



and revolution. There is also a program for teaching basic concepts: numbers, colors, names of animals, etc., as well as drawing, cut and paste, etc.

In the summer, much time is spent outdoors in the courtyard of the nursery. The importance of this can only be understood in contrast with the general camp environment. In all of Yarmouk camp, there is no playground except for a few schoolyards, but these are not suited to smaller children. For most, the playground is narrow streets which are often filled with dust, mud and garbage. As a result, many parents keep their younger children inside. For them, the nursery courtyard, with its little garden, small though it may be, is the only chance for outdoor play in safe and healthy surroundings.

Later in the morning session, the children who need to sleep take a nap. Then all gather to eat the lunch they bring from home, which can be warmed at the nursery kitchen. Throughout the day the staff works to instill social behaviour and develop the children's independence. It is a rule that the children are not hit for misbehaviour. Rather the staff seeks to discuss the problem with the child and guide him or her to alternate behaviour.

Most children return home at 2 or 3 p.m. However, the nursery is open until 6 p.m. to accommodate children whose mothers work in the afternoon, or want to attend a political meeting or other political activity.

Staff commitment- key to success

While many Palestinians are educated to be teachers, few are trained specifically for early childcare. For this reason, the Women Bureau was unable

to assemble a professional staff. Rather women were chosen on the basis of interest in the project. Thus the staff members' commitment plays an important role as does on-the-job training. The nursery is attached to the PLO's Education Committee which plans for all Palestinian kindergartens and nurseries. As of now all staff members have participated in at least one PLO-sponsored training course. One has attended a month-long session arranged jointly with UNICEF, while the director of the nursery has lectured at some of the training sessions.

Limited resources mean that a great deal of work and commitment are demanded of the staff, which is composed of nine women who must attend to cleaning and practical matters as well as childcare. The child-teacher ratio is good by local standards, but does not allow the staff to do as many creative and developmental activities as they might like, for with small children, physical care alone is time-consuming.

The staff hold weekly meetings to sort out problems and discuss ways of improving the nursery. These have proved to be a form of on-the-job training and a process of learning to give and take constructive criticism in order to improve each teacher's work.

The nursery is regularly visited by a doctor in order to spot any health problems among the children. In the case of sickness, the staff has responsibility for taking the child to the doctor directly.

A high priority is contact with the parents. Besides daily conversations when the children arrive or return home, there are monthly meetings between the staff and the parents. These aim to acquaint the parents with the functioning of the nursery and also with the political line and work of the PFLP. Parents are encouraged to ask questions and air

problems, so much time is devoted to finding collectively acceptable solutions for problems that arise.

The staff has also made it a goal to visit the homes of the children in order to better know the specific situation of each, but the demands of work at the nursery itself have left little time for this. There is also a wish to eventually make the nursery into a kind of children's center in the afternoon, for example by staging puppet shows with political themes which would interest the older brothers and sisters of the nursery children. However, this is as yet not done, again due to the demands of the daily work.

At the nursery

A visit to the nursery shows five rooms, filled with children, and walls brightly decorated with painted flowers and animals. The children are divided into four groups according to age. Two of the rooms are filled with the cribs of the youngest. Another two are equipped with pallets which are taken up to make room for activities. The ceiling of the central room has been lowered with red-and-white silk in parachute shape, to make it more cozy and colorful; here the children eat and play. The general impression is one of happy children with relations of liking and trust to the adults. At the same time one sees that the nursery is quite crowded and that toys and other materials are not abundant.

Talking with the staff members, one learns that these limitations are due to shortage of funds. The parents pay 100-150 Syrian pounds per month depending on the length of time their child stays at the nursery, but this does not cover all the expenses. At the same time, the Womens Bureau feels it is impossible to raise the fee as this would take too great a cut from parents' salaries and make it less worthwhile for women to work. Thus it is the staff's commitment which makes the nursery go round despite insufficiencies; expenses are reduced by the fact that the staff itself makes most of the toys and decorations for the nursery. The success and improvement of the nursery also depends on aid from friends who are interested in this project and wish to support its aims of allowing more women to work, while providing good collective childcare.

The Womens Bureau has recently published a brochure with pictures and text about the nursery's function and activities. If you would like to receive a sample, please write to:
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Box 12144 Damascus, Syria