her value and importance. On one occasion, when she was very distressed, it was the children who were able to comfort her rather than the adults.

There is a closeness among the children which is not found in many families. This does not mean that the children are always kind to each other - they're not : aggression is often allowed to go farther than would be tolerated in a lot of pre-school centres

We also suggest to the less aggressive children that they organise together to challenge the bullies. These things may all sound trivial, but they are examples of how to translate the theory into practice, how to begin to develop different ways of being. Realistically we're probably having a limited effect for the reasons mentioned above, but we must keep on trying.

We have been learning to relate in a more equal way with the children. This is very difficult because of our authoritarian childhoods, but the children respond and learn more when we explain and discuss and treat them with the same respect and rights as we expect to give adults. On the whole, in society, we see children operating in a strictly authoritarian set-up. Adults as the authority figures dole out disapproval or affection according to the pattern of behaviour which defines the child as good or naughty. It is little wonder in these circumstances that children relate in a superficial and competitive way.



Sex Roles

One of the aims of the Centre has always been to break down traditional sex roles, but it's not an easy task. At two years old the kids have already learnt that -

"Girls don't play with guns", and
"Boys don't wear tights".

There are very clear differences in their play, with the boys engaging in rough-and-tumble fighting whilst the girls go 'shopping' or push the prams. It's depressing to witness how early these differences exist, and a real problem to work out what to do about it. It's not sufficient to treat the boys and girls equally, but there has to be positive action against the already defined roles :

"I want to be a nurse", says Lucy.
"Why not a doctor?" says a woman, "Girls can be doctors, you know."
Lucy persists in wanting to be a nurse.

True all the doctors in children's books are male and all the nurses female. Books don't even represent the real situation where there are some female doctors. Sure, you can understand where the kids get these ideas from, and we must keep on discussing and challenging them with the kids (and anyone else for that matter) and try and produce alternatives. There are some feminist

books from North America which help, but most of them are not very exciting.

We have to actively encourage the girls to use tools, to fight back when attacked, to be adventurous and curious and to try to develop their confidence in everything. And we must encourage the boys into the kitchen to prepare the snacks, to set the tables for lunch and to be gentle and sensitive. In addition at the Centre the children sometimes see men cooking the lunch and women changing plugs, and hopefully they will form less conventional images of men and women than are perpetrated elsewhere.

It's all too easy for us to say that these things happen at the Centre, but they don't happen consistently enough. It's the same problem that we have in developing collective ideas : not everyone who works on the rota with the children shares the idea that it's crucial to break down sex roles if the position of women and men in this society is ever to change. There are only a few women involved who are in the Women's Movement, and as we've said before, the Centre embraces a wide range of political viewpoints. Inevitably this means we are not all agreed by any means about the kinds of things we should be doing with the children or the kinds of children we would like to see emerge at the end.

Independence

The Centre is carefully organised to allow the children to do things for themselves. Nearly all the toys and materials are kept at child-height on open shelves so that the children can help themselves to things without asking a grown-up. By making everything there's room for available at all times and by allowing the children the use of all the rooms nearly always, we hope that the kids will learn to motivate themselves and be able to choose what they want to do and when they want to do it. Of course many kids need a lot of encouragement and stimulation by adults, particularly before they are used to the place, and there are enough adults around to respond to such kids and to try to help them.

We'd like the children to leave the Centre knowing how to find things out and not being afraid to ask questions. A routine was devised at meal times, after a chaotic, nightmarish first week, which allows the kids to serve themselves (taking what they think they can eat), pour their own drinks, clear away the dirty dishes and scrape the plates. After lunch they go off to brush their teeth. Health and care of their bodies is really important for kids to learn, and we try to explain which foods contain protein, vitamins, fat and so on, and which things aren't good for you. It's amazing how much children of this age can really understand if you take the trouble to tell them.

We try to involve them in everything that happens at the Centre so that they will come to feel that the place is theirs : they come out shopping for

some of the food, help to cut up fruit or butter bread for snack, go to the laundrette to do the washing, make rice pudding or jelly for dessert. Some of the older kids are so competent now that they are truly helpful and their labour is really positively employed! We're not just trying to keep them occupied in asking them to lay the tables, but believe that they are sharing the work in doing so. Why should one person do all the work for all the kids? Why don't we share the jobs and work for each other instead?

Activities

As well as the basic activities we've mentioned (See section on House) we plan 'special activities' around a weekly theme which we decide on at the weekly meeting. Some of the themes we have used have been - plants, animals, the body, the senses, colour, shape, time and so on. This means that during any one week there are several new activities to do which are related to each other.

Often these activities are designed more for the older children who can become bored by the everyday materials. We try to find outings which are related to the themes whenever possible, and have been on trips to Kew Gardens, the Science Museum, Big Ben, London Zoo, King's Cross station and Heathrow airport, to name a few. The kids really enjoy trips on public transport, and if you're well organised (in small groups) it's not as nerve-racking as you might think with a large bunch of under-fives on a tube or bus. We nearly got turned off a bus once when one of the three-year-olds offended the conductress by her use of 'foul language'.

In addition to big outings there has been endless observation of work on the local building site, visits to the bus station, bank, post office, pet shop, florist and other local sources of interest. We also make great use of local parks and playgrounds, plus exciting 'jungle' walks in the overgrown parts of Highgate Cemetery, often culminating in a visit to "Mr Marx" (Karl) and a ceremonial dance around his grave.



The Adults

Magic Box

One of the practical problems of working at the Centre on a 'one-day-a-week' basis, especially for those with little or no experience of under-fives, is "What to do with the kids?"

On the whole the children will find plenty to do to occupy themselves, but since we aim to be an educational establishment whereby we endeavour to teach the children new skills, broaden their horizons and encourage them in logical thinking, it is necessary that certain times of the day should be set aside for structured activities.

We run a card index system of suggested activities for use with the kids. These are filed under headings such as 'Number', 'Pre-reading', 'Singing Games', 'Art and Craft', 'Outings', 'Recipes' etc.

Each card states the aim of the activity, the materials required and gives instructions. It may also include other suggestions such as a song to sing or a story to tell in connection with the activity.

The card index, known as "Jane's Magic Box", is kept in the office and can be referred to at any time by anyone "at a loss for something to do." The cards can be extracted for handy reference and added to at any time as ideas occur or new equipment is acquired for the Centre.

Workshop

When it was discovered that some of us didn't know how to mix playdough, mix powder paints, use clay with children or what to do with the children on outings, or couldn't join in with the songs the children knew, it was decided to hold fortnightly workshops to pool our resources.

A list of subjects such as Painting, Stories, Music, Clay and Playdough was drawn up and two people volunteered to introduce each workshop, one of whom usually had a working knowledge of the subject. It was lovely to see as a result, a group of adults engrossed in finger-painting, making tin-foil sculptures or singing lustily about Dan Tucker scratching his belly with his big toe nail! More practically, however, these adults in turn were able to pass these experiences on to the children, who delighted in new songs to sing, different skills to learn and a change of media to work with in the art-room.

