

MODEL KINDERGARTEN BUILDING – New Zealand Centennial Exhibition, Wellington, November 1939 – May 1940



Figure 1 Model Kindergarten building, N.Z. Centennial Exhibition, 1939 – 1940. Photo courtesy of Fletcher Construction.

The New Zealand Centennial Exhibition celebrated one hundred years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 and the subsequent mass European settlement of New Zealand. For the country's free kindergarten movement the exhibition provided a critical opportunity to showcase their work in shaping the nation's children and their aspirations for future growth. An opportunity also to celebrate the progress made since the opening of the first free kindergarten in Dunedin in 1889. Fifty years on the movement was responsible for 38 kindergartens and almost 2000 children. Further growth was planned. Speaking at the national conference in 1938, Mrs. Kidd, president of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union (NZFKU), advocated, "every child in the community should have the opportunity of kindergarten training." It was, she said, her hope that the "proposed exhibit of a model kindergarten would prove a means of bringing before the public the usefulness of the work."¹ National planning of kindergarten displays began in earnest. There was much to be done.

The biggest task centered around the planning, equipping and staffing of the prized item – a full sized model kindergarten donated by James Fletcher of Fletcher Construction to the value of £1000 free of charge. The additional cost of the building was covered by voluntary contributions and a government subsidy up to £1000.ⁱⁱ At the closure of the exhibition the building was to be handed over to Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA) for use as a functioning kindergarten.

The kindergarten building was positioned alongside the Crèche and close to the main entrance and the Exhibition terminus of the city trams. The building, designed to match the art deco style of the exhibition, was innovative and differed from established precedents of kindergarten architecture. The building measured a generous 78 feet long by 30 wide and sported classrooms, cloakrooms, kitchen, a large enclosed sunroom and two open-air verandahs.



Figure 2 'The main room of the Model kindergarten', Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NP-1714-19

One of the rooms was reported as being

a delightful place in which little girls can play at keeping house. It is completely furnished with miniatures of the appliances used by the housewife in the upkeep of her home – ironing boards, clotheshorses, carpet sweepers etc. Another room is fitted up as a playroom for small boys with slides, building blocks, etc., and there is a charming dinning room with little chairs and tables beautifully set for a meal. ⁱⁱⁱ

The NZFKU's objectives for the model kindergarten were twofold. Firstly, that visitors to the exhibition might learn something of the work done by the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union for the education of children under school age. Secondly, 'it was to assist parents to provide for their own children some of the training, furniture, toys, etc., that children attending kindergarten might enjoy. Kindergarten teachers were brought in from around the country to serve as demonstrators and to assist parents.

As the host association, Wellington Free Kindergarten Association (WFKA) held responsibility for a number of related tasks with the exhibition as well as in hosting visits from associations throughout the country. Edna (Ted) Scott, director of Taranaki Street kindergarten held an active leadership role with over the time of the Exhibition as did Maud England in her role as a council member for the WFKA. A booklet, "Let us live with our children" was specially written and published for parents and sold to help allay costs.

