

**Part**

*One*

**Children and Childhood**



# Chapter

## *One*

# Histories of Childhood

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The history of childhood has become a particularly influential area of study in recent years. The chapter examines Philippe Ariès's claims that childhood didn't exist before the seventeenth century. Criticisms of Ariès's ideas are also explored, but it is concluded that while the detail of Ariès's views may be questioned, his overall idea is accurate.

*I know a lot about children – I used to be one.  
(Spike Milligan)*

*It goes without saying that Sam will not enjoy his childhood. That is not the point – childhood is not an end in itself, but a means to growing up.  
(Roger Scruton, philosopher and conservative columnist, talking about his 4-year-old son. Independent 10 May 2002)*

The questions about childhood and its meaning are ones that have concerned historians in recent years, most obviously in the debate about whether or not our current idea of childhood is in fact just a recent invention – ‘an artefact of modernity’. Some writers have argued that up to the modern period the current idea of childhood simply did not exist. This view holds that some time between 1600 and the twentieth century the idea of childhood was ‘invented’ and what we now think of as childhood would not have made sense to our ancestors. This view is most strongly associated with the French author Philippe Ariès, whose book *Centuries of Childhood*, first published in the 1960s, has dominated debates on the history of childhood ever since. The text of a number of Ariès's chapters is available on the web at <http://www.socsci.kun.nl/ped/whp/histeduc/links09e.html>.

Much of this debate has involved historians identifying evidence to show Ariès and his co-thinkers to be wrong about the historical facts. However, the debate has focused people's attention on previously neglected areas of history and allowed for the development of the history of childhood as a serious specialism.

## Philippe Ariès: Childhood as a Modern Invention

Ariès is a French historian associated with a school of history which attempted to shift attention from what might be seen as traditional history, which described the actions of kings and statesmen, towards aspects of everyday life such as diet, family life or popular customs and practices. This perspective stresses the importance of understanding how people saw their own lives and how ideas and feelings (what the French call *sentiments*) change over time.

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Ariès took the view that the modern world had seen a transition in people's ideas about childhood. Put simply, in medieval society young people about the age of seven moved out from the protection of the family into a broader adult society where they acted as smaller versions of the adults around them. By contrast, in modern society the age of seven marked a gradual move from infancy to childhood, which was a special state of transition, neither infant nor adult, around which the whole structure of the family revolved. The modern world was characterized by a separate isolated family unit which was centred on the needs of the child. This idea of the child-centred family is so familiar to us today that we find it hard to imagine that it is a recent invention, but Ariès argued that it is only modern changes, particularly the development of schooling prescribed and provided by the state, which brings about the phase we call childhood. In his most extreme and controversial claim, Ariès states: 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (Ariès 1960: 125).

Ariès came to his conclusion in the following ways:

- He studied medieval writings on age and development, particularly those which talked about the 'ages of man [*sic*]', and attempted to show which things were appropriate at different phases of life.
- He looked at the portrayal of children and childhood in medieval art.
- He looked at ideas of how children should dress.
- He looked at the history of games and pastimes.
- He studied the way moralists and others wrote about the idea of childhood 'innocence'.

This led Ariès to develop his claim. For example, his study of medieval painting suggested that in early medieval art children tended to be portrayed as if they were small versions of adults. The most common portrayal of a child in medieval European art was of course the picture of Jesus in innumerable paintings of the Madonna and Child. You can find some examples at <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/te/cd/cd106/slide3.html>.

Ariès argues that these portrayals show Jesus as a small version of an adult – the faces have very 'grown up' features and the bodies are elongated and developed like an adult. Only size indicated that a figure was that of a child. This suggests that medieval artists saw children as simply 'reduced' versions of adults. Ariès says: 'medieval art until the twelfth century did not know childhood or did not attempt

to portray it' (Ariès 1960: 31). This view is reinforced, says Ariès, by the study of medieval children's clothing, which was generally simply smaller versions of what was fashionable for adults. Infants wore baby clothes which were generally the same for boys and girls, but at about the age of seven people moved on to smaller versions of adult outfits.

