

TOPIC 2



Child soldiers

GETTING STARTED

In pairs, complete the following:

- 1 What stereotypes of childhood does the picture challenge?
- 2 List five words that you would associate with childhood in the UK.
- 3 Find out the age at which you are permitted to do the following in the UK:

a serve in the army	e drive a car
b smoke	f leave education
c get married	g vote in an election
d have sexual intercourse	h drink alcohol at home.
- 4 Compare your answers to questions 1 to 3 with the rest of the class.
- 5 Why do you think sociologists argue that childhood is not a fixed biological stage?

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Understand why sociologists see childhood as a social construction.
- Know the reasons for the emergence of the modern notion of childhood.
- Be able to analyse and evaluate different views of the position of children today.
- Be able to analyse and evaluate different views of the future of childhood.

CHILDHOOD

Sociologists are interested in how the status of different family members has changed over time. For example, as we saw in Topic 1, there have been debates about whether couples have become more equal today than in the past.

In this Topic, we look at changes in childhood and the position of children in the family and society, as well as the factors responsible for these changes.

We examine three major issues:

- How childhood is socially constructed; that is, how it is created and defined by society.
- Is the position of children better today than it was in the past?
- What is the future of childhood likely to be?

Childhood as a social construct

Sociologists see childhood as socially constructed; in other words, as something created and defined by society. They argue that what people mean by childhood, and the position that children occupy in society, is not fixed but differs between different times, places and cultures. We can see this by comparing the western idea of childhood today with childhood in the past and in other societies.

However, this view of childhood as a separate age-status is not found in all societies. It is not universal. As Stephen Wagg (1992) puts it:

'Childhood is socially constructed. It is, in other words, what members of particular societies, at particular times and in particular places, say it is. There is no single universal childhood, experienced by all. So, childhood isn't "natural" and should be distinguished from mere biological immaturity.'

The modern western notion of childhood

It is generally accepted in our society today that childhood is a special time of life and that children are fundamentally different from adults. They are regarded as physically and psychologically immature and not yet competent to run their own lives. There is a belief that children's lack of skills, knowledge and experience means that they need a lengthy, protected period of nurturing and socialisation before they are ready for adult society and its responsibilities.

As Jane Pilcher (1995) notes, the most important feature of the modern idea of childhood is separateness. Childhood is seen as a clear and distinct life stage, and children in our society occupy a separate status from adults.

This is emphasised in several ways, for instance through laws regulating what children are allowed, required or forbidden to do. Their difference from adults is also emphasised through differences in dress, especially for younger children, and through products and services specially for children, such as toys, food, books, entertainments, play areas and so on.

Related to the separateness of children's status is the idea of childhood as a 'golden age' of happiness and innocence. However, this innocence means that children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection from the dangers of the adult world and so they must be kept 'quarantined' and separated from it. As a result, children's lives are lived largely in the sphere of the family and education, where adults provide for them and protect them from the outside world. Similarly, unlike adults, they lead lives of leisure and play and are largely excluded from paid work.

This means that, while all humans go through the same stages of physical development, different cultures construct or define this process differently.

In western cultures today, children are defined as vulnerable and unable to fend for themselves. However, other cultures do not necessarily see such a great difference between children and adults. We can see this by looking at examples both from other cultures today and from European societies of the past.

Application

- 1 Explain what is meant by the phrase 'childhood is a social construct'.
- 2 Suggest three ways in which children in our society occupy a separate status from adults.

Cross-cultural differences in childhood

A good way to illustrate the social construction of childhood is to take a comparative approach – that is, to look at how children are seen and treated in other times and places than our own. The anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1934) argues that children in simpler, non-industrial societies are generally treated differently from their modern western counterparts in three ways:

- **They take responsibility at an early age.** For example, Samantha Punch's (2001) study of childhood in rural

Bolivia found that, once children are about five years old, they are expected to take work responsibilities in the home and in the community. Tasks are taken on without question or hesitation.

