

Changes in the concepts of childhood



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Discuss how childhood has changed since the 19th century. How do concepts from this period continue to influence current attitudes to childhood?

What is childhood???

Childhood, the early years of a person's life, between birth to about 8 years, is also considered most beautiful, most meaningful and most important part of life for a human being. The importance of childhood can be understood by observing the fact that though many scientists have different theories to define the process of human development they all agree on the importance of childhood and experiences in that time having a profound affect on an individual's life. Many researches have been made on the process of human development and though there are many proposed theories the actual difference between them is about how complex the relation really is between the stages and not what the stages really are. The differences are intrinsic not extrinsic. They all agree that childhood is a time when a person is moving from concrete to abstract thought.

Man did learn sciences such as astrology, numerology, mathematics etc but the concept of schooling was deficient. People only knew as much as was required to trade and earn a living. A study conducted on child development concluded that in the year 1750 about 33 percent of infants and new born babies were left on doorsteps or social care homes by parents. (Archard, 1993) Poor children were also made to work in land mines and other industries by their parents to earn a living. Efforts to eradicate child labor have been made over centuries by the responsible government bodies in different countries and social welfare organizations in the world. But it seems

that despite the changing perceptions towards childhood, statistical data proves otherwise.

The commencement of specific child development theories and acknowledgment of these theories only date back to some 200 years ago, in the 17th and 18th century. An acclaimed name, in this regard is of Professor Malcolm W. Watson. (Heywood, 2001) He researched on Human Development and formed theories that are still studied and followed. Results of his findings emphasized on six major theories by different people in different times.

These theories focus on different stages man goes through from infancy to adulthood. Details of how environment and other factors affect childhood are also underscored.

The theories encompass effects and behavioral changes in man and what we opine about our own selves, be it scientists, researchers or a common man.

Psychodynamic theory-Sigmund Freud. (James, 2004) This theory says that human psychology can be broken down into three separate parts. These are namely “ the id, the ego and the superego”. Id is the childish part of our personality and its driving force is food, warmth and appreciation and the sexual drive. This side of every being is then balanced by the other two parts i. e. ego and superego. The superego is contradictory to id. It is that part of human personality which enables us to control one self. Through this one acts in a socially acceptable manner. The ego is some where in the middle of these two extremes. Most of our troubles arise from balancing between the id and the superego.

“ Oedipus complex” is another very important entity of Freud’s theory. This stage is when the child develops feelings for his opposite sex parents. Boys wish to take place of their father and be the head of the family and act as a husband to their mother but at the same time they respect their father and fear that if they cross limits they will have to bare the consequences.

Psychosocial theory by Erik Erickson (Kehily, 2003)He coined the famous phrase “ Identity Crisis.” His personality theory had 8 stages from infancy to old age. These were 1. Hope, 2. Will, 3. Purpose, 4. Competence, 5. Fidelity, 6. Love, 7. Caring, 8. Wisdom. Erik was the first to bring forth the notion that development is spread over our entire lives and not just childhood.

Integrated Attachment theory- John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth: This theory originated in the early years of 1950s and was a joint effort by John Bowlby, specialist in child psychiatry and a psychologist, Mary Ainsworth. The concept is based on relationships and connections developed in the yearly years of our life. Also real life issues in a child’s life pertaining to loss and separations with which he had emotional ties are emphasized upon in the theory.

Social Learning theory by Albert Bandura: This theory was a modified version of the traditional learning theories. It says that learning is the same in infants, children, adults and even animals. Albert says that all respond to stimulus.

Cognitive Mediation theory- Lev Vygotsky: Supporting many other major theorists, Vygotsky opines that learning comes first and paves way for development. According to his theory, a child learns through other

individuals around him i. e. parents, teachers, siblings and other children. He says that developing thoughts and new skills is based on people in the environment we live in and our interaction with them.

Cognitive developmental theory- Jean Piaget: Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist says that children learn by building their own cognitive worlds. He believed that individual's go through four stages of understanding. All of these are age related.

Sensorimotor stage: This is from birth to two years of age. In this first stage, infants coordinate the senses of seeing and hearing with physical and motoric experiences to understand. Thus, the name sensorimotor.

Preoperational stage: It goes on from two years of age to seven years. Children at this stage start relating the world and their surroundings with words and images. They go beyond the sensory experiences in this stage.

Concrete Operational Stage: This third stage lasts from 7 years to eleven years. “ Children can perform operations, and logical reasoning replaces intuitive thought as long as reasoning can be applied to specific or concrete examples. For instance, concrete operational thinkers cannot imagine the steps necessary to complete algebraic equation, which is too abstract for thinking at this stage of development.” (Mayall, 1994)

Formal Operational Stage: The final stage is from 11 to 15 years. Children move further from concrete thoughts to abstracts and logical thinking. As a part of abstractive thinking they create hypothetical ideal circumstances and

then compare their own life with these standards, deducing a satisfactory conclusion.

