

HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD

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The history of childhood is a rich and growing field that reveals much about societies in the past but also about connections between past conditions and current issues and trends. It can contribute thus to an active, interdisciplinary discussion about the nature of childhood itself, and about variations among regions, social classes and the two genders. The field has been gaining strength and range during the past two decades. It boasts, among other things, its own journal (*Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*) and scholarly association, with an international scholarly board (Colon, 2001; Fass, 2004; Stearns, 2010).

This essay seeks to highlight major findings and issues in the history of childhood, while suggesting areas of interest with professionals in the mental health field. Thus a number of childhood disorders have a clear history, and a clear connection with the broader history of children: modern patterns of *anorexia nervosa* are a case in point. Broader aspects of the history of childhood – for example, the emergence of the concept and experience of adolescence, also flow from historical analysis and can contribute well beyond the discipline.

Several important constraints apply to the history of childhood, though some are beginning to yield. Most obviously, children themselves leave relatively few records. Their existence is sometimes charted, as in registers of births and deaths. Material artifacts such as toys may remain. But historians of childhood are inevitably hampered by knowing less about how their subjects saw their own experiences than is the case in most other historical fields. Historians of childhood seek to deal with children directly, but inevitably they spend much of their time analyzing adult approaches to and ideas about children. This is an important topic area in its own right, embracing for example the economic roles of children or the history of schooling, but it offers some limitations.

The history of childhood has also been unevenly developed, geographically. The richest studies apply to Western Europe and the United States, where the most abundant literature has been developed. But work on the history of childhood in China is advancing rapidly, and there is also important research on Latin America and Russia. Individual studies apply to other regions, but it remains true that several key regions, such as the Middle East and India, are underserved in the history of childhood (Kinney, 1995; Kinney, 2004; Hsiung, 2005). This situation is gradually changing, but current levels of scholarship continue to hamper not only the geographical range of inquiry, but also opportunities for comparison. In practice, inevitably, one result is a series of questions about the applicability of Western patterns of childhood, particularly in the modern period, and gradually historians are trying to address these issues through questions for example about the relevance of adolescence (initially, at least, a Western concept) to the world history of modern childhood.

The history of childhood is also the subject of considerable debate. This is a sign of scholarly health, but it can also complicate the use of historical findings in other disciplines. A crucial debate arose several decades ago over the work of the French scholar Philippe Ariès, and the uses to which his findings were put by other pioneering historians of childhood. Ariès argued that, in Western Europe, the concept of childhood was a modern one, that premodern European society had not clearly differentiated children from adults (at least after an infancy period). His

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findings encouraged other historians to see dramatic differences between modern and premodern conditions, ranging from dramatic shifts in the uses of physical discipline to the provision of love and emotional support or the experience of grief at the death of a child (Ariès, 1962; Koops & Zuckerman, 2003; Hunt, 1972; Pollock, 1983; Stone, 1977; Ozment, 2001). These claims, almost certainly exaggerated and biased toward a simplistic idealization of modern patterns, generated intense scholarly opposition from historians working for example on the medieval period. Their arguments, sometimes exaggerated in the other direction, tended to claim that basic treatments of children, and adult reactions including emotional reactions such as love, are human constants, immune to significant historical change.

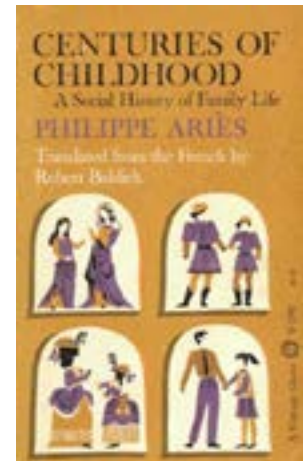
On the whole, more recent historical work seeks to operate with a recognition that some aspects of childhood involve invariable aspects of the human condition, but that others can both vary and change, sometimes quite significantly. Still, the history of childhood does raise fundamental issues about the extent of change possible in the experience of childhood and the treatment of children, and it is important to keep these challenges in mind particularly in interdisciplinary discussions.

BASIC FRAMEWORKS

The history of childhood features two massive, structural changes in the position of children in society. The first occurred in the transitions from hunting and gathering economies to agriculture. The second involved the equally dramatic shift from agriculture to an urban, industrial economy. Obviously, remoteness in time limits our full understanding of the first transition, particularly in terms of how human beings actually experienced it and how rapidly it took shape. The second transition, deeply relevant to an understanding of trends and problems in childhood today, is of course complicated by the fact that many societies are still experiencing it, with some outcomes that are difficult to anticipate.

Much of the standard treatment of world history in fact involves the experience of agricultural societies, and this is certainly true in the history of childhood. Grasping basic features of childhood in predominantly agricultural societies is thus a crucial part of any large historical project in the field. At the same time, attention inevitably moves to a consideration of the changes brought by industrial conditions. This is where, among other things, careful attention to the balance between continuity, including sociobiological continuity, and change comes into play particularly.

Within the context of basic shifts to agriculture, and then from agriculture to industry, several other factors have a role. One, obviously, involves the extent to which other changes, though less sweeping than the structural transformations, deeply affect the experience of childhood. How much, to take a crucial example, did the rise of new religions affect childhood during the long agricultural period of world history? Or to take a modern example: how much did the emergence of globalization generate additional changes in childhood within an increasingly industrial context?



Philippe Ariès (1914 – 1984) was a French historian of the family and childhood, known for his statement that “in medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist”. “Ariès was especially concerned with countering conservative claims that the 20th century family was suffering a decline; he sought to prove instead that the family as we know it today – private, domestic circle founded upon mutual affection – is a relatively new concept. To confirm this claim, Ariès chose to study the figure now considered to exist at the very heart of the family: the child. Childhood, Ariès argues, is a relatively new concept that emerged around the 17th century, concomitant with such developments as a decrease in infant mortality, changes in the European educational system, increasing class stratification, and a gradual withdrawal of the family from a wider web of social relations.” (A Ulanowicz) Ariès’ book, *Centuries of Childhood*, is widely considered the seminal text in family history. However, his ideas have been the subject of severe criticism.