Similarly, Lowell Holmes' (1974) study of a Samoan village found that 'too young' was never given as a reason for not permitting a child to undertake a particular task: 'Whether it be the handling of dangerous tools or the carrying of extremely heavy loads, if a child thinks he can handle the activity, parents do not object'.

- **Less value is placed on children showing obedience to adult authority.** For example, Raymond Firth (1970) found that among the Tikopia of the western Pacific, doing as you are told by a grown-up is regarded as a concession to be granted by the child, not a right to be expected by the adult.
- **Children's sexual behaviour is often viewed differently.** For example, among the Trobriand Islanders of the south-west Pacific, Bronislaw Malinowski (1957) found that adults took an attitude of 'tolerance and amused interest' towards children's sexual explorations and activities.

Benedict argues that in many non-industrial cultures, there is much less of a dividing line between the behaviour expected of children and that expected of adults. Such evidence illustrates the key idea that childhood is not a fixed thing found universally in the same form in all human societies, but is socially constructed and so differs from culture to culture.

The globalisation of western childhood

Some sociologists argue that western notions of childhood are being globalised. International humanitarian and welfare agencies have exported and imposed on the rest of the world, western norms of what childhood should be – a separate life stage, based in the nuclear family and school, in which children are innocent, dependent and vulnerable, and have no economic role.

For example, campaigns against child labour, or concerns about 'street children' in developing countries, reflect western views about how childhood 'ought' to be – whereas in fact, such activity by children may be the norm for the culture and an important preparation for adult life. In this view, western-style 'childhood' is spreading throughout the world. However, arguably such campaigns have little impact on the position of children in developing countries.

Historical differences in childhood

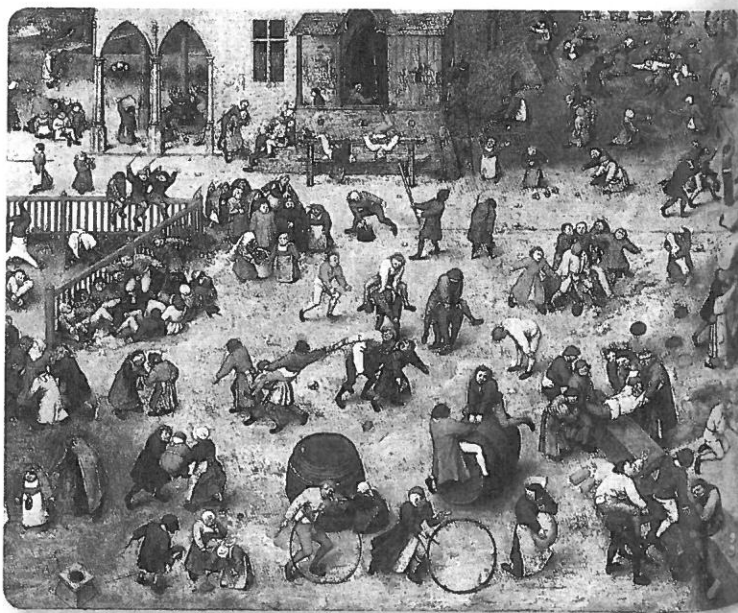
The position of children differs over time as well as between societies. Many sociologists and historians argue that childhood as we understand it today is a relatively recent 'invention'.

The historian Philippe Ariès (1960) argues that in the Middle Ages (from about the 10th to the 13th centuries), 'the idea of childhood did not exist'. Children were not seen as having a different 'nature' or needs from adults – at least, not once they had passed the stage of physical dependency during infancy.

In the Middle Ages, childhood as a separate age-stage was short. Soon after being weaned, the child entered wider society on much the same terms as an adult, beginning work from an early age, often in the household of another family. Children were in effect 'mini-adults' with the same rights, duties and skills as adults. For example, the law often made no distinction between children and adults, and children often faced the same severe punishments as those meted out to adults.

As evidence of his view, Ariès uses works of art from the period. In these, children appear without 'any of the characteristics of childhood: they have simply been depicted on a smaller scale'. The paintings show children and adults dressed in the same clothing and working and playing together.

