

## Pre-school Pressure

by Julia Roebuck

As the mother of a two-year-old boy, I decided to home educate him when he was about 16 months old. Deciding to exclude him from school left us with another dilemma; should we send him to pre-school? I didn't want to say no just because the place had "school" in its title, and I had heard that, most of the time, the children just played.

Before we reached our decision about pre-school, I was asked by a local parent to come to the local pre-school's Annual General Meeting. Their aim was to recruit me into the fold, with the view that I was the sort of person who would become active for an institution like this.

The committee was voluntary, mainly parents, and throughout most of the meeting, the children hardly got a mention; the focus was money. They didn't have an equipment or toy problem, they never did, but cash flow was tight. There was a cyclic four-year drop in the population, and they were struggling. They had made redundancies, they needed more pupils, especially three years plus, because the government vouchers gave them approx £8 per child session (whereas paying parents are charged half that). They had recently been given the go-ahead by OFSTED to drop the age of their intake from three to two and a half to boost their numbers.

I sat and listened, I could see the people had good hearts, and believed they were serving their community by providing the facility.

The pre-school building is next to the local primary school, the building and play facilities are very impressive. There really is nothing to fault about the place. Children can play and have fun, and if the parent wants them to, the child can spend most of the day there, every day, including lunch time and after school. The Government vouchers mean that half of the school week would be free of charge.

So why not send my child there? Well, I was almost tempted until I found out one thing: pre-schools are forced to follow the pre-school national curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, that's right, the pre-school national curriculum.

Nothing, it seems (except HE) is out of the reach of the government's tentacles when it comes to curricula.

The pre-school national curriculum isn't very stringent, it covers:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication
- Language and Literacy
- Mathematical Development
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development
- Creative Development

But don't worry, the government's website states "The goals do not put pressure on your child as most of the time they feel they are just playing and having fun." Well, that makes me feel much better then!

Most of the time? Why not ALL of the time? Why not just let the children play without any worry that they are not learning maths? Or that they can't read?

The one part of the curriculum that worried me the most is under "Personal, Social and Emotional Development." It states that a child should be "able to dress and undress." Actually, I resent that. Are they seriously saying that as a parent, I cannot teach my own son to dress and undress? Or that he hasn't the desire in him to be able to dress or undress himself?

Pre-schools don't test children, but they do have to fill out a "Foundation Stage Profile", a record of observations from the teachers. ("Teachers" is the term the government website uses, not mine). So a parent can know whether or not their child is 'normal' according to the government. It's a kind of school report that is given to the parent. So, at the age of three and four a child is already assessed.

I even had a look at the pre-school's OFSTED report. It made interesting reading. All OFSTED reports are available online.<sup>2</sup> The report is just as you might expect from a government body; they worry about how much of the curriculum is being covered and how the children are being assessed. This worries me. Why are children this young being assessed? Does it matter that at the age of four a child can't count yet? Not to me. Why should it matter to the government?

During the decision process, I inevitably reflected on my own time at pre-school. I went to one in the mid 1970s, it was expensive, and my parents could barely afford it. But somehow they found the money because the local playgroup was badly run. To be perfectly honest, I can only remember two things about pre-school: I was an angel in the nativity play, and I was told off quite severely by one of the teachers for opening a letter addressed to my parents. Except, I was three years old: I couldn't read yet.

I assume it was a bill for their fees.

My mother told me that the pre-school taught me French, and that I was very good at it. Well, at the age of 3-4 that's not surprising. My brain was a sponge, I was learning English, so French was a doddle. Unfortunately at the age of four I had to go to primary school, and French wasn't part of the curriculum there. So I had to wait until I was 11 to learn French again; by that time, I struggled to learn another language, and never grasped it, not even doing GCSE.

Interestingly, my parents were made to pay for five mornings a week, though I only went two or three times because I was often too tired to go. An ominous sign.

My husband never went to pre-school, and that was one of his main arguments against it for our son. He spent the pre-school years being looked after by his grandmother, a time that he still looks back on with great fondness; even reverence, especially since his grandmother died a few years after he started school.

