

Editorial introduction: In this issue of *Paths*, we profile the Charlestown Play House, a center of learning and growing for very young children, located in the village of Charlestown, near Phoenixville, in southeastern Pennsylvania. In the best tradition of holistic living and learning, this warm and inviting place uses the talents of creative and dedicated teachers and parents all working on behalf of the children in their care.

A Magic Place: A Profile of the Charlestown Play School

BY SANDY HURST



Charlestown Playhouse

In a chest in my daughter's living room there is a small woven rag rug with a hole in it, and among her two little children's toys is a well worn cloth bag decorated with the name of Charlestown Day Camp and a scene of bunnies and children. They remind me of happy four and five year olds weaving rugs in Miss Carol's room at Play School and paddling in the creek at day camp, wearing underpants and bare feet. No one worries about whether the children get dirty as they collect stones and sticks to build dams and fill their buckets. Teachers and helpers are there to protect them and help them in their exploration of the water and the plants and creatures they encounter.

When Betty Stonorov, then Elizabeth Foster, said to her sister in 1936, "Let's get some children to come and play" (twenty-fifth anniversary booklet), and when the children did come and literally take over her Broadwater Farm home, she could not have imagined how many children like my daughters would grow up to treasure those symbols of a magical time in their lives.

As the children came, riding tricycles on the porch, invading the library and kitchen, playing music and dancing

I'm going to Charlestown Play School
Gonna have a lot of fun,
Gonna run in the grass,
Gonna play in the sun,
They've got a big old tire,
Swingin' from an old tree,
And there's lots of little children
Gonna be friends to me."

— Michael Bacon

through the house and barn, Miss Betty's father, Frank B. Foster, recognized that this was a serious endeavor. He decided to hire an architect to develop a plan to create a "house for children" in the abandoned First Presbyterian Church of Chester County, built in 1734 near the town of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Oscar Stonorov, a young architect who would become Miss Betty's husband and go on to design great sculptures and buildings, took on the task. That old church was transformed to include expanses of glass and rooms built into the side of a wooded hill, with even a slide and fire pole running from upstairs to down. It stands as a tribute to those forward-looking people who believed with Miss Betty that "the ideal community must be built around the training of children" (twenty-fifth anniversary booklet). And it stands, still, as a tribute to the thousands of families that have been nurtured within the loving arms of this community.

In time the community also included a summer day camp for children from six to about twelve, where play is the order of the day and where arts and crafts as well as swimming in pool and creek, nature exploration, drama and games reign in an open and relaxed atmosphere of complete accep-

tance. Here, older teens, most of them veterans of day camp, act as junior counselors and learn from master teachers and counselors the value of free play and unrestricted time for growing children.

Charlestown Play House is committed to the belief that children learn best through play, in a nurturing environment where loving people attend to the children's physical and emotional needs as well as to their intellectual and artistic growth and development. In the booklet prepared for its twenty-fifth anniversary, Playschool's position was described this way: "The thread that runs continuously through it all is our belief in children; they are our hope, and each one must have the best experience possible to further his ability to take his place in our democracy, and to learn to live with love for his fellow man."

Known to most people in the area simply as Play School, this buzzing hive of little people from two to six or seven (the school includes Kindergarten) overflows with energy and creative imagination. The day is from 9:00 A.M. to 11:45 A.M., and there is an optional afternoon care session during which children have lunch, rest, and play while parents are at work. Play School is a nonprofit corporation organized as a parent cooperative. Each family is expected to spend 120 days each year helping in the classroom and 30 hours helping with maintenance. There are a few long-term substitute helpers who might be paid to take the place of parent helpers in unusual circumstances—for example, when a parent is too ill or when business takes both parents out of town. The year begins in October and continues through about the middle of July. Groups range in size from fourteen in the Twos to twenty in the Kindergarten. Thus, Play School is essentially a pre-school that includes Kindergarten. The Twos have two teachers and two parent helpers. Each other group always has at least one certified teacher and at least two parent helpers. The school also offers consultation with a licensed psychologist.