Parental attitudes towards children in the Middle Ages were also very different from those today. Edward Shorter (1975) argues that high death rates encouraged indifference and neglect, especially towards infants. For example, it was not uncommon for parents to give a newborn baby the name of a recently dead sibling, to refer to the baby as 'it', or to forget how many children they had had.



▲ Adults and children are barely distinguishable from each other in Bruegel the Younger's famous 16th century painting.

The modern cult of childhood

According to Ariès, however, elements of the modern notion of childhood gradually began to emerge from the 13th century onwards:

- Schools (which previously adults had also attended) came to specialise purely in the education of the young. This reflected the influence of the church, which increasingly saw children as fragile 'creatures of God' in need of discipline and protection from worldly evils.
- There was a growing distinction between children's and adults' clothing. By the 17th century, an upper-class boy would be dressed in 'an outfit reserved for his own age group, which set him apart from adults'.
- By the 18th century, handbooks on childrearing were widely available – a sign of the growing child-centredness of family life, at least among the middle classes.

According to Ariès, these developments culminate in the modern 'cult of childhood'. He argues that we have moved from a world that did not see childhood as in any way special, to a world that is obsessed with childhood. He describes the 20th century as 'the century of the child'.

Some sociologists have criticised Ariès for arguing that childhood did not exist in the past. Linda Pollock (1983) argues that it is more correct to say that in the Middle Ages, society simply had a different notion of childhood from today's.

However, Ariès' work is valuable because it shows that childhood is socially constructed: he demonstrates how ideas about children and their social status have varied over time.

Analysis and Evaluation

What problems might there be in using evidence such as paintings and diaries, as Ariès does, to understand childhood or family life in the past?

Reasons for changes in the position of children

There are many reasons for the changes in the position of children. These include the following changes during the 19th and 20th centuries:

- **Laws restricting child labour and excluding children from paid work.** From being economic assets who

could earn a wage, children became an economic liability, financially dependent on their parents.

- **The introduction of compulsory schooling in 1880** had a similar effect, especially for the children of the poor (middle- and upper-class children were already receiving education). The raising of the school-leaving age has extended this period of dependency.
- **Child protection and welfare legislation**, such as the 1889 Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act. Exactly a century later, the 1989 Children Act made the welfare of the child the fundamental principle underpinning the work of agencies such as social services.
- **The growth of the idea of children's rights** For example, the Children Act defines parents as having 'responsibilities' rather than 'rights' in relation to children, while the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) lays down basic rights such as entitlement to healthcare and education, protection from abuse and the right to participate in decisions that affect them, such as custody cases.
- **Declining family size and lower infant mortality rates** have encouraged parents to make a greater financial and emotional investment in the fewer children that they now have.
- **Children's development became the subject of medical knowledge.** Jacques Donzelot (1977) observes how theories of child development that began to appear from the 19th century stressed that children need supervision and protection.
- **Laws and policies that apply specifically to children**, such as minimum ages for a wide range of activities, from sex to smoking, have reinforced the idea that children are different from adults and so different rules must be applied to their behaviour.

Industrialisation Most sociologists agree that the process of industrialisation – the shift from agriculture to factory production as the basis of the economy – underlies many of the above changes. For example, modern industry needs an educated workforce and this requires compulsory schooling of the young.

Similarly, the higher standards of living and better welfare provision that industry makes possible lead to lower infant mortality rates. Industrialisation is thus a key factor in bringing about the modern idea of childhood and the changed status of children.

The future of childhood

So far, we have looked at how childhood has changed and developed from pre-industrial to modern society. But if childhood is socially constructed, we can expect it to

continue to change in the future as society itself changes, for example from modern to postmodern society.

Activity Webquest

Child labour laws around the world

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



The disappearance of childhood

One influential view of the future of childhood is put forward by Neil Postman (1994). Postman argues that childhood is 'disappearing at a dazzling speed'. He points to the trend towards giving children the same rights as adults, the disappearance of children's traditional unsupervised games, the growing similarity of adults' and children's clothing, and even to cases of children committing 'adult' crimes such as murder.