These practical workshops were successful, but as they became more theoretical in content, ie "Language Development" and "The importance of Fantasy Play", the attendance began to decline. We concluded that the subjects had less appeal and that

due to the increased number of meetings held in connection with the Centre such as the publication of this pamphlet and the production of the film, people were not prepared to sacrifice yet another evening to a cause seemingly not as beneficial as a practical art and craft session.

It was decided, therefore, to shelve the project until the autumn, when, with new parents on the rota, we can perhaps re-run some of the more successful workshops. It is hoped also to publicise these in the neighbourhood and invite any interested parents to join us. This, it is felt, would be one way of throwing ourselves open to the community - something which, due to various pressures of time and space, has long been overdue.

Working together

One of the most important things about the Centre is the actual process of working together and sharing the responsibility for child-care. This kind of sharing is a good arrangement for all sorts of reasons : apart from the variety of adult contact available to the children, it means for the adults not only a bit of time to get on with their own activities, but the possibility of dispersing the intensity of the parent-child relationship. For those of us who are used to the isolation and exclusiveness of the parent-child, one-to-one situation, the process of working together comes both as a challenge and a relief.

We're all so used to the intense privacy of the family, and caring for our young children throws up such deep-seated feelings that it is hard to bring this private world into public. At the same time, the very fact of coping or failing to cope as a group with the kids means that problems, difficulties - and successes - can be shared. This involves, too, the realisation that many of the fears and fantasies, and feelings of inadequacy about which we felt secretly guilty are in fact common among us - that anger or depression, for instance, are understandable emotions in a difficult situation, and can be countered by making child-care a social activity instead of a purely private function. In this way we hope to 'socialise' not just the children but ourselves as well.

There are also, however, the personality problems inevitable in trying to tackle the task together, and the conflicts between the individual and the group. It's not easy to relate to a group when you've no previous experience of collective responsibility - to strike the right balance between being over-dominant and over-submissive, to cope with such feelings as the fear of looking a fool or not being useful, or to avoid feeling these things about other people. It is difficult, too, to know how to express these feelings if you have them. There is also the problem of individuals wanting to impose their personality or ideas on

everyone else instead of thrashing them out in the group

A central issue is that of sharing authority. We all to some extent have in-built attitudes to authority, and tend to invent or expect authority-figures to whom we react with a mixture of submission and defiance, and it is very hard to feel secure in taking equal control with other people. Competitive feelings are common - and destructive : for instance people feel able to do a job either better or worse than others, and it is difficult to accept this realistically, without feeling resentful at doing everything, or a failure, and do nothing. In addition, the working structure of the Centre is not in fact equal, as the paid workers obviously know more about what is going on than the rota workers, just because they are there more. These kinds of problems, though inevitable, are not overwhelming - in fact if we are willing to confront them, dealing with them can be a dynamic and revealing process.

In general, it feels more positive and hopeful to try to build up something with other people than to concentrate exclusively on our own private worlds. The relationships which emerge out of the collective effort encourage people, despite all, to become more aware of themselves and other people, and to consider the interest of the group rather than the individual. What we need most of all is to be able and willing to change, both in the way we relate to each other and to the children.



Myth of Motherhood

In the past any discussion of the care of the pre-school child has taken for granted the desirability of an exclusive mother-child relationship. There is therefore very little past experience for us to draw on in order to come to firm conclusions about which is better - the traditional, exclusive, maternal relationship or the non-exclusive relationship which a child would experience at the CCC.

Examples of the emotionally deprived 'latchkey'

child, the child brought up in institutions, are there to convince us that the ideal environment for the emotional stability of a child is one in which the relationship with its mother plays a dominant part.

In "The Myth of Motherhood", Lee Comer challenges most of the traditional assumptions about child-care, and we have found much in our own experience to substantiate what she says.

We have found that in some cases where most of a child's waking life is spent at the CCC, its linguistic and emotional development has improved rather than deteriorated. In one instance a lively, intelligent four-year-old was way behind other children in the acquisition of skills such as counting and colour recognition. Because the Centre was able to provide the stimulus that had previously been lacking, the child very quickly caught up. At least two children who have been at the Centre full-time since they were two are more articulate than a lot of children who spend very little time away from their mothers.

This does not mean that all the children are well-balanced, articulate and independent. Some of the kids have serious emotional disturbances. Even in (or especially in) these cases, it seems to us that kids who have problems of adjustment and development are best coped with collectively by people who love and respect the child rather than by an isolated and frustrated mother burdened by feelings of guilt which she believes are unique.



Mens Role

We wanted to say, as men, why we're here and how we see ourselves relating to the Centre. Our piece is a mixture of general statements and quotes from individual men. Because we're all at different stages of development in relation to politics and sexism, we often see things differently, but what has brought us together is the

conviction that child-care is equally the responsibility of men and women.

It's clear, however, that for some men this is easier to put into practice than for others. All the men who put in time on the rota are either part-time teachers or self-employed. For any man with rigid full-time working hours - for instance one father, a post office shift worker, who considered working on the rota - it is out of the question. We want to make it clear that we're not setting ourselves up as models, and we're well aware that there are many men who do as much domestic work as their jobs allow.

In treating child-care as 'men's work' we are not yet free of self-consciousness :

Gerry : Walking past the construction site near the Centre - you have certain feelings about you being with these kids and these guys are doing all this heavy labour.

Simon : Yes - in fact the exchanges that take place there are sometimes unexpected. I usually feel that they must be thinking, "Christ, that guy's got it easy" - that they're about to jeer any minute, and in fact they quite often say things like "I don't envy you that lot."

Rainer : I think it's a different kind of strain. I have worked on a building site and I have worked with kids and I have felt emotionally exhausted and I can take physical strain much better.

Hugo : To be identified with what the Centre is about and what Women's Liberation is about we must see it as an honest job of work. The women are saying, "We want the job we do in the home recognised as such." The only difference now is that the job is done collectively.

In relating to the children, one of the differences between the men and the women is a traditional one - some of the men are much more likely to spend their time on physical activities like climbing, swinging or jumping, or in a rough-and-tumble. This can be put to good use by encouraging girls into these activities - several of them are a lot more agile than they were, and one or two of the older ones even join in the rough-and-tumbles - a real advance.

We believe there are ways in which we have a special contribution to make : many of the mothers support themselves alone, so many of the children have little experience of men around the home. It's noticeable that several of these kids get quickly attached to men at the Centre. Also we want the children to grow up accustomed to open affection between men, to men who show their emotions openly, and to men who give comfort and support. We want them to see men cooking, washing up and changing nappies. And as men we have a particular responsibility to work at breaking down the old male image of authority and (in the child's eyes) omnipotence.

Personal Contributions

These personal views serve a dual purpose - they show how different individuals feel about the Centre, and they provide an outlet for dissenting opinions. For these reasons they were not edited, but left just as they were written.

