

Examining childhood



Sociologists claim that childhood is a social construction; something that is created and defined by society. This essay will therefore attempt to assess the changes in the status of childhood. This can be done by comparing the western idea of childhood today with the childhood in the past and in other societies. Aries (1960) believed childhood is a concept developed with the industrial age with the children getting education, not used as child labour.

He also believes that in the middle ages the idea of childhood 'did not exist'. Children were not seen as having different needs from adults, as long as they had passed the stage of physical dependency. Children were in fact 'mini adults', with the same rights, duties and skills as adults. For example, the law often made no distinction between adults and children and therefore often faced with the same severe punishments as those given to adults.

For example, a child of seven could be hung for stealing. This could be supported by Item A, 'they mixed freely with adults in both work and leisure. Little distinction was drawn between adults and children. 'Parental attitudes towards children in the middle ages were also very different from those today. Edward Shorter (1975) argues that high death rates encouraged indifference and neglect, especially towards infants.

For example, it was not uncommon for parents to give a newborn baby the name of a recently dead sibling, to refer to the baby as 'it', or to forget how many children they had. Aries work is valuable because it shows that childhood is socially constructed. It is argued that in many non-industrial cultures, there is much less of a dividing line between the behaviour expected of children and that expected of adults. According to Aries,

elements of the modern notion of childhood gradually began to emerge from the 13th century onwards. Schools grew to specialise purely in the education of the young.

There was a growing distinction between children's and adult's clothing. By the 17th Century, an upper-class would be dressed in 'an outfit reserved for his own age group, which set him apart from adults'. By the 18th Century, handbooks on childrearing were widely available, a sign of the growing child-centred of family life, at least among the middle classes. According to Aries these developments culminate in the modern 'cult of childhood'. He argues that we have moved from a world that did not see childhood as in any way special, to a world that is obsessed with childhood.

He describes the 20th Century as the 'century of the child'. Some sociologists have criticised Aries for arguing that childhood did not exist in the past. Linda Pollock (1983) argues that it is more correct to say that in the Middle Ages, society simply had a different notion of childhood from today's. It is generally accepted in our society today that childhood is a special time of life and that children are deeply different from adults. They are regarded as physically and psychologically immature and not yet competent to run their own lives.

There is a belief that children's lack of skills, knowledge and experience means that they need a lengthy, protected period of nurturing and socialisation before they are ready for adult society and its responsibilities. As Jane Pilcher (1995) notes, the most important feature of the modern idea of childhood is separateness. Childhood is seen as a clear and distinct life

stage, and children in our society occupy a separate status from adults.

Children also differ from adults through the differences in dress. Neil

Postman (1994) says that childhood is a social construction and that it has changed over time. He states that childhood is created by society and culture, and not biology.

This could be proven by looking historically at how 'being a child' has changed. In the Middle Ages, childhood was a very different entity and Aries, said that to an extent, 'childhood did not exist', which is stated in Item A. Postman (1994) says that childhood is 'disappearing at a dazzling speed'. He claims that the cause of the disappearance of childhood lies in the rise and fall of the 'print' culture and its replacement by 'television' culture and this has meant that children are being given the same rights as adults, are wearing similar clothing to adults, are taking part in adult activities like smoking and drinking and are committing adult crimes such as murder. These ideas clearly demonstrate that society's need for children to act older than they are is causing trouble emotionally and psychologically for the children.

Society is pushing children to behave in a manner that encourages them to take part in activities that are unsuitable for their age group.