Perhaps most controversially, Ariès and other historians associated with his view have tended to see childhood in medieval times as having less emotional loading or significance to their parents. The suggestion is that parents, especially fathers, were less emotionally tied to children and were less affected by the impact of children's illness or death.

From the seventeenth century onwards, Ariès argues, our conception of childhood in the modern sense begins to develop. This is reflected in art; for example, by the beginning of the **representation** of *ordinary* children (i.e. not Jesus or angels) in everyday situations and even the portrayal of dead children. This is described as 'a very important point in the history of feelings' (Ariès 1960: 352). This change in sentiment takes two forms: firstly, within families children take on a more central role: 'parents begin to recognize pleasure from watching children's antics and "coddling" them' (Ariès 1960: 127). Secondly, among moralists and writers on social life there begins to emerge an idea of children as fragile beings who need to be safeguarded and reformed.

This implies that neither of these sentiments had been common before 1600. Their development in the seventeenth century lays the foundation for modern views of what childhood is. The crucial role in this development, for Ariès, is played by the development of schooling, initially for the (male) children of the aristocracy, but increasingly as the modern period develops for all children whatever their social origins. Schooling is seen here as providing a kind of 'quarantine' period for children between infancy and adult life and its gradual extension and intensification is the basis for defining a new idea of childhood.

It is important before moving on from Ariès to note that his work is essentially about ideas, not about the reality on the ground. He writes about childhood, not children, and what he is trying to do is to construct a history of the way people think about the idea of childhood rather than how individual children were reared or treated.

His work was extremely influential in generating new ideas about children in history. In particular, his ideas fed into a growing body of theory which saw the family as progressing from an institution based on practical needs and economic necessity, with little or no emotional content, to the modern idea of the family as the institution which meets the needs of its members, especially children, for love and affection. The French writer de Mause (1976), for example, portrayed the history of childhood as a progression from classical times, where children were frequently killed or abandoned, through medieval indifference, where wet-nursing and the 'farming out' of children were common, to the present-day emphasis on caring. Shorter (1976: 170) goes so far as to argue that 'good mothering is an invention of modernization' and that in traditional societies infants under the age of two were treated with emotional

indifference because of the high possibility of infant mortality, while in the twentieth century the welfare of the small child has been given a dominant status in public discourse.

**G** Lawrence Stone (1977) points out that as late as the seventeenth century relations within the family were remote and emotionally detached and that the Puritans held a negative view of the child as a sinful being whose will had to be broken by flogging and denial. Only with the growth of the middle classes and the stress on individualism which came with industrialization did a child-centred view emerge, gradually filtering down from the middle class to the rest of society.

While the above historians differed from Ariès in matters of chronology and detail, they shared a key perspective, what Anderson (1980) calls the *sentiments* approach. What they all argue is that the key change which arrived with modernity was a shift in the way people *felt* about children – an alteration in their emotional meaning and significance. This shift was broadly one from indifference or neutrality to high valuation. The twentieth-century family is seen as child centred and focused emotionally on the welfare of the child in ways that these writers claim would have been unrecognizable to people from previous centuries.

### **Criticisms of Ariès and his Co-thinkers: The Case for Continuity**

Many writers agreed with Ariès's perspective, but his work also attracted a wide range of critiques. Other historians attempted to show that his central idea that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' was wrong. Much of this work is summarized in Linda Pollock's book *Forgotten Children* (1983), which attacks Ariès and his co-thinkers on a number of grounds.

Essentially, these critics reject the view that childhood did not exist in medieval times, and criticize the idea of childhood as an invention of modernity. Ariès, de Mause, Shorter and Stone are all attacked for their methodologies and for the conclusions they draw from evidence. Pollock argues that there is a need to study *actual* parent-child relationships in history rather than generalized ideas about 'sentiments'. These are represented in diaries, autobiographies and other first-hand accounts, which she examined for the period 1500 to 1700. If we do that, Pollock argues, the strongest impression is one of *continuity*. For instance, she quotes examples of grief at infant death (from mothers and fathers), from throughout the period, to show that there was no pattern of indifference. Similarly, she shows that while there were examples of cruel and brutal child discipline practices these were by no means the norm and were frequently described by writers so as to condemn them as undesirable extremes.