In each group, described according to the prevailing age (twos, threes, etc.), children are encouraged to explore their



Sandy Hurst is the Director and one of the co-founders of Upattinas School and Resource Center in Glenmoore, PA, which was designed by its families and staff to emulate Play School in its philosophy and approach to children as they grow through elementary and high school. Miss Betty was her mentor when Sandy was a young mother and teacher at Play School, and this article is a labor of love that only touches on the rich learning of those years.



The twos develop their imaginations and make memories.

environment, both indoors and in the play yards. Over many years of "work parties" parents have contributed to these varied spaces and yards. Set apart from the others, surrounded by a solid fence, is the Twos' Yard, sheltered by a huge oak tree and complete with tiny structures for climbing and sand piles full of tools. The other yards are centered around riding toys and Miss Betty's old jeep, swings and climbers, water fountains and sand with real shovels and rakes, and structures in the woods including log houses and a theater. When a tree falls, it becomes a part of the yard. The children climb on it, examining all the roots and branches that remain and often dragging other building materials to make a fort around and within the branches.

Rooms here are functional, with space to hold hundreds of unit blocks. These are the wooden blocks that many of us remember from our childhood. They offer the opportunity to build vast towns of houses and roads and high towers, while they also contribute to the development of the understanding of spatial relations and linear and geometric concepts. Because each block has a mathematical relationship to the others, children learn through their muscles and bones about halves and wholes and ramps and arches, and spheres, cones, cubes, and pyramids.

Large climbing structures as well as dress-up and house play corners full of clothing and jewelry for both boys and girls encourage cooperative play and experimentation with adult roles in life. Tables and easels hold the tools—such as paint brushes, pencils and markers, and puzzle blocks—that will help to develop small muscle coordination. All sorts of found materials, like seeds and pine cones, styrofoam pellets, and popsicle sticks become parts of collages and small sculptures or tools for counting and grouping in mathematical sequences. In the hallway there is a wonderful closet complete with labeled boxes and crates full of all manner of interesting "stuff," ready for the teachers to use at a moment's notice. Who knows when a box of corks or buttons or old shoelaces will come in handy—offering just the right ingredient for a work of art or a science experiment?

One never knows what at the school will offer an opportunity for exploration and imagination. An old piano, ready to be hauled away, is taken apart by the five year olds. Using screwdrivers and pry bars, they carefully dismantle this magical instrument. It becomes a source for understanding the size and tension of the strings as they make music high and low, loud and soft. And then it becomes a harp and the hammers are incorporated into art and sculpture.

Paints and paper are the means for exploring color and texture. When the paint powder is mixed with milk or starch, or even soapsuds, all kinds of interesting effects are created. The results of this exploration contribute to the child's understanding of color and what happens when it is mixed with things other than just water. Although many of the pictures the children make are truly works of art, the value of this exploration by young children lies in the process of creating and experimenting rather than in the final product. A paper filled with the color of mud shows that the child has found out what happens when we mix all the colors that we have.

When I was the teacher of the Kindergarten, I had a child who painted a city picture with a greenish yellow sky. When asked about that sky she said, "That's how the sky looks in Conshohocken, where I live." How easy it might have been for someone to have simply thought that she did not know her colors!



Top left: Exploring the earth. Bottom left: A favorite spot for everyone, the tree swing. Above: Betty Stonorov enjoying navigating the school's yards. Right: Stuffing Thanksgiving turkeys.

Big lumps of clay or piles of play dough may be used for making things, but they may also be used to pound and beat and stretch and pull out all the frustrations and anger that sometimes come to school with a child. In the woodworking area there used to be a big log full of nails pounded into it by children who needed to work out their troubles physically before they could talk them out. And sometimes, after such a physical workout, or maybe even without it, one can see a child wrapped in the arms of a loving teacher as the child cries out that frustration we all encounter in our day-to-day living.