MICHELE

A few thoughts about the Centre, as a mother.

I was, first of all, very happy to find a place which would accept my (then) two-year-old Daniel. This is very difficult to find, as various play-groups believe that two years old is 'too young' (whatever that means) to be left by his mother. The fact that the CCC takes children of that age is a very important challenge to the prevailing attitudes and theories concerning the relationship of the child to his parents and to other adults. Also the way the CCC is set up and run reduces these objections considerably, as I will try to show.

Presumably, when a child is three, he is more 'Independent' of his mother, and this implies that he has learned quite a lot from her, about how to interact and relate to other adults and peers. And yet, what I wanted Daniel to learn, I could not possibly have taught him, being in a nuclear family set-up.

It is only in a centre like the CCC that I see how those values, feelings and emotions which shape (miss-shape?) my life, and which I'm trying to change in myself, are actually broken through. At the Centre, Daniel LIVES sharing, reliance on other children rather than adults only, sensitivity to other children's needs, joys, distress; he sees that the adults he loves and relates to love him as well as other children : emotional relationships aren't exclusive, and do not necessarily entail possessiveness. Daniel is never upset when, during my afternoon on the rota, I hold other children and cuddle them rather than him. Although Daniel isn't aggressive at all - to the point of not even defending himself - he learns that aggression isn't irremediable, can occur in play, that anger does not sever friendship, isn't equivalent to loss of love, and has a beginning and an end. And it is perhaps because he is so unaggressive that it is important for him to learn this. I think he also learns self sufficiency. Recently, I understood something very important : I'd been told that he'd cried - seemingly without reason - one afternoon. When he came home, I asked him why he had cried. He looked at me, smiling, and replied : "I cried and then I stopped - I didn't cry any more." "But why were you crying?" I insisted. He ignored my question. And I realised that for him, crying was just another emotion he could express, and not a sign that he needed to be comforted for his crying to stop. After all, I never ask him why he was happy.

These are just a few examples of what Daniel is learning, which I couldn't teach him but wanted

him to learn so that he doesn't have to work through these things like I do...

When I work at the Centre, I experience what it means to love and be involved with several children. I am learning a great deal about giving children their own space, and room to express themselves. I am learning what it means not to be an authority. I have problems dealing with physical aggression between kids, and while I'm still pretty ignorant, I feel I understand more about what it means for the children themselves.

Finally, being involved in the aims of the Centre, in the collective decision-making, I feel I have never had to feel guilty or insecure about 'leaving' my child in a place where 'they' take care of him in a way I know nothing about, by people who are supposed to be 'experts'. I feel the CCC is an extension of me, and that Daniel is cared for and loved collectively, in the same way as I care for and love the other children.



SHEILA

My ideas on what the Centre does and should achieve have changed considerably since I first introduced myself just over a year ago.

I had heard about the Centre from local gossip and I'd passed it a couple of times and been interested in what I saw.

We'd lived in the area for about eighteen months and I'd had a growing sense of isolation. I had not worked for pay for two and a half years (since shortly before my second child was born) With two kids under five I didn't see much prospect of returning to work.

I have always found it difficult to relate to people except in a work situation, and whenever I talked to women in a similar domestic situation the whole of our conversation revolved around husband, children and home. It seemed to me that domesticated women (I being one of them) led a life entirely materialistic, totally without ideals and ideas.

The idea of the Centre with parents talking about child-care and pre-school education appealed to me firstly because the discussion is not merely theoretical but arises from involvement in the education of a group of kids including one's own; and secondly because it elevates the role of parenthood to a plane of ideals and ideas. The rearing of children, far from being seen as a non-job, is seen at the Centre as one of the most important and demanding jobs of our society.

The enrichment and enlivening of mine and others roles as parents seemed to me to be the Centre's main purpose. Better child-care would obviously be the result.

However as time went by it seemed to me that only in a few cases was the Centre fulfilling this purpose, and also my idea of my own needs changed. There was difficulty in getting local people involved in the Centre. It was not a community centre because the people involved had come from outside the community and assumed a need that they did not know existed. As it happened a need for child-care and pre-school education did exist within the community but the nature of the locality means that the needs of the local people are on the whole very different from mine and from most of those who originated the scheme. I speak from a privileged middle class position. I don't have to work full-time. I can easily afford to give time to the Centre and on the whole I enjoy the time I spend there.

However vast numbers of parents in families who need the advantages that the CCC offers cannot give time, either because financially it is impossible, or because life puts such tremendous pressures on them that they cannot cope with involvement but need relief from children for part of the day. Also there are the middle class and privileged, who, although they would want to involve themselves in the running of the Centre, would not necessarily want to give time on the rota. I began to feel through contact with other working women that I would like to go out to work at the job I had had before (teaching in a secondary school), and gradually began to see the Centre as having for me a dual function: enriching my role as parent and also giving me an opportunity to take on other roles and thus lead a more complex and satisfying life.

I now feel that if the CCC is to be a fore-runner and not just an interesting experiment which dies a natural death in five or six years, then we must always be conscious of the fact that voluntary work from parents and others is a temporary measure, and that the pittance we receive from the council is the thin end of a large wedge. There must be adequate paid workers so that the Centre can function without the goodwill of volunteer labour. At the same time we must retain our autonomy. The degree of parental involvement could then depend on the demands and needs of the community and individuals within it.

PHYLIS

Since having my first baby I have increasingly felt that child-care should be a social activity and this idea is fundamental to the running of the Centre. I think a close parent-child relationship very important and I find making it gives me a great opportunity for personal growth, but it is often too isolated and exclusive.

At first it is the mother who needs other people, being thrown without preparation into bearing responsibility for someone who is totally dependent, very demanding and strange. But without nearby relatives, lacking a structured social context, living in small separate units, many women are isolated at a time of most needing support. These first months are crucial to a mother's future confidence, and some way to help needs to be found. I think it is a great pity that the Centre cannot provide facilities for mothers and babies as was originally intended. Local authority clinics play a part but something organised by mothers themselves would be more to the point.

Very soon the child too needs company. My son Lucis was responsive to people very early on - perhaps babies are naturally sociable. I enjoy seeing him make relationships with other adults, partly just because they are different from my husband and me, but also because they can be more casual and objective than us. When he was eighteen months a friend and I started a regular child-swap, and we were surprised at how real a relationship the boys made, earlier than the authorities suggest. If child-care were shared more, children would have an earlier opportunity to relate to each other - and might grow up less isolated than their parents. Also mothers badly need some free time with a job that is so constantly demanding. I think the Centre is right to stress and encourage the relationships among the children: they can give each other something no adult can.



