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Peter K. Smith and Kevin J. Connolly
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Preface

Ethological methods and concepts have played an important role in the recent history of the behavioural sciences. Ethology has its roots in evolutionary biology and often gives rise to functional questions about behaviour. The methods have been characterised by careful and detailed descriptive work along with a paramount concern for ecological validity. In contrast, much of psychology has been characterised by the careful experimental analysis of behaviour which has led to the search for immediate antecedent causes of behaviours. In the study of animal behaviour these once separate approaches have come together over the last 25 years, so that it is often impossible to discover an author's intellectual origins from an account of his or her typical research style and approach.

Both of us have been interested in child behaviour and development throughout our professional careers. The use of sophisticated observational methods for studying the behaviour of children suggested itself to KJC after attending an International Ethological Conference in the early 1960s. These methods were used first in work with the human newborn and then in studies with preschool children. About that time PKS came to Sheffield to work on a doctoral thesis under KJC's supervision. This research took the form of detailed observational studies of the behaviour of young children in day nurseries, nursery schools, and playgroups. At that time simply watching and recording behaviour seemed a dangerously new idea compared with the laboratory traditions in which we had both been educated. It is interesting that now it seems quite commonplace and unremarkable. During the late 1960s and early 1970s we had fruitful meetings with a small number of other research workers with similar interests, often in Nick Blurton Jones's rooms in the Institute of Child Health in London.

It was generally our view that the initial observational studies should be seen as laying the groundwork for more structured research. Many of the factors we believed to be important influences on the behaviour of preschool children could be clearly investigated only by using some form of experimental manipulation and control. This book documents our attempt

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to combine experimental rigour with ecological validity and to explore at least some practically important issues concerning how the preschool environment influences children's behaviour. Thus work with children begins to show the merging of traditions that is evident in research on animal behaviour.

The research was supported by grant number HR 1414/2 from the Social Science Research Council, London, to KJC. Amongst our colleagues we should like especially to thank Mrs Dorothy Fleming, who provided invaluable help in the early stages of setting up and running the playgroup, and Dr Margaret Martlew, whose own doctoral work was based upon 'the playgroup' and who has provided help and support in organisation and in discussing our findings. We are indebted to the staff who ran the playgroup over the three years. Mrs Patricia Blanchard, Mrs Maureen Gascoyne, Mrs Janet King, Mrs Winifred Froggatt, Mrs Susan Laughlin, Mrs Wendy Wilkinson, and the late Mrs Margaret Perkins. We thank also the children who made up the playgroups. We are especially grateful to Mrs Audrey Rixham for many things, not least of which was the masterly typing of an exceptionally complex manuscript. Finally, our thanks to the staff of Cambridge University Press for their care and thoroughness in seeing the book through to publication and to Sarah Connolly who made the indexes.

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April 1980

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