

# [To what extent can childhood be considered a social construction? essay](https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-can-childhood-be-considered-a-social-construction-essay/)

To what extent can childhood be considered a social construction? This essay will analyse the major experiences by which childhood is constructed: one determined by the society and the other examined personally. Following this approach will be explained socially constructed childhood that asserts children’s attitudes, expectations and understandings that are defined by a certain society or culture. Furthermore various aspects of childhoods will be taken into account in relation to social, economic, historical, religious and moral context where each child carries specific components depending on the time and place.

Everybody has been a child and can relate more or less to the world of children. Childhood is a part of human life that people consider as a natural stage of biological development. Surely not only that, childhood is also a social category that emerges and changes from particular beliefs, attitudes and values depending on the society. Nowadays children are viewed as a separate group of people with their own interests and have a special role in the everyday life.

Childhoods in developed countries have certain aims and are determined by the society looking at the expectations and requirements how to care about children as well as to facilitate their childhood world. Childhood has also changed throughout time. Historically the concept of childhood has been known and consciously discussed for the past 300 years and its role has been properly defined in the last century. Lots of research has been done to look at the process of constructing childhood and to understand the implications of the childhoods of different times and generations.

The French medievalist, Phillipe Aries (1962) has concluded after investigating some paintings and diaries that in ‘ medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist’. (Coster, 2007: 3) He believed children were treated as smaller adults once they were old enough to fend themselves. Children were working alongside adults, wearing the same clothes and behaving like adults. Children participated in all aspects of adult social life. Each childhood past or present indicates the nature of the society and its significance. So the idea of childhood changes onstantly and it is reconstructed over time. Enormous transformations in regards to the conditions of childhood in the past have taken place. Until the late 19th century most people in Britain accepted as normal for children of the poor families to work. Then these children were considered as a big part of the working force and they were the main contributors to the economic progress. As Laurence Stone (1977) argues the poor families could not ‘ invest emotional capital’ in their children due to their social status which was the main reason for the high mortality of children in the past. Coster, 2007: 3-6) Neither families nor the society at a time provided happy environment and care to look after the children. They were simply treated as small adults and the majority of the children from poor families did not know what was like to play with their peers and to enjoy their childhood. The biggest transformation in children’s lives came with the Industrial Revolution in Britain which organised children’s labour in factories and mines. The changes that happened such as factories act from 1833 prevented children under 9 years to work, allowed improvement of working conditions and compulsory schooling introduced in 1870.

Different societies in different times have distinct ideas of childhood. In addition, Industrial Revolution brought better payment for the workers in general and improved the lives of the poor allowing them to afford an education (even minimal for their children). That increase in wealth and new laws changed the perception of what childhood should be as the British society evolved so did the definition of childhood. In some present societies many children need to work and that is a part of social norms in the reality they live in.

In the western modern societies children are protected by many laws which restrict children’s behaviour in order for them to learn to conform to certain social norms. On the other hand now children are given lots of rights and they have the power to influence some rules, laws and procedures. With the factory acts in 19th century children were banned to work in mines and factories and that meant they moved away from ‘ adult lives’ to be separated into a new group of people with their own lives. Together with the effect of compulsory chooling throughout Europe children gathered a legal status. The efforts of the modern countries are to facilitate children’s lives by providing for them experiences from the real life. The researchers, Ritchie & Kollar (1964) suggest that children are seen as ‘ beings who have the potentials for being slowly brought into contact with a complex adult world’. (Jenks, 2009: 103) As a result children are prepared to enter the adult world competently. The knowledge found by research in children’s psychology and social sciences defines certain models of childhood.

Children are able to build their own intelligences and competences about the world by interaction with the adults and by being exposed to real life situations, whether in relation to the family, the peer group, the school or the culture. In that sense children are active in constructing their own lives. James & Prout (1990) establish that childhood sociology engages in the process of reconstructing childhood where children are treated as both natural and universal looking at their particularity and cultural difference. (Jenks, 2009: 94) That is why childhood is socially constructed.

In the past Christianity introduced a contradictory picture of children viewing them either as innocent angels or little devils. The images of such children are pictured in the literary depiction of childhoods in Oliver Twist (1838) by Charles Dickens in the English literature and in Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain in the American literature. The conventional approach to childhood which developed from these two images, one being innocent needed protection and the sinful one needed to be disciplined.

As the society changed in 19th century transformed so as the attitudes towards children and as a result National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) was initiated in 1889. (Coster, 2007: 9) The whole concept of childhood takes on both positive and negative sides. Nowadays in developed countries the children are in better position because of the multiple social policies that protect them and secure their childhood. The childhood is extended to 16 years and children have good chances to be better educated. But still childhood varies from time to time, place to place, class to class, gender to gender.

Unfortunately there are still children in the world who live in poverty, cannot go to school, have to work and their health is neglected. Looking back in the past English children had to work, even went to war. The strong evidence from Rogers & Rogers (1992) findings support the idea that childhood is a social construction. Sociologists exaggerate that point focusing mainly on the cross- cultural differences but neglecting the biological limitations of a child. Social constructionism challenges the assumption that moral values can be denied and measured objectively. (Stainton- Rogers, 2003: 29)

The developed countries in present days offer good protection for children by many laws and their childhood becomes a ‘ protected time of innocence with happy life’, free education, no child labour. On the other hand the quick pace of life with the advanced technology of media where children are easily exposed to any kind of information in video games, movies, television and internet. Children face real dangers there and as a result some children become offenders. Adults are obliged to protect children and to keep them emotionally positive so they can be competent and ready for the life in the society where they are safe.

To conclude childhood is a complex social construction which employs various organizations and people to consider factors including economic, social, cultural, religious and moral to secure children’s wellbeing. Constructive childhood involves different kind of knowledge of the families, mothers, teachers, social workers and educational psychologists who embrace the whole concept of different childhoods and to provide the needed support. There are multiple types of childhood which differs in various situations and cannot be fixed universally. Contradictory views of childhood can coexist depending on the circumstances that define the society.

Therefore to summarise the socially constructed childhood has characteristics determined by the society and constantly changes from place to place and time to time. References Coster, W. (2007) ‘ The Social Construction of Childhood’ in Zwozdiak-Myers, P. (ed) Childhood and Youth Studies. Exeter: Learning Matters. Jenks, C. (2009) ‘ Constructing Childhood Sociologically’ in Kehily, M. J. (ed. ) An Introduction to Childhood Studies. Berkshire: Open University Press. Stainton-Rogers, W. (2003) ‘ What is a Child? ’ in Woodhead, M. and Montgomery, H. (eds). Understanding Childhood: An Interdisciplinary Approach. Chichester: John Wiley.