I started work once a week at the Centre at a specific point in my life, when with a small second baby, I felt I should like to work with other people, but didn't have the energy for much that was separate from child-minding. I was also very nervous, being out of practice, so I was glad to have the opportunity to get out with the children during a rather house-bound winter, and for Lucis to have the stimulus of a group situation. I liked the set-up in various ways : it was smallish, had quite a mix of children, there was a lot of freedom and awareness of educational aims. Being run in a house it was quite like a home, with meals being cooked, household jobs done and children roaming about casually, and a great deal of affection. But what struck me most was an energy and sense of purpose about the place. I suppose this must come from people working together for something they feel to be important and that they are genuinely responsible for. In a way, problems, like coping with difficult children, help : the more effort put in, the more energy is generated. The Sunday meetings also help, giving a chance to evaluate both what goes on and its relevance to society as a whole. It is good to be able to formulate and discuss ideas about child-care in a context where - for a change - it is regarded as socially important.

I have learnt specific things at the Centre, like how to make playdough, or to encourage Lucis's independence in practical matters; but more important, it helps to remind me, when I am feeling tired and harrassed, that looking after my children can be interesting and cheerful.

HUGO

A man's share in the Children's Community Centre.

The part that a man has in the upbringing of children is not only important for the child, but also important for the man himself. Historically he has missed out on the know-how of bringing up and educating children. That was and still is seen as the woman's responsibility.

Only through a realistic perception of their own developing personality will children be able to see the inadequacies and injustices that exist for both men and women in society. For children this realistic perception of their own personality can be made meaningful both for man and woman - not because of their sex, but as parent or friend.

At the Centre I learned that I can be fatherly as well as motherly and certainly childlike. I can wipe noses and bottoms, not only of my own children - as I am used to at home - but of other children at the Centre. Taking physical care of children establishes an intimacy which was new to me. I can actually hug and be hugged by children whom I thought could only do that with their own mother.

I feel no longer type-cast as I still am in many other social situations. This extension of my traditional male role is a conscious process that

requires the support and encouragement of all involved with the Centre. My share in being involved with the children at the Centre has a great deal to do with my attitude against sex-stereotyping and all kinds of stereotyping. I feel confident that girls as well as boys run and jump and fight, chase each other with guns (which is frowned upon at the Centre) dress up and act out adult roles. I can tell any man who wants to be involved in a children's centre how rewarding it is when children treat you for what you are, not because you are a man or a dad. It is certainly not the kids who do the stereotyping.

It is society that does the sex-stereotyping of children. Girls are ushered into a life of 'domesticity' and boys are ushered out on to the 'hunting life'. I think that from babyhood some of the fantasies in girls and boys are different. Children's fantasies are inspired by bodily experiences which are extended into experiences with parents and others. I think the difference in bodily experiences in girls and boys is largely determined by the clitoris and the penis. Vive la difference! Children grow up with individual inclinations which are also determined by their sex. I think these physical sex differences are extremely valuable in the shaping of the personality. They are one of the resources of our human nature that every society has used and often abused and no society has as yet begun to use these sex differences to the full.

In the same way that children have personality characteristics that make them real little individuals, so being a boy or a girl influences the shaping of their personality. But society has set aside different roles for boys and girls. It is more economic for society to stylise the behaviour of the sexes very differently, teaching them to walk and dress and act in contrasting ways and to specialise in different kinds of work. Children become sex-stereotyped. Only when economically and socially convenient are the differently fostered sex behaviours matched, for example in men and women doing the same job.



Children can take pride in their sex. Therefore we encourage the exploration of each other's bodies. They see from each other what the male and female attributes are. In this way the child will also go through the experience of the opposite sex to some extent. A boy proclaims proudly that he is going to have a baby while a girl claims to be in proud possession of a penis. And of course this early experience is very physical and is carried through into indiscriminate dressing-up and in the playing of different roles such as nurse, pilot, traindriver and doctor. I get quite carried away by their antics and I wish there were at least fifteen genders available in our language to indicate the unique personality characteristic of each child.

All of us at the Centre have found that we are good mother substitutes - also the men - and the results with sometimes very difficult children are very encouraging.

For an outsider observing one of us involved with the children at the Centre to say :

"I cannot really tell whether there is a mother or a father, a teacher or a friend busy with the children," I consider to be a positive observation.

ANN

My personal experience of the Centre.

From the beginning of the Centre when the first girls were visiting people throughout the neighbourhood, I myself didn't think a children's centre could be run just by ordinary mums and dads - I emphasise the dads because there aren't many nurseries around where fathers take part in their child's pre-school education. I have found it both rewarding and helpful to have a father around a children's nursery. It doesn't make children quite so dependent on the mum figure.

When I first started coming to the Centre as a worker on the rota, the first couple of months I found it gruesome. The children didn't adapt to me as promptly as they had to the others - like Gill and Denise (two of the paid workers). The fault was in me because I never tried to adapt myself to the other kids. At first they were just other kids and the important one was my own. Then I started to mix with the other kids and join in their activities. Before this the kids didn't even know I was there. Suddenly one of the older kids called me by my name and from then on I started to become more and more interested in not just the kids but the Centre.

It wasn't just a place where I dropped and picked up Sharon - it's a place that was put there by a few girls approaching Camden council for the benefit of people like myself who like a few hours to themselves in the afternoon or mornings. I finally came to the conclusion that this centre was what most people want, to be able to have some say in what goes on with your child during the time you are away from them. The weekly meeting gives every-

one a chance to discuss their feelings about what has happened or what's going to happen.

DENISE

I began coming to play at the Centre for several reasons. I was working full-time in the office of a group sending volunteers to Bangladesh and felt the personal need for something local, direct and basic.

So I began to spend my weekday lunch-hours telling and reading stories during the children's "Quiet Time" to give the workers there a break and the kids a chance to rest and digest their dinner.

I had three grown-up sons who'd never had the benefit of a playgroup, had fostered an unwanted baby and had helped with two conventional playgroups as well as setting up one for half-a-dozen mentally handicapped under-fives. This is the age-group I most enjoy being with, and feel very strongly that the right to play is next in importance to a child's right to be loved.

But also, I have learnt over the years that not only is it enjoyable and right for them to play, but that it can help relieve the anxieties of children under stress, and prevent problems in relating, even mental breakdown, in later life.

I feel that it is of the utmost importance for us to learn to listen to children, to allow the expression of feelings, in words when they are ready to use them, and before then in actions we must take time to understand, as two-to-five year olds tend to behave how they feel. It is this directness that I find so refreshing, before we build in controls and 'social' behaviour, which, I suppose, makes it easier to co-exist, but which also often loses part of ourself, so that we sometimes wonder in adulthood who we are and what we really want.

If in early years, we have lots of equipment to stimulate us and understanding adults around to answer questions and lend a hand (when asked) in projects we've initiated, others of our own age to interact with, tolerance and encouragement in our growing, perhaps fewer of us will end up with psychiatrists and may even become reasonable parents later. We may even manage to continue asking questions about the way things are organised, and have the strength and energy to do something, collectively, about what prevents people being as fully alive as they might be. Who knows? - but it seems a worthwhile attempt in the right direction.

ROWENA

"No, I wouldn't like Tom to go to the Centre. It's too middle class. I'd rather send him part-time to the local state nursery school along with the other children in the street."

