



## Childhood as a Mirror of Culture

by Willem Koops

### Abstract

*Inspired by J. H. Van den Berg's book 'Dubious Maternal Affection' the author illustrates the changing nature of the concept of 'child'. Throughout history, opinions and ideas about child development and pedagogy have changed dramatically. These normative views are shaped by the cultural context of the time. An understanding of cultural history, rather than a focus on linear scientific progress, is needed to understand such changing opinions concerning the approach towards children and their behaviours. Beginning in the thirteenth century there has been an ongoing increase in the length of infancy. This increasing infantilisation can be observed in the representation of children in historical paintings. Empirical findings provide evidence for this by showing that children, depicted in paintings between the thirteenth and the twentieth century, have become increasingly infantile. The eighteenth century marks an enlightened approach towards the child with a focus on keeping children separate from the adults' world. Spontaneous development was seen to occur in a separate 'garden' for children. In the second half of the twentieth century infantilisation was replaced by the 'childless period'. Inventions such as the television, mass media and the internet have removed the clear distinction between children and adults. As a result children have become equal discussion partners. This has significant implications for their upbringing and education. A cultural historical background is valuable in understanding changes in the way society thinks about children.*

### Introduction

More than forty years ago, before I became academically trained in developmental psychology, I read a small book entitled *Dubious Maternal Affection* (translation of the Dutch original, *Dubieuze liefde in de omgang met het kind*) by J. H. Van den Berg. Van den Berg, a gifted, original and extremely productive professor of psychology and psychiatry, is responsible for at least 8000 printed and published pages, which are very inspiring but not (quite rightly) taken very seriously by the average academic. However, this book about dubious affection, which

was published in 1958, has continued to influence me for a number of reasons. I will now briefly discuss two of these reasons.

#### *Reason 1: Dubious love for psychology*

The first reason this book inspired me was based on methodological reasons. For example, Van den Berg (1958) writes:

Psychology is that remarkable science that can substantiate itself, even when its statements utterly lack any wisdom or truth. (p. 36).

At first glance, I am a little worried that this insight reflects many people's opinion of psychology. However, such triteness does not affect me, or rather - it does not affect me anymore. Van den Berg does not intend to say that psychology is rubbish which is unfortunately swallowed by many. Instead, what he wishes to express is the idea that scientific discoveries in psychology, whether they are tenable or not, always influence psychological reality. In so doing, he touches on a fundamental problem in psychology and all other social sciences, and this is that the participants in the research/experiment are also people who, just like researchers, entertain opinions about themselves and the social reality.

My own doctoral research in the seventies focused on the children's imitation of behaviour (Koops, 1980). Aided by fun experiments I was able to prove unambiguously that the accepted rules in the developmental psychological literature concerning imitation of behaviour only apply to children who have no knowledge of these rules. In other words, these rules only apply to 'naive experimental subjects'. My study found that a short, didactically useful mini-lecture on imitation theory was sufficient for children to withdraw from the relevant imitation laws. In a way, these children became 'emancipated subjects'.

Outside of my research lab, in the 'real world', people also continue to be fed popularised forms of psychology. For psychology this means, in a very succinct sense, that science can never be completed. It also means that psychology is charged with an important, never-ending, emancipating task. Gaining self-insight is of great cultural significance, a point that vast masses of psychology students, who are not to be stemmed by *numerus fixus* or other measures, have rightly understood. In addition, the intelligent self-reflection that is rather important to our society can probably not be captured by any definition of 'knowledge economy', thus making the acquiring of funding that much harder.

The change-overs that continuously occur between the subjects and objects (i.e., the participants) of psychological science result in methodological problems. These problems are not as fierce in the (in this respect) rather comfortable natural sciences or even the humanities. Psychology is a social science precisely because of the fascinating ambiguous relationship between subject and object. It is in this sense that Van den Berg's little book aroused my lifelong 'dubious love' for psychology.

### **Reason 2: Langeveld and Bowlby**

There is a second reason why this booklet had such a lasting impact on my thinking. In his booklet Van den

Berg (1958) argued against the theories of child psychiatrists Spitz and Bowlby who believed that children who do not experience enough love from their mothers during the first years of their lives, face bleak futures, possibly marked by antisocial and maladjusted behaviour, delinquency, and psychiatric disorders. According to Van den Berg (1958) there is not enough empirical evidence to justify this connection. However, the public at large was (and still is) apparently more than happy to believe these theories. Classic child psychiatry used to revolve around 'mother blaming'. Although child psychiatry has long since passed this stage the same cannot necessarily be said of popular opinion.