But the pressures to pre-school your children are stronger now than ever, thanks for the government vouchers, and thanks to community too. If you can send your child to pre-school for half the school week for free, then of course, uptake is going to be high. At least a lot higher than when I was three.

We live in a village in Devon, and once a week I take my son to a toddler group there. It's run by the parents and can be somewhat disorganised. The group allows children 0-3. Why only until three? Because the village pre-school takes them from then on, of course, so why would anyone want to bring their child to the toddler group when they could be at pre-school?

Not only this, but as I sit amongst the toddler group, I am the odd one out by not wanting to take my child to pre-school. (Well okay, I'm the odd one out because I'm going to HE). But it does seem that nobody else has even questioned whether pre-school is right for their child.

One of the other mothers at the group has a three-year-old. She took her son to the pre-school when he was two and a half. But that quickly stopped because he didn't like it. So, six months later she tried again. This time, for free, thanks to the government. He still doesn't like it. He cries all the way there, and doesn't want his mum to leave him.

"Have you thought about not sending him at all?" I said, not trying to get on my HE high horse, and trying to be as subtle as possible. "If he doesn't like it, why put both of you through all that stress?"

She shrugged. "I don't know why I bother sometimes, but I want time on my own. He's OK with his grandmother, or other child minders."

It didn't seem to occur to her, that those other forms of childcare were more suited for her son, if she wanted time to herself.

"Well," said her friend, "He's going to have to go to school eventually, so he may as well get used to it now."

Needless to say, I did argue that no, he didn't have to go to school and then sat through an hour's lecture from them as they told me that by home educating my son I would be harming his social skills for the rest of his life. It seems that these two arguments: social skills and getting used to school are the overriding arguments used within communities.

She is just another mother, going with the flow of the village, following blindly what her friends do – sending her child to pre-school because that's what everyone else does. This is the attitude of many of the mothers.

The thing that worries me the most about the other mothers is that when I asked them what exactly their older children did when at pre-school, none of them knew. Why? Well, it's pre-school, why should they know? Their education is being taken care of by the government. They can leave their child at the gates, walk away, and not worry. If anything is amiss, they get a report to tell them.

There is no doubt that many children have benefited from pre-school, and that as a means of childcare, it has a big attraction. But I do question the pressure put on parents to pre-school their children, without thought for the individual need of the child. After all, does it really harm a child's social skills at the age of three or four if they don't pre-school? Certainly not. Pre-school is a modern idea, born out of the modern idea that parents should try and get their child into day care as soon as possible, so that the growth of the country can be secured for a government bent on helping parents get back to work and getting children learning as young as possible.

Well, as a parent, I am working; hard, tiring work every day of my life by simply being a parent. I do not want to get my child into a school environment as soon as I can. I want to cherish the time I have with him, you never get it back. I want him to play and have fun without the fear that he is failing what the government of the day thinks he should be achieving.

Besides, rather than enclose him in four walls for a couple of hours a day, I honestly don't think that with all the things we get up to every day, there is time for him to go to pre-school. When he is school age, I believe home education will socialise him more than anything else. We can go to the library and meet other children, adults, the elderly. In fact we cannot go to the library, the park, the museum without somebody speaking to us. There are plenty of indoor and outdoor play areas complete with other children. Nature walks, a free entry animal sanctuary, farms, swimming pools, the list is endless.

If I wasn't already opting out of free schooling, I would most likely have gone with the flow, and pre-schooled my son. I hadn't thought that it might be doing him harm, after all, the government encourages it, and they monitor it. What could be wrong with that?

Everything, if people blindly follow and do not question if it is right for their child, or are pushed into it by the community in which they live.

So pre-school, no thanks. Just like with schooling, I can do better myself.

1 [www.direct.gov.uk/EducationAndLearning/EarlyLearningForUnderFives/NurseriesPlaygroupsReceptionClasses/fs/en](http://www.direct.gov.uk/EducationAndLearning/EarlyLearningForUnderFives/NurseriesPlaygroupsReceptionClasses/fs/en)

2 [www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/)