This may not be a typical view, but how many people in the neighbourhood see us in this light? Are there too many middle class mums? The Centre

was given the Highgate New Town address, so that it could provide a social service in an area where the need was greatest, but to provide this service parents able to work on the rota were needed, and inevitably those most likely to have free time come from comfortable middle class homes. It is easy to see how the Centre can appear to an outsider as a trendy playgroup, essentially middle class, but providing a few places for working class children to justify the grant received from the Council. By choosing to provide a service in Highgate New Town and yet to insist on involving parents on a rota system, the Centre is faced with an insoluble conflict of purpose. Working class parents, working full-time, are unlikely to be able to give any time at all on the rota, and it is difficult to feel totally involved and responsible, as the group demands, if one is not concerned in the day-to-day activities of the children.

The Sunday meetings also expose another area of class difference. Most of the middle class parents are fairly articulate, they are at home with abstract argument, full of jargon and references to authors one may or may not have heard of. It is not surprising that many parents lose heart and seldom come to meetings.

Certain themes have also aroused the antipathy of working class parents. One father came in a few weeks ago looking very embarrassed and defensive: "When are you talking about sex to the children? My child's too young. Tell me which day and I won't bring her in." We told him that any discussion would be very elementary and that if the child wasn't interested (and I doubt if she was) there'd be no pressure on her to listen. He found that difficult to accept, and I suppose the best solution would have been to talk it out with him at one of the meetings, but this particular father never came. And, anyway, if it had been talked out, I doubt whether we could have changed his views - he would probably have left the meeting feeling even more alienated.

Many parents at the Centre will accuse me of presenting a very one-sided view of the aims of the Centre. The Centre, they will say, was not created purely to fulfil a need among working class families. The original group, all committed to the Women's Liberation Movement (and here I'm on shaky ground since I'm not involved in the Movement) envisaged it also as a centre where parents could talk out their feelings on child-care, on the nature of the relationship between child and adult, and could attempt to break free of the stereotyped roles society tries to impose. Such aims are relevant to the needs of both middle class and working class parents. Ironically, though, the working class parent loses out once more, since she/he has no time to give to the Centre, and only those who participate fully in the activities of the Centre are likely to benefit from this interchange of ideas.

The essential problem is one of priorities. We

need the parents for the rota. We want to attract parents interested in the Women's Movement and to perpetuate their ideas in the running of the Centre. We also want to provide a service where the need is greatest - i.e. families living in the temporary housing in the immediate neighbourhood. Which of these objectives is the most important?

On re-reading the article :

I'm probably treading on a lot of people's toes and realise that I'm not conversant with the way the philosophy of the Centre has evolved. Still, if my point of view helps to stimulate further discussion and argument, I feel it is justified. Although neither Dave nor I would now consider ourselves working class, we are in a similar situation to the working class parent in the Centre with a full-time job, and perhaps have a more detached attitude to the Centre than the workers on the rota. Obviously, another full-time worker will make more places available to neighbourhood families and relieve the need for more parents willing to give time on the rota, although this will, as discussed last Sunday, intensify the problem of space at lunchtime.

WENDY

Paranoid scream of a middle class mum

Because of a mixed background of lower working class 'mum', upper class 'father' and intellectual middle class first marriage (with two boys now aged sixteen and eighteen) I have never wanted to put class labels on values and beliefs that I subscribe to.

Now, in my middle forties, in a new marriage with two more children aged five (adopted) and three-and-a-half, I am still sorting out my values, which relate strongly to my role at the CCC. I was one of the earlier members who did a fair amount of work in setting up the Centre. At the time I accepted the responsibility of working on the rota, in fact I welcomed the concept of parent participation and control, as did my husband Hugo, who went into part-time teaching to make it possible. I teach in the evenings and work half Saturdays and Sundays to make it economically possible. But because of our commitment to our jobs, the Centre and our four children, I have less time to myself as a woman, and to exploring the work I am committed to as a sculptor, than I had two years ago. But this was our own choice based on what are called middle class aims, that I would not want to deny.

So I have not found that the Centre has been able to help me as a woman who wants to be working viably in society, though it has helped me considerably as a mother who wants particular care and education (very different from what my two elder boys had) for her kids.

But the Centre has made assumptions about both myself and Hugo that we ourselves have fortified

by the nature of our commitment there. The assumption is that we are comfortable middle class with all the time in the world to help and contribute. Also I feel under pressure because it would not be 'right' under my label of middle class to say I would prefer to use the time I am at the Centre to expand my work - that to help me properly as a working woman I need to give up working on the rota and have a full-time place for the youngest child who is still there.

Already Hugo has found that he can no longer work part-time as a teacher : the school will not keep him on in that capacity, and we can't afford it any longer. When Hugo leaves, does it mean I have to do more time on the rota to support what we are doing, when I often feel under pressure to earn more myself and develop the work-fields that interest me so. Even the holidays are as busy as term times, with four children at home and the need to use the holidays to catch up with my own work.

I say all this because I find the value-judgements made on members of the CCC based on their apparent class role too simplistic and unhelpful in communicating among ourselves the difficulties we all have as, hopefully, working women.

ASTRA

Who'd have thought I'd ever land a job as cook at a children's centre or anywhere else for that matter. But when I heard that CCC was about to open after much delay, I sped over to offer my services. That was in November 1972. I met Gill (our full-time worker) for the first time and she said that help at dinner time would really be needed. So in January '73 I came along, and with great assistance from Jenny Rymer (one of the Founding Mothers) on my first day, a risotto with brown rice appeared for lunch. Since then I've never looked back and have really enjoyed the food preparation, cooking, and even the washing up. Perhaps it's the atmosphere of the kitchen where all kinds of people - CCC workers, parents, visitors and kids - gather for chat, coffee, reading of and writing in the Journal, using the phone, helping to make the main course and/or the pudding, and more chat. It's the collective, comfortable, caring feeling of the Centre that keeps me coming back for more.

Yet despite my own positive reactions to the CCC I am aware of the negative side. Perhaps as many as half of the people involved do not agree with the Centre's ideas and/or policies. Many people want simply a conventional playgroup for their kids - with or without parental involvement. Many people find certain concepts irrelevant to their daily lives - ie collective action, breaking down of sexual stereotypes, and change of any sort (personal, political, social, educational). These very people are amongst the less confident and less articulate, so their views never get a hearing at the weekly meetings or anywhere else. It appears to be an uphill battle to put across

ideas involving change in one's thinking and behaviour. It is equally difficult to act collectively. However, changes on a personal and group level are slowly happening and that is hopeful. Now I want to see dozens of CCC's in every borough.

SUE B

As my daughter, Tasha, reached two years, I realised that a balance would have to be found between what I felt best for her and what I myself needed. The answer was simple - I wanted to start a full-time college course, so I would have to find a friendly place with other children, where Tash could spend her time. After a term at college and nowhere available, the relief was immense when the Centre opened and she had somewhere to go.