In Postman's view, the cause first of the emergence of childhood, and now its disappearance, lies in the rise and fall of print culture and its replacement by television culture.

During the Middle Ages, most people were illiterate, and speech was the only skill needed for participation in the adult world. Children were able to enter adult society from an early age. Childhood was not associated with innocence, nor the adult world with mystery. There was no division between the world of the adult and that of the child.

the information hierarchy

Postman argues that childhood emerged as a separate status along with mass literacy, from the 19th century on. This is because the printed word creates an information hierarchy: a sharp division between adults, who can read, and children, who cannot.

This gave adults the power to keep knowledge about sex, money, violence, illness, death and other 'adult' matters a secret from children. These things became mysteries to them, and childhood came to be associated with innocence and ignorance.

However, television blurs the distinction between childhood and adulthood by destroying the information hierarchy. Unlike the printed word, TV does not require special skills to access it, and it makes information available to adults and children alike. The boundary between adult and child is broken down, adult authority diminishes, and the ignorance and innocence of childhood is replaced by knowledge and cynicism.

The counterpart of the disappearance of childhood is the disappearance of adulthood, where adults' and children's tastes and styles become indistinguishable.

Application

Suggest three ways in which children's and adults' leisure, dress and food are now similar.

evaluation

Unlike Postman, Iona Opie (1993) argues that childhood is not disappearing. Based on a lifetime of research into children's unsupervised games, rhymes and songs,

conducted with her husband Peter Opie, she argues that there is strong evidence of the continued existence of a separate children's culture over many years.

Postman's study is valuable in showing how different types of communication technology, such as print and television, can influence the way in which childhood is constructed. However, he over-emphasises a single cause – television – at the expense of other factors that have influenced the development of childhood.

Childhood in postmodernity

Unlike Postman, Christopher Jenks (2005) does not believe childhood is disappearing, but he does believe it is changing.

Jenks agrees with Ariès that childhood was a creation of modern society. For Jenks, modern society (especially the 20th century) was concerned with 'futuraity' and childhood was seen as a preparation for the individual to become a productive adult in the future. To achieve this, the vulnerable, undeveloped child needed to be nurtured, protected and controlled, especially by the 'child-centred' family and by the education system, which imposed discipline and conformity on children.

Now, however, Jenks argues, childhood is once again undergoing change as society moves from modernity to postmodernity. In modern society, adults' relationships were more stable, but in postmodern society, the pace of change speeds up and relationships become more unstable. For example, divorce becomes much more common.

This generates feelings of insecurity. In this context, relationships with their children become more important as a source of adults' identity and stability. While your marriage may end in divorce, you are still the parent of your child.

In postmodern society, relationships with their children thus become adults' last refuge from the constant uncertainty and upheaval of life. As a result, adults become even more fearful for their children's security and even more preoccupied with protecting them from perceived dangers such as child abuse.

This further strengthens the prevailing view of children as vulnerable and in need of protection that we have already seen in the modern notion of childhood, resulting in even greater surveillance and regulation of children's lives.

For this reason, Jenks does not agree with Postman that we are seeing the disappearance of childhood. Childhood continues to be a separate status, and the legal and other restrictions placed on what children can do continues to mark them off from adults.

evaluation

Evidence both for and against Jenks is limited. There is some evidence that parents see their relationship with their

children as more important than that with their partners, and that parents are very concerned about the risks they believe their children face. However, the evidence comes from small, unrepresentative studies.

Jenks is guilty of over-generalising. Despite the greater diversity of family and childhood patterns found today (such as lone-parent families, stepfamilies etc), he makes rather

sweeping statements that imply that all children are in the same position.

Activity Media

The accordion family

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Has the position of children improved?

As we have seen, childhood is socially constructed and varies between times, places and cultures. There are important differences between childhood in western societies today as compared with both present-day developing countries and European societies in the past. For example, in the Middle Ages, child labour was a basic fact of life for almost all children, while schooling was available only to the wealthy.

