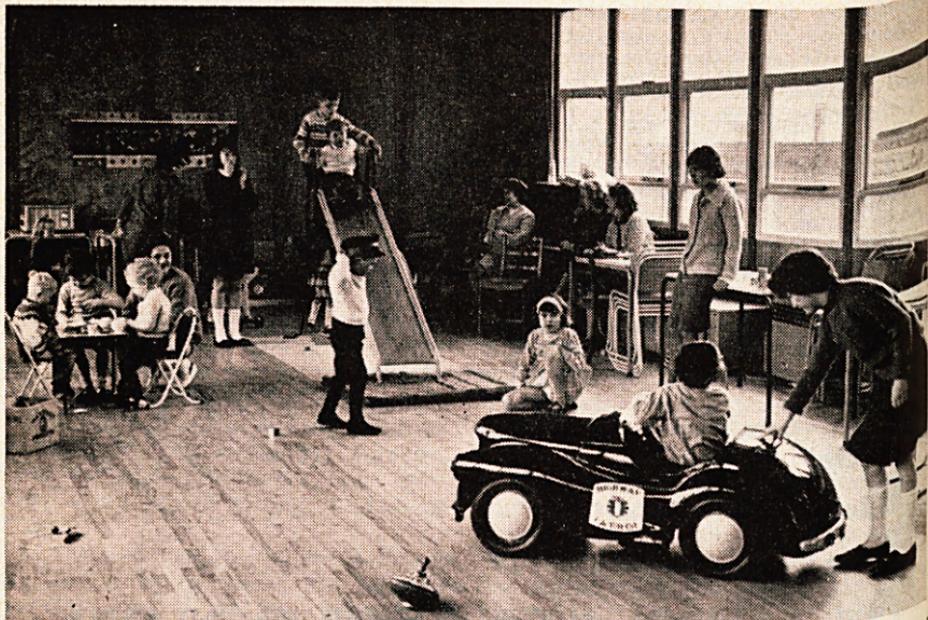


## INTRODUCING THE SLOUGH PLAYGROUP



### FOR MENTALLY HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

by Sean O'Connell

It was to prove the potentialities of mentally handicapped children and to help their mothers to overcome their reluctance to face the world that the Hon. Mrs. Iris Cawley, herself the mother of a five year old mongol boy, found herself leader of a group of housewives which began a special playgroup in Slough.

Every feature of the group was carefully mapped out to help the children's mental development and to accustom them to mixing, rather than being kept apart from society. Every toy was bought, every game was planned, to help to teach co-operation and conformity.

Then came a set-back. Had it been for a youth club, the Buckinghamshire County Council would have provided 75% of the £4,000 cost of the building and equipment. But as it was for children considered ineducable, the County Council only felt able to contribute £25 towards the cost of equipment.

So, with the help of public subscription the Slough Society for Mentally Handicapped Children provided the building, and the idea of the playgroup was put into practice a year ago. It began with a membership of 3.

"It was started for the sake of the children, but we soon realised that it was the mothers who badly needed somewhere like this where they could relax while their children played together instead of nursing them at home," said Mrs. Cawley.

"One of our difficulties has been in tracking down mothers and convincing them not to shut themselves away from society. It is such a shock for a woman to learn that her child is mentally handicapped that she is reluctant to put a foot outside her own front door. She is inclined to want to stay within the circle she knows and keep her child protected from the outside world."

Mrs. Boniface, whose son David is now six, was another mother who helped to start the playgroup.

"When David was a baby, I knew no-one who could help me," she said. "I was terribly depressed and just sat at home feeling as if I were forgotten by the outside world. The playgroup has been wonderful for all of us. It is amazing to see the difference in the children after they have been coming for a few weeks."

Membership of the group has now grown to fifteen, who attend three days a week from a radius of twenty-five miles around Slough. They are picked up and returned to their homes by an ambulance-bus, presented by the Mayor of Slough. During school holidays other children are encouraged to join in to extend the aim of getting the mentally handicapped children used to community life. They watch listen and copy, and slowly they take their first faltering steps away from dependence on their mothers.



On the facing page, children from the neighbourhood play with mentally handicapped children from the Slough Playgroup during the school holidays. Above, 4-year old Robert learns to play a nursery game.

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