



draft

**REPORT OF THE FIRST SESSION ON 5 DECEMBER 2006 IN BRUSSELS OF THE  
WORKING GROUP OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ON THE QUALITY OF  
CHILDHOOD**

PRESENT

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**1. OPENING BY MRS RESETARITS**

Mrs Resetarits is Member of the European Parliament for Alde. She took the initiative with Christopher Clouder to create this Working Group on the Quality of Childhood and she chaired the meeting.

Mrs Resetarits opened the meeting with the following:

'I would like to welcome everybody who has come today to join the first session of a new working group. The group's name is Working Group on the Quality Of Childhood. The aim of this group is to mainstream children's needs in the European legal framework.

Why is this necessary? Changes which benefit adults are not always so good for children. Experts warn: An increasing number of children are suffering, the side-effects of modern living that are damaging their social, emotional and cognitive development with a knock-on effects on their behaviour.

Let me point out, this is not a conservative circle blaming modern lifestyle or wishing back to good old times. The opposite is true.

I am a working mother of four children, divorced. I know what is going on also in practical terms.

I noticed that we politicians do care about a lot of different interest groups but children are not our main concern, only if we deal with demographic questions.

This working group will invite experts on different topics, discussing important children related problems. And at the end of every meeting we ask members of the parliament or their assistants to suggest further action points, elements that he or she finds important to be addressed by the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood.

This working group is open for all parties. It is supported by the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group. In many countries in the world grass root organisations have been set up in the past 25 years to work in their own environment on the topic of the quality of childhood. This year different NGO's from member states of the European Union decided to

join forces at the European level. More about this Alliance will be explained to you by Michiel Matthes, secretary of the network group’.

For ease of reference the objectives of the meetings of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood are cited below:

- To get a better understanding of the Quality of Childhood in the EU member states;
- To think about the role that the European Parliament could play to improve the situation;
- To get to grips with the principles and approaches that could lead to a betterment for children;
- To form a group and to get a sense how to move on.

## 2. THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD EUROPEAN NETWORK GROUP:

Michiel Matthes, Secretary of this Group, informed the audience about this initiative.

Eleven organisations in seven EU member states decided on 4 October 2006 to set up the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group. The members are:

Belgium	The Linkedness Project Experiential Education Project
Denmark	The Kempler Institute
Germany	Verein mit Kindern Wachsen
Italy	Legambiente
Netherlands	Universal Education Foundation Professor Rene Diekstra Janusz Korczak Foundation
Spain	Professor Rosario Ortega Ruiz
Brussels	European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education Ecology of the Child

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, as a partner in the worldwide Alliance for Childhood [www.allianceforchildhood.org.uk](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org.uk), decided to work on:

- The Quality of Childhood in the European Union.

The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group formulated in its first meeting on 4 October 2006 the following declaration:

### **Declaration of 4 October 2006**

The participants of the meeting declare that they share a deep concern about the quality of childhood in the member states of the European Union. For this reason they have come together and have decided to start to work together on the improvement of the ‘Quality of Childhood’ in the member states of the European Union.

The participants have the understanding that a poor quality of childhood is harmful for children. When society would improve this quality it will be beneficial for the children and adolescents concerned and for the societies in which they grow up.

The participants furthermore believe that a good quality of childhood is, among others, based on the following principles and attitudes:

- The child is respected as a fellow human being, who wants to be who he or she is and to develop his / her inner potential;

- The quality of the relationships of the child with important adults and others is a key element of the quality of his / her childhood and for his / her growth as a human being.

### 3. TOXIC CHILDHOOD SYNDROME

In 2006 Sue Palmer, a well known author in the UK on the subject of children and their upbringing published the book entitled 'Toxic Childhood, How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and What We Can Do About It'. For this reason Sue Palmer was invited to present this book in the meeting. However, since she was not able to come because of other engagements Mr Christopher Clouder, a long time ally of Sue Palmer, presented the subject in her place.