The march of progress view

These differences raise the question of whether the changes in the status of childhood that we looked at earlier represent an improvement. The march of progress view argues that, over the past few centuries, the position of children in western societies has been steadily improving and today is better than it has ever been. This view paints a dark picture of the past. As Lloyd De Mause (1974) puts it:

'The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken. The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of childcare, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and sexually abused.'

Writers such as Ariès and Shorter hold a march of progress view. They argue that today's children are more valued, better cared for, protected and educated, enjoy better health and have more rights than those of previous generations.

For example, children today are protected from harm and exploitation by laws against child abuse and child labour, while an array of professionals and specialists caters for their educational, psychological and medical needs. The government spends huge sums on their education.

Better healthcare and higher standards of living also mean that babies have a much better chance of survival now than a century ago. In 1900, the infant mortality rate was 154 per 1,000 live births; today, it is 4 per 1,000.

the child-centred family

Higher living standards and smaller family sizes (down from 5.7 births per woman in the 1860s to 1.83 in 2014) also

mean that parents can afford to provide for children's needs properly. According to one estimate, by the time a child reaches their 21st birthday, they will have cost their parents over £227,000.

March of progress sociologists argue that the family has become child-centred. Children are no longer to be 'seen and not heard', as they were in Victorian times. Instead they are now the focal point of the family, consulted on many decisions as never before. Parents invest a great deal in their children emotionally as well as financially, and often have high aspirations for them to have a better life and greater opportunities than they themselves have had.

Furthermore, it is not just the family that is now child-centred; so is society as a whole. For example, much media output and many leisure activities are designed specifically for children.

Activity Webquest

The cost of child-centredness

...go to www.sociology.uk.net

toxic childhood

As against the view that the position of children now is better than it has ever been, some writers suggest that children in the UK today are experiencing what Sue Palmer (2007; 2010) calls 'toxic childhood'. She argues that rapid technological and cultural changes in the past 25 years have damaged children's physical, emotional and intellectual development. These changes range from junk food, computer games, and intensive marketing to children, to the long hours worked by parents and the growing emphasis on testing in education.

Concerns have also been expressed about young people's health and behaviour. For example, UK youth have above average rates in international league tables for obesity, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, early sexual experience and teenage pregnancies. A UNICEF survey in 2013 ranked the UK 16th out of 29 for children's well being.

The conflict view

The march of progress view is that the position of children has improved dramatically in a relatively short period of time. However, conflict sociologists such as Marxists and feminists dispute this. They argue that society is based on a conflict between different social groups such as social classes or genders. In this conflict, some groups have more power, status or wealth than others. Conflict sociologists see the relationship between groups as one of domination and subordination, in which the dominant group act as oppressors.

Conflict sociologists argue that the march of progress view of modern childhood is based on a false and idealised image that ignores important inequalities. They criticise the march of progress view on two grounds:

- There are inequalities *among children* in terms of the opportunities and risks they face: many today remain unprotected and badly cared for.
- The inequalities *between children and adults* are greater than ever: children today experience greater control, oppression and dependency, not greater care and protection.

Inequalities among children

Not all children share the same status or experiences. For example, children of different *nationalities* are likely to experience different childhoods and different life chances. 90% of the world's low birth-weight babies are born in developing countries.

There are also *gender* differences between children. For example, according to Mayer Hillman (1993), boys are more likely to be allowed to cross or cycle on roads, use buses, and go out after dark unaccompanied. Jens Bonke (1999) found that girls do more domestic labour – especially in lone-parent families, where they do five times more housework than boys.

Table 4C Children who were the subject of a child protection plan at 31 March 2013: England

Type of abuse	numbers
Neglect	17,930
Physical abuse	4,670
Sexual abuse	2,030
Emotional abuse	13,640
Multiple abuse	4,870

Source: DFE (2013)

Analysis and Evaluation

- 1 What difficulties might there be in defining emotional abuse?
- 2 Suggest reasons why these statistics might not be an accurate measure of the true extent of child abuse.

