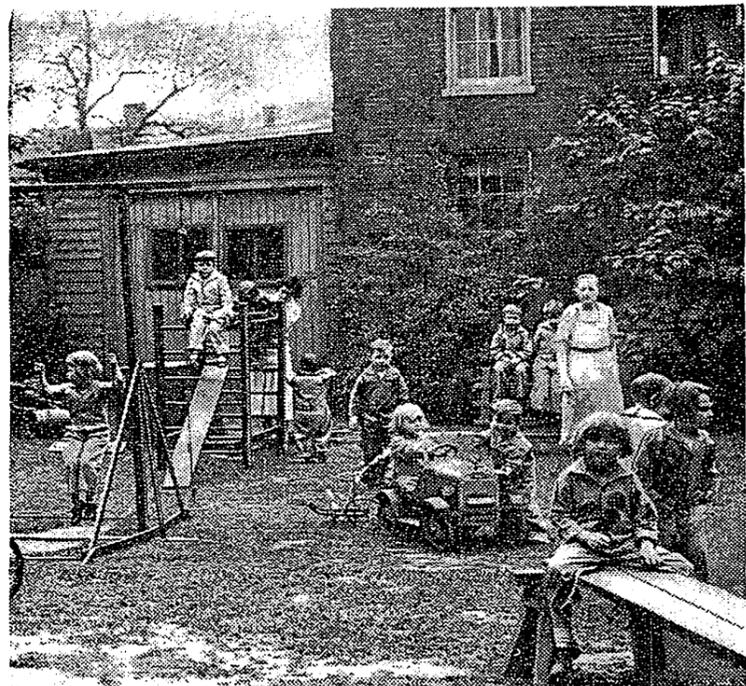


Survey of FERA Nursery Schools Reveals Conditions That Surround the Pupils

By GRACE T. LANGDON, Specialist, Emergency Nursery Schools, FERA.
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ENJOYING LIFE UNDER THE FERA



Underprivileged Youngsters at Supervised Play in One of the Government's Emergency Nursery Schools.

Survey of FERA Nursery Schools Reveals Conditions That Surround the Pupils

By GRACE LANGDON,
Specialist, Emergency Nursery
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WHATEVER else the Relief Administration has or has not done, it should be cited on Child Health Day this week as having conducted for almost two years one of the most widespread experiments in child welfare ever undertaken by a national government.

In forty-seven States and in Puerto Rico it is giving for six or seven hours each day to 55,000 needy children nourishing food, medical supervision and healthy, happy conditions for rest and play. In city slum, open countryside, industrial district and Indian reservation there are today approximately 1,900 emergency nursery schools providing such care. They are unevenly distributed through the States, ranging from one in Utah to 232 in Massachusetts.

But wherever located, any child, white or Negro, or of whatsoever religion or none, may go to the nursery school, if he is between 2 and 4 years of age and comes from an underprivileged home. And the children do come from such homes—cold, dreary, windowless shacks and basement rooms of city tenements where sunshine has never penetrated.

Types of Children.

Now for the first time, from 10,000 individual record blanks filled out during the first year and just analyzed by Dr. John Anderson of the University of Minnesota, we know exactly what kinds of children we have been helping.

We know, for instance, that the vast majority of these needy are children of American-born parents living together in American homes. In only 5 per cent of the cases were the parents either divorced or separated, and in only 18 per cent was any other language than English spoken at home. Some of the parents are fairly well educated: almost a third have had one to four years of high school, and more than 7 per cent have had at least a year of college.

As one visits home after home from which the children come one feels that constant impact of personality upon personality which is the result of overcrowding. The figures of the study show that that feeling is well founded, for 46.5 per cent of the children lived in homes of four rooms or less, and in almost half of these cases there were four children or more in the families. Often, too, other adults than the father and mother lived in the home.

Crowded Homes.

Many a child has found at the emergency nursery school the only opportunity he has ever had of sleeping alone. Some 93 per cent of the children represented in the study slept in rooms with other children; in 10 per cent of the cases three children slept together and in nearly 3 per cent of the cases more than three shared the same bed. Sometimes the "bed" is only a mattress or straw tick on the floor. It is not surprising that children come to the nursery schools pale and anemic-looking and often too listless to play.

More often than not the homes were devoid of opportunity for play or for cultural advantages of any sort. In many of the homes there never had been books or toys or music; in others such things had existed, but were a part of the toll taken by the depression.

The report shows that 43 per cent of the children were found through physical examination to have bad tonsils, 26 per cent bad adenoids, while 19.3 per cent had teeth in poor condition and many showed skin defects; eye, ear, nose and throat trouble, chest and heart defects and other conditions needing the correction which the emergency nursery school has tried from the beginning to provide.

What do these children do in a nursery school six or seven hours a day? Obviously they are too young to read or write. What do they learn? They learn to feed themselves; many have never before sat down to a table; many have never used a fork or spoon. They learn to help wash themselves, to try to manage their own buttons, to get themselves in and out of bed. They learn to let the child who has the doll play with it, to ask for the coveted book instead of snatching it, to stand up for their own rights without biting and scratching. They learn that there is serenity and peace in the world, that not every man's hand is against them; they learn a little of the art of living.

There is morning inspection for every child to determine whether he is well enough to be with the group. Sometimes the nurse is also the assistant teacher, sometimes she is a public health nurse. Each school has its own dietitian who may cook the food as well as plan the menus. In some cases the nurse also acts as a dietitian-cook. Always there is a head teacher and an assistant, and it is expected that for every group of thirty children there will be the equivalent of three full-time people.

These teachers, all recruited from the relief rolls, have come into the service, most of them, with little if any specialized training for work with very young children. Some have had backgrounds of social work, some of teaching in kinder-

garten or elementary grades. Some are college women, many have had normal school work of one kind or another, and a few are equipped with nursery-school training. It has been necessary to introduce a period of intensive pre-service training, which was made possible with the cooperation of colleges, universities and training institutions.

As early as January, 1934, less than three months after the authorization of the emergency nursery school program, institutions all over the country had mobilized their services and were ready to provide periods of training ranging from one to four weeks. The training, for which no tuition fees were required, included class work and lectures in various phases of nursery-school work together with conferences, observation of children and in many instances actual practice in teaching under expert supervision in schools already established.

Continued Training.

These short periods of training have been looked upon as merely the beginning, and every effort has been made to provide such "in-service" training as insures continuous growth on the part of the teachers. Institutes have been organized in various States and four-week training institutes have been provided through the FERA in cooperation with the United States Office of Education, using the facilities of the National Child Research Centre in Washington.

According to the authorization, the emergency nursery schools were required to be housed in buildings either owned by or leased or lent to the public school system. In every case it has been the responsibility of the community to provide the space.

Community organizations of all sorts have helped, notably Parent-Teacher Associations, the American Association of University Women, and the American Legion. Professional and educational groups, college sororities, business and professional women's clubs and college women's clubs, welfare and religious organizations have done their part.

Civic clubs, too, such as Rotary and Kiwanis, have provided equipment or supplies or services of one kind or another, and in every community commercial concerns, local stores and interested individuals have given the help both in the way of financial support and service which has made the emergency nursery school a real community project.

The time has come to look to the future. One mother expressed the feeling of many when she said: "It's makin' livin' a sight easier for the kids and us." And so it is—for 55,000 children in this the second year—for 100,000 parents or more—for some 5,800 staff members.