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Children's Understanding of Biology and Health

This book uses new research and theory to present the first state-of-the-art account of children's understanding of biology and health. The international team of distinguished contributors views children's understanding in these areas to be to some extent adaptive to their well-being and survival and uses evidence collected through a variety of different techniques to consider whether young children are capable of basic theorizing and understanding of health and illness. Topics ranging from babies to elderly people including birth, death, contamination and contagion, food, and pain are examined and close links between research and practice are made with obvious attendant benefits in terms of education and communication.

MICHAEL SIEGAL is Professor of Psychology at the University of Sheffield. He has researched and taught internationally and has published extensively in the area of developmental psychology; a second edition of his book *Knowing children: Experiments in conversation and cognition* was published in 1997.

CANDIDA C. PETERSON is Professor of Psychology at the University of Queensland and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. She has published a wide range of popular and academic texts in the field of child development, including *A child grows up* (1974) and *Looking forward through the lifespan*, 3rd edn. (1996).

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# Children's Understanding of Biology and Health

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and

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# Preface

Anyone who deals with children knows the importance of answering their questions about birth and death, of promoting their health through proper diet, exercise, and hygiene, and of caring for them when they fall ill or suffer pain. However, probably no area of children's understanding is in greater need of fresh insights.

This collection of essays is intended to provide the first state-of the-art examination of what children can and do know about biology and health. It represents a reappraisal of traditional stage-like conceptions in which it has been proposed, for example, that young children cannot understand contamination and contagion as causes of illness.

Based on research gathered by a variety of techniques, each of the contributors addresses the question of whether young children may be capable of demonstrating at least a skeletal knowledge of the causes of human health and illness (ranging from the origins of babies to the causes of aging). Referring to experimental studies, case histories, and historical changes in views of biology and health, the authors review and evaluate children's understanding of birth, life, and death, their knowledge of contamination and contagion as well as processes related to food, digestion, and pain. The chapters focus tightly on the connection between research and practice in examining the positive implications for communication with children about a wide variety of illnesses and diseases – implications that extend to children's ability to make informed decisions about medical and therapeutic treatment.

Our hope is that the balance of theory and practice contained in the chapters will appeal to students and professionals in psychology and disciplines such as education, law, medicine, nursing, physiotherapy, counselling, social work, and child welfare. But above all, we hope that the contents will engage the interest and curiosity of readers who are simply concerned to know more about how children think and learn about issues that are central to their wellbeing and survival.

MS, CCP
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