In an inaugural address, my Leiden colleague, Van der Veer (2003), demonstrated the extent to which babies in the past used to be regarded, at least to our modern eyes, as being barely human at all. He cited well-known educationists from the first part of the twentieth century such as Utrecht professor Martinus Jan Langeveld (1905-1989), who believed that people should stay away from the cots of new-born babies. According to Langeveld, only once a baby was five or six months old should he or she receive more attention, and this attention should not exceed about ten minutes at a time. Van der Veer (2003) cited some American educationists who also believed that babies should be left in peace and not shown any affection. According to these theorists, all that babies require is sufficient rest, good hygiene and routine. It is tempting to quote the American behaviourist Watson who wrote of children: "Treat them as though they were young adults. Dress them; bathe them with care and circumspection. Let your behaviour always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say goodnight" (Watson, 1928). The latter recommendation was mainly provided for reasons of hygiene. When I read these quotations, I wonder why modern readers are inclined to think that all such advisers were 'not quite right in the head'. I also wonder why Van der Veer (2003) appeared to be relieved that modern studies into the interaction between mother and child, based on Bowlby's ideas, have made it clear that affection for babies is of much greater importance than the above mentioned conditions, thus turning Watson and Langeveld into historic curiosities.

I am afraid that the reason for these beliefs is a lack of sufficient historic understanding among researchers in the field of developmental psychology as well as among researchers in related areas, such as pedagogical science and child psychiatry. The enormous expansion of empirical-analytical research and the intelligent and productive experimental paradigms in these disciplines, as well as the unheard-of number of discoveries concerning unsuspected

cognitive and social competences in young children during the past forty years, have perhaps led to a rather presumptuous universalism. With respect to the regularities in the development of cognitive and social behaviour, what we are presently discovering in our laboratories is indeed impressive, but it has resulted in us forgetting that throughout our history children have not remained unchanged and that the concept of 'child' as such is culturally and historically determined. An excellent illustration of this cultural and historical specificity of the concept of child can be found in a well-known quote from the book *Bint* (1934) by Bordewijk. Bordewijk writes that:

The century that invented the child cherished it as a new invention and became infatuated with its being. Previously, the world had shown no interest in the soul of a child, and it had not mattered. The adult looks awkward when he bends down to a child's height. (1934, p. 111)

This statement is obviously in stark contrast to current thinking. Current research into mother-child relationships and the analysis of so-called 'attachment patterns', is focused on 'responsive sensitivity' or sensitive responsiveness. According to this viewpoint in order to allow for an emotional balance and the healthy prospective development of the child, the primary carer (this can also be the modern father) needs to sensitively respond to the child's needs. Bordewijk, fortunately, did not live long enough to learn of these new insights.

In the following sections I attempt to provide the reader with a short cultural history of ways of thinking about children. The purpose of this discussion is to explore whether we are able, from a cultural historical background, to come to grips with the historically changing opinions about childlike behaviour and the pedagogical approach towards children.

### Infantilisation

At the beginning of the 1960s, a sub-discipline emerged within historical science that focused specifically on the history of children. This field of study is usually referred to as the 'history of childhood'. The specialisation has been predominantly inspired by the work of the French historian Philippe Ariès concerning the social history of school and family. Ariès' main work, *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, published in 1960, has been, and still is, the driving force behind scientific historical research into ideas about children and their upbringing and development. However, I must resist the temptation to elaborate on the impact of Ariès' work. Instead, I will confine myself to

briefly outlining his ideas in relation to two hypotheses, which I have called the 'discontinuity hypothesis' and the 'change hypothesis'.

The 'discontinuity hypothesis' is based on the assumption that the child did not exist in the Middle Ages and developed after this era. According to this hypothesis, medieval civilisation saw only a marginal difference between the worlds of children and of adults. As soon as the child stopped being breastfed it became the natural companion of the adult. With the exception of Ariès, few historians have supported this hypothesis. For example, the American historian Barbara Hanawalt (2003) showed that children in fourteenth and fifteenth century London actually did live in a world that was in many ways specifically made for children and not for adults. Thus, children not only played more than adults but they also did so in separate, safe environments. In addition, Hanawalt (2003) found that during this era children participated in peer groups and had access to their own similarly aged social circles. Ariès himself conceded that his discontinuity hypothesis required some major modification.