In a nutshell, childhood is the time when we are understanding simple operations in order to be able to understand and master complex tasks in future. We need to identify the environment around us and use language to make connections to objects and the world in general. If this basic understanding is faulty, the future would certainly hold a lot more surprises, and many of them would be unwelcome. Only when a child fully understands the world around is he really able to grasp abstract concepts and use logic to reach meaningful conclusions in future.

Having now understood what childhood is all about, how a human mind is developing, in stages, to understand the world it is introduced to and how important this part of life is in your life and mine, let us now take a look into how childhood has been different for people in the past century and the present.

Childhood in the 18th century

Compared to

Childhood in the 19th century

To begin with, the treatment of children with utmost care, especially in their earliest years, is a fairly recent notion. Before the 18th century, child mortality rate was so high that people had a lot of children of whom only a few actually survived. Parents could not afford to get too emotionally attached to children until they crossed a threshold age where chances of survival became greater than chances of death. In France, during the 17th

century, between 20%-50% of infants died in their first year. (5) (Wyness, 2000)

Zelizer, in his book, *Pricing The Priceless Child*, tells us how in the middle ages, Spanish children when they died could be buried anywhere on the premises, rather like a cat or dog, often, their bodies were sewn together into sacks and put inside common graves. In early Arabian cultures, the birth of a female child was considered a burden, it was mourned upon and in cases the infant was buried alive. Religion played a vital role in controlling erratic human behaviors and in both the east and the west, the religious institution was the first to recognize the rights of children and honorable dealings with them. The following table describes how religion based institutions have provided childhood care facilities in the African continent. (Linda, 1984)

With time and with the slow but steady spread of education, the world started becoming a different place altogether, especially in respect of the rights of children, and that happened mostly during the 18th and 19th centuries. We have, as the human species, come to realize that childhood is not just a biological phase in life. It holds much more meaning; it gives birth to a social being that embodies the belief system of an entire populace at a point in time. Parents' attitudes toward child bearing and rearing have undergone drastic reconstruction in modern times.

19th Century Concepts:

In the 19th century children did not have a significant importance. No formal education and learning took place inside homes. Mothers generally did not

have the awareness to spend time with their children and nurture them. A father in every home has been the breadwinner since times immemorial but women in the 19th century also joined the earning league. Till the early 19th century children were used to earn a living and a study shows that more than fifty percent of factory workers were children under the age of eleven years in northern parts of the world. They were made to work hard and perform hazardous jobs such as cleaning up narrow chimneys and going down cramped tunnels owing to their small size.

Most historians would agree that children in present day world are much better off than the children in past centuries. But they continue to debate the extent to which childhood has changed since the 19th century and how the adult's approach to childhood and dealing with children has altered. As such, children in past centuries worked with their parents from a very small age. But it was the industrial revolution of the 19th century which actually caused the inception of child labour. Researchers in the field of human development take one of two stances when explaining early childhood. They hold either an essentialist view (which considers childhood a commonality that is no different in any part of the world, more a biological state than anything deeper). The other view to childhood, the constructionist view pictures childhood as being different in different cultures and different times. A child in Japan would be fundamentally different than a child in Britain. The children of one country would also be much different at different times. We can just take a look at the children around us and see the difference between our childhood and theirs to grasp the importance of the constructionist view.

Cross cultural differences in childhood and its perception by elders is linked to the societies' sense of a child's autonomy. It was considered an a vital aspect of Western cultures (Holland, 1992)but was not so prominent in eastern ones. While western mothers emphasized on teaching their child personal values and their rights at , each part of their lives, Japanese and Pakistani mothers have always emphasized more on differential treatment of elders and good mannerism (Gittens, 1998)The difference, as we see it plainly today, is that Japanese children display greater sensitivity and self discipline while American children are more confident and expressive. However, it has long been a subject of argument between researchers that irrespective of the vast differences in child rearing strategies across many cultures the fundamental importance of parenthood comes out in the form of warmth and acceptance against rejection and neglect (Jenks, 1996)However whether eastern cultures have been more hostile toward the child in the past or western cultures have been more so is a matter of debate. While western cultures have displayed a generally strict attitude toward the childrearing and the lack of acknowledgement to their a child's own autonomy, eastern cultures on the other hand believe that strictness, control and and even corporal punishment are but ways to shw a child how much a prent cares. While the Chienese may consider American parents less caring for their children's development of important social virtues, the American parent may consider Chinese as totally autorotarian and irrational (Higgonet, 1998)However, another psychological argument presented by

Scientists say that in such collectivistic cultural arrangements as the Chinese, Japanese or Indian, authoritarian and restrictive parenting practices are necessary for maintaining harmoniously stable society .

Literature on childhood from different cultures across the world have shown two main stream belief systems, the concept of childhood as Dionysian and Apollonian (Jenks, 1996)The Dionysian belief, taking from the greek mythological figure Dionysus (Prince of wine, nature and revelry) assumes that every child is born with evil or corruption in its nature imbued in their conscience. The Apollonian child is considered, from nature, the very image of beauty, poetry, sunshine and light. This is the belief that is prevalent today in the 21st century but did not exist in earlier centuries.