Pollock argues that it is a mistake to base our image of what childhood was like on the texts of advice books, sermons and other documents removed from actual experience. It would be rather like assuming that we could describe what driving is actually like on the roads by a reading of the current edition of the Highway Code! It is

better, says Pollock, to study what people actually did, what their experience actually was, and this suggests much more similarity between families of the past and those of the present day than Ariès and his colleagues would assert. It is important to note, of course, that the family lives described in diaries and autobiographies are generally restricted to the literate upper and middle classes.

In relation to Ariès's specific claims about the Middle Ages there have been a number of strong critiques. Shahar (1992: 1) argues that there was indeed a concept of childhood in medieval society. She claims that 'a concept of childhood existed' and 'that scholarly acknowledgement of the existence of different stages of childhood was not merely theoretical and that parents invested both material and emotional resources in their offspring'.

Ariès, of course, was not arguing that there was no affection for children in the Middle Ages. People having no idea about childhood is not the same as people not caring for their children, but Ariès maintains that there was a much clearer sense that from about seven years old people moved out of the family into a broader adult world. What distinguishes modern society is the separation of a distinct childhood sphere, a distinct world of childhood with its own clothes, games, entertainments, etc.

In relation to Ariès's use of pictorial evidence critics have pointed out that there were in fact numerous medieval pictures showing the naturalistic portrayal of childhood and that the way in which religious paintings were constructed did not so much reflect the painter's idea of naturalistic truth as his idea of theological or religious truth. Jesus was depicted as older looking than his age and as larger than might be expected because of his significance as the Son of God, as 'God become human'. Spiritually he was seen as superior to all the adults around him and this was reflected in the painting.

In the same way, the spread of naturalistic images of Jesus later in history, such as Raphael's chubby little baby, reflects the fact that religious views were changing to stress more forcefully the humanity of Jesus (e.g. in displaying his genitals). It was theology which determined the treatment of Jesus and angels, not sentiments about childhood.

Critics have also rejected the view that in some sense children in earlier ages were not valued because of the likelihood of infant mortality. As we have seen, diaries and personal accounts suggest that the loss of a child was deeply felt by mothers and fathers despite the much greater probability of such bereavement, and that while pious families might see the death of a child as God's will it was nevertheless a source of enormous grief and pain.

### **The Middle-Class Family: Ideology of Child-Centredness**

Despite the critiques there is a general agreement that something about the role of children in families and in the broader society changed between the seventeenth century and the present day. This is best described as the emergence and then the

spread of a middle-class model or ideology of the family. This model is associated with the newly emerging commercial classes in Western Europe and is based on the idea of the self-contained family led by a strong father with a central focus on the upbringing of children. Children are seen as the central part of the family's purpose. There are mechanisms for the proper upbringing of children and their key function is education. In some cases this version of the family was derived from religious faith. The Puritan family in England or the American colonies was seen as an institution based on ensuring the salvation of family members by proper education in the rules of good behaviour and the importance of faith. This responsibility was seen as resting primarily with the father, who was seen as the head of the household in religious as well as economic terms. The need was to 'school' the child in correct behaviour using appropriate punishments (including regular beatings) to enforce discipline. Children were seen as inherently sinful and in need of guidance. At the extreme they were compared to wild animals whose spirit needed to be broken in order that they might develop the humility and obedience which would lead them to be good Christians (Ozment 1983). Not all families followed this extreme model, even in Protestant communities. Simon Schama describes seventeenth-century (Protestant) Holland as a society 'besotted with the children', where the idea of children and their pastimes played a major part in family life and in art (Schama 1987: 495).

What both models of the family share though, is a focus on the child and the importance of education. This emphasis was widespread among the new middle classes and was re-emphasized in the eighteenth century by the Enlightenment view that children were 'naturally innocent' and needed to be directed by appropriate care and education to become good citizens. This view is best expressed in Rousseau's classic book *Emile* (1758), which sets out a plan for the education of a boy to allow natural curiosity and virtue to flower.

