

Examine reasons for changes in the position of children in society and in the family.

Sociologists have identified a number of changes in the position of children in the family and society. Most sociologists agree that childhood is socially constructed. Although being a child is a biological state, the meanings given to being young vary from society to society. Sociologists largely agree about the type of changes that have taken place in the position of children in the family and in society, but they have put forward a variety of reasons for these changes.

Philippe Ariès argues that in pre-industrial societies there was little difference between childhood and adulthood. Children were treated as little adults and were expected to take part in adult activities as soon as they were capable of doing so. Children dressed similarly to adults and there were few specialist children's toys and games. There was little sentimentality about children and families were not at all child-centred. Children were subject to harsh discipline and families did not see the welfare of children in the family as a primary concern.

Ariès argues that by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries modern ideas of childhood were emerging. Childhood was now regarded as a distinct phase of life, with children separated from the adult social world and families becoming more child-centred and more concerned with the welfare of children rather than with disciplining them. Ariès believes that this change was the result of changing religious attitudes (which thought that children needed nurturing to become religious) and the development of education. Prolonged the period when children were separated from the adult world and, as a result, the idea of childhood innocence developed. Another factor was declining infant mortality and fertility. Women had fewer children but expected them to survive, meaning that it was more worthwhile to invest time and emotional commitment in the smaller number of children they had. This led to a more child-centred family. Ariès believes that in the twentieth century the development of specialist sciences like psychology and pediatrics have further encouraged families to prioritise the physical and psychological well-being of children.

Other sociologists accept Ariès's description of the changes, but disagree about the reasons. Edward Shorster believes that the development of romantic love led to an idealized image of children as innocent (the Apollonian image of the child). As a result mothers developed a sacrificial role in families - the interests of children came before their own.

Fostman sees the development of the printing press as more important. Because reading is a skill that develops over a long period, and literacy is an important part of being an adult, childhood became extended as a preparation for adulthood. Jane Pilcher emphasizes the importance of employment legislation which banned children first from work and later from other forms of employment.

In reality, all the above changes have probably contributed to the development of modern childhood rather than one single factor being of primary importance.

Some sociologists believe that the role of children in the family and in society is changing again as we enter postmodernity. Neil Fostman argues that the distinction between adulthood and childhood is breaking down. Children are growing up quicker because they are increasingly exposed to adult knowledge, with easy access to adult media content. As a consequence, children engage in adult activities (for example: drink, drugs and sex) at a younger age. However, this view can be exaggerated. In some ways, children stay dependent on families longer than ever before. The school leaving age has been raised several times, and more children stay on to higher education than in the past. Rather than becoming independent adults at a young age, children may be experiencing an extended adolescence where they are neither children nor adults but remain partially dependent on parents/guardians.

A problem with all the theories, however, is that they assume that all children have the same position in society and the family. In reality, the position of children varies considerably from family to family, and in different ethnic, class and religious groups. For example, in Britain some Asian families place more emphasis on the maintenance of family honour than other families, so the duties of children towards the family are stressed as much as the duties of parents to children.