It was only later, through working there one afternoon a week and watching Tash change, that I realised how lucky she was in that it was the Centre that took her on. I now feel sure that if she had been placed in any of the standard nurseries or with a child-minder, my work at college would be riddled with guilt about 'dumping' my child. I would have known so little about the way she was being treated and what ideas were being put on her. If I had felt that she was receiving a life of confinement, filled with "do's" and "don'ts", my reaction would have been to give her extra freedom at home - so at best she'd probably be schizophrenic!

On a wider scale, the problem between quantity and quality of under-fives care is intensely difficult. There are thousands of women who, like me, desperately needed somewhere for their children to go, not just because they have to work, but because they feel completely inadequate in the day-to-day stimulation of their child.



Publicity

We have always felt that it is important to publicise the Centre as widely as possible. It seemed crucial that we did not exist as an isolated, interesting experiment. We wanted to be instrumental in increasing the number of day-care places and hoped to encourage other groups to pressurise their councils to finance similar schemes, using us as an example of a working model in their negotiations. We therefore wanted to make as much information available as we could in order to help other groups. In addition to being concerned about the quantity of places, we were anxious to influence the quality of day-care provision, and by making our ideas publicly known, hoped to affect existing and future practice in the care and education of the under-fives.

We have used many different forms of publicity over the past eighteen months, and perhaps it would be useful to say briefly what we did :

First Pamphlet :

This was produced just before the Centre opened and was available for the Women's Liberation Conference in November 1972. In this pamphlet the original seven organisers all answered the same five questions :

- 1) How did you get involved?
- 2) Why did you get involved?
- 3) What was your experience of organising the Centre?
- 4) What advice would you give a new group?
- 5) What criticisms have you?

This pamphlet gives the details of the twenty months' struggle to get the Centre off the ground and states the original aims of the group in full. The pamphlet was not very widely distributed and tended to reach women already in the Women's Movement and some groups who had already begun to organise. There are still copies available and it sells at 10p.

Press Conference :

In order to get beyond the converted and to get some national coverage we held a small press-conference in March 1973. We didn't want the ridicule that Women's Liberation had in the past received in the press so we contacted those journalists whom we knew and trusted. The result was quite a wide and favourable spread in local and national papers and magazines.

Public Meeting :

After we had been open for a few months we had received several enquiries, and there did seem to be an encouraging number of groups organising to start children's centres. They all wanted information from us about what they should do. We decided that an efficient way to spread our knowledge was for us to hold an open meeting and for us to talk about our experience in both setting up the Centre and in running it. In addition we worked hard to produce material

for visual display - photographs showing life at the Centre, a plan of the house showing activities, a chart illustrating how the council operates etc.

We publicised this meeting in many of the London community newspapers. In addition we sent out letters inviting people from council social service departments in all the Inner London boroughs in the hope that we might be able to sell the idea to them before they were approached by groups asking for money for such projects. About sixty people came to that meeting which we held on May 3rd 1973 in a local community hall, and many of them found it very useful. Unfortunately we did not publicise the meeting in our local neighbourhood and thereby missed an opportunity to let people know more about who we were and what we were doing.

Neighbourhood Leaflet :

It was only much later, in the autumn of 1973, that we made another effort to inform local residents about us. Apart from our initial attempts to contact families in the immediate area before we opened, we hadn't directed our publicity locally at all. By this time we knew that many of the older residents disliked us (See section on the Area) and there were many false rumours floating around about what went on in "that place". A short leaflet was written explaining what we were doing, that we were a registered day-nursery and that they would be welcome to come and visit us. It also invited people to come to our next workshop session on painting and drawing (See section on the Workshops) because we wanted the workshops to be open to people outside the Centre. We distributed the leaflets door-to-door in the surrounding streets. Noone came to the workshop and we don't know if anyone read the leaflet. We suspect that leaflets need to be followed up by personal visits if they are to be at all effective.

Visitors :

Many of the people who have heard about the Centre have wanted to come and see it in action, and there has been a regular flow of visitors. Although this is obviously a good way for people to find out what we're doing, it has sometimes been quite a strain and for some of us it has been very disruptive. Most visitors are keen to hear all about the Centre and this means that an adult is drawn away from the children. We now ask people to try and let us know before they come, as some days are more convenient for us than others. Visitors ARE welcome, but please phone first : 01-272-9383. Our visitors have included two students spending time with us in order to write theses on child-care as part of university courses, and we also have local schoolchildren working with us on a regular basis.

Film :

A film about the Centre is half-way made but its completion is protracted since we have always had the problem of raising money for it and finding time to raise money. There is also the continuing

problem of how it is made and who makes it. Film is a great way to give a feel of what a place is about - in our case this pamphlet can explain some things in detail and complement the more impressionistic work of a film. People will watch a film when they won't, unless highly motivated, read a pamphlet.

The Weekly Meeting

The meeting is the key element in the parents' control of the Centre. It is the regular gathering to which all decisions affecting the group are referred.

It helps to give a sense of contact and continuity among the many different workers on the rota. It is held every Sunday evening from 8 to 10.30. The agenda is arranged and posted up the previous week so that people can add to it if they want to, and the meeting is chaired and minuted by different people each week so that everyone shares this experience. We discovered early on that it was necessary to structure our meetings to prevent the evening discussions continuing into the next morning.

Our aim is to discuss one or two children each week - but only if their parent(s) are there. This is always useful to parents and workers as it makes the crucial link between the home and the Centre: does the child behave differently in each place? Is she treated differently? Does the parent act in the same way in both places? How do people on the rota react to the child? In this way important issues are raised about attitudes to child-care, and discussions can take place not, as it were, between a lone parent and a group of professionals, but among a group of people who know and care for each other's children, and who can share their problems and learn from each other.

Administrative work is shared out, with various people taking different jobs - writing letters to the council, attending to the building troubles, bulk-buying, working out the rota, etc. We plan and discuss the weekly theme and any activities that might be connected with it: visits and excursions, special books or materials, songs, games etc, and how we might use or interpret the theme.

A theme on the Body, for instance, relates easily to everyday things like eating, sleeping or movement, and to the kids' own questions. We use clearly illustrated books that are also used in schools, and on conception and childbirth we explain the biological facts simply - though some kids reject the truth as ridiculous.

It is here that we try to thrash out basic attitudes - how to allow aggression without ensuring that the little kids always come off worst, and without constant intervention from adults? What to do about a child who has to cope with sudden changes at home - such as a new baby, moving house, or father leaving - and who takes it out on the other kids? What kind of allowances should we make? Will the other kids be jealous?



We have many unresolved problems connected with the meetings: at the moment only about half the parents come regularly. We have, in theory, made one attendance per month conditional to parents having children at the Centre, but many of us have doubts about this, and it is not enforced. More to the point, perhaps, the meeting clearly reflects the power structure of the Centre: even though different people take on different jobs and represent the Centre at various local meetings, the paid workers - and especially the full-time worker - have the most information, and the more articulate people still dominate the proceedings. Several of us who had no previous experience of talking in groups have gained confidence as a result of the meetings, but others have gained little or nothing. This imbalance has yet to be corrected.

