Politics has never been child’s play. Like the mentally disturbed, criminals, foreigners and, for most of our history, women, children tended to be considered as mere denizens. Their fate, if poor, generally depended on charity, not on rights, and they lacked the privileges of citizenship including the ability to make to personal judgments in public affairs.

Even if children were denied the rights of citizenship, however, modern Western states developed a considerable political interest in the lives of children. After the seventeenth century, political authorities began to view the population not only as a threat, but also as an asset. Developing the productivity of the nation enhanced the power of political authorities, and, at the same time, strengthened the bargaining position of the population. Children were understood to be the future of the nation. The care of a healthy and loyal, resilient and responsible citizenry was considered to be a *sine qua non* of national wealth and international prominence.¹

Since the eighteenth century, the debate on how to turn children into good and useful citizens has turned on two issues. There has been debate about the support children needed in order to become good citizens, as well as about the kind of citizen they were supposed to become. In both dimensions dominant conceptions have altered over time, and the history of the mental and bodily state of children as it pertains to nation and state building is a story of shifting and interrelated change in concepts of human development and citizenship.

In this article, I want to outline three phases of this development in the Netherlands. All three are defined by successive dominant conceptions of citizenship and human development. The first is the phase defined by the transformation of citizenship in the liberal state around the turn of the century; the second phase concerns the
rejuvenation of citizenship in the consociational state of the Interbellum. The final phase is that of the post-war welfare state, when citizenship became increasingly embedded in a system of social rights and institutions of social care.

One of the noteworthy aspects of the developments I will sketch is the change, not just in the conception of the major threats to the health of the nation’s stock of new citizens, but of the relationship between their physical and mental health. There seems to be a cycle in which the transformation of children into citizens was initially understood to be a mental issue; since the turn of the century, attention shifted to physical aspects. After 1945, the focus was once again on mental aspects, be it that they were related to physical aspects in a different way.

Finally, changes in the conceptions of citizenship are also related to shifting notions of childhood and gender. For much of the period under discussion, child health concerns were actually directed at juveniles. Even though infant health care was an important issue, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, the greatest debates evolved around the health of youngsters. Moreover, all of these debates were gendered: while in the earlier period, the implied subject of debate often turned out to be male, in the later phases, the health of young females was the centre of attention.

The demise of liberal citizenship, 1870–1900

At the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing awareness in the Netherlands that the bodily health of children mattered to the nation. A law to restrict child labour was promulgated in 1874, and expanded at the end of the following decade. In the first year of the new century, a whole series of laws was issued, all concerned with juvenile care and discipline. There was also growing attention to physical education, which eventually resulted in the adoption of obligatory physical education as part of the education act of 1920.

The growing emphasis on the physical well-being of children implied a major shift in the dominant perspective on the development of children into citizens. During most of the nineteenth century, it was the mind, not the body that was the object of struggle between contesting groups. The liberal elite of the Netherlands, which dominated the political arena for most of the second half of the century, held a restrictive view on the pays légal, and accepted the exclusion of most of the inhabitants except for a small group of independent tax payers. However, if not in practice, they recognised the gradual extension of citizenship in principle, even though they