Mr Clouder started with the remark that he recently read in the Le Monde that Britain is now in football terms in the post-hooligan phase, having had tragic experiences in this area and having to learn from mistakes, Whereas in some other European countries the phenomenon of hooliganism is just picking up. So the UK can serve as warning to others about negative developments in society and this is also true for questions around childhood.

2006 was a remarkable year for the subject of childhood in the British media. The subject has been given a lot of attention. Until to recently the subject was mentioned occasionally when an emergency situation emerged or when a scandal came out, but this year it is different. This year the media continued to write on it and it has really become a hot topic.

The same is true for the above mentioned book of Sue Palmer. The media paid attention and politicians likewise

#### *Academically 2 to 3 years behind*

Prof. Michael Shayer, of the Economic and Social Research Institute in the UK, recently remarked that research shows that children of 11-12 years old are academically some 2 to 3 years behind in comparison with children of the same age some 20 years ago. Children are not any more the same as 20 years ago. He speculated about the reasons:

- Is it the lack of play, that causes the changes?
- Is it because children play more with video and computer games?

#### *Movement*

It is presently known, that when children have learnt to move their bodies this has a positive effect on their academic achievements. Nowadays there are children that are not any more able to play. This is harmful for children because it will hamper the development of their personality.

#### *Stress*

Research has also found that many children in day care centres suffer from stress. In many day care centres the quality is not very high. The main parameters for the quality are:

- The level of competencies among the people working there
- The adult / child ratio.

Sue Gerhardt has written a very good book on this phenomenon entitled 'Why Love Matters, How Affection Shapes A Baby's Brain'. Mr Clouder concludes: you cannot replace love by playing video games or watching television. Steve Biddulph, the well known author on parenting, has recently changed his position in this respect and also expresses great concern .

#### *OECD's PISA Study*

The UK did quite well when we look at the academic scores, but when we look at the well-being of the children, then the UK is in the 21<sup>st</sup> place. Prof. Jonathan Bradshaw has recently

published a report on this also (The Well-being of Children in the UK). In this book they explain that today's children are more often than previously unhappy, pressurized and obese.

### *Food*

The television cook Jamie Oliver started a campaign to improve the diet in the British schools and this has raised public awareness. In Britain they are now discussing a measure to ban advertisements on television for junk food before 21.00 hours.

### *Children are Pressurized*

The American author Dr. Madeline Levine has just published a book about the damage done to children, that have been given a tight schedule for the entire week - hothousing. If they are not in school they have to exercise a certain sport, or go to dance lessons or play a musical instrument etc. In this way they have no time for themselves and do not learn how it is not to have such a schedule. They do not learn to play or to think about what to play with their brothers and sisters or friends etc. They get stressed. The title of the book 'The Price Of Privilege, How Parental Pressure And Material Advantage Are Creating A Generation Of Disconnected And Unhappy Kids'.

### *Our technical world is changing the brains of children*

Professor Susan Greenfield of York University has just published a book entitled 'The Private Life Of The Brain', in which she explains that our technical world is changing the brains of children. Their brains are less able:

- To recount stories
- To use words as they are more focused on pictures;
- They are less able to control their impulses and emotions.

Mr Clouder also refers to the book of Jane Healy 'Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think, And What We Can Do About It'. She explains that with the modern life style children lose their imagination and originality.

The US Association of Paediatricians recommends now, that children under 2 should not watch television. From 2 to 6 watching of television should be severely limited.

Christopher Clouder furthermore refers to the effects of lead on the brain of a child. This has been well researched and that has been one of the reasons to ban lead from our environment and to introduce petrol without lead. However, he remarks that research indicates that many other chemicals have a similarly negative impact as lead. An article in the Lancet mentions the number of commonly used chemicals in this respect. (Please find enclosed in the annex some more information on initiatives taken in Europe in this area.)

Next Christopher Clouder referred to the report 'Freedom's Orphans, Raising Youth In A Changing World' by Julia Margo and Mike Dixon. The number of children with depression is rising and it even occurs among children younger than 6.