Throughout the day at Play School one finds an undercurrent of care for the emotional well-being of the children. They are encouraged to express themselves through conversations and stories, plays made up from books and from their own imaginations, artwork, and physical play. Children learn to talk out their problems and to cope with the outcome of their actions through small group interactions as well as within their group's daily Circle Time.

Cooking provides one of the built-in opportunities for group sharing and interaction. Everyone cooks at Play School. Each group has a day of the week to use the kitchen, which is very small, but complete. Projects like pretzels and bread or cookies and puddings are put together in the classrooms, cooked or baked, and brought back to share and take home to families. In the fall, families and friends with apple trees provide cider for juice time and for sale to support the school. In the spring children and helpers hike to the top of the field to collect wild raspberries and blackberries to bake into their pies and other goodies. At Hanukkah there are potato latkes and at Christmas there are cutout cookies.

Thanksgiving is a special occasion. Each child brings something to include in the meal. On the day before the

celebration, bread, celery and onions are cut up, seasoned, and stuffed into chickens and turkeys. Little hands wield the knives under the watchful eyes of their teachers and parent helpers. They slather the birds with butter and salt for the parent helpers to take home to roast for tomorrow. On the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, the special people who have helped Play School during the previous year are guests for this feast in the Old Fours' room. The children set the tables and everyone gathers 'round. One day I remember, knowing that the Twos had four chickens to stuff and only three were on the tables, we searched everywhere before finding one in a child's cubby. He had put it there because, since he helped to make it, like an artwork, he thought he should take it home.

A typical Play School day will begin with Miss Betty greeting each child at the car and welcoming her or him to the day. The children climb the short hill to the school and go to their classrooms where they have time to play with the other children or by themselves, at any pursuit they choose.

Sometimes this will be the continuation of a group project from the day before and sometimes just exploration of toys or structures. Often they go directly to the easels to paint. It might be a time to take out the classroom guinea pig, bunny, or hamster and cuddle with it or sit with a favorite book or toy brought from home. In any case, the teacher will be watching and noting the mood and needs of each individual child and planning or re-planning the day according to the needs and interests the children bring with them.



After the initial playtime there will be a call to Circle Time, when all the children and helpers gather to talk about their day and their lives. This is a sharing time and often it is the opportunity to tell stories of life at home or in the play yard or to air grievances that need the help of the group in finding a solution. Children speak and are listened to, encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings as well as to show what they have brought. There may be singing, or there may be writing of the stories on large storyboards, depending on the ages and the mood of the day in the group. During Circle Time, the teachers remind the children of things available to do that day and what they might expect if there are time constraints to their play because of a special occasion like going swimming in the summertime or having a visiting storyteller or musician. It might also be a time to remember and act out an episode or create a short play about a trip from the previous week. As the children get older they are expected and encouraged to come and stay for the complete circle, although there may be days when the teachers allow a particular child to stay away. Children in the youngest groups may go off to play as they lose interest.

Circle Time is followed by free time with activities like those described above available on the tables or in centers around the room. In this school, although there are many toys and activities that help to build the concepts needed for academic learning, it is assumed that the play of the children is their work. The point here is not to teach the child anything, but to offer the opportunity for learning through direct experience with the tools and materials that promote the development of understanding in its own time. When the children help with cooking no one is thinking about whether they can read the recipe or understand what $\frac{1}{2}$ cup means. They are just

cooking and enjoying the use of interesting equipment and ingredients, with a close eye out for sharing the outcome and taking a treat home to their families. Again, the children learn through their muscles and bones. They feel and see the difference in volume and weight between a half and a whole cup of water or milk. They know how it feels to pour liquid as opposed to solids such as flour or chocolate chips. And when it is time, as they grow and develop in understanding more abstract ideas, they will remember and know the reality of the concepts traditionally taught only through the use of a pencil and paper. It is so much more fun when you learn through doing a task, rather than through just being told about how to do it. It is so much more meaningful when you are allowed to use real tools and equipment, like the things grown-ups use. And when the experience includes close contact with others and requires sharing and talking about what you are doing, there are so many opportunities for rich learning to take place.

