

The social construction of childhood

Evidence supporting the idea that childhood is a social construction rather than simply a natural product of biological immaturity is found in three main areas:

- the differing status, responsibilities and treatment of children in different contemporary cultures.
- the way the view of the nature of children and of childhood, and the status, responsibilities and treatment of children have changed through history, and continue to change today.
- the differences between children's status and responsibilities even in the same society.

CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CHILDHOOD

Looking at childhood from a cross-cultural perspective shows there is a wide variety or diversity of childhoods that exist across the world. The freedom from adult responsibilities experienced by many Western children is not found in all societies, especially those of developing countries. In many simpler societies the prolonged period of childhood and adolescence before the transition to adulthood found in contemporary Britain does not exist, and children take on adult roles as soon as they are physically able. The International Labour Organization suggests that one in seven children in the world work, with 215 million children aged 5–17 involved in child labour in Sub-Saharan Africa, 28 per cent of children (58 million) are involved in work. A more dramatic and disturbing example of the swift transition to adulthood is found in the case of child soldiers. A 2008 report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (now Child Soldiers International, www.child-soldiers.org) suggested that between 2004 and 2007 child soldiers were involved in active conflict in twenty-one countries around the world, with children both being brutalized and killed, and brutalizing and killing others, as part of adult conflicts. Girls as well as boys are involved, with girl soldiers frequently subjected to rape and other forms of sexual violence as well as being involved in combat and other roles. A report *Hidden in Plain Sight* from UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund – www.unicef.org) in 2014 found one in ten girls around the world experiences serious sexual violence, and very high numbers (around 95,000) of child murders each year.

These examples suggest that the nature of childhood is not the same in every society, and in many countries of the world today, small children are expected to take on at an early age what in contemporary Britain might be regarded as adult responsibilities, with many of them being against the law for children.

Activity

Go to www.life-hack.co.uk/2014/04/16-children-and-their-bedrooms-from.html?m=1
What conclusions can you draw about cross-cultural differences in childhood?

The experience of childhood can differ widely between societies, as suggested by these photos of a child labourer in India and a child soldier in Sierra Leone



HISTORICAL CHANGES IN CHILDHOOD

The notion of childhood as a distinctive phase of life between infancy and adulthood is a relatively modern development, and didn't develop in Western societies until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Philippe Ariès (1973) showed that, in medieval times, childhood did not exist as a separate status. Children often moved straight from infancy, when they required constant care, to working roles in the community. Children were seen as miniature versions of adults – 'little adults' – and were expected to take on adult roles and responsibilities as soon as they were physically able to do so, and to participate in all aspects of social life alongside their parents. Family portraits of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, like the one shown here, often depicted children as these little adults – shrunken versions of their parents, wearing adult clothes.



This painting from the seventeenth century (1608) of what appears to be a small adult is in fact a 2-year-old boy – he can be identified as a boy by the dagger in his belt: 400 years ago boys wore dresses until they were 8 years old. The picture shows how both ideas about childhood and gender identity have changed dramatically over time.

Children did not lead separate lives, and mixed with adults. None of the things we associate with childhood today, such as toys, games, books, music, special clothes, schooling and so on existed. Until the mid nineteenth century (the 1850s), child labour was commonly practised and accepted. Most children worked, starting around the age of 7. In the early part of the nineteenth century, many factory workers were children under the age of 11. Children worked as long and as hard as adults, and adolescent children often left home for years to work, with boys being taken on as apprentices and girls as servants in richer households. In poor families, parents sometimes forced their children to engage in scavenging and street selling, and occasionally they were used as thieves and prostitutes. Children frequently faced the same legal punishments as adults for criminal activity. The notion that children deserved special protection and treatment did not exist at this time.

In the nineteenth century, the father and husband was the head of the family – it was a patriarchal unit – and

fathers often had a great deal of authority over other family members. They would often have little involvement in the care of their children. Children might see relatively little of their parents and, generally, children had low status in the family and were expected to be 'seen and not heard'.

Ariès showed that the social construction of childhood was linked to industrialization. With industrialization, work moved outside the family home. Restrictions on child labour in mines and factories during the nineteenth century, designed to protect children from exploitation and hardship, isolated most children from the world of adult work and responsibilities. Children began to be seen as innocent and in need of protection, though they were also seen as weak and vulnerable to temptation. Strong discipline was applied to teach children appropriate behaviour, and they often experienced severe beatings in the name of discipline which we would regard as child abuse today.