In contrast, the 'change hypothesis' argues that from approximately the thirteenth century there has been a continuing increase in infantilisation, as seen in the cultural representations of children. The term infantilisation refers to the increasing length of the infantile phase and, inevitably related to this increase, an increasing distance between the infantile and the adult worlds. A huge amount of empirical historical support is available for the change hypothesis. The progress specified by Ariès' change hypothesis can be illustrated with the help of the history of childhood in paintings.



**Painting 1: Dierc Bouts: 'Mary and baby Jesus', first part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.**

According to Ariès, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries artists represented children merely as

miniature adults. However, from the thirteenth century onwards baby Jesus was depicted in an increasingly infantile manner, while Mary was depicted in an increasingly motherly manner.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a gradual shift towards a type of painting that appears to highlight the pretty and picturesque qualities of the child (see pictures 2 and 3).



**Picture 2: Ferdinand Bol: 'Johanna de Geer-Frip and her daughter Cecilia', 17<sup>th</sup> century.**

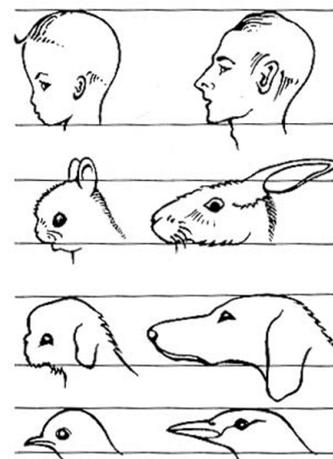


**Picture 3: Ceasar van Everdingen: 'Two-year-old boy', 1664.**

One of the most dramatic changes in the approach towards children occurred in the eighteenth century. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was one of the great advocates of this new attitude, which involved aspects such as encouraging mothers to care for children themselves instead of leaving this to others. At the same time, a renewed appreciation of the practice of breastfeeding developed. It is even possible to say that Rousseau made it fashionable to be affectionate towards children. On both sides of the Channel, many paintings demonstrated Rousseau's new attitude. Beautiful examples of this can be found in Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *La mère Bien-Aimée* (1769) and in Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Lady Cockburn and her children* from 1773. Both paintings contain a very striking excess of motherliness (see pictures 3 and 4).



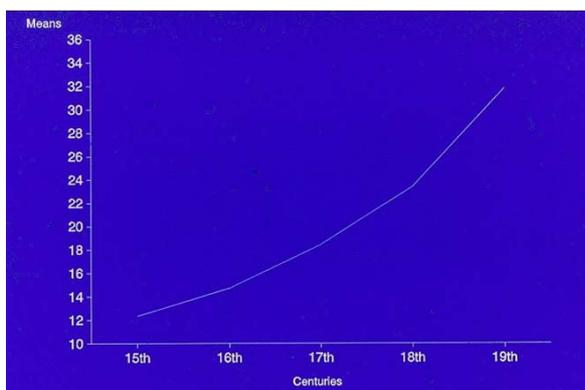
A few years ago I researched the empirical tenability of Ariès' arguments about the depiction of children in paintings. My principal motivation was the investigation of the tenability of the main argument against Ariès' representation of facts, which is based on the argument that Ariès' study of a few dozen paintings, which he had selected from millions of paintings, was not and could never be called representative. Based on this lack of representivity, these critics argue that the study was subjective and thus unscientific. Thanks to an equally time-consuming and meticulous inventorying of Dutch and Flemish paintings that depict children as well as the use of careful sampling, we were able to have a number of images assessed by experimental participants from representative samples (Koops, 2004; Koops & Zuckerman, 2003a, 2003b). It is not possible to elaborate on the methodology of our research here. Instead, it is sufficient to state that the images were essentially compared to the features of 'infantile' mammals, as described by the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989).



**Picture 5: Lorenz, Child scheme, 1971. The anatomical variants on the left have been 'softened' compared to the ones on the right.**

In our study we interpreted Ariès' change hypothesis

as meaning that infantilisation should cause the children represented in paintings from the thirteenth until the twentieth century to become increasingly more infantile. This increase in infantilisation was based on the features of Lorenz's 'Child scheme'. The analysis simply involved determining the correlation between the historical dating and the infantilisation. The results of the study yielded unexpected support for the change hypothesis. There was a correlation of .60, indicating that paintings in the past included less infantilisation than modern paintings.