Even the experience of not having your project work out as you wanted it to is a rich learning experience. In fact, the learning that comes out of failed experiments is the basis for most of the medicines we now use to cure our illnesses. Disappointment and failure, when coupled with lots of encouragement to try again and many successful experiences, help us to learn the patience and determination so necessary as we face the challenges of growing up. When children are allowed to create buildings out of boards and boxes and what many people call junk, they learn about what works and what doesn't work—being careful of splinters and the ends of long pieces of board, sharing tools and equipment, articulating their ideas. Sometimes their buildings fall down and there are tears. Sometimes they try again with stronger walls. And sometimes they draw pictures and write stories about their buildings and learn to spell the words they need to say "Girls (or Boys) Keep Out!" But sometimes the children abandon the task, having learned what they needed for the time being and going on to other projects and ideas. No one here considers this a failure. Adults often do not continue with a project that is not satisfying or one that they don't enjoy. Why should children?

Because outdoor play is important, not only in early development but as part of a healthy life, the groups spend some time out of doors playing, building, riding, swinging, and exploring each day. All the children are encouraged and expected to do this because the teachers and helpers are needed in the play yards, but there may be occasions when a helper stays indoors with a few who are busy with a project they want to finish or for other individual reasons. Just outside the back door there is a great oak tree upon which, for many years, hung a big rope swing. When I was a teacher at Play School in the late '60s and early '70s, a young man who had grown up with Play School and its Day Camp, and was beginning his career as a professional musician, created a song about that swing that has become a Play School theme song. His name is Michael Bacon, and he has since graced many stages with his music, sometimes as soloist, and sometimes with his very famous brother and another Play School graduate, Kevin Bacon.

At the end of the Play School day the children wait in their groups for their parents or car pools to arrive. Because the road is busy, Miss Betty is there again, to see each child into the car safely and to say, "Good-bye."

For some people, it is not easy to accept a philosophy that includes the belief that a building made from all kinds of blocks and construction materials is just as wonderful as a story written in a child's own hand. The child who reads at

Now What?

A Resource List on Other Early Childhood Programs and Information

Beyond Charlestown, are there still places like the Play School available for children? How do we find them or create more like them? Below are a few resources that you can explore to help as you investigate more deeply into the needs of early childhood and the kinds of programs that might match those needs.

Magical Books On Helping Young Children

Some of the following books are now out of print but that doesn't lessen their value. Check your local library for copies, or try the Internet at <http://www.bibliofind.com> for great bargains on used books.

How to Help Your Child in School, by Larry and Mary Frank (1959, Viking Press). This is one of the books by Larry Frank that Miss Betty credits greatly for informing her approach to parenting and education.

The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon, by David Elkind (1988, Addison-Wesley Publishing). Illustrates how social forces within families, schools, and the media serve to make children the unwilling, unintended victims of stress.

The Magic Years, by Selma Fraiberg (1996, Fireside). This is another book and author that greatly influenced Miss Betty and the tenets of the Play School.

Magical Child, by Joseph Chilton Pearce (1977, Penguin Books). Many chapters focus on the birthing process and infant years, both of which lay the foundation for developing well-bonded relationships during the preschool years.

Natural Learning Rhythms, by Josette and Ba Luvmour (1997, revised edition). Presents tools for more fully understanding child development so parents and teachers can better support how children grow and learn by being aware of their "stage-specific wisdom." For more information about obtaining this book, contact EnCompass, listed in the Resource Directory at the back of this magazine.