Along with attention to sources of change, cultural and geographical variations generate the most important analytical challenge. World historians spend a great deal of time assessing and comparing basic traditions of key complex societies (sometimes called civilizations). As early civilizations took shape in North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and China, were the treatment of, and ideas about childhood a significant variable? Major missionary religions, such as Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, may have generated some common changes in childhood, such as greater attention to aspects of education, but were they also very different (Browning et al, 2009)? Are there basic and persistent regional differences in approach to childhood that condition even common current trends derived from industrialization and globalization? As noted, the comparative analysis of childhood history is not as fully advanced as one might wish, but some relevant findings are already established. Some of these also involve the exploration of common modern issues in childhood – for example, adolescent suicide – in comparative historical context.

Bushmen children (one of the few remaining hunting gathering societies).
[kwekudee Trip Down Memory Lane](#)

THE IMPACT OF AGRICULTURE

Hunting and gathering societies, though quite varied in specifics as they developed in particular regions, generated several characteristic features of childhood. Birth rates were normally limited, achieved in part by a prolonged period of breastfeeding (up to 3-4 years) that reduced the chances of a new conception. The societies lacked the economic resources to handle too many children per family, and caring for young children amid recurrent travel around the region could be a problem as well. Young children did not have many assigned functions. Contemporary studies suggest that mothers who take children with

Gender inequality – as opposed to differentiation – in hunting and gathering societies was limited in that both sexes contributed vital components to the family and group economy.

them to gather nuts, seeds and berries are actually less productive than mothers who leave them behind. Hunting and gathering societies did of course develop fairly pronounced differences in function between boys and girls, which involved training differentiations after early childhood; ceremonies to denote maturation emphasized the readiness of boys to begin to assume some hunting roles. At the same time, gender inequality – as opposed to differentiation – was limited in that both sexes contributed vital components to the family and group economy.

Agriculture generated important changes for children and their roles, though how quickly this occurred is simply not known. Agriculture developed, presumably, because of some combination of population expansion or climate-induced limitations on available big game, along with the discovery – almost certainly by women, as the food gatherers – of the possibility of deliberately planting crops. Agriculture spread slowly but inexorably from its various places of origin – around the Black Sea, after about 8000 BCE, in south China by 7000 around rice growing, in central America by 5000 around the cultivation of maize, though of course a few regions developed an alternative nomadic economy or maintained hunting and gathering until modern times.

The big advantage of agriculture over hunting and gathering was a greater volume and reliability in food supplies (despite the recurrent local or general crop failures that bedeviled the system). More food meant the possibility of more extensive population growth and, for individual families, greater opportunity for sexual activity and a higher birth rate. Agricultural societies in fact began to generate a distinctive demographic structure, with large numbers of young children in the community, accompanied by relatively high rates of infant death (30%-50% of all children born would die before age 2) as a result of various ailments but particularly digestive disorders. The mortality rate would progressively diminish after early childhood.

Population growth was not reckless in typical agricultural communities, however, and it would ultimately reflect more than the improvement in normal food supply. Characteristic agricultural families sought 6-8 children on average, about half of the number a family can generate if it imposes no restrictions on fertility. That number of children gave some hope of enough survivors (after the infant death rate) to support parents in later age and maintain the family thereafter. It provided some normal excess, which among other things could help cover the roughly 20% of all couples in which one or both partners were infertile; exchanges of children, through a variety of systems of sharing or servanthood, helped distribute a compensatory labor force. To be sure, individual families might greatly exceed the average birthrate, and birthrates would also go up after widespread plagues or wars to generate population recovery (Baxter, 2005; Ardren & Hutsom, 2006; Burguière et al, 1996).

A further characteristic of agricultural societies was a pattern in which aristocracies and, sometimes, the urban wealthy had higher birth rates than the peasant and artisanal masses. More children represented one use of greater wealth, and the rich could also benefit from a larger brood to seed marriage relationships, political outreach and so on. For the average person, the great desirability of having several children was balanced against the great undesirability of having too many, and overwhelming the family economy. Various methods, including still fairly

prolonged lactation (18-24 months, obviously shorter than in hunter-gatherer communities), plus reductions in sexual activity as a couple aged, plus (in some cases, such as in early modern Western Europe) delays in marriage age helped limit the birth rate. The great feature of childhood in agricultural societies, beyond the expanded birth rate and relatively high infant death rate, was the new importance of children as a source of work.

A key feature of childhood in agricultural societies was the importance of children as a source of labor.

Greater food supply provided a basis for larger numbers of children, but the functions of agriculture provided the spur. In most agricultural societies the family became the key unit of production, supplemented perhaps by an occasional worker, sometimes an older child from another family. Relatively young children were expected to pick up some tasks, and labor obligations tended to grow with age. It was important to try to assure the labor of teenagers, whose productivity would begin to exceed the resources needed to support them. Many agricultural families embellished this basic pattern by deliberately seeking a final child when the couple neared the end of fertility, with the goal of having one child's labor available should one or both of the parents survive until later age.

When agricultural societies also began to support an urban economy (though always with a large rural majority), artisanal families would reproduce some of the work patterns of their rural counterparts. Children were expected to assist in production operations from a fairly young age. They might then be put in more formal apprenticeship, usually with another family, during their teen years, when training was combined with more productive labor. (Indeed, characteristic tensions in the apprenticeship system pitted the training aspect with the hope of getting some solid production assistance.) In contrast to peasant life, artisans sometimes afforded late teenagers/young adults an opportunity for a year or two of travel, to gain new experiences and let off steam – a feature as pronounced in Japan, for example, as in European artisanal life. Even in the countryside, use of children as workers was combined with special roles for children during festivals and opportunities for more informal village play.

The dependence on child labor, however modified, generated three or four other characteristic features of childhood in agricultural societies, amid a great variety of regional and cultural specifics. A strong emphasis on the importance of obedience was one standard feature, often reinforced by religious beliefs. Pronounced gender division was another common pattern, potentially affecting children from a very young age; this would include particular effort to control girls' sexuality. A distinctive emotional climate for children included the frequency of death. Finally, a bit more amorphously, agricultural societies may have encouraged a tendency to devalue childhood in favor of encouraging greater maturity, though this is less easy to demonstrate and certainly permitted some exceptions.