**Figure 1: Increase of 'infantilisation' in paintings from the fifteenth up to and including the nineteenth century.**

This result was surprising because it supported Ariès' interpretation of paintings. Most predictions had suggested that empirical research would, like many educationists and art historians, disagree with the change hypothesis. The research described above suggested that it would be foolhardy to discard Ariès' views concerning the infantilisation of children. For this reason, I argue that it is important to study the history of pedagogical science and developmental psychology, which are both cultural phenomena themselves, from an Ariès-like perspective instead of just from a naive enlightenment perspective, as has been the case for far too long. Instead of using gradual, scientifically-supported progress in our approach towards children, this perspective allows for the incorporation of culturally and historically changing notions of the child, of which science is perhaps rather the result than the cause.

### Educational and developmental notions

A discussion of the western history of educational and developmental theories, which goes back more than 450 years, falls beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper touches on a few relevant episodes.

The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) is usually described as the first thinker following the end of the Middle Ages who argued for

natural pedagogics. Influenced by humanism, De Montaigne broke with classical intellectualism and argued that the child should not be filled with wisdom from literature but instead should be allowed to learn to form its own opinions. Thus, the world should serve as the child's book. Although it involves some exaggeration, it is possible to say that De Montaigne was ahead of the theories of Willem Hendrik Gispen<sup>1</sup>, Rector Magnificus of Utrecht University. De Montaigne focused on the child and believed in a kind of broad, formative 'Bachelor' for all children. The somewhat radical philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) could be considered to represent the height of the enlightened approach towards children. Rousseau believed that natural, age-specific development should be taken as a guideline for educationists. He firmly established the modern notion that pedagogics should be child-centred and should therefore focus on the age-specific phases the children experience. Rousseau's notions were very influential and were further advanced by the Swiss educationist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) as well as by a large group of German educationists. These educationists based the national education system, at the time of its formation in Prussia, on Rousseau's principles. The educationist, Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (1782-1852), who could be referred to as the saint of the infant school, was in turn influenced by Pestalozzi. Fröbel aspired to what he called a 'following education', by which he actually believed that a child's upbringing should be limited to "educational actions which are aimed at guiding the (spontaneously) occurring psychological developments, in the most appropriate manner". Fröbel (Imelman & Meyer, 1986, p. 264) founded special institutions called *Kindergartens* (gardens for children) where he applied this method. This name is still used in America to refer to preschool institutions.

It is therefore clear that the history of pedagogics starts with setting children free from adult texts as recorded in books (this was the reason for De Montaigne's resistance to intellectualism). Due to the influence of Rousseau and Pestalozzi, pedagogics no longer helps children forward but instead awaits the spontaneous development of children and then carefully tunes itself towards this development. Fröbel's *kindergarten* is an appropriate way of referring to this attitude, in which the child is withdrawn (sometimes literally) from the adult world in order to be able to develop naturally in an isolated, specially designed garden for children.

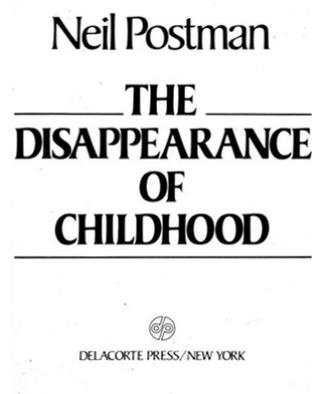
To summarise, the history of developmental psychology and pedagogical science is itself an aspect

<sup>1</sup>Professor Gispen introduced the Bachelor/Master educational model with great vigour, applying the maxim of 'Focus on the Student'.

of infantilisation. This has become clear since the historiography of the child inspired by Ariès; but it would also be fair to say that pedagogics played a prominent role in this development. Since the time of Rousseau, the child has been regarded as a being that still has to develop and that is essentially different from an adult in many ways. Therefore, the child first has to undergo a developing process before it can become the adult's equal. The work of individuals such as Pestalozzi and Fröbel in designing the upbringing and education of children has resulted in an increasing number of infants (think of the phrase national education) being placed in a separate world, a protected world, described as a 'garden' for children. This world is believed to provide the best possibility for their spontaneous development. This leads to the following questions: Should all this now be called progress? Is this a continuing progress advanced by sciences such as pedagogics and developmental psychology in an attempt to breach, through upbringing and education, the gap between children and adults that has actually been caused by these sciences?