Teacher, by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963, Simon & Schuster). Tells the story of a now well-known teacher in New Zealand who listened closely to the needs of the native Maori students and what they cared about, and then invented new ways to teach based on a deep respect for the children she was teaching. This work has influenced many teachers at the Play School and worldwide.

Other Programs for Preschoolers

Play Mountain Place—described in detail in Issue #4 of *Paths of Learning*, this school is considered by Sandy Hurst the West Coast equivalent of Play School. Website: <http://www.playmountain.org/>

Montessori Schools—Maria Montessori believed that young children learn best by doing, not by passively accepting other people's ideas and knowledge. Hundreds of Montessori schools now exist around the country based on this premise. For an index of several large informational websites developed by Montessori organizations, visit <http://www.inspiredinside.com/learning/info-montessori.htm>

Reggio Emilia Approach—The essential basis of the Reggio Emilia approach is a profound respect for the child's active, inquisitive, and vitally creative engagement with the

world. In this book, twenty-six American and Italian educators—including Howard Gardner, Lillian Katz, and the visionary founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, Loris Malaguzzi—reflect in depth on the origins, philosophy, teaching methods, and policy implications of these delightful learning centers. In contrast to Americans' emphasis on logical and verbal skills, this approach cultivates "the hundred languages of children"—the numerous artistic and kinesthetic (as well as verbal) ways in which children make meaning of their experience and express their discoveries. For more details, you may wish to read *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* by Carolyn Edwards, Lella Gandini, and George Forman (1993, Ablex Publishing).

Early Childhood Development Websites

These are not necessarily resources that are in line with the philosophies of *Paths of Learning*, but you might explore them to see for yourself what you think of their content.

Delaware Valley Association for the Education of Young Children—an organization to which Play School belongs and sends delegates to conferences. <http://www.dvaeyc.org/>
Early Childhood Educators' and Family Web Corner (sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children)—<http://users.sgi.net/~cokids/>

Early Learning Center (New Horizons for Learning)—section of an extensive website designed especially for teachers wishing to keep up with leading edge research in the field. http://www.newhorizons.org/fifth_kids.html

ERIC: Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education—a national clearinghouse which includes special search features for parents. <http://ericece.org/>

The Future of Children (sponsored by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation)—<http://www.futureofchildren.org/>

The National Association for the Education of Young Children—a membership organization with online resources for parents as well as for persons seeking professional development, and a special section on "Young Children International." <http://www.naeyc.org/>

Preschoolers Today—a resource and community created to support parents of kids ages 3 through 5. <http://www.preschoolerstoday.com/>

From Reflection to Action...

To understand children deeply, adults can begin by spending more time with them, as well as by being fully present with them when they are together. Often, paying attention to a child and listening to her or his needs without imposing one's own assumptions about what needs to be learned can be quite challenging, to be sure, but ultimately very rewarding for both children and adults.

If you would like more reflections and action ideas to supplement this resource list, we invite you to visit our Online Action Guides at <http://www.great-ideas.org/guides.htm>, where you can more easily link to the referenced books and websites. Or, for a printed version of this Online Action Guide to supplement *A Magic Place*, call 1-800-639-4122.



Above left: Horsemen on patrol. Below left: Sandy Hurst's grandson. Above: A cool but refreshing dip.



PHOTO BY SANDY HURST

four is not considered more advanced than one who shows no signs of being ready to read at five. Everyone here believes that given the time and opportunity to freely explore all aspects of their world, each child will come to what is usually thought of as "learning" in his or her own time and in his or her own natural rhythm.

This author can attest to the validity of this belief. My three daughters all spent years, including Kindergarten, at Play School and then went on to a school called Upattinas School, which was designed by three Play School teachers to follow that philosophy into elementary and high school. My girls are now adults, with college educations, including one master's degree. And, more importantly, each is enjoying a productive and fulfilling life and raising wonderful children. Play School children who go on to public or other private schools also do well. People often wonder whether these children don't have a problem adjusting to the more structured experience of public school. In my experience with children over the past thirty-five years I have learned that children are infinitely adaptable and, with loving adults in their lives, they are able to adjust to all kinds of situations. I have known many Play School children through the years I was a counselor in summer day camp and in my home as friends of my daughters. They are wonderfully "normal," but I often think that they may be more creative in their thinking and more open to trying new experiences than other people.