Obedience in preindustrial childhood

The common emphasis on the importance of obedience rested on at least two key features of preindustrial childhood: the need to encourage children to work at least fairly reliably, and the sheer size of the family itself. All agricultural societies went to great lengths to insist on the importance of obeying parents, often supplementing the basic directives with divine sanctions: family obedience could

Across cultures, a strong emphasis on the importance of obedience was one standard feature in upbringing, often reinforced by religious beliefs.

be linked to larger religious or political systems. Many legal systems gave parents great latitude in punishing disobedient children. China offers a clear example, from the time of the Han dynasty: “when a father or mother prosecutes a son, the authorities will acquiesce without question of trial”. Jewish law had potentially even harsher provisions. Christianity insisted on the importance of honoring father and mother. Chinese tradition, again, put the central point succinctly: “no parents in the world are wrong.” A great deal of family discipline, even amid the great variety of specific cultural systems, focused on instilling obedience, particularly to parents, and to adults in the community more generally (Ebrey, 1991; Pomeroy, 1997; Rawson, 1991; Rawson, 2006).

The point should not be pressed too far. Children in many agricultural communities had time off from work, when they interacted with each other (often, across a wide age range) and were not under direct parental control. Overall village supervision continued, but there was latitude. A number of cultural systems offered considerable indulgence of very young children, with the fuller emphasis on discipline entering the scene around age 5-7; this may have been true in India, for example. Village festivals gave older children specific opportunities to escape normal obligations, with days of “misrule” inverting standard authority; even acts of vandalism could be tolerated in the interests of allowing youth to let off steam. Finally, some parents undoubtedly found the challenge of insisting on obedience a bit daunting. One of several reasons for practices such as sending older children off to another family for work or training may have been the hope that other adults would find it less painful to insist on obedience and impose necessary discipline as children reached what we now call adolescence. The centrality of obedience remains, but a variety of other practices or options might relieve its starkness while indirectly confirming its importance.

Gender divisions

Agricultural societies famously insisted on the importance of gender divisions and of the superiority of men over women. Power differentials were more clear-cut than had been the case in hunting and gathering groups. With larger numbers of children, wives and mothers had less opportunity to contribute equally to the family economy; the earlier balance between the essential contributions of gatherers, and those of hunters, was disrupted, with men now responsible (in most cases) for assuring basic grain supplies. Agricultural families may also have felt greater need to control female sexuality in the interests of assuring paternity: with property and inheritance now at stake, fathers may have tried to insist on greater certainty that their children were indeed theirs.

Distinctions between boys and girls thus began fairly early, though again the infant years might be an exception. Even here, Chinese advice literature urged that infant girls be placed at the foot of the parental bed, in contrast to their brothers’ placement alongside. Work obligations differentiated male and female children fairly early as well, with boys assisting fathers in the fields or artisanal shops. Property systems varied, but boys always had greater property rights than girls – in case of death of parents, for example; and sometimes, as in some Christian regions in Europe, girls had no rights at all. Where schooling was available, boys almost always had greater access than girls. Sexual oversight of girls was characteristically

stricter than that imposed on boys, though many villages kept tabs on male behavior as well (Stearns, 2015; Wiesner-Hanks, 2010).

As with obedience, it is important not to overdo it. Gender distinctions were far greater in upper-class families than amid the majority, where women's work (and therefore the work and familial training of girls) remained absolutely essential. Individual parents might easily recognize the talents of a daughter and offer either informal or formal education. Still, agricultural families in the main trained their children to accept largely patriarchal gender relationships, in their own lives and in anticipated adulthood.

Children's emotional experiences

Distinctive emotional features for children in agricultural societies are predictably harder to pinpoint, but there are at least a few clear elements. The omnipresence of death is an obvious point. Very few families would not experience the death of at least one or two children, which means that very few children would not experience the death of siblings during their own formative years. High rates of maternal mortality in childbirth (one in ten women would die during one of their attempts to give birth), or the possibility of accidents or violence for fathers, meant that many children also would live through the death of a parent. Historians once speculated that the frequency of death generated stoicism among agricultural families, in which grief would not necessarily loom large. Better evidence has challenged this view and we now know that parents were often



Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Children's Games. (1560, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

devastated by what we can see were statistically normal losses. But what did this context do to children? How did they experience and cope with grief? It's clear that there is a topic here, but its ramifications are challenging (Demos, 1986; Greven, 1991; Heywood, 2001).

Almost all families, and children, experienced the death of at least one or two siblings.

Some historians have also claimed, for at least some agricultural societies including premodern Western Europe, that agricultural childhoods were full of fear, and deliberate adult efforts to inculcate fear. Fear could certainly be used to enforce obedience. This might follow from the frequency of death. Some religions may have played on children's fears as part of socialization. Less formally, many village families, in at least several cultural settings, invoked the threat of bogeymen or other sources of fright as part of instilling discipline and also warning children away from imprudent interactions with strangers or any tendency to wander too far into the woods or other dangerous settings. Again, emotional regimes are hard to analyze, and with regard to fear there may have been cultural variations as well, but the possibility of some distinctive patterns continues to stimulate historical research (Delumeau, 1990).

Childhood as a period of life

Finally, and for fairly good reasons, it is clear that childhood was not a preferred period of life in agricultural societies. To the extent that memoirs or other commentaries exist – for example, from the Roman republic and empire, from Han China, from early modern Japan – they feature (by modern standards) a striking absence of references to childhood, positive or negative. At most, mothers might be singled out for great affection, with fathers sometimes referred to as more distant, sterner figures. Correspondingly, while many adults played with children, particularly young children, there was a fairly clear preference (after infancy) for children capable of fairly adult demeanors and behaviors. The Romans thus referred approvingly to the *puer senex*, or “old boy,” while the author Pliny praised a girl for her “elderly sense of discretion, her matronly modesty”. Parents in agricultural societies might not only permit children's play but also



Francisco de Goya. The Seesaw (Cartoon for a tapestry in the Escorial 1791-92). Philadelphia Museum of Art.

help implement it by providing a few toys, but again there was a strong interest in encouraging seriousness. Adult attitudes toward childhood, possibly including their own, were surely conditioned by the high rates of mortality. Many authors in many societies commented on how risky it was to develop too much attachment to children because of the uncertainty of their survival.

