When childhood is believed to begin and end varies from culture to culture, across time, and between institutions within every society. For example, at what age can children legally work for pay? When can a young person legally consent to have sexual relations? Who does child pornography legislation protect? When can a parent stop paying child support? The varying answers to these questions indicate that childhood is a social construct—a social creation subject to redefinition. Historically, differing philosophical approaches to understanding childhood exist, and childhood is experienced differently depending on a child’s sex, race, and class background.

Defining Children and Childhood

There is little consensus in how the terms *children* and *childhood* are defined, even among contemporary legal documents. For example, according to the 2006 Canadian Census Dictionary, children refers “to blood, step- or adopted sons and daughters (regardless of age or marital status) who are living in the same dwelling as their parent(s), as well as grandchildren in households where there are no parents present.”

Here, child has nothing to do with physical maturation, chronological age, or level of maturity. Instead, it refers to the nature of the living arrangement, which is more likely to have something to do with dependency. This seemingly has its origins in the idea that economic adulthood begins with moving out of one’s parental home.

Many of the current ideas about childhood are related to parental rights and obligations toward children. But the end of parents’ legal obligations to children varies considerably, depending on its jurisdiction and type; therefore, childhood’s span depends on the context in which it is used, the purpose it is intended to serve, and the type and nature of interactions it involves. Childhood can refer to a chronological age range, a level of maturity, a period of physical maturation, or of economic dependency. Our definitions largely reflect assumptions about ability, power, autonomy, and dependency, which vary over time and across cultures.

Understanding Variations in Childhood

Because many children living in the past were silent or silenced by history, circumstance, lack of a public presence, powerlessness, and illiteracy, we are left with a considerable amount of speculation about the true lives of children and historical experiences in and on childhood. This has sparked theoretical debates about childhood, one of the more significant starting in the 1960s with Philippe Aries’s first book, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962).

Medieval Indifference Toward Childhood

French historian Philippe Ariès, has been recognized by many as one of the first, best-known, and most influential and controversial historians of childhood in the 20th century. Ariès argued that “there was no place for childhood in the medieval world.” He explained that he was not arguing that children were neglected or despised in the medieval world, nor that they lived lives devoid of affection, but rather that in the past people lacked the awareness of the distinctiveness of childhood apart from adulthood.
He added that adults in the 10th and 11th centuries in Europe simply did not devote much time or special attention to them, as evidenced by their absence, marginalization, and adult-like depictions in portraits, and by their absence from the focus of religious festivals. He deduced that adults must not have had a distinctive conception of childhood as a separate stage in life since children were not given special emotional or legal allowances, and because they were depicted clothed as mini-adults or mingling with adults in everyday life for the purposes of work, relaxation, and sport. He also noted a lack of vocabulary in French and English for distinguishing children of different ages from one another. Children were either relegated to the margins or were fully integrated into the adult world because they were so much a part of adult life in work and leisure. An outcome of this supposition of the medieval world's indifference toward childhood was that it gave children more latitude, less monitoring, and more autonomy.

The Development of Childhood

Ariès noted that at about the 13th century, images of children, at least in Europe, appeared closer to the modern concept of childhood. As a result, Ariès declared that "no doubt, the discovery of childhood began in the 13th century, and its progress can be traced in the history of art in the 15th and 16th centuries. But the evidence of its development became more plentiful and significant from the end of the 16th century and throughout the 17th. Among the elite of 17th-century Europe, there was a growing recognition of children's special need for attention, nurture, and guidance accompanied by increased attention to schooling. Birth rates began to drop, allowing parents the resources to pay more attention to individual children. The vocabulary relating to infancy appeared and expanded. He explained that with the passage of time, a more formal distinction was made between childhood and adulthood, especially among the elite who could afford to protect children longer.

While some scholars, like Albrecht Classen and Peter Stearns, note that Ariès's work was influential in kick-starting the historical study of childhood, they also note that a growing body of research indicates that Ariès's thesis was not always substantiated. Many have tried to prove, contrary to Ariès's views, that some medieval societies did have a view of childhood as unique and special. For example, Classen points to the writings of Jean Gerson (1363-1429), which suggested that parents pay more attention to their children's emotional needs; and to Mapheus Vegius (1406-58), who reprimanded parents for assuming that physical punishment was an ideal tool in education. Both Gerson and Vegius wrote in the period that Ariès claims reflected indifference to childhood. Others criticize Ariès for generalizing, overemphasizing, and misinterpreting on the basis of a limited and select amount of evidence.

Other scholars, like Colin Heywood, have argued that there was less homogeneity of experiences and thought about childhood than Ariès claimed. Heywood notes that "running like a red thread through the historical literature is the contradictory nature of ideas and emotions concerning childhood." Using evidence from diverse cultural traditions, he shows that at any given point, one can find competing themes in the treatment and understanding of childhood. Heywood shows that children have been concurrently written about as both innocent and wicked, products of nature and of nurture, needy and dependent, and unsupervised and independent. He also points to considerable variations in perceptions of childhood within Europe, at about the same periods in time as the work of Locke and Rousseau.