Similarly, there are *ethnic* differences: Julia Brannen's (1994) study of 15-16 year olds found that Asian parents were more likely than other parents to be strict towards their daughters. Similarly, Ghazala Bhatti (1999) found that ideas of *izzat* (family honour) could be a restriction, particularly on the behaviour of girls.

There are also important *class* inequalities between children:

- Poor mothers are more likely to have low birth-weight babies, which in turn is linked to delayed physical and intellectual development.
- Children of unskilled manual workers are over three times more likely to suffer from hyperactivity and four times more likely to experience conduct disorders than the children of professionals.
- Children born into poor families are also more likely to die in infancy or childhood, to suffer longstanding illness, to be shorter in height, to fall behind at school, and to be placed on the child protection register.

Thus we cannot speak of 'children' in general as if they were all equal – social class, gender and ethnic differences affect their life chances.

Inequalities between children and adults

There are also major inequalities of power between children and adults. March of progress writers argue that adults use this power for the benefit and protection of children, for example by passing laws against child labour.

However, critics such as Shulamith Firestone (1979) and John Holt (1974) argue that many of the things that march of progress writers see as care and protection are in fact just new forms of oppression and control. For example, Firestone argues that 'protection' from paid work is not a benefit to children but a form of inequality. It is a way of forcibly segregating children, making them more dependent, powerless and subject to adult control than previously.

These critics see the need to free children from adult control, and so their view is described as 'child liberationism'. Adult control takes a number of forms.

neglect and abuse

Adult control over children can take the extreme form of physical neglect or physical, sexual or emotional abuse. In 2013, 43,000 children were subject to child protection plans because they were deemed to be at risk of significant harm – most often from their own parents (see Table 4C). The charity ChildLine receives over 20,000 calls a year from children saying that they have been sexually or physically abused. Such figures indicate a 'dark side' to family life of which children are the victims.

controls over children's space

Children's movements in industrial societies such as Britain are highly regulated. For example, shops may display



▲ Constant supervision?

signs such as 'no schoolchildren'. Children are told to play in some areas and forbidden to play in others. There is increasingly close surveillance over children in public spaces such as shopping centres, especially at times when they should be in school.

Similarly, fears about road safety and 'stranger danger' have led to more and more children being driven to school rather than travelling independently. For example, in 1971, 86% of primary school children were allowed to travel home from school alone. By 2010, this had fallen to 25%. According to Hugh Cunningham (2007), the 'home habitat' of 8 year olds (the area in which they are able to travel alone) has shrunk to one-ninth of the size it was 25 years earlier.

This control and surveillance contrasts with the independence of many children in developing countries today. For example, Cindi Katz (2004) describes how rural Sudanese children roam freely both within the village and for several kilometres outside it.

controls over children's time

Adults in modern society control children's daily routines, including the times when they get up, eat, go to school, come home, go out, play, watch television and sleep. Adults also control the speed at which children 'grow up'. It is they who define whether a child is too old or too young for this or that activity, responsibility or behaviour. This contrasts with Holmes' finding that among Samoans, 'too young' is never given as a reason for not letting a child undertake a particular task.

controls over children's bodies

Adults exercise enormous control over children's bodies, including how they sit, walk and run, what they wear (sun hats, make-up, glasses), their hairstyles and whether or not they can have their ears pierced. It is taken for granted that children's bodies may be touched (in certain ways by certain adults): they are washed, fed and dressed, have their heads patted and hands held, are picked up, cuddled and kissed, and they may be disciplined by smacking.

At the same time, adults restrict the ways in which children may touch their own bodies. For example, a child may be told not to pick their nose, suck their thumb or play with their genitals. This contrasts with the sexual freedoms enjoyed by children in some non-industrial cultures such as the Trobriand Islands.

control over children's access to resources

In industrial societies, children have only limited opportunities to earn money, and so they remain dependent economically on adults:

- Labour laws and compulsory schooling exclude them from all but the most marginal, low-paid, part-time employment.
- Although the state pays child benefit, this goes to the parent not the child.
- Pocket money given by parents may depend on 'good behaviour' and there may be restrictions on what it can be spent on.