Emotional investment in children was clearly greater, however, for mothers than for fathers. Whatever is believed about “natural” maternal sentiments, agricultural societies encouraged particular attachments. Men were often predominantly working outside the home itself, in the fields; they often had little regular interaction with young children. Women might also have a particular stake in forming close ties, as an outlet given the unequal treatment they received in patriarchal families and indeed as a protection for the future. Tight emotional bonds between sons and mothers, even as the sons reached maturity, were a common part of extended family life in agricultural societies, noted strongly, for example, in historical work on childhood in China and also in Islam.

CHANGE AND VARIATION IN AGRICULTURAL SOCIETIES

Basic patterns of childhood in agricultural societies deserve attention, obviously in part because of changes that would later intervene. They should not, however, be overdrawn. Differences in culture, variations in family structure, and changes over time, even within the agricultural context, are also part of the historical picture. The distinctions that result obviously improve the accuracy of the historical record, but they may also explain different reactions and patterns that continue even into the present day.

The role of religion

Several examples highlight the importance of specific cultures in agricultural societies. Not surprisingly, Chinese Confucianism created an unusual emphasis on the importance of stylized manners and internal family hierarchies, at least in principle – and particularly in upper-class settings. Children were instructed to use great formality when talking with their parents, particularly fathers, asking for example if they were sufficiently warm in winter. Confucian values also encouraged the practice of giving parents presents on a child’s or a young adult’s key birthdays. Hierarchy showed in the way children should place themselves in family gatherings, with pride of place (among the children) going to eldest sons. The basic values here were common in agricultural societies, but the specifics were quite distinctive. At the same time, again particularly for the upper classes but also for a few talented peasant boys, Confucianism also emphasized the importance of education and successful test-taking, as means of entering bureaucratic service. Finally, while Confucianism did not in fact prevent real affection for daughters, it was under the guidance of Confucian values that China began to introduce foot-binding for some girls, from the Tang dynasty onward, as a means of limiting their ability to walk freely in the interests of standards of beauty and deference.

A key issue, at least partly cultural, involves the impact of religious change on childhood in agricultural societies. The spread of missionary religions such as

Buddhism and Islam unquestionably created new opportunities for education, for schools were seen as a vital source of religious values. By 1200 Islamic societies almost certainly had the highest literacy rates in the world thanks to religious training. While these opportunities were more available to boys than to girls, the latter could find new opportunities as well.

The missionary religions, spreading widely during the first millennium CE, also urged basic spiritual equality. Women as well as men had souls. This could in principle reduce some of the gender inequality characteristic of agricultural societies – as in some of the new schools. In Buddhism and Christianity, particularly, the rise of convents along with monasteries gave a minority of girls examples of life without directly male dominance (though Buddha was careful to put convents under monastic authority) and the opportunity to choose a spiritual life. Islam offered some new protections for female children, for example in careful rules about their access to inheritance. And all the newer religions worked hard to eliminate female infanticide as a common method of birth control. On the other hand, the new religions did not in fact preach gender equality. Men controlled the key religious offices, for example as Christian priests or Muslim imams. In Islam, property protections gave boys larger inheritance allotments than girls. At most, gender inequality in childhood was modified (Fernea, 1995; Gil'adi, 1992; Nakosteen, 1984).

Other kinds of religious differences are worth exploring. Christianity in principle urged that children were tainted by original sin, that without purifying ceremonies they would be sent to some kind of hell if they died. Islam on the other hand urged children's innocence, while certainly worrying about human sin in other respects. Did this important doctrinal distinction matter in real life? Did it lead Christian communities to more sweeping efforts to create a negative aspect to sexuality, and not just to regulate sexual behavior? Did it encourage harsher discipline? When Christian European parents reached the Americas, their tendency to punish their children physically startled and dismayed Native Americans: was this linked to religious doctrine (Browning et al, 2009)?

Family structure

Family structures also created important differentiations in the experience of childhood in agricultural societies. Some agricultural regions, but not all, featured extensive slaveholding. This was not necessarily the harsh institution that would develop in the New World with the African slave trade. Indeed, some parents, for example in the Roman Empire, tried to have their children accepted as slaves on grounds that it would provide them more certain support. And slaves might do a variety of tasks, even run shops or serve in the military, not simply the most backbreaking work. But slavery did limit a child's freedom and expose him or her to possible sale away from family (though Islam tried to prevent this where the slave family was Muslim). It could disrupt or constrain childhood in other ways – as in the Americas, where slave owners often deliberately tried to prevent access to any education. Here was the most extreme example of how social position created different childhoods in agricultural society, though others situations, such as the Indian caste system, could have similar impacts.



Mamluks

Mamluk means “owned”. The Mamluk system began during the Abbasid caliphs of 9th century Baghdad. Boys of about thirteen were captured from areas to the north of the Persian Empire and trained to become elite soldiers for the personal use of the sultan or aristocrats. The Mamluks therefore had no family ties in their new homelands and were personally dependent on their masters, giving them a solidity that allowed them to survive the tensions of tribalism and personal ambition. The Mamluks became increasingly powerful, so much so that they ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 until 1517.

Most agricultural societies featured extended family structures, usually based on a father's relationships, though sometimes with matrilineal influence as well. In Western Europe, however, from the later Middle Ages onward, a distinctive European-style family emerged. This emphasized a rather late marriage age (26-28) for ordinary people (younger for upper-class women), presumably in the interests of protecting property by limiting the birth rate. The structure had several results. It prolonged a period of youth, as people in their mid-20s were still not fully adult in that they could not form families of their own. It severely limited contacts between children and grandparents, who would not usually survive long after children of such late marriages were born. Different family structures raise important questions about variations in patterns and experiences of childhood (Creutziger, 1996; Hartman, 2004; Lynch, 2003).

Another source of differentiation among societies involved varied approaches to some of the common tasks of motherhood. In some societies, for example, the



Swaddling frees mothers to work on a farm or in a shop, without having to pay constant attention to an infant and it may help in soothing children.

Native American baby of the Nez Perce tribe, 1911 (Edward S. Curtis Collection People 007).

use of wet-nurses spread not only for upper-class women, fashionably eager to avoid breastfeeding, but for some urban working families seeking to maximize women's work. Several agricultural societies saw important debates over wet-nursing and the (usually) higher rates of child mortality involved.