### The disappearance of childhood

Although this straightforward linear, single-dimensional presentation of the history of infantilisation could be seen as suspiciously simplistic, I still believe that the historical essence of the approach towards children between approximately Rousseau's eighteenth century and our own century can be described reasonably adequately in this way. However, in the twentieth century there was a shocking and sudden shift away from the past. The second part of the century in particular witnessed a leaping development that was utterly new and involved access for all, including children, to the adult mass media.



**Picture 4:** Title page of Neil Postman's book from 1982.

The first author to make the fundamental connection

between the concepts of children and the mass media was Neil Postman in his book entitled *The Disappearance of Childhood*, which was published in 1982. In keeping with Ariès' formulation, Postman indicated that in an illiterate world it is not necessary to draw a sharp distinction between child and adult. The notion of 'child' is not required when everyone is sharing the same 'information environment'. The art of printing can therefore be seen as the mechanism that created a new world of symbols which in turn required a new notion, that of 'adulthood'. This adulthood needed, and this was a novelty at the time, to be achieved. In Postman's (1982) words: "Being an adult became a symbolic achievement instead of a biological given" (p. 43). The school as an institution was designed to ensure that children matured into literate adults. Seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke's (1632-1704) well-known image of the infantile mind as a *tabula rasa* accurately demonstrates the relation between the child and the art of printing - the child is an incomplete book whose pages have yet to be filled.

The notion of 'child' experienced its finest hour or rather its 'finest century' between 1850 and 1950. During this period, infantilisation was at its most prominent. However, since this time the notion of child has become weaker and the 'childless period' has commenced. According to Postman (1982), telegraphy started a process through which information became unverifiable and thus became detached from parental authority. Following the advent of telegraphy, this development was furthered by an uninterrupted flow of inventions, including the rotary press, the camera, the telephone, the gramophone, the film, the radio, and the television. For Postman (1982), the television in particular removed the boundaries between children and adults. Supported by other electronic media that are not based on the written word, the television has recreated communicative conditions such as those that existed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

In this new media climate all information is available to everyone at the same time. Electronic media "cannot keep secrets" and "without secrets, the notion of 'child' cannot exist" (Postman, 1982 p. 83). Postman's (1982) book is best summarised with the help of its blurb: "The fundamental notion of this book - the fact that our electronic information environment causes the 'child' to disappear - can also be formulated as follows: an electronic information environment causes the adult to disappear" (no page). It is obvious that the Internet, which only became available after the publication of Postman's (1982) book, led to an acceleration of this development.

## Larva or discussion partner

In this section I attempt to briefly discuss a few of the consequences of the cultural historical subjectivity in thinking about the child that was described above.

The disappearance of the notion of classical childhood as described above obviously means that the classical educational notions no longer apply to the modern child. A classical upbringing, as captured in the image of Fröbel's garden for children, presumes infantilisation and involves a very gradual step-by-step reaching of the adult world, rather than the direct and multiple visual confrontation with this adult world. I believe that a lot of the current insecurity and helplessness about the child's upbringing stems from this discrepancy. I also believe that parents are insufficiently aware of their young children's ramblings through this previously adult world. For example, there is a clear discrepancy between the situation where parents complain to the library staff about the fact that their children are given books that do not suit their ages and their complete unawareness of the kind of information these same children have access to via the Internet. Where it was previously attractive to children to reach adult status, this is currently far less the case. A mysterious adult world with vague notions of adult freedoms (for example, of an erotic nature) no longer exists.

In the second part of the nineteenth century the distance between children and adults became so wide that this gap needed to be bridged through the introduction of a new phase, adolescence. During this new developmental phase the child struggled against the adult in order to liberate itself from them. However, this classical nineteenth century adolescent who uses active resistance against its parents as a vital step towards adulthood no longer exists. Children who undergo sensitive responsiveness from early childhood lose the need to struggle against anyone or anything. In addition, adults themselves are also trying to remain infantile adolescents themselves for as long as possible. Modern day adults dress like adolescents, their leisure time is spent in the same consumptive manner, and they experiment with relationships in a way that was previously reserved for adolescents. These adults have become peers and consequently no longer offer a challenging image of the future. I am unsurprised that our students presently have no problems choosing to live and stay with their parents, a choice the classical adolescent would not have made.