G This benign child-centredness became popular and was associated with the growth of **Romanticism** (CHAPTER 33), which saw children as close to nature and in some sense uncorrupted and pure. A fashion developed for child portraits by artists such as Reynolds which stressed innocence and 'cuteness' (Porter 1990: 247). However, the view was largely confined to the enlightened aristocracy and the new middle classes.

G For the great mass of the population of Western European countries like Britain and France, children's lives were characterized by poverty, hard labour and **exploitation**. This set up a contradiction which was to dominate writing and thinking about childhood through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. There was a contradiction between a romantic idealized view of childhood rooted in eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the brutal reality of most children's lives. We only need to think of the works of Charles Dickens to see this contradiction constantly addressed. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, the simplicity and naivety of Oliver is contrasted with the adult corrupt lives of the Artful Dodger and Fagin's gang. Similarly, in Kingsley's *Water Babies* the chimney boys are shown to be really innocent babies. This view of childhood purity (which contrasted with the Puritan view of children's inherently sinful nature) paralleled the nineteenth-century concern to 'save' children from labour and exploitation (CHAPTER 39).



## Nineteenth-Century Children and Social Policy: Children Without Childhood

While the newly emergent middle classes were developing a child-centred ideology of the family, the impact of industrialization on the rest of the population had been to intensify the exploitation and wretchedness of many children's lives. In pre-industrial societies children always worked in farming or in cottage crafts, but the emergence of the factory system introduced the idea of going out to work. For the first time the workplace was separate from the family and children who worked in mines and cotton mills had to travel to their workplaces. Their working day was frequently longer than 14 hours, in addition to the time for travel.

**G** Child labour was not just an accidental side effect of industrialization. Child workers were often preferred to men or women because of their flexibility, their docility and above all their low cost. Child workers were generally economically essential to their families and made a major contribution to household incomes.

The exploitation of child labour by industrialism stood as a stark contrast to the idealization of childhood being spread among the new middle classes. This contradiction became the basis for the campaigns to limit and eventually to abolish child labour which ran through the century. The various Factory Acts limited working hours and set minimum ages. The idea was spreading that childhood was a period of life in need of protection, where even in the *laissez-faire* atmosphere of Victorian Britain it was appropriate for the state to intervene (Briggs 1999).

**G** This enthusiasm for saving children paralleled a growth in **philanthropic** and charitable initiatives which laid many of the foundations for the twentieth-century Welfare State. The massive movements of population which preceded and accompanied the industrial revolution had led to a growth in the numbers of abandoned children.

**G** **Foundling hospitals** became a major focus of humanitarian concern and the Poor Laws began to focus on the needs of 'lost children' or 'children without childhood' (McClure 1981). Later in the century the ideology of child innocence was most starkly challenged by the growing awareness of child prostitution, and campaigners like Josephine Butler demonstrated the hypocrisy of a society which turned a blind eye to such practices.

This idea of childhood as a special phase was even more strongly reinforced by the development of compulsory state schooling. This came late in the day in Britain as compared with continental rivals like Germany, and at first was not taken very seriously in parts of the country which saw child labour as essential. However, as the century progressed it was the need to attend school rather than the illegality of employment which ended the worst excesses of child labour (Hendrick 1997).

By the end of the nineteenth century, while the lives of most children were still dominated by poverty, ignorance and illness (see, for example, Robert Roberts's autobiographical accounts of his life in turn-of-the-century Salford: *The Classic Slum* and *A Ragged Schooling*), the idea of child-centredness as a key focus for policy

development had firmly taken root, paving the way for the twentieth century – described by many commentators as ‘the century of the child’.