The growing speed of technological change in the nineteenth century meant parents were frequently unable to pass on the knowledge and skills required for working life, and the requirements

for a literate and numerate labour force in part led to the development of compulsory education from 1880. These changes made children dependent on parents or other adults. There then emerged a new conception of a phase of 'childhood', with children lacking in power and dependent on, and supported by, adults. This period of dependency is getting ever longer today, as more young people spend time in education and training.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHILDREN IN THE SAME SOCIETY

It is important to recognize that the conception and experience of childhood are not the same for everyone, even in the same society. In contemporary Britain, inequalities based on social class, ethnicity and gender mean that not all children have the same experiences of growing up. For example, around 27 per cent of children in the UK in 2012–13 were living in officially defined poverty, and girls will often have a different and more restricted childhood than boys. This is particularly the case for Asian girls, with Brannen (1996; Brannen et al. 1994) and Bhatti (1999) finding them more strictly controlled by parents than their brothers. Margo et al. (2006) have pointed out that richer parents, unlike poorer groups, can afford to purchase activities, like dance and music lessons, and are more likely to attend constructive, organized or educational activities that can enhance their children's personal and social development. By contrast, poorer children are more likely to spend time hanging out with friends or watching TV, with less beneficial effects on their personal and social development. Some children are forced to take jobs as soon as possible, such as paper rounds or working in shops, in order to supplement any pocket money they may or may not get from their parents, and poorer children are likely to suffer more ill-health and disability, and to have fewer educational qualifications than those who are better-off.

Children in contemporary Britain

During the course of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first, families have become more child-centred, with family activities and outings often focused on the interests of the children. The amount of time parents spend with their children has more than doubled since the 1960s, and parents are more likely to take an interest in their children's activities, discussing decisions with them, and treating them more as equals. Often, the children's welfare is seen as the major family priority, frequently involving the parents in considerable financial cost and sacrifice.