All this contrasts with the economic role of children in developing societies today and in European societies in the past. For example, Katz found that Sudanese children were already engaged in productive work from the age of three or four.

Age patriarchy

Diana Gittins (1998) uses the term 'age patriarchy' to describe inequalities between adults and children. Just as feminists use the concept of patriarchy to describe male domination and female dependency, Gittins argues that there is also an age patriarchy of adult domination and child dependency. In fact, patriarchy means literally 'rule by the father' and as Gittins points out, the term 'family' referred originally to the power of the male head over all other members of the household, including children and servants as well as women.

Today this power may still assert itself in the form of violence against both children and women. For example, according to Cathy Humphreys and Ravi Thiara (2002), a quarter of the 200 women in their study left their abusing partner because they feared for their children's lives. (See Topic 1 for more about domestic violence.) Such findings support Gittins' view that patriarchy oppresses children as well as women.

Evidence that children may experience childhood as oppressive comes from the strategies that they use to resist the status of child and the restrictions that go with it. Jennifer Hockey and Allison James (1993) describe one strategy as 'acting up' – acting like adults by doing things that children are not supposed to do, such as swearing, smoking, drinking alcohol, joy riding and under-age sexual activity. Similarly, children may exaggerate their age ('I'm nearly 9').

'Acting down' – behaving in ways expected of younger children – is also a popular strategy for resisting adult control (e.g. by reverting to 'baby talk' or insisting on being carried). Hockey and James conclude that modern childhood is a status from which most children want to escape.

However, critics of the child liberationist view argue that some adult control over children's lives is justified on the grounds that children cannot make rational decisions and so are unable to safeguard their interests themselves.

Critics also argue that, although children remain under adult supervision, they are not as powerless as the child liberationists claim. For example, as we saw earlier, the 1989 Children Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child establish the principle that children have legal rights to be protected and consulted.

Activity Discussion

Has the position of children improved?

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



The 'new sociology of childhood'

The views we have examined so far see childhood as socially constructed; that is, shaped by social processes such as industrialisation, laws and government policies, and institutions such as the family and education system.

While this helps us to understand how childhood changes over time, there is a danger of seeing children as merely passive objects who have no part in making their own childhoods. It risks seeing children from what Berry Mayall (2004) calls an 'adultist' viewpoint. That is, it may see children as mere 'socialisation projects' for adults to mould, shape and develop, of no interest in themselves, but only for what they will become in the future.

A different view is taken by the 'new sociology of childhood'. This approach doesn't see children as simply 'adults in the making'. Instead, it sees children as active agents who play a major part in creating their own childhoods.

the child's point of view

For this reason, as Carol Smart (2011) says, the new approach aims to include the views and experiences of children themselves while they are living through childhood. As Mayall says, we need to focus on 'the present tense of childhood' to study ordinary everyday life from the child's perspective.

For example, Jennifer Mason and Becky Tipper (2008) show how children actively create their own definitions of who is 'family' – which may include people who are not 'proper' aunts or grandfathers etc, but who they regard as 'close'.

Similarly, Smart et al's (2001) study of divorce found that, far from being passive victims, children were actively involved in trying to make the situation better for everyone.

Studies like these use research methods such as informal, unstructured interviews, which empower children to express their own views and allow researchers to see the world from the child's point of view.

This enables sociologists to explore the diverse, multiple childhoods that exist even within a single society. For example, as Smart notes, there are 'disabled childhoods, Chinese childhoods, girls' childhoods, the childhoods of adopted children, poor childhoods and so on'.

Because it allows children to express their point of view, the new sociology of childhood also draws attention to the fact that children often lack power in relation to adults. As such, it is an approach favoured by child liberationists who campaign in favour of children's rights and priorities.

