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Letter to Members from SRCD President Ken Dodge

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Dear SRCD Members:

I write to you as the new SRCD President for the period 2019-2021. I am humbled and daunted by this position. Thank you for your trust in me and your commitment to our Society. Some members have asked me to articulate my priorities for the next two years, and I am happy to do so in this letter to you.

Developmental Science

My first priority is to strengthen our developmental science. When I was in graduate school, we had Piaget but not much more: behavior was thought to be a function of static-genes plus static-environment, personality development was oxymoronic, and we thought learning changed behavior but not the organism. Today, we have better scientific and data-analytic methods, a growing appreciation of the nuanced role of culture and context, and a deeper understanding of the action verb called “develop.” We have made

breathtaking discoveries about many aspects of development, including the explosion of early neural growth, the paradox of adolescent bio-behavioral development, and the co-construction of infant cognition. And we are just on the cusp of even more dramatic breakthroughs that lie ahead. Developmental science is thriving.

At the same time, I have heard rumors that applications to Ph.D. programs in developmental psychology have declined. I suppose we could legitimately claim victory: the theories, methods, and focus on the developing child forged by SRCD members over the years have so permeated the disciplines of neuroscience, genetics, cognitive science, clinical psychology, public policy, sociology, anthropology, and economics that "developmental psychology" has become a redundant term, and aspiring developmental scientists now have many educational options ahead of them. This success, however, brings a danger that scientists who are studying human development within these disciplines will become siloed and isolated from natural colleagues in other disciplines. Each discipline informs a comprehensive understanding of how humans develop.

This is where SRCD should strengthen its role as the leading organization to bring together scientists from diverse disciplines to support the study of the developing child. We must increase the ways we convene ourselves, publish our findings, and support strong science.

SRCD must support increased funding for developmental science within the various institutes of the U.S. federal government. We must strengthen the quality of our science through careful attention to our journals, meetings, and seed grants. And we must shine light on the science of human development as a guiding source of wisdom in public discourse.

Inclusiveness

My second priority is to crack the shell around our science and make it inclusive (I contemplated saying, "more inclusive" here, but it is inaccurate to claim much inclusiveness at all, yet.). We must become inclusive not only because it is necessary for a complete understanding of human development but also because it is morally right. We need to study the full array of children in the world who represent varied backgrounds and cultural contexts and who are on course toward diverse ways of displaying competence, in order to understand the universality and specificity of developmental phenomena. We need to admit modesty when our samples are limited and humility when our theories are biased. We need broader methods of inquiry and

more diverse disciplinary perspectives. We need scientists who themselves represent diverse backgrounds. We need neophytes and grizzled veterans, anthropologists and economists, scholars from the Global South and the halls of Cambridge, with faces of all colors and political stripes. And we need to figure out how to help our scientists communicate with each other vigorously, freely, and safely, because it is during the course of interpersonal debate and social interaction that new ideas are generated and knowledge grows.

The strategic plan articulated by SRCD's Governing Council makes clear that inclusiveness must become a high priority. SRCD must become a leading model of the path to inclusiveness in all its forms. We must admit our transgressions, and some of us must acknowledge our white privilege. Our journals must describe whom we study, our studies must broaden the methods we employ, and our theories must embrace counterfactual perspectives. We must not hide behind a pretense that our private version of "quality" trumps inclusivity, because inclusivity is actually the path to higher quality. And, finally, we must become inclusive in our nurturance of the next generation of developmental scientists.

I will promote inclusiveness in many ways, by: listening to under-represented voices and asking fellow members to listen; supporting hidden voices; calling for diversity in our scientific methods and topics; finding travel grants for international scholars, early-career trainees, and scientists from under-represented backgrounds; convening open meetings; nurturing seed research grants to study children from diverse backgrounds; and respecting the voices of each member.

Science to Action

SRCD recently moved its headquarters from Ann Arbor to Washington, D.C., to implement its strategic plan to bring our science to bear on public discourse, policy, and practice. We have more to contribute to society than we have dared in the past. Today's children are in danger without us, and we cannot wait to act. My third priority is to bring our science to action.

One danger facing our children is a threat to the premise that scientific evidence should inform policy and practice. This Luddite view has infiltrated many contemporary fields (witness climate change policy debate), but it is particularly salient for society's treatment of children (witness the lack of consideration of scientific evidence in U.S. policy on separating children from parents at the U.S.-Mexican border; in looming cuts in government support for food, healthcare, and education of children; and in international apathy about trafficking of children, child abuse, and recruitment of children as soldiers). We need to bring science to bear

on these issues. We can join other organizations that call for policy reform based on our values, but SRCD's unique contribution will be our expertise in translating scientific evidence to inform policy, practice, and public understanding. We own this responsibility.

We must translate our scientific findings so that others can make good use of them. We must broaden our publication outlets and media venues to reach the people we need to reach. We must testify before governmental bodies, confront policymakers when they act in ways that contradict our knowledge, and contribute to making the sausage called public policy. I hope we grow our outstanding SRCD Policy Fellows Program and find more ways for our scientists to connect with the world.

As we try to have impact, we will realize we still have much to learn about how to get it right. We will sometimes make mistakes by over-reaching or by hiding, but that is how we will figure out how to have our science play an optimal role in shaping society. We will learn how to follow science, not our politics, as our North Star.

As we travel the path to policy, we will be humbled when we discover that this path is not a one-way street; policymakers and practitioners have knowledge that we lack, and they have questions we have not yet addressed. Listening to them will enrich the science we conduct and make us even more relevant.

How to Make It Happen: Funding and Volunteering

I have been asked which of these three priorities is most important, and I have answered yes.

None of the priorities can be implemented fully without new funding. Although SRCD is on a solid financial foundation, we are at risk of spending more than we take in, which is a sure path to bankrupting ourselves. My final priority will be to raise revenue to implement these three substantive priorities. I will approach foundations to help them see we have mutual goals. I will appeal to donors, including our own members. Together, we will become creatively entrepreneurial.

One of the most wonderful things about SRCD is that it is member-governed. Our 16-person elected Governing Council is highly diverse in background and uniformly committed to improving our Society. We have dozens of committees and task forces made up of volunteers, and there is always room for more. I ask you to join with your colleagues in becoming more involved in these endeavors.

I hope you will give me feedback and input on anything important to you. You can email me at dodge@duke.edu, and I promise to reply. Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Ken Dodge
President of SRCD