

Examine the ways in which childhood can be said to be socially constructed essay ...

[Society](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' Examine the ways in which childhood can be said to be socially constructed'

A social construct is an idea or concept that has been created and defined within society. Many sociologists argue that childhood is a social construct, as it isn't a fixed, universal idea, and differs in different areas and time periods- they believe that childhood as we know it is a recent phenomenon. Aries argues that in the Middle Ages ' the idea of childhood did not exist'.

Within modern Western society children are seen as very different and separate to adults. Childhood is seen as a precious time in someone's life, and so children's innocence is protected from adult life. For example Pilcher stated that the most important aspect of childhood was the separateness from adult life, which can be shown through laws which regulate and dictate what children can and can't do, for example putting an age limit on buying alcohol and cigarettes. Another way in which childhood is seen as separate from adult life is the new commercialisation of childhood, in which entertainment, toys, food, books and averts (etc) are aimed directly at children, as a separate social group of people- as oppose to the ' property' of adults like they once were.

Modern Western society also views children as being dependent upon their parents. It is believed that they are incapable of looking after, and being responsible for themselves, meaning that they needed a period within their life in which their parents or responsible adults could nurture and socialise them. This is what is viewed in the modern western society as the social construct of childhood.

Since children have become dependent upon their parents, the family has become much more child centred. Edward Shorter reported that the parental attitudes towards children had changed massively, and that the declining infant mortality rates meant less neglect, and parents focusing on nurturing and caring for their children. In pre-industrial society, couples used to have four or five children because they could be sent to work and were seen as an economic asset, which could provide a better life style for the family. However in the UK's society today the average number of children per couple is 1.96. Since working laws have been passed banning children from working, and bringing in compulsory education- parents have started focusing on socialising and bringing up the few children that they do have in a way which will benefit them in the future- pushing them to get good qualifications and further their education in order to get a well-paying job in the future.

Neil Postman, however, criticised this view by stating that it idealised childhood, despite it being what everyone wanted to be, was not the reality of childhood in today's society. He said that the vision of childhood was 'disappearing at a dazzling speed' as children are rebelling against the label of 'innocence and dependency' that has been placed upon them. This can be shown through the growing closeness in the position of children and adults, for example children's rights becoming more equal to adults, children's clothing becoming more mature, children wearing makeup, smoking and drinking at a much younger age, and in some extreme cases children committing 'adult crimes' such as murder, rape, and abuse.

In some non-industrialised societies, and different cultures across the world, childhood is viewed very differently. Childhood is not always viewed as separate from adult life, for example in countries such as the Congo Republic, children are forced into becoming soldiers and are expected to fight in wars. They are treated like adults, with the same laws and punishments. There is no special treatment for children like there is in the western societies (which sentence children in juvenile detention centres for example).

Many sociologists have studied childhood across different cultures and found that the concept is not universal. Wagg concluded that although all humans go through the same stages of development in life, different cultures and areas see these stages in different ways. Benedict also studied childhood in a non-industrial society, and found that children there took responsibility at a much earlier age, and that less value was put on a child's innocence- for example children getting married and having children as early as ten in countries such as Samoa. This shows that childhood is not a universal idea. Where countries such as England and America stretch out childhood for as long as possible, protecting children from the adult ways of life and keeping them sheltered until their late teens, non-industrial countries such as Samoa and Gambia discard the social concept of childhood and class children as 'mini adults' as soon as possible, putting children in dangerous jobs such as mining, or becoming a soldier at ages as young as four.

Overall, even though there is a large amount of evidence showing that the concept of childhood is not the same over different parts of the world, it

shows that the basic framework of childhood can be found throughout different cultures and societies. It could be argued that even though the way in which childhood is shaped and moulded by different societies is not a universal concept, the basic skeleton of childhood is very much universal, and different societies and cultures just have to adapt and define this basic idea in a way that is going to benefit their particular position and type of society, as whole aswell as the family.