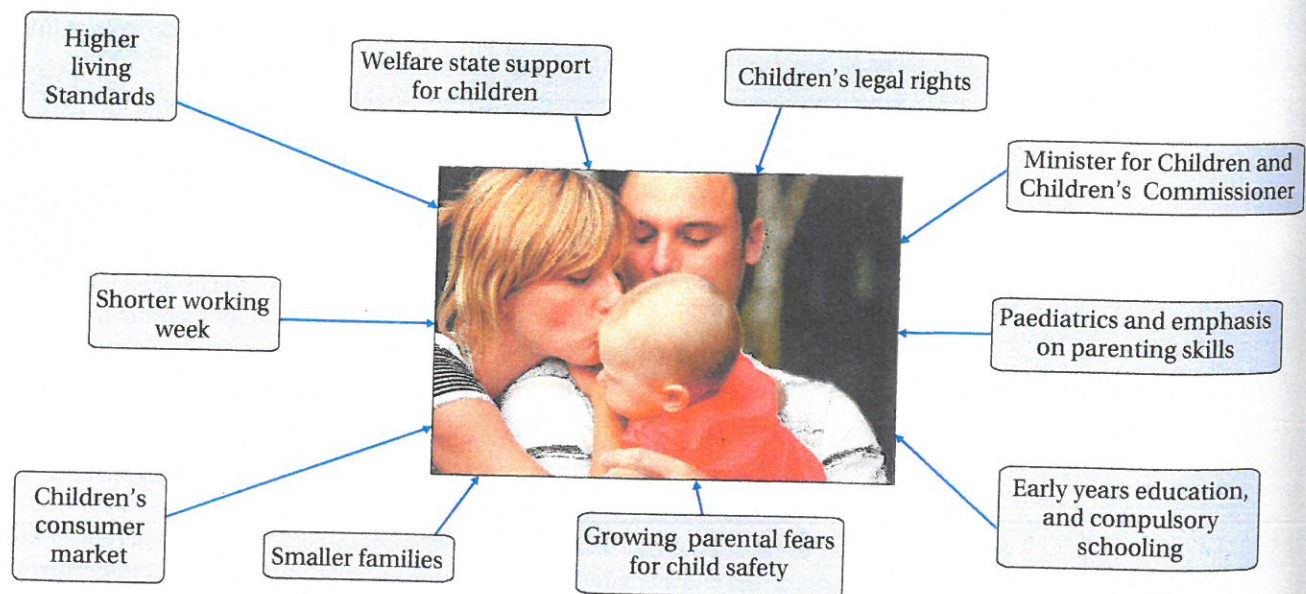


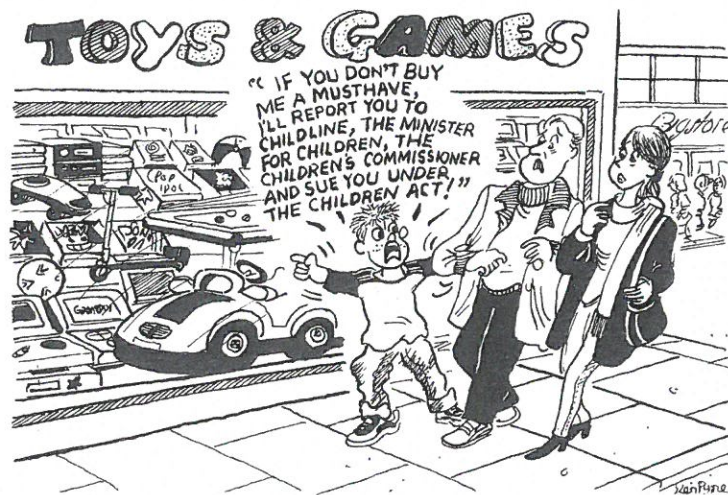
Figure 5.14
Reasons for a more child-centred society

Family life has become more child-centred over the past fifty years



THE CAUSES OF CHILD-CENTREDNESS

- Families have got smaller since the end of the nineteenth century, and this means that more individual care and attention can be devoted to each child.
- In the nineteenth century, the typical working week was between 70 and 80 hours for many working-class people. Today it is more like 43 hours (including overtime), and is tending to get shorter. This means parents have more time to spend with their children.
- Increasing affluence, with higher wages and a higher standard of living, has benefited children, as more money can be spent on them and their activities.
- The welfare state provides a wide range of benefits designed to help parents care for their children, and has increased demands on parents to look after their children properly. Social workers, for example, have an extensive range of powers to intervene in families on behalf of children, and have the ultimate power to remove children from families if parents fail to look after them properly. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) sets the international standard for protecting and promoting the rights of children, and the Children Acts of 1989 and 2004 established children's legal rights in the UK, and there is now a Minister for Children and a Children's Commissioner to champion the views of children and protect and promote their interests.
- Paediatrics, or the medical science of childhood, developed rapidly during the twentieth century, along with a wide range of research and popular books suggesting how parents should bring up their children to encourage their full development. The nurturing, protection and education of children are now seen as a vital and central part of family life, with parenting skills and early years education now recognized as an important aspect of children's educational and social development. There have been a number of TV programmes, like *Supernanny*, suggesting ways parents can avoid having, or learn to cope with, 'problem children'.
- Compulsory education and more time spent in further education and training have meant that young people are dependent on their parents for longer periods of time. Tuition fees for higher education and the abolition of student grants have recently extended this period of dependency of young people on their parents. In this respect, 'childhood', including the dependency on adults it involves, has itself become extended.
- Compulsory education from age 5 has meant that children are better educated today, and mix with and learn more from other children. This means they are probably both more knowledgeable and more assertive in their dealings with parents.
- Children's lives have become more complex, with more educational, medical and leisure services for them. This frequently involves parents in ferrying children to schools, cinemas, friends and so on.
- Parental fears (largely unjustified) of 'stranger danger' – the perception that their children are at risk of assault or abduction by unknown adults – and growing traffic dangers have meant that children now travel more with parents rather than being left to roam about on their own as much as they used to.
- Large businesses have encouraged a specific childhood consumer market. Businesses like Mothercare, ToysRUs, Nike, publishers and the music industry focus on the childhood consumer market, encouraging children to consume and parents to spend to satisfy their children's demands. Margo suggests children are taking greater control over family spending decisions, and 7- to 11-year-olds have become an increasingly lucrative target audience for advertisers eager to harness their 'pester power' – where advertisers target children to pester their parents into buying them CDs, clothes, toys, sweets and so on.