Swaddling was another variable. The practice might free mothers to work on a farm or in a shop, without having to pay constant attention to an infant; and it may have offered other advantages as well, in soothing children. But swaddling might also affect infant development: here is another case where historical and contemporary debate can conjoin. Swaddling spread widely in Europe, Russia and elsewhere, but other regions found other options. African mothers, for example, characteristically preferred to carry infants in front pouches, and this preference, and arguments in its favor, also persist into the present day.

Finally, change happened, even within a basically agricultural framework. The advent of new religions was a case in point; so, for the children seized by slave traders, was the imposition of the new slave trade on West Africa after 1500. Ideas about swaddling might change: the practice came under increasing attack in Western Europe by 1700, though it persisted in southern and eastern parts of the continent. Needs for children's labor might increase. It is widely believed that the rise of a more commercial world economy after 1500, with increasing pressure to produce goods for sale and, in some cases, the impact of population growth, increased pressures on child workers reducing play time and heightening the discipline imposed for example on apprentices.

It is possible to offer only a sampling of differences in childhood that might emerge amid a common agricultural framework thanks to culture, regional economic and family structure, or economic and demographic change. Many historians will continue to devote great effort in tracing particular regional patterns, as opposed to a focus on shared features of agricultural childhoods. Yet the distinctions are not always easy to trace, particularly given disparities in the historical coverage of key regions to date. Above all, historians inevitably grapple with the question of the significance of particular regional variants compared to the common features of agricultural childhoods; debate continues.

CHANGING AGRICULTURAL PATTERNS

During the 19th and 20th centuries, an increasing number of societies gradually began to introduce four important, ultimately related, changes in the patterns of childhood that had long prevailed. These changes might have further implications, but they were absolutely crucial in their own right.

Education

First, many societies, though hesitantly, began to shift the emphasis of childhood away from work. New ideas about children often encouraged a heightened belief in the importance of education, but even more clearly the demands of a changing economy seemed to argue in this direction. Growing commerce and rising industry required a labor force that was increasingly literate and numerate. Even peasants, somewhat hostile to education that put children outside standard familial controls, came to realize that schooling was in their own

best interest. At the same time, changes in the workplace could make children less useful or otherwise reduce interest in their employment. While children had a clear role in very early factory industry, for example, particularly in Britain, their services were less useful when machines became more sophisticated, taking over more aspects of the production process. On another front, many working class families, though accustomed to child labor, began to worry when their children came under the supervision of strangers in the factory setting. And finally, new laws began to limit child labor; early legislation was usually not strictly enforced and applied only to factory industry, but over time both inspection and range expanded, along with increasing legal requirements for school attendance (Cunningham, 2001; Cunningham, 2005; Heywood, 1988; Maynes, 1985). Childhood, in other words, ultimately shifted from a primary responsibility to contribute to the family economy through work, to a primary responsibility – to self, but also to family and society – to be schooled.

Birth rate

The second area of change involved the birth rate. Families began to cut back in the number of children sought. As children shifted from economic contributors to liabilities, as their costs increased, some change was inevitable. In most cases it occurred in layers: middle classes preceded working classes, more secular regions preceded more religious ones and so on. Methodologies also varied, though ultimately the decline in birth rate involved some new opportunities for birth control thanks to new devices, greater availability of abortion, or other combinations. The change ultimately was widespread within societies adjusting to or preparing for the decline of agriculture. It also inverted the agricultural family hierarchy: poorer families tended now to maintain higher birthrates than all but the very wealthy (Mintz, 2004; Seccombe, 1993).

Infant mortality

Linked ultimately to changes in birth rate, as cause or effect, was the dramatic decline in infant death rates (and also maternal mortality). In combination with the shifts in birth rates, this *demographic transition* saw dramatic changes in family size



Chinese citizens must attend school for at least nine years. The literacy rate in China is now higher than 95%.

but also in expectations that children would survive. Death and childhood became more separate than ever before in human history. Children grew up with fewer siblings, which could have its own impact on the experience of childhood and, along with schooling, encouraged increasingly age-specific social relationships.

Growing state involvement

Finally, the state became more directly involved with aspects of childhood than ever before (and often, the role of religious institutions declined accordingly). Premodern states had relatively little direct relationship with children, whose care was left to families and religious groups. Now, governments began to mandate schooling, regulate labor, offer, and sometimes require certain kinds of health services, issue childrearing advice, deal with problem children, even remove children from families found unfit to provide appropriate care.

These four great, interrelated changes might have further effects, though amid considerable variations. The kind of gender separations characteristic in agricultural societies would come under review. There were several reasons for this. First, declining birth rates ultimately suggested changes in the training-for-motherhood approach to girls' informal or formal education, reducing differences with boys. Education itself was increasingly open to both genders. Girls might long be encouraged to pursue separate courses of study – for example, dissuaded from too much mathematics. But in fact girls could do as well or better than boys in modern schools overall, and certainly the spread of education reduced or eliminated gender gaps such as basic literacy. Over time, young women in fact turned to education with a vengeance precisely because of hopes that it would reduce traditional gender disadvantages; by the early 21st century 55% of the students in higher education, in societies as diverse as Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States, were female.



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Gender factors persisted in childhood, as in Chinese or Indian preference for male children that led to disproportionate numbers of girls in orphanages and (possibly) some renewed female infanticide. Many Islamic societies saw new resistance to girls' education, including attacks on schools and students by extremists. Overall, however, gender factors in childhood declined without disappearing, in connection with the wider shifts away from agricultural patterns.

Adolescence

Historians have also speculated about a global spread of the ideas and concepts associated with adolescence. The idea of adolescence emerged in the West in the 19th century, partly as a result of increasing research on children. The idea corresponded with longer periods of schooling and dependence for teenagers, initially particularly in the middle classes, and also with increasingly early onset of puberty, probably as a result of better nutrition, and heterosexual contacts. The concept explained some more difficult features of characteristic adolescent behavior, and it also might encourage some such features as older children sought to live up to stereotypes. A youth consumer culture began to emerge as early as the late 19th century around consumer products such as cheap, sensationalist books and, by the mid-20th century, music and film. All of these features might help create at least elements of adolescence across cultural boundaries (Fass, 2006; Gillis, 1974; Wegs, 1989).