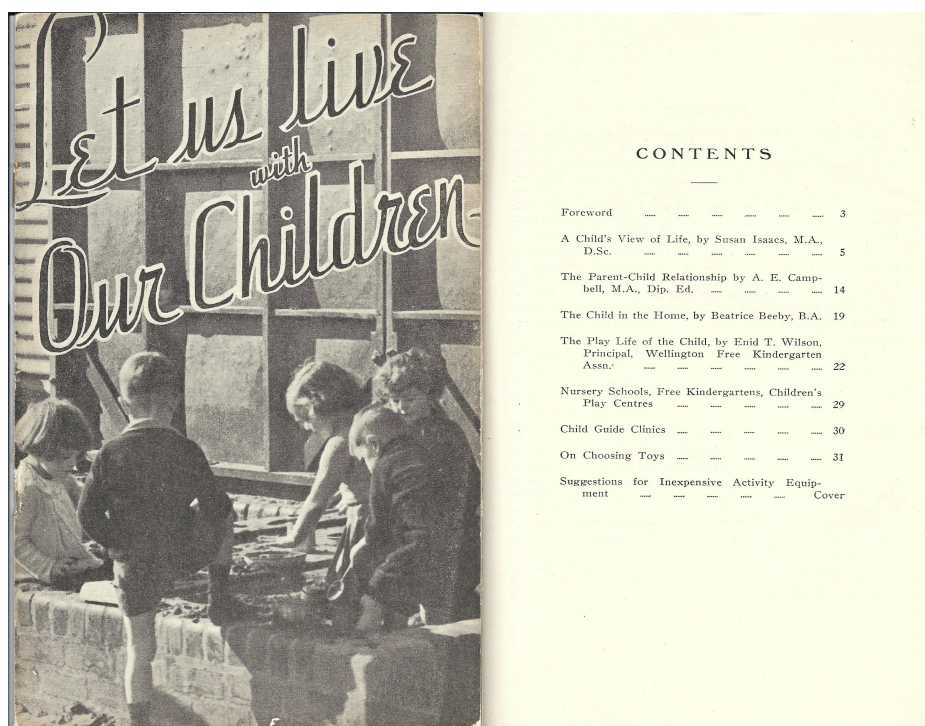


Figure 3 & 5 Cover and content page of WFKA Exhibition Booklet. Note use of Froebel's quote as the title. Private possession.

The accompanying lectures and demonstrations offered those sympathetic to the cause of educational progress avenue to challenge traditional teaching practices and to promulgate the new and the future in educational provision for young children. Kindergarten senior teachers from Wellington, Enid Wilson spoke on "The Development

of Free Kindergarten Work in N.Z" and E. Stewart Hamilton on " The Kindergarten in Action".



Figures 4&7 A small sample of the 2,641,043 visitors to the NZ Centennial Exhibition between 8th November 1939 and 7th May 1940. Left image: Audrey Newton, 1st year WFKA kindergartener, her brother Eric Newton on right and friend. Right image: Corinne & Hilda McMurdo (mother & grandmother of author). Souvenir Photos from Leicagraph Studio Wellington.

The Exhibition closed in May 1940. Enid Wilson in her Principal's report for 1940 wrote, 'we are aware of much progressive effort. Our number of kindergartens in operation remained the same, but we have achieved an up-to-date, well-equipped building which fulfilled its just function as a Kindergarten Union Centennial Exhibit even more satisfactorily than we had dreamed of. ^{iv} WFKKA president Catherine Doctor, writing in her annual report for 1940, also expressed her belief that the day would come when the free kindergarten would be part of the educational system – for all children.

Can anything be of greater value to the Nation than its children? It is surely this fact that makes us feel how truly worthwhile and essential Kindergarten is. It is one of the movements that has to be maintained no matter what the year may hold. Let us not lose sight of the fact that in keeping our Kindergarten flag flying

high, we are rendering a service of great value significance at this time, the national importance of which can never be framed in words'^v

The same year Governor General, Viscount Galway, generously made available a portion of Government House grounds on which to site the model kindergarten and for a playground. The City Council offered to prepare the site for the building and the playground area. In the event a building was erected, not the actual Centennial exhibition building, as planned, but a newly constructed building based on the original and again with Fletcher's support.

However the opening of the new kindergarten building faced further delays due initially to the exigencies of the war and then to the earthquake of 1942 when the building was used to house builders working on damaged buildings.^{vi} It was November 1943 before the building was handed over to the association and yet another year before the official opening of the new building on a wet day on November 18, 1944. Miss Miriam Bauche was appointed as the director and Miss June Morris as her assistant. The building continues to operate as a kindergarten today.

ⁱ 'Every child's right' Evening Post, (17 August, 1938).16

ⁱⁱ 'Model kindergarten' Evening Post, (4 April 1939), 16

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Inspired work' Evening Post, (9 December 1939), 19

^{iv} 'Principal's Report', WFKA Report for the Year Ended 31st March, (1940), 2

^v *President's Report, WFKA Report for the Year Ended 31st March, (1940)* 7-8

^{vi} 'Site in Newtown' Evening Post, 22 November 1940), 9