The business world is cynically using children to expand their sales. They have discovered that children have already brand recognition at the age of 2 and that brand loyalty with children can already be attained at the age of 4. Car manufacturers try to expand sales by focusing their advertisements at children, because they have discovered that children greatly influence their parents with decisions in this respect – pester power

Children grow up in a culture of peers, which alienates them vis-à-vis adults with concepts of cool and uncool manipulated by the media. However, when they have become adults themselves they have a problem, because they have difficulty to assume the responsibilities that go with adulthood.

He concluded that the above remarks and references are not made to create a false romanticism about the past conditions or just a doom laden scenario of childhood but to serve as a wake up call about modern tendencies in the affluent world and that we should also keep in perspective how much suffering there still is among children in the developing world

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Mrs Resetarits remarked, that children do not have an adult role model any more. We can see that also in the series 'Desperate Housewives'. These persons do not behave as grown up women and for their daughters they are not a role model as a mature adults.

Many adults don't know how to behave towards children:

- Should they be authoritarian?
- Should they give the children the freedom they want?
- Should they behave in an authoritative way?

How many adults are secure in their behaviour towards children? Many adults look to the politicians for easy solutions regarding the subject of children and their upbringing.

Mr Clouder pointed out that many boys get fully involved in computer and video games and live partly in a virtual world. We see that many girls are getting interested in sexuality earlier and earlier, but their social and emotional development lacks behind. How to handle this phenomenon as parent or educator is a shared and complex task. Technological time is going faster than human biological time. In this respect to the book of Sue Gerhardt 'Why Love Matters, How Affection Shapes A Baby's Brain' brings us to a the discussion on the subject of childcare and its quality. There are quality differences between the various EU member states. The following is mentioned in this respect:

- It is important to pay the person working in childcare sufficiently and the job should also have a good status;
- The people working in childcare should have sufficient professional quality;
- The group size should never exceed 16 and the ratio between children and adults should be 2 adults per 16 children. If the group is bigger and the number of adults less, then the child may have difficulties with the attachment to the adults in question. Under two's actually need a one to one relationship.
- We should be promoting an authoritative approach to upbringing as a balance between laissez-faire or authoritarian methods.

#### 4. THE QUALITY OF CHILDHOOD: EXPLORING A PEDAGOGICAL VIEW. WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

Professor Hans van Crombrugge of the Higher Institute of Family Sciences, Brussels addressed this subject.

##### *Preliminary remarks:*

Professor Van Crombrugge stated, that he is happy that he is invited to contribute to this meeting, because the subject of the Quality of Childhood is a very important subject and it is good to think and to work on this subject on a European level. However, it is a new area and the various scientific disciplines, e.g. psychology, pedagogy, education etc. have not or hardly worked on the subject from this angle. Moreover, the various scientific disciplines in the different EU member states have evolved in manifold ways. At present they are not on the same par regarding their approach vis-à-vis the quality of childhood. According to Professor Van Crombrugge the quality of childhood is a practical and philosophical concept. Professor

Van Crombrugge therefore states that what he will say is preliminary. What he will try to do is to develop a framework, that could form the start for further work of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood and to which the various scientific disciplines could contribute.

*Introductory remarks:*

The quality of childhood is changing continuously: it is getting both ‘better’ and ‘worse’ and how we perceive this is also a matter of values.

*Stress*

The environment for children is often very complex and many children cannot cope with that complexity. To improve the quality of childhood will often mean to reduce the complexity in the life of a child.

*Parents have much influence*

When we talk about the quality of childhood it is clear that parents and educators play an important role in this respect, because they create for a big part the environment in which the child lives.

Many parents think, that the children have to find their own way. They state that we must listen to the children for guidance. Professor Van Crombrugge warns for this approach, because we do not do justice to children if we let them decide too much. In this respect Professor Van Crombrugge advocates an authoritative way of parenting. This is a way of parenting whereby the adult explains to the child why he chooses a certain approach. In this way the parent communicates to the child at the same time the values that he or she adheres to.