HAS THE POSITION OF CHILDREN IMPROVED OR WORSENERD?

Most people would see the lives of children in contemporary Britain as a major improvement compared to the lives of children in earlier centuries, and as better than the lives of children in many other parts of the world. The status of children in the family and society has improved substantially, and most children have better diets, better medical care, more rights, more facilities in society geared towards their needs, and are better protected and cared for, better educated, and enjoy healthier and happier lives than ever before in history. Nonetheless, children do face a number of inequalities and other problems.

Inequalities and problems of children

Child-centredness does not mean children are equal to parents, nor are they always well cared for. Children are often told by parents what they can do, when they can do it, where they can go, and what's appropriate for them at their age, including things like hairstyles, dress, wearing of jewellery and so on.

Legal controls over children Many laws restricting what children can do primarily arise from a desire to protect their overall health and safety, security and well-being, to protect them from exploitation – for example, by minimum wage regulations – and harm from child abuse and paedophilia. There are also many laws preventing children and young people from engaging in activities which they are thought not yet to be sufficiently mature or responsible to participate in. These include things such as:

- getting married (age 16 with parent/guardian consent, otherwise age 18).
- driving a car (age 17).
- voting and becoming a Member of Parliament or a local councillor (age 18).
- taking paid work: those under 14 (13 in some areas) aren't allowed to undertake paid work, except for odd jobs for a parent, relative or neighbour, babysitting, light work like a paper round, and some specially licensed sport, advertising, modelling or appearing in plays, films, television shows or other entertainment. Those under school-leaving age are not allowed to work during school hours or for more than two hours on any school day or 12 hours in any week, or before 7 a.m. or after 7 p.m.
- having sex: those under the age of 16 (the age of consent) cannot legally engage in sexual acts.
- buying some goods: shopkeepers cannot legally sell lottery tickets, aerosol paints and petrol to under-16s, or cigarettes, tobacco, solvents, lighter fuel, knives and alcohol to under-18s.
- watching or buying some films or computer games: films, DVDs, video and computer games have '12', '15' and '18' age restrictions.

Laws like these mean children have fewer legal rights than those of other ages. While they might be designed to protect children, they are at the same time a form of control over them, undermining their independence and enforcing dependence on adults.

Unhappy children Womack (2011) reports that Britain's children are said to be the unhappiest in the West. Family breakdown is a cause of considerable childhood angst, with one-third of British 16-year-olds now living apart from their biological fathers. According to an international league table compiled by UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, children growing up in the United Kingdom are more prone to bad physical and mental health, failure at school, and have the poorest relationships with their parents and friends, suffer greater deprivation, and are exposed to more risks from alcohol, drugs and unsafe sex than those in any other wealthy country in the world. Teenage pregnancy is among the highest in Europe. At some point, 10 per cent of British children develop a mental health problem and research suggests about half of adults with lifetime mental health problems first experienced difficulties in childhood.

Child poverty remains a problem in the UK, with 3.7 million children officially classified as living in poverty in 2012–13.

Margo indicates that British children spend more time in the company of peers, and less time with adults and parents, than young people in culturally similar countries, and she cites research showing many children are concerned that their parents are not there when they need them, and do not make them feel loved and cared for.

Research by Rees (2011) for the Children's Society found, in England, an estimated 9 per cent of young people aged 14–16 run away from home overnight on at least one occasion each year, and 84,000 children under the age of 16.

Such evidence suggests that the experience of family life for many children in contemporary Britain may not be a happy one, and their dependency on adults and their inability to obtain legal paid employment means they have few opportunities to escape unhappy family lives.

Neither should we assume that children themselves are the innocents they are sometimes made out to be. Figures collected from police forces in England and Wales suggest that around 3,000 crimes, including criminal damage, arson and sex offences, in which the suspects are under the age of 10 – below the age of criminal responsibility, and therefore too young to be prosecuted – are reported every year. Every year around 75,000 school-age children enter the youth justice system for various offences. Under-age drinking, drug abuse, anti-social behaviour and criminal activity are common complaints by older people about children and young people today, with parents often blamed for not socializing and supervising their children properly. Some may interpret this behaviour of children as a way for them to assert some independence from the suffocation of child-centredness which maintains their dependency on and regulation by adults, but it does nonetheless suggest that family life is not necessarily as child-centred or happy as some may believe it to be.

