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Roebuck, Rosemary

(1940 - 2024)

Born	19401111, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Died	20240429, Sydney New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Early Childhood Educationist, Playgroup Movement Activist, Volunteer

Summary

Rosemary Roebuck was the founder and first President of the Playgroup Association of N.S.W, a significant part of the newly emerging Australian playgroup movement that is still alive and well over 45 years later. She and her colleagues, with their young children, began organising and supporting playgroups from Balmain, New South Wales, in 1970, on a voluntary basis. Rosemary had previously trained as a pre-school teacher under Joan Fry, and worked in pre-schools and childcare. She spent some time working in early childhood in London before returning to Sydney with her husband, John, and first child. When her children were older she continued her career in early childhood.

Details

The following reflective essay was written by Rosemary Roebuck.

Balmain in the 1970s was an old suburb with cheap housing. Young families were moving in, as it was affordable and closer for husbands' work in the city.

I was a 29 year old mother with Duncan, two years, and Alasdair, five months. Living in Balmain with a small garden, John and I were renovating. I was lonely, needing mental stimulation after ten years of teaching in Early Childhood Education, and friends for Duncan and myself.

I was introduced to Julie Campbell, a New Zealander teacher living in the area and organising a little "Playcentre" in Adolphus Street, Balmain, just around the corner. Six mothers and their children, meeting once a week, for play and chatter. "Would I like to come?" "Yes!!" It was wonderful, meeting new friends and sociable Duncan loving every moment. Julie had returned to university and quite soon invited me to organize the group. Additional mothers and children were coming and soon we were overcrowded. Wishing to continue and extend the group, we needed new premises. Reverend John Booth, of St John's, Birchgrove, invited us to use their premises, including an open grassed outside area.

Our husbands built a sandpit and made easels, and the kids had a lovely open area. We rostered the mothers to bring paint, playdough and junk, and provide activities. Stories and music were routine activities. Our local butcher gave us large sheets of "butcher's paper" – remember those days? We shared fruit and juice and a "cuppa" and chat at morning tea time.

New mothers and children were visiting and joining all the time. The grapevine was spreading far and wide! Soon two mornings a week, then adding afternoon sessions to accommodate everyone. After one year we had a membership of 45 families, with at least 20 children each session.

The interest generated by these "play" sessions grew rapidly across Sydney suburbs, into the country, and even to Kalgoorlie, WA, where one visiting mother started a group of Indigenous people.

The initial cost was $1 membership and 30c per family per session, covering very basic needs. As mothers played with their children, supervising and running activities, child welfare regulations of child to adult ratio did not apply as required for Pre Schools and Child Care.

Again we soon outgrew our space, inundated daily with visiting mothers and children keen to learn how to develop their own groups We would not turn anyone away.

In early 1972 Reverend Andrew Soos of St Andrew's Church, Campbell Street, Balmain, invited us to use the crypt at the back of his church, with the additional bonus of a huge outside area, accessed by a back lane, with chooks in a nearby garden. Copious storage and permission granted to add swings, a sandpit, climbing equipment and grass. An independent telephone number for the evolving group of centres was urgent. John and I had been sole contact. My amazing, patient husband helped with calls or the children, as we were now receiving calls from 7 in the morning until 10pm – FRANTIC!

It became apparent that we needed a volunteer rostered office, to establish an Association with Solicitor, Insurance coverage and a Treasurer. Noel Bracks volunteered as Solicitor, Gordon Waddell and Rex Russel as Insurance brokers – husbands, of course, of involved mothers. In such a grass roots organization the multi skills of members were being put to good use. It was also becoming apparent we needed some financial backing.

A New Zealander, Lex Grey, came to our attention, working at Sydney University, under the Bernard van Leer Foundation, on Aboriginal Family Education Centres (AFEC). He was working with Aboriginal country women, based on a Maori program, helping to train them to educate their own young children, using natural materials and observation of early development – thus "learn and play". Lex had written "Look and Listen" and developed a "Parent Effective Programme". Lex encouraged us to begin our own Association, to offer advice, and if parents were interested they could enrol in a three year course, which many did. AFEC was unable to offer financial backing to us but willing to give information to families.

In April 1972 we held our inaugural meeting of the Playgroup Association of N.S.W.. Unlike New Zealand Playcentres where a supervisor organized each session, our philosophy was to have a mother/child based session with parents in charge, planning, supervising and being with their own and other families, supporting each other. I was elected first President, holding the position from 1972 to 1974.

Thus began campaigns of advertising, including newspapers, radio and TV interviews, "A Current Affair" with Simon Townsend, articles in Women's Day, notice boards in Baby Health Centres, shopping malls – everywhere, anywhere. Our very proactive Sister Johns of Balmain Baby Health Centre visited and recommended our playgroups to many mothers and those needing a social outlet and support.

Our first playgroup magazine, "Totline", was printed on 1st October 1972, with the logo designed by Anne Beverley, portraying the circle of parent and children. Incorporated within the magazine were ideas for craft, fingerplay songs and a list of 19 established playgroups and contact addresses. This led to the publication of "How to Form a Playgroup."

In 1973, with another Committee Member, we went to Canberra, applying for a grant from "The Australian Council of the Arts" – unfortunately we were not successful. With the establishment of the Association and the voluntary manned office in Campbell St., the pressure was slightly eased. Playgroup days had become so busy I had little time for my boys and they and I often arrived home frustrated and exhausted. But, it was all worthwhile.

As the movement grew, so did outside and professional interest develop, including from the following:

Macquarie Uni Sociology Students
Western Sydney Metropolitan Community Health
regarding benefits for the mental health of women
Ann Gash of Mona Vale Hospital, community health worker
Playgroups in hospitals
Toy libraries
National Youth Orchestra under Robert Millar invited playgroups to listen to the music, participate – stamping around the hall, then play and touch the instruments – magical. "Introduction to the Orchestra".

We recognized early on to set a limit of 30 children at each session, and support playgroups in their own areas. By the second birthday of the Playgroup Association of NSW we had 290 registered groups and publications available. These included:

How to Start a Playgroup
Kids Move
Kids Make
Parent Education Books
Guidelines

In 1974 at the Annual General Meeting Helen Bradfield was voted as next President. To Helen and all the future Presidents, Committee Members, and indeed the parents and children who have gone on to continue and develop the Association, I salute and thank them, for a dream accomplished and established for our special Australian children – then and now and the future and my grandchildren.

Published resources

Journal
Totline : Journal of the Playgroup Association of N.S.W., Playgroup Association of N.S.W., 1972 -

Book
Playgroup in action, Playgroup Association of N.S.W., 1977

How to start a playgroup, Playgroup Association of N.S.W., 1976

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