Next Professor Van Crombrugge presents the various elements of his framework for the Quality of Childhood

*1. Responsibility of public authorities and the rights of children*

Professor Van Crombrugge remarks, that all EU member states have ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. This is a major step forward, but it is a juridical instrument, which can guarantee the outer boundaries and qualities of the environment of the life of a child. It is according to Professor Van Crombrugge not a sufficient instrument to ensure that the quality of childhood is good.

The quality of childhood is namely a concept, which has to do with the quality of the relationships that the child has with the various adults in his or her life.

*2. Quality of childhood*

The quality of childhood is good when a child is happy and feels well.

The quality of childhood has also to do with the quality of the relationships of the child with the important adults in his life. In this context Professor Van Crombrugge mentioned the concept of empathy. It is important that the adults have empathy towards the child and at the same time that the child acquires the ability to empathise.

He furthermore mentions the ethics of care and he remarks that the book of Virginia Held entitled ‘The Ethics of Care, Personal, Political and Global’ could provide a schema for further work of the Working Group in this area. In this context reference is also made to the Linkedness Project, which is a partner of the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group.

One of the leading advocates regarding the care approach is Nel Noddings, the author of various books on the subject, among others ‘The Challenge to Care in Schools, An Alternative Approach to Education’.

### 3. *Elements of a pedagogical framework*

The quality of childhood is directly related to the quality of the pedagogical framework for the child in question. For this reason Professor Van Crombrugge explored the following dimensions of a pedagogical framework;

#### a. Relation between human beings

The first element of a pedagogical framework is the quality of the relationships between human beings in general and between adults and the child in particular and to do justice to the child as human being.

#### b. People are continuously changing

The Convention of the Rights of the Child teaches us to see the child as a human being and to respect him or her as a human being and not to consider the child as a person that will be somebody in the future.

Professor Van Crombrugge agrees with this, but he remarks nevertheless that people, including children are continuously changing. In this respect he mentions that we could distinguish the concept of the quality of the change within the child.

#### c. Multidimensional reality

A child lives in many different worlds at the same time. We should recognise this complexity. It is necessary to develop concept in this respect and start to understand how this complexity impacts the quality of childhood.

#### d. Child as a changing human being

The child is a changing human being. Professor Van Crombrugge distinguishes three dimensions in this respect:

- development
- learning
- dialogue

#### Development:

- A child needs time and space to develop; the development should neither be too fast nor too slow. The brains of the children are changing. We should not be afraid of that, but rather treat it as given and as a challenge.
- A child should be given the opportunity of self-realisation and to use all of his or her talents. Professor Van Crombrugge remarks that at present, due to the current educational system, a lot of talent is wasted.
- When we look at the child as a developing human being it is of course important to ensure that the child is protected, but this protection should not go so far that there is no stimulation. The right balance should be found and in the course of the life of a child these two elements evolve continuously.

#### Learning

Professor Van Crombrugge mentioned the following catch words:

- experience and agency (what is the quality of the input, c.q. the educational institution)

- culture and creativity
- social needs and personal contribution

With the word 'contribution' Professor Van Crombrugge refers to the need of a child to contribute to the society and the community in which he or she lives.

Professor Van Crombrugge remarked, that he thinks that the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group does not have a sufficiently strong representation of organisations focusing on 'learning'.

#### Dialogue

With this catch word Professor Van Crombrugge refers to the circumstance that the child is part of a community of people and this community is based on communication and dialogue. There is no full participation without taking up responsibility. Both elements should be addressed when thinking about the quality of childhood.

#### e. Complexity

The child grows up in a complex world. To get to grips with this, and with the concept 'quality of childhood' in this respect is an enormous challenge for the sciences concerned such as philosophy, psychology, pedagogy and learning.

However Professor Van Crombrugge stated that it should not only be a job for scientists to work on this, but at the same time the practitioners can greatly contribute to the work at hand. In this respect is mentioned that we should be aware of the social capital of families, educational institutions and childcare centres. It would be good if we could go one step further and define the elements of this social capital.