Long experience with children helps the teachers at Play School to reassure parents who are buffeted about by the pressures of the times. It is difficult not to be concerned when you read about what every child must know or do, or where he or she should go to school in order to get into the "right" college or university. Many people believe that the only way to be successful in the world of adults is to be able to climb to the top of the ladder in a major corporation or profession. What about all the rest of the people who do not fit on that top rung? At Play School all those rungs are valued, as are the people who choose to live in other ways—off the grid, like tool and die makers and forest rangers. Parents

here are farmers and stonemasons as well as doctors and lawyers. Children are encouraged to dream about becoming firefighters and bakers as well as stars in the business and entertainment world.

At the same time as there is unequivocal support for the children at Play School there is also that same kind of support for its teachers. Through monthly staff meetings that include the school's psychologist and Miss Betty, teachers compare notes and share both joys and frustrations. They discuss new ideas and ways to work with the children and parents, always with Miss Betty's support and encouragement. In fact, Tina, a long time teacher of the Threes, once said, "And if one of us were found running around the square in Phoenixville naked, Miss Betty would say that she was sure we had a good reason." Although the school's underlying philosophy never wavered, we were always as free as the children to explore and improve upon the basic underlying structure. Miss Betty listened and encouraged us to try new ideas and to introduce new experiences, as long as we did not forget the importance of free play in the lives of the children. In effect, we were also

free to play—with new ideas and experiences—and to grow and learn along with the children.

When asked about how she learned about this kind of approach to parenting and teaching children, Miss Betty gives credit to her old friend Larry Frank, who taught and wrote about helping children to learn (*How To Help Your Child In School*, now unfortunately out of print). She also remembers her experience as a young woman helping in a nursery school in a public housing complex in Philadelphia, although she did not think that the style of that school was right for her because it was too structured and limiting in its approach to children. She spent a year in New York City, during which time she went to Bank Street College of Education on Fridays and watched and learned all she could about teaching young children, even though she was not enrolled there. But mostly, she says, "It just happened." And what happened became a laboratory for students who came from Bank Street to

observe, as well as those who came from many local colleges. Even Eric Erickson, again an old friend of Miss Betty's, sometimes came to visit and included his observations in some of his research about children and their learning and growth.

In the words of Selma Fraiberg, whose writings, along with those of Larry Frank, gave voice to many of the basic tenets of this school, these are *The Magic Years* and this is, indeed, a magic place (Fraiberg 1959).

References

- Fraiberg, S. 1996. Reprint. *The magic years: Understanding and handling the problems of early childhood*. New York: Fireside. Original edition, 1959.
- Frank, L. and M. Frank. 1959. *How to help your child in school*. New York: Viking Press.

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PathsofLearning Resource Center

—————> www.PathsOfLearning.net <—————

Are you a parent faced with tough decisions about finding creative and learner-centered options for meeting your child's unique needs?

Are you a teacher wanting to create space for more creativity and individuality while fostering a dynamic classroom community?

Are you a school board member or administrator seeking solid evidence for how to implement new programs or restructure schools in ways that better fit how students learn while maintaining students' natural curiosity and love of life?

Visit the new Paths of Learning Resource Center, www.PathsOfLearning.net

In collaboration with the magazine, we now offer an online search tool that brings together educational research and stories about effective learning options—in public schools, charters, private schools, homeschooling, and more.

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For anyone without easy access to the Internet or who prefers print materials, please call us at 1-800-639-4122 for an offline request form.

To contribute stories or research about more holistic learning options, write to: robin@PathsOfLearning.net