In addition, the increasing load of day to day business that is carried by the meeting means that less time is devoted to the children and how we work with them. During the last few months the need to get a new house, to get a builder to repair this one (again), to fit a fire alarm system or (another regulation) another kitchen sink have taken up far too much of our time. The meetings are often boring as a result, and we are considering pushing some of this kind of work on to a separate group - despite the danger of creating our own little bureaucracy.

In spite of all this, we don't regard the meeting as a failure. It does bring people together, it does assure the accountability of the paid workers, and it does function as a vehicle for changing policy at the Centre. We have to work much harder to overcome its faults in the future.

The Daily Journal

The journal also plays an important part in the linking of workers and parents with the day-to-day activities at the Centre. It is a diary of daily events, activities and personal reactions written by the workers as they record in detail the progress through the day. As well as telling us of happy and successful days, it tells us that a particular child has been unhappy or disruptive and seems to need attention or affection, or that another seems quiet or withdrawn and may need encouragement to participate. The journal often gives us the background to these problems in that it is possible to trace back what has been happening over the past few days or weeks. It also helps us to communicate with each other and therefore try to develop a consistency in our approach to the children.

It is reassuring to learn how other people have faced and handled or failed to handle difficult moments and situations. It also helps us to clarify our thoughts in writing down our comments and experiences. Perhaps most important, it enables us to trace the development of the children during their time here, and provides a detailed account of how our own attitudes to child-care are developing.

In a wider sense we feel that it is important to keep a record of this particular child-care experience. Eventually we hope to publish relevant and interesting parts of the journal, which might be useful to other people organising in similar ways.

Finance

The Centre relies on a hundred percent grant from Camden council to enable it to function. The first year the grant was £3,000, which included the salary of a full-time worker, plus an initial, once only payment of £1,500 to equip and decorate the premises. This was separate from the £5,000 which the council had spent on repairing and converting the house. There are no fees, but there is a weekly charge for food which covers lunch, and morning and afternoon snacks. This was 50p when we started and is now 60p.

Our first year's expenditure bore little relation to the estimate we had given the council - though this fact was hardly surprising given that none of the original group had any professional experience of costing or finance. The main difference was that we cut back drastically our spending on furniture and equipment - buying second-hand or scrounging - partly in order to pay a part-time worker who could be more consistently available than the rota workers. The fact that we have almost absolute control over how we spend our grant enabled us to make this decision.

Although we have this immediate control over spending, in the final analysis every penny is accountable to the council's Finance Department through an annual audit. This means that the work of the Centre's treasurer includes all the details of PAYE and National Insurance for the paid workers.

When it came to 1973/74 our grant renewal application was very late as we assumed, quite erroneously, that grants, once issued, were self-perpetuating. In fact it was necessary to provide an income and expenditure account for 1972/73, prepare estimated accounts for the following year and compile an annual report.

The sum asked for was £4,500, which included for the first time payment for the first time payment for a part-time worker. We finally received £4,000, which our complaints did nothing to increase. Our application for 1974/75 is in excess of £7,000, as we have found it necessary to employ a cook, and we need another full-time worker to give us greater flexibility in taking children whose parents cannot give time on the rota.

Staffing and Wages

Out of our annual grant of £4,000 (1973/4) we pay local authority playleader rates to one woman to work full-time with the children - that is, eight hours a day, five days a week, with an hour off for lunch. In addition we pay one man to work part-time for twenty hours a week, and one woman for two hours' cleaning each day.

We pay nominal weekly sums to three other people: a woman who cooks lunch three days a week, a woman who keeps the books and finances, and a woman who reads stories to the children each day after lunch. All other staff is voluntary, and is mainly (though not exclusively) the parents of the children.

There are usually three or four voluntary workers each day, some working half days, some all day. One might expect, with a partial change of staff each day, and people coming and going at staggered hours, that chaos would result, but amazingly this is rarely the case, and in general people take the responsibility of working at the Centre seriously.

But there are several contradictions which arise from being staffed in the main by voluntary labour. The first of these (See section on How we choose the children) involves discriminating against families who cannot give time on the rota - often the ones whose need is most desperate.

The use of voluntary labour also raises the whole question of our relation to Trade Unions, who

exist to defend the rates of pay and working conditions of their members. The National Union of Teachers recently took a decision not to support the use of voluntary labour in schools, on the grounds that it undermines the jobs and conditions available to paid and qualified teachers.

Although we agree totally on the need for all staff to be paid, some people in the collective question the need to exclude 'unqualified' people, and are suspicious of what constitutes 'qualifications' in areas involving children. It's not that they deny that child-care requires skill, patience and experience - what they fear is the tendency of qualified people to hide behind their professional status and cut themselves off from ordinary people.

Also our situation is slightly different to that of a school in that we came into existence in our present form because of the extreme shortage of nursery provision. Had we not existed on voluntary labour we would not have existed at all, for that was our most attractive feature in the eyes of our local council. What we want to stress here is that we see our dependence on voluntary labour only as an interim step towards getting a full paid staff, be that a staff of parents or not.

We are concerned, however, about what will happen when all our labour is paid and we are no longer a cheap proposition. There will then be fewer obvious advantages to the council in our scheme, and it may be at this stage that the danger of their control will be most critical - for example pressure on us to charge fees (this is already beginning) or to let them choose our staff for us. But it seems to us that the greatest danger of co-option by local councils lies not so much in being paid by them as in doing their work for them and not being paid for it. This could also impose limitations on the kind of service we could provide. If, for example, our method of voluntary staffing were incorporated into existing day-nurseries (not, perhaps, as unlikely as it may sound in the climate of cutbacks in local authority expenditure), this would inevitably mean the replacement of high priority children of mainly working parents by children whose parents could give voluntary work at the nursery. The consequent reduction of priority places would be a very serious setback. It is therefore very important that schemes such as ours work only to increase nursery places, never to replace existing ones.

The present status and wages of Nursery Nurses is deplorable, and this is why, though there are long waiting lists, some day-nurseries are forced from staff shortages not to take their full quota of children. If the use of voluntary labour became a possibility in day-nurseries there would be even less chance of improving conditions for Nursery Nurses. It is very important that women whose need is desperate and who are therefore most vulnerable are not further exploited into undermining the already low status and pay of other women.

Another reason we see for having a full paid staff is to do with ensuring the continuance of the Centre. Though the majority of our staff is voluntary it has contained a high proportion of teachers; but as people move on this may not be the case, and we can see what a different place the Centre might be without the volumes of teaching experience that have been ploughed into it. This is another reason why we are anxious to increase the number of permanent paid staff, given that they are people of our choice. We are not of the opinion that a weekly wage will 'reduce' the quality of a person's work.