Certainly new ideas about childhood encouraged some common policies beyond the enforcement of school attendance or efforts to provide better medical care to pregnant women. Many societies, for example, such as Japan, developed the idea of special treatment for juvenile offenders, which contradicted more traditional practice which had lumped criminals regardless of age.



PROCESSES OF CHANGE: THE WEST

Many historians would worry about too much emphasis on common features of modern childhood, urging more attention to the persistence of earlier traditions – as in gender preferences – and the importance of significant regional differences. They would warn against overuse of a largely Western model. One way to introduce greater nuance is to note the different timing and specifics of changes away from agricultural patterns of childhood.

Fundamental changes in childhood first developed in Western Europe and in “settler societies” like the United States and Australia. As the initial centers of industrialization and new types of commercial agriculture, these regions began to experience some of the new pressures on child labor or the need for greater access to education by the early to mid-19th century. Initial legislation limiting some forms of child labor began to be introduced by the 1830s and 1840s. National school systems and, gradually, school attendance requirements emerged during the middle decades of the century. On another front, middle-class families began to take the lead in reducing birth rates, in some cases as early as the 1790s, as they sought to adjust family size to new economic and demographic realities. These regions were also the first to experience a full demographic transition. By the 1880s, declining birth rates began to be matched by dramatic reductions in infant mortality. Between 1880 and 1920 the “Western world” saw infant mortality drop from 20%-30% to 5% or less, thanks to improving living standards and new efforts in public health. By the early 20th century Western childhood had been substantially transformed. Child labor was now rare (in the United States, the second decade of the 20th century saw peak rates, but then very rapid decline as laws banned the use of children not only in factories but in virtually all economic sectors). School attendance was almost universal, at least through the primary grades. And the pattern of low birth rate/low death rate became firmly established in virtually all social classes.

These various changes in Western childhood were accompanied, indeed preceded, by important new ideas about children. As an offshoot of the scientific revolution of the 17th century, leading thinkers, headed by John Locke in Britain, began to reconsider some of the standard Christian or Protestant concepts of childhood. Locke fought against the idea of original sin, arguing that children were “blank slates”, open to improvement and enlightenment through education. By the later 19th century, guided by Enlightenment gurus such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, this blank slate approach had morphed into a positive statement of children’s basic goodness and innocence. And, gradually, some of these concepts began to gain a hold in wider popular culture. In the new United States, for example, mainstream Protestant churches conducted vigorous debates over the original sin/innocence dichotomy in the early decades of the century, emerging with a clear victory for the innocence proposition though with an Evangelical minority clinging to earlier ideas about sinfulness (Stearns, 1994).

From these new ideas, in turn, came a number of further shifts. Childrearing advice, increasingly taken out of the hands of churchmen, altered. In the United States, from the 1820s onward, mainstream manuals began to insist on the importance of avoiding fear in disciplining children. Interest in insisting on obedience began to decline in favor of an attempt to view children as part of an

emotionally-rewarding, loving family; children in turn were now increasingly urged to be cheerful. Traditional efforts to shame children began to yield (though more slowly in school settings than in middle-class families), in favor of an inculcation of guilt. On a wider scale, these new ideas about children underwrote important changes in law. By the later 19th century, reformers were successfully promoting the need to treat juvenile offenders as a separate category from adult criminals. Juvenile courts and treatment centers began to proliferate.

Obviously, for many Westerners, reformers and ordinary families alike, key changes could seem part of a common package. New ideas about children, for example, readily supported the expansion of school requirements, which also made sense in an increasingly industrial economy. Lower birth rates responded to economic changes, but also to beliefs that parents owed children more sensitive and loving attention. Equally obviously, however, the Western “package” might look different to other societies, as the need to sponsor significant social change became more widely recognized. Here, historians have explored more complex patterns, in which some standard developments were accompanied by significant regional distinctiveness.

OTHER PROCESSES OF CHANGE

Japan

Japan began its great reform process at the end of the 1860s. Reconsideration of childhood was explicitly involved, as Japanese leaders sought to figure out what elements of the new Western pattern were essential, particularly in order to promote industrialization.

Two elements quickly emerged. First, new attention was devoted to public health measures, in order to promote population strength. Infant death rates began to drop, ultimately in a pattern similar to that in the West. Second, expansion of education was essential: not only Western example, but also considerable Confucian commitment to schooling facilitated Japanese action here. The result was the 1872 law mandating universal primary education for boys and girls alike. Obviously the sweeping measure took time to implement and there was some peasant resistance to the imposition. By the 1890s however literacy was widely established in the relevant age groups, and the Japanese were also expanding into further secondary and technical options (Stearns, 1998; Uno, 1999).

Measures of this sort brought childhood into more explicit focus than ever before, particularly at the political level. One historian has argued that the result – rather like what Ariès once claimed for the West – was an unprecedented recognition of childhood as a special state, clearly separate from adulthood. Other spillovers included new government efforts to provide childrearing advice; traditional family wisdom could not be trusted. And interest in special identification and treatment for juvenile delinquents emerged as well.

But this was not simply the Western model transferred. The Japanese did not move to limit birth rates as quickly as the West had done. This aspect of the demographic transition would be completed only after World War II. In Japan, as in many other parts of the world outside the West, mortality reductions came

first, birth rate adjustments later. Japanese leaders were also at pains to seek special Japanese values for children, even amid new education and growing emphasis on modifying Confucianism by a greater valuation for science and technology. By the 1880s, educational leaders clearly established the importance of teaching nationalism, group loyalty, and reverence for the Emperor as alternatives to what was seen as excessive Western individualism among children.

Communist countries

Yet another model for childhood change came from communist regimes in the 20th century. Both in Russia and later in China, communist revolutionaries turned surprisingly quickly to childhood after they gained political control. Motives were twofold: a general desire to revamp childhood as a means of promoting industrialization, but also an interest in shaping children, apart from their parents, toward communist values and loyalty (Chan; 1985; Kelly, 2007; Kirschenbaum, 2001).