Topic summary

Childhood is a **social construction** and varies between times, places and groups. Most sociologists see our idea of childhood as a fairly recent one, the result of **industrialisation** and other social changes. Modern society constructs childhood as a time of **vulnerability, innocence and segregation** from the adult world. Some argue that we are witnessing the **disappearance of childhood** as the media erode the boundary between childhood and adulthood. In **postmodernity**, adult surveillance and control increase.

'**March of progress**' sociologists believe we live in an increasingly **child-centred society**. They state that children have never had it so good. Critics argue that this ignores the continued existence of child poverty, abuse and exploitation.

Child liberationists argue that children in modern western society are victims of **age patriarchy** and are subject to adult control. The **new sociology of childhood** argues that we must take the perspective of the child.

EXAMINING CHILDHOOD

QuickCheck Questions

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net

- 1 Suggest three ways in which childhood in non-industrial cultures often differs from childhood in the west.
- 2 Give two examples of parental neglect or indifference towards children in the Middle Ages.
- 3 Why does Jenks think parents have become more fearful for their children's security?
- 4 Why are children less of an economic asset to their parents today than they were in the past?
- 5 Give one example of class differences between children.
- 6 What is age patriarchy?
- 7 Give one disadvantage of seeing childhood from an 'adultist' viewpoint.

Questions to try

Whether or not you are taking the AS exams during your A level course, answering the AS questions below is a very good way of testing your knowledge and understanding and practising your skills in preparation for your A level exams.

Item A According to some sociologists, children in today's supposedly child-centred society lead lives that are segregated and controlled, but childhood was not always like this. Ariès describes a medieval world where there was little distinction between children and adults in either work or leisure. According to this view, industrial society brought major changes. Children's lives became increasingly confined and regulated by adults. Not all sociologists share this view. Some argue that the distinction between childhood and adulthood is again becoming blurred.

Item B A popular view is that childhood is a fixed, universal, biological stage of physical and psychological immaturity that is common to all human beings. Everyone will pass through it on the way to biological maturity and adulthood. However, evidence shows that what counts as childhood, what experiences children undergo and what roles they play, are far from universal.

AS questions

- 1 Define the term 'child-centred society'. (2 marks)
- 2 Using one example, explain how the difference between adulthood and childhood may be becoming less clear. (2 marks)
- 3 Outline three ways in which adults control children's time, space or bodies. (6 marks)

AS and A level question

- 4 Applying material from Item A and your knowledge, evaluate sociological explanations of changes in the status of childhood. (20 marks)

A level question

- 5 Applying material from Item B, analyse two arguments against the view that childhood is a fixed, universal stage. (10 marks)

The Examiner's Advice

Q4 Spend about 30 minutes on this. Explain the concept of social construction and apply historical examples of how childhood varies. Develop points from Item A, e.g. on children in medieval society and the emergence of the modern notion of childhood as segregated, innocent etc. Discuss industrialisation, child protection legislation, schooling, literacy etc. Consider whether childhood is now changing again, e.g. the blurring of the distinction between children and adults. Use these and other key concepts and issues such as age patriarchy, the role of the media, toxic childhood etc. Use evidence from studies such as Ariès, Shorter, Postman, De Mause, Gittins, Hockey and James, Mayall, Palmer etc. Evaluate by considering debates between march of progress and child liberationist views on the status of children today, whether childhood is disappearing etc.

Q5 Spend about 15 minutes on this. Divide your time fairly equally between the two arguments. You don't need a separate introduction; just start on your first argument. To answer this question, it's essential that you take two points from the Item and show through a chain of reasoning (see page 248) how each demonstrates that childhood is not a fixed, universal stage. (It is a very good idea to quote from the Item when doing so.) You could use changes over time, cross-cultural differences, or differences within the same society. For example, compulsory education changed children's status by removing them from the workforce. This meant they became economically dependent on adults. Use concepts such as social construction, industrialisation, legislation, work, literacy, the media etc. Include some brief evaluation, e.g. that all societies distinguish between children and adults.