We should mention the positive aspects of voluntary labour as we have experienced it at the Centre. It's no exaggeration to say that the Centre has crucially changed our experience of looking after children and our attitudes to it. Our involvement has meant for some a social contact where none previously existed. For others it has been a lifeline in what was otherwise an unbearable situation. It has been for many the first opportunity of knowing and thinking about what was happening to their children at nursery, not least having



the possibility of making suggestions and having them incorporated into the running of the Centre. We have all been forced to think about political questions developing out of our discussions, which, on first sight seemed to be nothing to do with politics.

Though there are overwhelming arguments for having a full paid staff, we are determined that when this happens, the control that parents have now shall not be diminished, for it is directly the result of their daily involvement in the running of the Centre.

It seems to us that nurseries should be situated in community centres where parents and local people have easy access and therefore involvement. Also that they should be run with flexibility and diversity according to the specific needs of the neighbourhood. But really there are no easy answers, and it's up to each nursery/centre to find the best way of stretching their particular situation to their best advantage.

More Problems

The idea of the Centre did not arise out of the community in which it was implanted, nor were people from this community involved from the start in getting it together. This means that to some extent the Centre has been an alien imposition on an already deeply oppressed area, both in terms of ideas and values, and in terms of the people involved, most of whom were middle class women. Attempts have been made to deal with the resentment these things aroused, but it is a continuing problem. This difficulty is not specific to the Centre, of course, and faces, in some way, many radical groups which attempt to intervene in community politics.

The second problem is related to this one : insofar as part of the Centre's ideology has been parental (and other adult) participation and control, this has meant mainly middle class people, who have the time and share the 'voluntary labour' ideology, becoming involved in it. By no means all of us working in the Centre have actually gone beyond the idea of 'voluntary labour' to seeing working with kids, and in an autonomous institution, as in some way part of our politics, or as something to be learned from in the context of developing alternative lifestyles and alternative values. This leads to a third point :

The efforts which have been made to develop non-authoritarian, non-sexist, self-regulating relationships have been severely limited by own continuing hang-ups and the effect of our history and subjection to bourgeois social relations; lack of general agreement among those involved that these things need to be struggled against - so that there is a lack of consistency, of shared purpose (this has its positive side too, in that the kids relate to very different kinds of people); and the real difficulties involved anyway - the fact that the main formative influence on the kids is still, mostly, home situations in which many of the attitudes etc we wish to change are reinforced.

There is some doubt about how the continuity of the Centre can be assured once the initial enthusiasm of starting something really new has worn off. Some have thought this reflected as well the special nature of the group involved, several of who had organisational experience. But part of the point of the Centre can be for people who have not had this kind of experience or background to gain that experience, to learn how to struggle collectively for what they want (and to learn that that can be enjoyable as well), and to take

back some of the power that has been alienated from them. The Centre, despite its contradictions, has at least glimmerings of being a place where these things can happen.

However, over the last eighteen months we have come to realise that schemes such as ours are not going to solve the national child-care problem. Our model can only be reproduced in its present form in areas where parents - and especially women - have the time, energy and confidence to organise their own nurseries. Most do not. Although we recognise the limitations of our model, we'd still like to see more neighbourhood-based nurseries controlled by parents. We conclude by setting down some practical information to help you set up yours.

Practical Guide

1) MONEY :

Money can be obtained from several different sources :

a) Local Council Social Services Department :

This is where ours comes from. Contact the day care department within Social Services. Try to find a sympathetic person to work through.

b) Urban Aid :

Money is available for capital costs and running costs of 'suitable' projects. 75% of the money comes from the Home Office and 25% from Local Government. You have to go through your Social Service Department for support of your application. Ask them for advice on how to apply for Urban Aid money.

c) Local Education Authority :

You might be able to get some money from your L.E.A. but it will probably mean employing at least one trained teacher. You might also lose some of your control.

d) Charities :

You could apply to different charities for money (Trust book available from your Library). The politics of doing this are dubious as it lets the council off the hook - it is their responsibility to provide day-care for the under-fives.

e) Fund-Raising :

As a last resort you could try to raise some of your own money (jumble sales, discos etc). This is the worst method of raising money for at least two reasons : first it is another case of doing the council's work for them, and second it is a terrific drain on valuable time and energy and a constant worry.

2) PREMISES :

a) Finding suitable premises :

This is one of the most difficult tasks, particularly in inner London where there is so much pressure on all available property for

housing people. We would recommend a house rather than a church hall (See section on the house). First decide roughly where you'd like your Centre to be and then look for empty or recently sold houses in the area. You can discover who owns the houses by going along to the Rates and Valuation department of the council and asking them. In this way you can discover which houses the council owns. Next compile a list of empty council-owned houses which you think are suitable and send it to the Housing Department accompanied by a written proposal describing your project. Keep applying pressure until something happens. Should all forms of 'peaceful' negotiation fail, then how about squatting a house and asking questions later. Try to decide whether you would be content with a short-life house (like our current one) or whether you insist on something more permanent. Short life houses are much easier to come by.

b) Insurance :

Once you've got your house and are ready to start, you will need to insure the house. Our building is only insured by the council for fire and riot. We as occupiers have separate insurance for third party and damage to council property and an all risks policy for contents of the Centre.

c) Rates :

You can apply to your council for rate relief on the grounds that you are providing a social service. We got a 100% rate rebate on our house.

3) FOOD :

a) Milk :

You are entitled to free milk - a third of a pint per child per day. If you are in London the address for free milk forms is :

D.H.S.S.
AGDI Government Buildings (Block 2)
Honeypot Lane
Stanmore HA7 1AY
Middlesex

Tel : 01-952-2311 Ext.80

b) Bulk Buying :

Start a food co-operative amongst parents and workers and buy all your food in bulk - it's much cheaper and fresher, and involves sharing the work of shopping for the group as a whole.

4) EQUIPMENT :

For London :

a) G.L.C. Supplies :

Art materials, furniture etc. This is the stuff used in schools. For catalogues and requisition books apply to :

GLC Supplies Marketing Section
Room 399
County Hall
London SE1 7PB

Free or improvised materials :

Get a large roll of white kitchen paper from your local printers. It is the end roll of the newsprint.

Get sheets of yellow drawing paper from the X-ray department of your nearest hospital. It is the backing paper from the X-ray film.

Use empty large cardboard boxes for creative play (trains, boats, cars etc).

Tape around empty shoe boxes to close and reinforce them and use for building blocks.

Great for group play as they're big.

Save all empty cartons, packets etc and use for 'junk box modelling'.

MOTTO : SCRUNGE AS MUCH AS YOU CAN.

We think it's a good idea to save as much money as you can on equipment etc and use it to pay wages to as many people as possible.

5) BOOKS :

There are some North American Liberation Presses which have produced some books designed to challenge the sexual stereotypes usually found in children's books. Most of these are available from :

Books
84 Woodhouse Lane
Leeds
Yorks

Tel : 0532-42483. Send for booklist.