Internationally, the position of many children is a cause of grave concern, with reports of the sale and trafficking of children, child prostitution, child pornography, children involved in armed conflicts as soldiers and the illegal trafficking of children's organs and tissues.

Child abuse As suggested above, child-centredness doesn't mean that all children are happy, or well looked after, and they remain unequal to adults in many respects. Further evidence of this, and a consequence of their dependence on adults and lack of control over their lives, comes in the form of child abuse, which is an all-too-common experience for some children.

There are several different types of abuse of children, as figure 5.15 shows. *Sexual abuse* refers to adults using their power to perform sex acts with children below the age of consent (age 16). *Physical abuse* refers to non-sexual violence. *Emotional abuse* refers to persistent or severe emotional ill-treatment or rejection of children, which has severe effects on their emotional development and behaviour. *Neglect* refers to the failure to protect children from exposure to danger, including cold and starvation, and failing to care for them properly so that their health or development is affected.

A report in 2011 from the NSPCC (the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today*, found that around one in five children had been severely maltreated during childhood, with most of the ill-treatment committed by a parent or guardian.

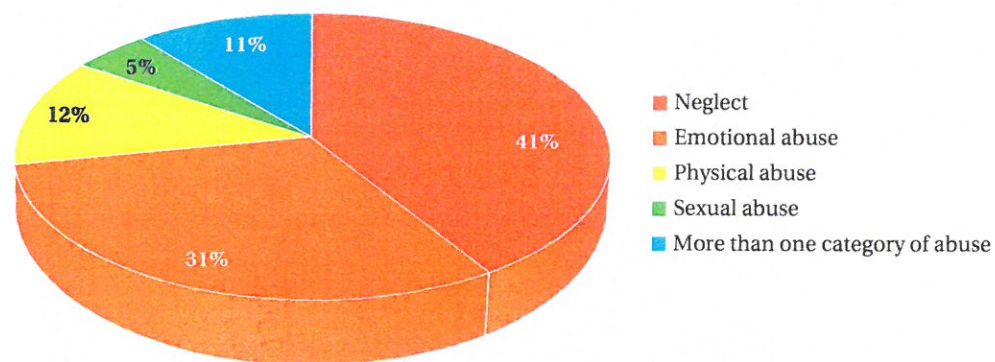


Figure 5.15 Children and young people who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan (CPP), by category of abuse: England, year ending 31 March 2013

Source: Department for Education (DfE), *Children in Need Census* (2012-13)

In 2005, the most comprehensive survey ever of teenagers and domestic abuse, conducted by the teen magazine *Sugar* in association with the NSPCC, found one-fifth of teenage girls were hit by parents – a quarter of them regularly. In 2013, statistics from the Department for Education (DfE) showed there were 43,100 children and young people under the age of 18 who were the subject of a Child Protection Plan (CPP) in England because of various forms of abuse (see figure 5.15). There were over a third of a million children registered as ‘in need’ who were at risk of not achieving or maintaining a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of local authority services, and there were nearly three-quarters of a million episodes of need referred to and assessed by local authority social care services.

These figures were just for England (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland typically add around a further 20 per cent to this number) and only for cases that came to the attention of children’s services departments. It is very likely that many children in need or experiencing abuse remain undiscovered. Some indication of this is given by statistics from ChildLine, the free confidential counselling service for children. ChildLine has helped over 3.5 million children and young people since its launch in October 1986. Physical and sexual abuse have consistently remained in the top ten concerns throughout this period, but ChildLine has also seen a large rise in children and young people contacting the service about mental wellbeing issues such as self-harm, suicide and mental health/depressive disorders in recent years.