My introductory comments concerning approaches to very young children can now be better understood - Watson and Langeveld's comments belong to a time when the child was relatively classically infantilised. During that time the child became a fully-fledged

discussion partner only at a very late stage because it still had so much to learn and discover. This infantilised child is hardly human and more like a larva, as 'television genic' Midas Dekkers argued in one of his best-sellers (2005). In this book, Dekkers (2005) deliberately provoked, probably without realising that his provocation consisted of a brushing up of an atavism. Currently, despite Dekkers' (2005) mocking of this attitude, the child is taken seriously as a discussion partner from birth. The theory of sensitive responsiveness and the importance ascribed to the notion of 'secure attachment' are therefore definite features of our time. Based on this body of theory and research, infants who cannot yet talk are seen as emitting all kinds of subtle signals and the primary carer has to be sensitive to them and respond adequately. These opposing images of the child, the infantilised larva as opposed to the equal discussion partner, belong to different time frames and cannot be considered in isolation from the cultural historical context. This brings me to my final comments concerning facts and norms.

## Present and future

The question of the extent to which questions about upbringing can be solved with the help of empirical analytical research has long plagued researchers. During the last few decades an unprecedented and nearly exclusive confidence has arisen in relation to the results of empirical research concerning the behaviour and experience of children. On the one hand, this pleases me enormously because the interesting studies that are currently carried out through my faculty (the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences) concerning the development of social behaviour, cognitive development and the influences of the family, all with internationally respected results, are cause for huge satisfaction and help determine our international academic status. However, on the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that the essential questions about the upbringing and development of children can be answered using this methodology. Although empirical research can undoubtedly prevent us from wrong assumptions about the competences of children and can provide us with a plethora of useful tools to handle their education and correctional education, I still believe that the most essential questions cannot be solved by empirical science. These questions include: 'To what end do we raise our children?' and 'What kind of citizens do we need in future?' Such questions demand a normative contemplation while current methodologies require clear preliminary designs and ideals. It would be wonderful if researchers could find the time to address these concerns, even if this does mean that they will have to leave their labs.

This paper thus ends where it began. I believe that developmental psychology, pedagogics and other behavioural and social scientific disciplines within the social sciences are at a crossroads between norms and facts. I also believe that our children are situated right on these crossroads. Children are a mirror of our culture and as such can be empirically analysed; but they are also a reference to a future that can only be

normatively designed. As researchers, academics, and intellectuals, we should not be afraid to prioritise that which is important - high-quality research and the teaching of children. In short, we need to make the next generation our priority.

### Referencing Format

Koops, W. (2011). Childhood as a mirror of culture. *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, 11(2), 9 pp. doi: 10.2989/IPJP.2011.11.2.2.1161

### About the Author



Professor Willem Koops (born in 1944) studied psychology at the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and served as an Assistant and Associate Professor in Developmental Psychology from 1968 to 1981. In 1980, Willem successfully defended his doctoral dissertation entitled *Social Development and Naivety of Experimental Subjects*, which was based on methodological research in the field of social cognitive development. Dr Koops was a Professor of Developmental Psychology at the Free University of Amsterdam from 1981 until 2002. In 2000, he moved to Utrecht University to occupy the Chair in Developmental Psychology. Since 2007 he has been a distinguished professor at Utrecht University and his Chair has been renamed “Foundations and History of Developmental Psychology and

Pedagogy”.

Willem Koops has, over the many years of his academic career, served as the leader of several research projects on the cognitive and social development of children and adolescents. He has published extensively, and continues to do so, on a broad range of subjects in national and international scientific journals. Over the last few years his research has increasingly moved into the field of the development of aggression. Additionally, in line with his distinguished professorship, he continues to publish books and chapters on the cultural historical context of childhood and child development.

At the international level, Willem Koops was a Professor in Developmental Psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA (as the Netherlands Visiting Professor and as Fulbright Fellow) from 1991 to 1993. He has also taught at several universities in the USA, Japan and Indonesia for shorter time spans. Willem is a member and past-President of the Board of the European Society for Developmental Psychology (ESDP); Editor (and founder) of the *European Journal of Developmental Psychology* (EJDP); Chair of the Archive and Documentation Center Dutch Behavioural Sciences (ADNG); and Dean of the Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. Professor Koops is also a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and a member of the History Committee of the Society for Research in Child Development.

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