#### 4. *What action to take*

Professor Van Crombrugge stated, that he very much welcomes the initiative of Mrs Resetarits and Christopher Clouder in setting up this Working Group on the Quality of Childhood within the European Parliament for the following reasons:

- Very probably it will not be the scientists who will formulate the framework for the Quality of Childhood, because the subject itself covers different sciences and the scientific cultures and traditions in the various EU member states differ from country to country. It is therefore a very good role for the Working Group of the European Parliament to begin this important task.
- The Working Group on the Quality of Childhood could function as a forum to which the various scientific disciplines could contribute.
- The Working Group on the Quality of Childhood could bring together the various stakeholders in the area concerned with the aim to explore the concept of the quality of childhood.
- Certain elements of our culture have become global, e.g. the electronic village, the pressure of work etc. and for this reason it is good to formulate a response on a European level.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

Mrs Resetarits thanks Professor Van Crombrugge for his most interesting contribution.

Next Mrs Resetarits brought forward some questions about the Audio Visual Directive on which the European Parliament will voted in week 50 of 2006. Mrs Resetarits is concerned about the advertising aimed at children. The persons present express their preference for a clause that obliges the advertising sector to come up with a Code of Conduct with regards to

children rather than the watered down version that only encourages them to follow a code of conduct.

Mrs Resetarits once more thanks the participants for their contribution and reminded those present that the next meeting will be in Brussels on 9 January 2007 13.00 to 15.00 hours.

The report was made by Michiel Matthes.

## TEXT OF THE INVITATION

**Working Group of the European Parliament on the Quality of Childhood**

First meeting: **‘the Toxic Childhood Syndrome’** by Christopher Clouder

Time: 5 December 2006 from 13.00 until 14.30 hours

Location: Room X (room to be reserved).

Over the last twenty-five years, huge technological and cultural changes have transformed the lifestyle of people in the developed world, largely for the better. But it has all happened so fast we haven't noticed that changes which benefit adults aren't always so good for children. A **toxic cocktail** of the side-effects of cultural change is now damaging the social, emotional and cognitive development of a growing number of children, with knock-on effects on their behaviour.

The English author Sue Palmer has written a very good book on this and looks into the following ten aspects of childhood where profound changes, in many cases a deterioration, for children occurred:

- Food and diet
- Play and exercise
- Sleep
- Communication
- Family
- Childcare, who is looking after the children?
- Education
- Mobile phones, marketing, peer pressure
- The electronic village
- Parenting, manners maketh man

In her book she summarises how cultural influences have affected child-rearing practices in each of these ten areas, and the implications of these findings for child development.

**Toxic Childhood Syndrome**

When deteriorations in various areas add up and children cannot any more cope with it this can lead to severe damage to the children in question and can lead to what Sue Palmer called the **Toxic Childhood Syndrome**.

Christopher Clouder, Director of the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education and a long time ally of Sue Palmer, will present the main elements of the book on 5 December.

**Alliance for Childhood European Network Group**

In many countries in the world grass root organisations have been set up in the past 25 years to work in their own environment on the topic of the quality of childhood. This year nine NGO's from member states of the European Union decided to join forces on the European level and created the Alliance for Childhood European Network Group, as part of the worldwide network of the Alliance for Childhood ([www.allianceforchildhood.org.uk](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org.uk)). They had their constitutive meeting in Brussels on 4 October 2006.

**Working Group on the Quality of Childhood**

Personally I have been involved for some time in the activities of the Alliance for Childhood and I am deeply concerned about the quality of childhood in the member states of the European Union. For this reason I have taken the initiative to set up a **Working Group on the Quality of Childhood** within the European Parliament. Together with the Alliance for

Childhood European Network Group we are planning a number of sessions, of which the first is on 5 December 2006.

**Objectives of these meetings:**

- To get a better understanding of the Quality of Childhood in the EU member states;
- To think about the role that the European Parliament could play to improve the situation;
- To get to grips with the principles and approaches that could lead to a betterment for children;
- To form a group and to get a sense how to move on.

It is therefore a pleasure for me to invite you for the first session of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood on 5 December next. I think, that this subject really needs our attention and I think, that we as members of the European Parliament can play an important role in this area.