Elements of this program were quickly recognizable. New attention to public and maternal health began to reduce infant death rates. By 1960, infant mortality rates in the Soviet Union had dropped well below 5%, a 900% reduction since 1917. Education received equally prompt attention. A Decree on the Eradication of Illiteracy, issued in 1919, ushered in a rapid expansion of schools from the nursery level on up. Schooling quickly became a core component of childhood. In China, primary education enrollments would triple during the 1950s alone, a huge investment for a still-poor nation.

Communist regimes at the same time sought their own definitions of childhood, within what might be seen as a standard modern model. Debates over birth control could be fierce. The Soviet Union, under Stalin, opted for rather conservative family policies including encouragement to large families. In fact, parents increasingly chose otherwise, amid the pressure of urban housing and expanding industrialization, and a fairly standard demographic transition resulted. China of course was different, continuing to encourage high birth rates until 1978, then dramatically reversing course with the one-child policy.

Communist regimes sought to maintain some commitment to work as part of childhood, while imposing clear limits on conventional child labor. Communist youth groups did labor service. Government efforts to inculcate new values involved more explicit attacks on parental authority than had been common either in Japan or the West, though the results were not always predictable.

China's One Child Policy

This policy—sometimes described as the boldest experiment in population control in history—was established in 1979 to limit China's population growth. The policy applies particularly to Han Chinese (91% of the population) living in urban areas. Should this policy remain in place, China is expected to achieve zero population growth by 2025. Critics of the policy point to its undesirable social consequences, such as China's skewed gender ratio—currently there are about 113 boys born for every 100 girls (globally the ratio is about 107 boys born for every 100 girls)—along with abandonment of female infants and infanticide, or the aging population. The 4-2-1 (four grandparents, two parents, one child) family pattern that ensues is also seen as a potential problem.

Other parts of the world

Patterns of change in other parts of the world, particularly over the past half-century, have reflected a mixture of standard emphases, particularly on expanding education; regional value systems, such as Islam in many parts of the Middle East; and often the constraints of incomplete industrial development.

Latin America, for example, moved more gradually toward some of the key changes in childhood. Urban and rural poverty constrained the process of change and in some cases religious factors – for example, vigorous priestly opposition to birth control – entered as well. Many Latin American countries also inherited from colonial times a fairly high rate of illegitimate births, which could introduce some instabilities for children as well. Yet change did occur. Schooling spread steadily and by the 21st century Latin American literacy rates were above global averages. Many Latin American countries experienced the demographic transition by the 1970s with sharply falling birth rates (Hecht, 1998; Scheper-Hughes & Sargent, 1998).

South and Southeast Asia remained noteworthy into the early 21st century for the high and sometimes rising rates of child labor, against overall global trends. Many parents continued to find child labor both normal and essential, resisting pressures for schooling. High levels of competition prompted many small businesses to seek cheap workers. Only after 2000 did this region begin to display the more common modern pattern of reduced child labor and growing rates of school attendance.

The basic theme is clear: for many decades, most regions of the world have introduced or begun to introduce important changes in childhood. The result however was not a completely standard pattern, as local values, levels of economic and political development, and other factors created important variants on the process of change.

CHILDHOOD IN CRISIS

The fairly complex, often gradual, movement away from the standard patterns of agricultural childhood is not, of course, the only modern phenomenon to trace in dealing with the recent history of childhood. At various points from the 19th century to the present, other developments have taken precedence.

In reviewing the history of childhood over the past century, two points deserve particular emphasis. First, the global economy has generated new pressures and deteriorations for certain groups of children, along with the larger emphasis on education and the decline in mortality. And second, other dislocations have created their own dynamic in certain key regions, clearly superseding the more general changes in modern childhood (Goodenough & Immel, 2008; Hecht, 1998; Schlemmer, 2000; Singer, 2006).

We have already seen that the decline of child labor has not been uniform. Multinational companies are not, in the main, direct exploiters of child workers, but they may commission local producers who depend on child workers to keep costs down. More traditional local industries, pressed by international competition, may similarly make working conditions more severe for their child workers. The



[Click on the picture to watch a one-hour lecture by - Professor Hugh Cunningham on "What's happened to Childhood?" \(50:03\)](#)

“Our understanding of childhood is shaped by two narratives. The first describes how children underwent horrific experiences in the factories and mines of the Industrial Revolution, but were then rescued for an increasingly ‘healthy and happy’ childhood. The second, dominant since the 1970s, tells how childhood is getting worse, becoming ‘toxic’, the deaths of James Bulger, Victoria Climbié and Baby P evidence for it. How far do these narratives about childhood reflect the reality of the lives of children past and present?”



Photograph of Bibb Mill No. 1, Macon, GA, by Lewis Hine for the National Child Labor Committee, 1/19/1909.

carpet industry in India, for example, now organized in factories, depends heavily on the work of children, often migrants, some sold to the employer, working 15-hour days in confined quarters.

Increasing economic inequality within key societies may bear on children directly. The point needs careful treatment. Over the past two decades or more, income inequality has been dropping in the world as a whole, thanks to industrial growth in places like China, Brazil and India; this was what has helped support new health measures and expanded schooling. But within these countries, and in many others, an impoverished sector of the population has often become poorer. Even in industrial countries like the United States, the expansion of poverty has disproportionately affected children (with up to a quarter falling below the poverty line, according to some estimates).

The impoverishment of a portion of the child population in contemporary world history generates deteriorations in child health and nutrition, even as overall global standards may improve. It drives some parents to extreme measures, such as selling some children into the expanding global sex trade or trying to market some of their bodily organs. Growing poverty may also expose children to random violence, as gangs take over sections of cities or countries. Death of children by violence, and wider fears of violence, would become a fact of contemporary life in some United States cities and also in parts of Central America.

Children have also been disproportionately affected by another key development in contemporary world history, the erosion of civilian-military distinctions in cases of outright conflict. The change began to become visible in the 1930s and with the growth of aerial bombardments as part of military operations. Attacks on civilians by Franco's German and Italian allies during the Spanish Civil War provided one example, as did the widespread assaults on civilians in Japan's invasion of China. The Holocaust, notoriously, targeted children extensively.