While 19th century children were treated rather like animals. The industrial revolutions laid the foundations for the market for low paid child labour. IN textile factories, they worked as many as twelve hours a day. As education crept into the masses the parliament began passing laws to curtail child labour, but the first effective rule, enforced with the help of factory inspectors, came about in 1833. Education was not considered a necessity for every child and the responsibility of the state as late as 1870 and even then the poorest members of society could not afford school fee which were abolished in 1891. Victorian children were used to beatings and in extreme circumstances, poor children were forced to wear a cap which said ‘ dunce’ meaning ‘ a stupid person’. Children dressed like adults, were supposed to act like adults and were treated in both love and hate as adults. The extent of neglect towards children can be seen by the fact that the first public park for children was build as late as 1859 in the city of Manchester. To us then,

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the hundreds of complex laws that protect children from evils makes utmost sense. Sexual and physical abuse, pornography, beatings and even simple neglect are considered crimes against childhood. Special laws for the special treatment of children are now in place to ensure that children are treated with delicate care. It seems that parental affection is not much of an instinct but only a reflection of what parents consider to be their duties toward their off spring. (Higgonet, 1998)

It is a fact that parents in our world today can exercise less power over their children than in the past because a part of child rearing is controlled by the state (Donzalot, 1980). However these regulations have been brought into action to curtail the misuse of parental authority over children. Good parents can still be good parents, in fact, outside interference in matters such as family etiquettes, a child's eating, dressing, sleeping and entertainment habits and the setting of acceptable behavioral standards is considered a breach of the parents' right. The state usually only intervenes when it fears that the child is being ill treated or when it believes that the child is not well brought up and would be a danger to those around him or her. John Hood Willams (1990) points out that children's lives are controlled by their families in quite a array of ways. Their social spaces are strictly defined, their times are set by elders, their clothes and haircut is subject to the parent's image of decency or acceptability. Parents even provide rules to be followed when eating, walking, talking and even standing in a crowd. Children are the most vulnerable to corporal punishment or all other members in the human society (Kline, 1993)

However, 19th century and present day childhood is vastly different. Today's world is quite different than in the past century. Science and technology have rocketed human understanding of life many times over. Though the industrial revolution laid the foundations of all the progress we have seen in the past two hundred years, the greatest speed in the development of sciences and discovery has been hosted by the past 60 -70 years.

Increasingly, the world has accepted that it is a global arena and not one divided by geographical boundaries. Cross cultural knowledge exchange has lead to a different populace which is ready to take on aspects of other societies almost readily. The media and internet have, without a trace of doubt, the greatest importance in the life of the modern child. Children are not only aware of fashion, trends and coursework, they are also aware of their rights and that 911 can save them from a parent's physical or emotional abuse. At the same time that the present century is a blessing on children, it should also be brought into account that the 20th and 21st centuries have made childhood much more prone to corruption than previous centuries. To begin with, our environment is in a state of alarm, pollution and the green house effect have starting melting glaciers. Sea levels continue to rise and natural calamities have begun to affect humans in ever increasing ways. While countries emphasize on becoming wealthier and more powerful, they continue to expand their industrial and technological horizons but do not place due importance to the physical and mental development of a child. Physical activity (especially sport) for children has become an endangered species while computers and mobile phones have taken their place as a child's entertainment activity. Life has become fast and so much so that we enjoy and prefer fast food even if it delivers

extremely low nutrition value and high cholesterol levels. Drug and sex abuse of children seems to be rising steadily, despite the existing laws to regulate such unacceptable actions. Terrorism, radical thought and the spirit of revolution among youth have made childhood an age where there should actually be more protection and concern from parents and the state.

A child's cognitive and socioemotional development is therefore at the forefront of modern world's strategies to rear better children. Cross cultural psychological studies have discovered that there are many ways in which cultural factors help in developing a sound child who would later develop into a socially acceptable person.

The organization of physical and social setup in a surrounding, dictated by culture has a profound affect on the child's mannerism and activities.

Prevalent social values, customs and norms provide a medium to evaluate his own acceptability or conformity in a society.

Parental beliefs and practices, which have been molded by culture play a mediating role in a child's understanding of the world in which he/she lives.

Contemporary societies use the schooling system, also built around their own cultural value, to imbed certain levels of acceptability criteria in the minds of children.

(Gittens, 1998)

For the broad minded modern child, many pieces of information, the instance of sexual information, is quite important in order to be able to perform in an

agreeable way. It has already been shown by research that romantic ideals pave way for women coming to terms with their sexual drives and experiences .(Woodhead, 2003)At the same time boys, who hardly share romantic ideals with their parents tend to take on their masculine audacity to deal with love and sexual involvement . This finally leads to a pattern of married life (seen among the general populace) where women hardly get to the emotional closeness they expect to receive from their husbands .