Sibling abuse While most people think of child abuse as being committed by adults, it can also occur between brothers and sisters, and may take similar forms to that between adults, or of adults who abuse children. Sibling abuse may involve emotional, physical and sexually aggressive behaviour, like bullying, name calling, ridiculing, put-downs, hitting, slapping and punching, and unwelcome sexual touching (or worse). Womack, reporting results from the 2010 *Understanding Society* UK household longitudinal study, showed that 31 per cent of young people said they were hit, kicked or pushed by a brother or sister ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’; nearly 30 per cent of teenagers complained of being called ‘nasty names’ by brothers or sisters, while others reported having their belongings stolen by siblings. Nearly a third of children (30 per cent) with siblings were frequently bullied by their brother or sister, with 8 per cent scared of being hurt badly by him or her. Around 40 per cent of children admitted to bullying their brothers or sisters. In many families, such aggression

Sibling abuse can have serious short-term and possibly long-term psychological effects on children



between siblings is frequent and a source of great concern to parents. While most of us will probably have experienced such things as part of normal sibling rivalry, if it gets out of hand it can have very damaging consequences for the development of young people, and may even establish a pattern of abuse which resurfaces in their own adult relationships. Research by Bowes et al. (2014) revealed children who said they had been bullied by a sibling several times a week were found by the age of 18 to be twice as likely as other children to have depression, to self-harm and to suffer anxiety.

Activity

- 1 Why do you think child abuse statistics are likely to understate the extent of these social problems?
- 2 How would you define child abuse? Do you think ideas about what child abuse is have changed over time? Give reasons for your answer.
- 3 What difficulties do you think sociologists might face in trying to research the area of child abuse?
- 4 What explanations might there be for child abuse?

Is childhood disappearing?

Postman (1994), first writing in 1982, was concerned with the disappearance of childhood. He argues that the distinction between adults and children is disappearing, and that there is a merging of the taste and style of children and adults, with behaviour, language and attitudes becoming indistinguishable. Children in contemporary society are rapidly becoming exposed to a range of experiences that they share with adults, such as the globalized media, especially the internet and TV. This may be eroding the cultural divisions between childhood and adult status. In the contemporary world, children are increasingly exposed to the same issues, themes and experiences as adults, and are no longer sheltered from adult experiences and knowledge, including sex, pornography, crime, alcohol and drug abuse, and violence. Evidence for this was found in a 2007 report from the Cambridge University-based ‘Primary Review’ inquiry. This found children of primary school age expressing concern about adult-related themes like climate change, global warming and pollution, the gulf between rich and poor, terrorism, crime and street violence. A BBC News School Report survey of 11- to 16-year-olds in 2011 found they were most concerned about terrorism and climate change as threats to the world.

Cunningham (2005) argues that parental authority has been undermined by children having money from either parents (pocket money) or, for those who are older, from part-time work. The 2014 Annual Halifax Pocket Money Survey found the average child between 8 and 15 years old received pocket money of around £6.35 a week (£330 a year), and of course some will get much more than this. Average spending by children themselves (aged 7–15) in the UK in 2007–8 was £12.50 per week – a total of over £4 billion each year. Children are in most cases able to make their own decisions as to how to spend this money, reducing their dependency on parents. Margo also emphasizes that children’s access to advertising is unprecedented, and transforms them into consumers, who demand access to the adult world earlier.

Adults and children, particularly older children, lead increasingly separate lives. Silva (1996) suggests that perhaps the roles of parents may be diminishing in face of the growing importance of peers, teachers, and other influences that children are exposed to through media such as film, television, DVDs, computer games, mobiles and the internet, including chat rooms and porn sites.

Many children now have their own rooms with their own televisions, computers with internet access, and mobile phones. This means parents are no longer able to control or manage the range of information, images and values that their children are exposed to, and this reduces the opportunities for parents to socialize their children, and regulate their behaviour. The Primary Review report mentioned above confirmed this, with parents saying they had little control over such things as mobile phones and the internet, through which children had access to unsuitable or harmful material, and both teaching assistants and parents were concerned about a ‘loss of childhood’. Palmer (2007) has suggested that parents increasingly use modern technology like television, computer games,

the internet and mobile phones, together with junk food, to keep children occupied. She argues that, combined with the increasingly busy and stressed life of parents, this is depriving children of a 'proper' childhood, with quality family time, like family meals with conversation and 'proper' food. She sees the contemporary world creating what she calls 'toxic childhood syndrome', developing a toxic new generation which potentially faces a whole range of social and behavioural problems.