Yours sincerely,

Karin Resetarits.  
Member of the European Parliament

**Program Outline for 5 December 2006**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Speaker / facilitator</b>
12.00	Opening	Mrs Resetarits
12.05	The Alliance for Childhood European Network Group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The members</li> <li>• The aims</li> </ul>	Michiel Matthes, Secretary of the Network Group
12.10	Toxic Childhood Syndrome	Christopher Clouder on behalf of Sue Palmer
12.30	Discussion	Mrs Resetarits
12.50	The Quality of Childhood: exploring a pedagogical view. What can we do about it?	Prof Hans van Crombrugge, Higher Institute of Family Sciences, Brussels
13.10	Discussion	Mrs Resetarits
13.20	Rounding off: each Member of Parliament suggests two or three action points / elements that he or she finds important to be addressed by the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood	Mrs Resetarits

**BOOKS MENTIONED BY THE VARIOUS SPEAKERS**

'Toxic Childhood, How the Modern World is Damaging our Children and What We Can Do About It' by Sue Palmer

'Why Love Matters, How Affection Shapes A Baby's Brain' by Sue Gerhardt

'The Well-being of Children in the UK' by Jonathan Bradshaw and Emese Mayhew.

'Learning for Tomorrow's World, First results from PISA 2003', OECD.

'The Price Of Privilege, How Parental Pressure And Material Advantage Are Creating A Generation Of Disconnected And Unhappy Kids' by Madeline Levine

'The Private Life Of The Brain' by Professor Susan Greenfield

'Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think, And What We Can Do About It' by Jane Healy

'Freedom's Orphans, Raising Youth In A Changing World' by Julia Margo and Mike Dixon

'The Ethics of Care, Personal, Political and Global' by Virginia Held.

'The Challenge to Care in Schools, An Alternative Approach to Education' by Nel Noddings.

**‘THE ETHICS OF CARE, PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND GLOBAL’ BY VIRGINIA HELD**

A short description of this book is added as an annex because Professor Van Crombrugge suggested that this book could be helpful in elaborating a framework regarding the Quality of Childhood.

Virginia Held assesses the ethics of care as a promising alternative to the familiar moral theories that serve so inadequately to guide our lives. The ethics of care is only a few decades old, yet it is by now a distinct moral theory or normative approach to the problems we face. It is relevant to global and political matters as well as to the personal relations that can most clearly exemplify care.

This book clarifies just what the ethics of care is: what its characteristics are, what it holds, and what it enables us to do. It discusses the feminist roots of this moral approach and why the ethics of care can be a morality with universal appeal. Held examines what we mean by "care," and what a caring person is like. Where other moral theories demand impartiality above all, the ethics of care understands the moral import of our ties to our families and groups. It evaluates such ties, focusing on caring relations rather than simply on the virtues of individuals. The book proposes how such values as justice, equality, and individual rights can "fit together" with such values as care, trust, mutual consideration, and solidarity.

In the second part of the book, Held examines the potential of the ethics of care for dealing with social issues. She shows how the ethics of care is more promising than Kantian moral theory and utilitarianism for advice on how expansive, or not, markets should be, and on when other values than market ones should prevail. She connects the ethics of care with the rising interest in civil society, and considers the limits appropriate for the language of rights. Finally, she shows the promise of the ethics of care for dealing with global problems and seeing anew the outlines of international civility.

Source: website Oxford University Press

## **POLLUTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE IMPACT OF THIS ON CHILDREN**

Within the European context three network organisations work on this topic: PINCHE, CHILDRENGENONETWORK and PLUTOCRACY and they held in Brussels from 23 until 25 November 2005 a conference on the topic. The project managers of these projects are:

### **PINCHE**

Peter van den Hazel

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### **PLUTOCRACY**

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### **CHILDRENGENONETWORK**

Professor Lisbeth E. Knudsen

University of Copenhagen.

A network group has been created in this area which is called European Public Health Alliance and its website is: [www.epha.org](http://www.epha.org) .