

Childhood in One Page

From a contemporary point of view, **childhood** is an accepted and largely unremarkable concept. It is seen as a standard phase in human development, starting from birth until a traditional maturity age is reached. This age varies from society to society. For example, in Mali and Cameroon people become adults at 15 (though girls sometimes marry at an even earlier age), whereas in some US states one does not become mature until 19. The average age of 'majority' worldwide is 18. In the UK, until recently it was 21.

Childhood has not conventionally existed throughout history. In pre-Renaissance societies, for example, children were required to work as soon as they were physically able. Only those families who could afford servants would allow their children limited opportunity to mature or could afford to provide them with a suitable education. Hence the majority of the population grew up illiterate, only learning those skills necessary for their functions within very pre-ordained lives.

After the Renaissance, as the wealth of society became less centralised, the ability to break out of ones station in life created a greater demand for education. This in turn meant allowing time during the working week for children to learn. But again, this only benefitted those families who were relatively wealthy.

As industrialisation took hold, if anything the position of children declined. The demand for child workers was high. That children **should** work became embedded in working class tradition. A child of 11 or 12 years old could end up helping to provide for their family as part of the industrial workforce, where their small size and dexterity was useful in production roles. Later, in the Victorian era, the growth of Socialist tendencies, emphasised the need for children to both be more thoroughly educated, to allow them time to develop in an organic manner, and included such activities as play. This was firmly embedded in most European nations by the early 20th Century.

In addition, the creation of childhood as a concept offered many possibilities of economic exploitation. Industry recognised that selling to children required the romanticisation of what it was like to be a child. Hence, advertising appealed to adults in terms of sentimental imagery of what it was like to be a child. It created relevant products (e.g. toys and clothes) for this new market. Hence our current attitude to childhood is far more emotionally-based, compared to that understood two or three centuries ago.