For some, the inventor of the concept of childhood was Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78). The French philosopher has been credited with pushing the concept of childhood to mean something that was not only quantitatively different from adulthood, but qualitatively different as well. Others point instead to
the work of John Locke (1632-1704), the English philosopher, for his pioneering work on childhood.

**Turning Points in European Thought**

John Locke, the “father of English liberalism” in *Some Thoughts on Education* (1693), is believed to have provided Europeans with the first treatise or manifesto on a scheme for child-centered education. His work on governance refers to childhood as a distinct and unique period in the life of a person. Locke wrote about children as “citizens in the making” or incomplete versions of their future adult selves. While this may not seem especially significant to readers today, it was revolutionary for his time, when it was commonly believed that children were born either good or bad (born of original sin), a concept that could be twisted to relieve parents of a sense of responsibility over how children turned out.

His views that children have needs and interests different from adults required that children receive special attention and proper upbringing. He argued that children are born free of reason—as blank slates, and that experience alone, slowly acquired, stocked the mind. In other words, with proper education, children—who were not yet fully rational—were brought gradually to reason. Contrary to popular views of the time, he argued that children should not be driven into conformity and good behavior by being beaten or coerced. For Locke, education formed a child’s ability to reason and function as a free and equal adult.

In contrast to Locke, as Rousseau expressed in the first sentence of his most famous work, *Social Contract* (1762), is the concept that “Man is born free but everywhere is in chains.” Rousseau’s political statement also expresses his views on childhood, which implies that a child is born carefree and innocent, but not “blank” and unequal, as Locke believed; and not “of sin,” as many, especially priests and educators, believed. In another of his famous works, *Emile* (1762), Rousseau exclaims, “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.” For Rousseau, childhood was uniquely a time of innocence and honesty, in sharp contrast to Locke’s view of childhood as an “imperfect state.” He believed that children had their own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling apart from adults; and while they did not reason as adults, they had their own form of sensitive or puerile reason that they should be free to explore and enjoy. He condemned Locke’s advice that children should be reasoned with, explaining that they should be left alone to “be children” as nature intended, left to enjoy their social worlds before becoming stifled by life experiences.

Rousseau blamed educators and other adults for much of the stifling. While his views were highly controversial, they were extremely significant in challenging past European views on childhood. Ironically, Rousseau and his lifelong companion, Thérèse Levasseur, abandoned their own five children at the Paris orphanage soon after their birth.

Although these views seem very different, both had profound social consequences because their views laid the responsibility on parents and educators for how children turned out. While they did not agree on the type of attention needed, both recognized childhood as distinct from adulthood, and both expressed an underlying need for more adult attention to addressing children’s needs. They also show that there was no single, unified view on what childhood was or how it should be treated.

**Cross-Cultural Variations**

Across borders and within cultures, oscillations in the notion of childhood are caused by social, cultural, economic, and political diversity and change over time. Anthropologists hold that there are multiplicities...
of childhoods, each culturally codified and defined by age, ethnicity, gender, history, and location. Transnational variations exist in such assumed standards as the structuring of age categories and chronological age. Some, like Peter Stearns, have taken a world history approach in the study of childhood, and examine how the economic organization of diverse societies (hunting and gathering versus agricultural versus industrial) affects how childhood is understood and experienced. Stearns explains that nomadic peoples in hunting and gathering societies, with more temporary settlements, represent childhood as a period of dependency that potentially burdens the group. He cites anthropological evidence from the Americas, Australia, and India to show that in hunting and gathering societies, birth rates were kept relatively low through prolonged lactation, abortion, infanticide, or regulation of sexual contact.

Stearns notes that in agricultural societies, however, children of different ages quickly come to be seen as part of an essential labor force. With an expanded food supply, birth rates begin to grow. With more children in society, they gain attention in legal codes, have more peers, and are considered a distinct group. Their increased numbers, worth, and visibility also resulted in the rise of protective superstitions; in agrarian societies, it was important that children be protected so they could work.

Other interesting information has been uncovered about childhood and the treatment of children in early civilizations. The four great civilizations that emerged between 10,000 and 5000 B.C.E., close to large rivers—the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia (the Middle East), the Nile in Egypt, the Hindus River in Indus, and the Yellow River in China—all provide examples that counter Ariès's thesis that childhood did not exist as a concept before medieval European times.

For example, some of the earliest known codes of law, dating back to 4,000 years ago in ancient Sumer in Mesopotamia, reference the concept of parental responsibility toward children. Similarly, around 1792 B.C.E., the famed ruler Hammurabi created a code of 282 laws, of which 16 directly mentioned children. Some of these laws protected children from abduction (punishable by death), and from loss of rights resulting from a loss of one parent (through remarriage) or of both parents. Archaeological evidence of toys have been found buried with their affluent, young, prematurely deceased masters.

The notion of childhood has oscillated, taking on a more or less significant place within the life cycle depending on the economic, political, and cultural composition of any given group at any point in time. Childhood also varied along social class and gender lines; the same can be said about childhood today.

See Also:
Adolescent Children, Care Giving, Children, Child Poverty

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