The rapid pace of technological and social change often means that children are more up to date than their parents. Computer technology and use of the internet are good examples of this, as children are often far more adept at using these than their parents. The BBC News School Report online survey in 2011 (www.bbc.co.uk/schoolreport) found nearly 90 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds had helped an adult in their family go online, and over half had helped with finding websites and emailing. The internet particularly gives young people access to a range of knowledge and imagery of which their parents in many cases have little awareness. This creates the possibility that young people will increasingly develop a culture that parents find goes beyond their comprehension or experience, and is far more in tune with the future than the culture of their parents. This may make parental involvement with their children's activities more difficult, and create a barrier between parents and children.

Margo suggests another indicator of a loss of childhood: that, over the past 50 years, the average age of first sexual intercourse fell from 20 for men and 21 for women in the 1950s to 16 for both by the mid-1990s. There is concern over the sexualization of childhood, with advertising and retailers encouraging children to dress and act in a sexually precocious way, and Margo points to the proliferation of sex tips for teenagers in youth magazines and health and beauty spas for young girls as evidence that children are exposed to, and expected to navigate, adult concerns at ever younger ages.

Practice questions

- 1 Define the term 'social construction'. **(2 marks)**
- 2 Using **one** example, briefly explain how there may be a 'loss of childhood' in contemporary Britain. **(2 marks)**
- 3 Outline **three** reasons why children have less power in society than adults. **(6 marks)**
- 4 Outline **three** reasons why the experience of childhood may differ between children in contemporary British society. **(6 marks)**
- 5 Outline and explain **two** changes in society which may be reducing the distinction between 'childhood' and 'adulthood'. **(10 marks)**
- 6 Read **Item B** below and answer the question that follows.

Item B

Some sociologists suggest that contemporary families have become more child-centred than in the past. Parents today spend much more time with their children, and spend a great deal of money to ensure they give their children the most fulfilling upbringing possible. Many parents want their children to have opportunities that they never had themselves as children. Critics of this point to children's lack of control over their lives, child abuse and other problems that children today may face.

Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, evaluate the view that contemporary families have become more child-centred. **(20 marks)**

Topic 5

SPECIFICATION AREA

Demographic trends in the UK since 1900; birth rates, death rates, family size, life expectancy, ageing population, and migration and globalisation

Demographic change

In order for a government to plan its policies with regard to social policy, the allocation of scarce resources, land, housing, education and finance, it is necessary to have accurate information and estimates of future trends in population size and distribution. It is important to know whether the population is increasing or decreasing, what typical family size might be in the future, whether more people are living alone, and what proportion of the population will be at school, working (or possibly unemployed) and retired in fifteen or twenty years' time. Such information will influence, for example, the number of schools and hospitals, and the number and sizes of houses that will need to be built, the number of teachers, doctors and nurses to be trained, the number of jobs that will be required, and the number of welfare benefits to be paid out. These changes cannot be made overnight, and so governments need this information to plan for the future.

Demography is the term used for the study of population. Information on population is obtained from a wide variety of sources, such as the compulsory registration of births, marriages and deaths, and national surveys like the Office for National Statistics Labour Force Survey and the General Lifestyle Survey. A main source is the census, which has been carried out every ten years since 1801, with the exception of 1941, when the Second World War made it impractical to hold one. The last census was in March 2011.

There are four main factors that influence the size of a country's population:

- births
- deaths
- **immigration**: the number of people *entering* the UK for a period of at least a year, so that the UK effectively becomes their country of usual residence
- **emigration**: the number *leaving* the UK for a period of at least a year, so that their country of destination effectively becomes their country of usual residence

SOME KEY TERMS IN DEMOGRAPHY

You should learn these definitions.

Birth rate – the number of live births per 1,000 of the population each year.

The **fertility rate** – a general term which is used to describe either the general fertility rate or the total fertility rate.

General fertility rate – the number of live births per 1,000 women of child-bearing age (15–44) per year.

The **total fertility rate (TFR)** is the average number of children women will have during their child-bearing years. The number of births in any society depends on both the fertility rates of women (how many children they have) and the numbers of women of child-bearing age.

Demography – the term used for the study of the characteristics of human populations, such as their size and structure and how these change over time.