INTRODUCTION

With the development of the women’s movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the nuclear family became a central focus of political and personal concern (Segal, 1983). Women questioned traditional ideas about the nuclear family, especially the central role of the mother as a primary caretaker for children (Comer, 1971). In response to these concerns, the Children’s Collective was created as an alternative childrearing environment by feminist and socialist women and men at the beginning of the 1970s in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

These feminist mothers and progressive fathers were looking for an alternative to the nuclear family. Single and married parents who participated in the Collective shared common views about the necessity of economic independence for women, greater participation of fathers in childrearing, and less rigid sex roles. All the parents participated in caring for the children and housekeeping. The parents together bought a home where their children could live together without each parent’s continuous presence. The parents lived in several houses close by. At least one parent took care of all the children during one 24-hour period, once a week. On the weekends, the children left the Children’s Collective and went to their parents’ homes. The Children’s Collective thus reflects one of the most radical ideas in the field of childrearing. Two similar Collectives were established 8 years later in Rotterdam, the Netherlands; they are still functioning.

In this chapter, I first discuss the historical and theoretical background for the Children’s Collectives in the Netherlands. Second, I discuss the origins of
the collectives and their practical organizations as well as indicate similarities and differences between the Amsterdam and Rotterdam collectives. Finally, I evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the Collective in Amsterdam. The descriptions of the Collectives draw upon some interviews with participating parents and articles they have written.

HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The Netherlands in the 1960s

The philosophy behind the Children's Collectives reflected the particular historical time and cultural background in the Netherlands in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This period was characterized by rebellion against authority. Spontaneous gatherings and organized demonstrations against the State were common. Many people wanted to be freed from institutional power.

Institutions of different kinds were challenged, including universities, other educational institutions, the law, religion, the family, and political institutions. The student movement challenged the power structure of the universities, claiming the one-person, one-vote system in the university boards. Teachers challenged the authoritarian relations in the school system. Progressive lawyers organized collectives and challenged the class-based law system. Student priests left the religious institutions. Feminists rebelled against marriage and the nuclear family. The continuity of the monarchy was questioned.

Within this changing political climate, the antiauthoritarian, antipatriarchal feminist movement formulated a critique of the ideological basis of the nuclear family. In women's consciousness-raising groups, women analyzed the effects of this ideology on their lives. They realized that traditional ideas about the family kept women as nonpaid housekeepers and mothers within the confines of the home. Being married was also seen by some as oppressive, as it created possessiveness, jealousy, and exclusiveness. More efficient contraception liberated women from certain sexual constraints, but not from sexual subordination to men. Thus women were trying to liberate themselves on different levels, asking for the right to free abortion and for more child-care facilities, adult education, and economic independence (Smit, 1967).

Women who were involved in the women's movement and had small children to look after felt the constrictions of their situation. They went to meetings, participated in political activities, wrote articles about the position of women, and tried to combine paid work with child care. They were inspired to try to change their own situations. Some women dissolved their marriages because they could not accept their dependent economic positions, and they could not persuade their husbands to share the responsibility for child care and household activities. Some mothers demanded paid work outside the home, while others completed their education.

Thus women who were trying to formulate a fundamental critique of the