## The Twentieth Century: Century of the Child

The first change in thinking about childhood during this century was the growth of deliberate limitation of family size (Banks 1968). The spread of family limitation from the Victorian middle class to the rest of the population was a gradual process which extended throughout the period up to the 1970s. What it led to was the decline in the average number of children per family from five or six in the 1870s to below two in the 1970s. This also needs to be considered in the light of the dramatic decline in infant mortality. A family of five or six children in Victorian times would generally have involved a higher number of pregnancies which resulted in the loss of the children involved. The decline in average family size obviously has an influence on the extent to which time, effort and attention are devoted to individual children. One or two children are easier to focus on and idealize than eight or nine.

The development and gradual extension of compulsory schooling (along with the corresponding decline in child labour) changed children from being an economic asset to be coolly valued as part of a family strategy for survival. Children were being seen as a ‘liability’, something into which the parents had to pour resources in the hope of receiving emotional and expressive rewards (affection, pride, etc.) rather than financial returns, as Anderson’s (1972) study of nineteenth-century family life in Preston suggests.

Schooling also creates a period of ambiguous status for children. The period of compulsory schooling (gradually extended throughout this century) is a time when children are not physically dependent (breastfeeding, nappy changing, etc.) on adults, yet they are not adults themselves. From nursery school to their late teens they occupy a kind of limbo status with confused signals about rights and responsibilities offered at every turn. What is implicit in the provision of schooling though is the fact that this is a time when they are in need of protection, nurturing and guidance. Further, it is clear in the twentieth century that the welfare of children is not just a family responsibility. Children are seen as increasingly the responsibility of the state, which intervenes in their education, their health, their diet and their upbringing in ways designed to improve the national well-being by developing its future citizens. In some countries like France this reflects a concern with population size and the need to ‘keep pace’ with rival nations; in other countries the concern arises from a sense that families and in particular mothers are not to be trusted to act always in the child’s and the nation’s best interests.

A further development in the twentieth century is the idea of the child and their development as a proper subject for scientific study. The growth of psychology as a discipline is closely tied to the role it played in the increased surveillance and control of childhood, from IQ testing to identifying the origins of delinquency. As the century went on parents were bombarded with advice, often contradictory, on the appropriate

ways to look after children. From Truby-King's regimented view of the importance of routine to the more relaxed perspectives of Benjamin Spock there was a general view that the care and nurturing of children was a skilled task and not one which came naturally to parents through instinct (Hardyment 1983).

In this sense, whatever the criticisms levelled at Ariès and his colleagues, it does make sense to see our current notion of childhood as a modern invention. Primarily because of the spread of the middle-class ideology of the child-centred family, the development of compulsory universal schooling and the preoccupation of policy makers and welfare institutions with the interests of the child, there did come into being in the late twentieth century in the affluent West a new idea of childhood. This separate conception of childhood would have made little sense to our ancestors.

This is not to say of course that children are not still abused, exploited and brutalized in the affluent West as well as elsewhere. Millions of children still live in poverty in the heart of affluent Europe and America. For much of the developing world the realities of child labour, high infant mortality and abandonment remain facts of everyday life. However, these failures and abuses are seen as contradicting the central value systems of the societies where they happen. Groups like the Child Poverty Action Group or Save the Children (CHAPTER 38) can appeal to the public's sense of what childhood ought to be like when they try to combat these problems. In this sense our idea of what it is to be a child is a social construct of modernity and one that affects all who are involved with children.

### *Activity*

Collect the childhood memories of some friends and relatives. Choose people who represent different generations.

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#### FURTHER READING

- Ariès, P. (1960) *Centuries of Childhood*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. This is obviously the key work and it is certainly worth browsing to get a sense of Ariès's arguments.
- Cunningham, H. (1995) *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500*. London: Longman. This is a very accessible, readable introduction to the whole area. It includes a clear discussion of Ariès and his critics as well as good descriptions of the changing attitudes to children in the last three centuries.
- Hardyment, C. (1983) *Dream Babies: Child Care from Locke to Spock*. Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks. A clear, well-written account of the 'advice to parents' industry.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1762) *Emile*. Web version at <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/pedagogies/Rousseau/Contents2.html>. The classic portrayal of a child-centred education. Compare Rousseau's plans for Emile with those for Sophie, who he sees as a helper and servant of the 'ideal (male) citizen'.