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CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN Susan A. Gelman, Ph.D. Department of Psychology University of Michigan-Ann Arbor Prepared for the Forum on Early Childhood Science, Mathematics, and Technology Education February 6, 7, and 8, 1998 Washington, D.C. PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY R. G. 42 Aveval. TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) Sponsored by Project 2061 of the American Association for the Advancement of Science with funding from the National Science Foundation

ESY COPY AVAILABLE 2 CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN Susan A. Gelman This paper addresses concept development in preschool children, based on recent psychological research. Over the past thirty years, there have been more than 7,000 journal articles written on children's concepts or categories. Scholars are attracted by the opportunity to understand fundamental theoretical issues (How can we characterize early thought? How does it change over time?) as well as by the practical concern of determining how children reason about concepts that are directly relevant to their lives and schooling (including mathematics, biology, and physics). I will not attempt an exhaustive review of this vast topic in so few pages (see Siegler & Kuhn, 1997, for extensive, state-of-the-art reviews). Instead, I will highlight and illustrate four key themes that emerge from recent research: Concepts are tools, and as such have powerful implications for children's reasoning both positive and negative. Children's early concepts are not necessarily concrete or perceptually based. Even preschool children are capable of reasoning about non-obvious, subtle, and abstract concepts. Children's concepts are not uniform across content areas, across individuals, or across tasks. Children's concepts reflect their emerging "theories" about the world. To the extent that children's theories are inaccurate, their conceptions are also biased. These four themes contradict some widely held (but erroneous) views of early concepts, and raise a variety of issues regarding early education.

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