And this pattern has continued, in many outright wars and in internal civil violence alike. Attacks on civilians became a standard feature in Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, with offenses on both sides. Warfare in the former Yugoslavia, during the 1990s, involved extensive civilian casualties, exacerbated by attacks on certain groups in the name of ethnic cleansing. Ethnic cleansing in Cambodia deliberately targeted children, with pits filled with the bodies of hundreds of children killed. A third of all those killed in civil strife in the Congo have been under five, and paramilitary forces also often deliberately maimed children (particularly girls), by cutting off arms as well as rape. Growing use of land mines posed dangers for children even after wars ended. The list is long and it continues to expand.

Overall, it has been estimated that 150 million children have been killed by military violence worldwide, since the 1970s, and another 150 million maimed. Other estimates hold that 80% of the victims of collective violence in this same period have been women and children.

Wars have always had the potential for dislocating civilian populations, but this impact too has tended to expand. Blurring the line with civilian populations and deliberate attacks on certain ethnic, religious or national groups clearly exacerbate the potential here. Many children, with or without other family members, have been forced to flee conflict scenes. In many refugee camps in the later 20th century, up to 65% of the population might consist of children. Poor material conditions, lack of systematic schooling, and the possibility of sexual or other violence are common companions in the life of child refugees.



The modern history of childhood involves two groups of children divided by economic conditions and exposure to collective violence.

And of course children themselves are sometimes pressed into conflicts. The growing use of child soldiers, particularly in civil strife in Africa, drew growing international attention and reproof.

International agencies have tried, certainly, to provide assistance, and international groups have formally condemned child soldiering, rape, and other extreme acts as contrary to children's rights. Individual children, supported as refugees or even given opportunities to emigrate, have sometimes found happy endings.

On the whole, however, the modern history of childhood involves two groups of children divided by economic conditions and exposure to collective violence or its wider results. In some key cases – Iraq during and between two wars; some regions in Africa – the results have actually reversed modern trends directly, with rising rates of child mortality and declining rates of education. In the case of some African regions the impact of disease, particularly the AIDS epidemic of the late 20th century, has contributed to these trends as well.

PROBLEMS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN

Economic divisions and war already complicate the recent world history of childhood, confounding any facile optimism about the benefits of modernity. Another fascinating set of issues affecting children who are not impoverished or direct victims of war is equally intriguing. This section sketches a number of child maladies that form part of modern history, where historical research in fact sheds light directly on the problems themselves and where, arguably, interdisciplinary inquiry can lead to further understanding in the future.

- It became already clear in the 19th century that modern conditions could promote new psychological problems in certain children. In Western Europe and the United States, a number of teenagers and young adults, almost exclusively female, became afflicted with *hysterical paralysis*, confined to their beds despite no discernible physical cause. The disease was new (initial cases appeared in the 18th century) and may have been a response to some of the stringent standards placed on middle-class girls as part of respectable domesticity. The disease would virtually disappear by the 1920s, perhaps because gender restrictions yielded.
- More durably, doctors in several Western countries began from the 1860s onward to identify cases of *anorexia nervosa*, mainly in middle-class girls and young women. The disease seemed to differ from earlier outbreaks of religiously-inspired food denial. In its initial phases preceded the adoption of slenderness styles in fashion, though by the 20th century these would play a growing role. Apparently, the phenomenon reflected a desire for rebellion against family, particularly maternal control, but in a situation where parental attention was framed in terms of loving affection (laced with encouragement to eat well), and so could not be protested directly. *Anorexia nervosa* rates would go up and down for several decades, but remain an important issue for a minority of young people in affluent societies (Brumberg, 2000).

- New ailments cropped up in association with children's role in consumerism. New concepts of *boredom* reflected the increasing expectation for active entertainment, and increasingly (particularly by the 20th century) children could use boredom claims as a way to plead for more adult indulgence. *Kleptomania* began to be identified by the later 19th century, an indication of new shopping arrangements with the rise of department stores, but also a new lust for unnecessary goods. Initial kleptomaniacs were disproportionately adult, middle-class women, but the disease would spread to teenagers, again in affluent societies, during the course of the 20th century.
- Rigorous school demands provoked new problems. An early identification of what would come to be called *attention deficit disorder* emerged in Germany in 1856, but discussion of the issue became more common from the 1920s onward. After World War II a perceived increase in the school problems of overactive children (particularly boys) led to greater impatience by parents and teachers, while new drugs, headed by Ritalin® (methylphenidate), became available. Use of prescription medicine to help children cope with school problems proved increasingly common, particularly in the United States. Another school-related disorder cropped up in Japan, called *hikikomori*; thousands of children annually proved unable to leave home and function normally (Stearns, 2004).
- *Childhood obesity* won growing attention from the later 20th century onward. Headed by a large and growing minority in the United States, Australia and most parts of Western Europe, weight problems soared. The problem resulted from increasing reliance on commercial snacks and fast foods, with large portions; an increasingly sedentary lifestyle that combined passive school attendance with immersion in television watching and computer games. While the problem originated in the affluent West, it spread rapidly among middle-class families in China, India, and even urban Africa.
- A global increase in *asthma* rates among children began to be reported from the 1980s onward, and the trend has continued. Explanations vary: some researchers believe that modern standards of cleanliness created households that were too dust-free depriving young children of adequate opportunities to develop immunities. Other explanations focus on over-medication of respiratory problems in young children, as in inhalers used for wheezing. Pollution may be involved, but not in a simple way: studies in West and East Germany in the 1980s (the latter measurably more polluted) showed higher asthma rates in the West.
- Perhaps most troubling was the apparent rise of *depression* among children. The disease was first identified in the West in the 1820s, initially called "lypemia" and described as a "sadness which is often debilitating and overwhelming." Use of the term depression began in the 1850s. Diagnoses became increasingly common from the 1920s onward; some authorities claim that rates doubled in urban societies in the second half of the 20th century. Here was a case, almost surely, in which modern circumstances including greater family instability joined a new capacity to label and diagnose in producing distinctive increases. Several studies suggest contrasts between more traditional community settings (rural Canada, Indian villages) and urban lifestyles

"One morning when he was 15, Takeshi shut the door to his bedroom, and for the next four years he did not come out. He didn't go to school. He didn't have a job. He didn't have friends. Month after month, he spent 23 hours a day in a room no bigger than a king-size mattress, where he ate dumplings, rice and other leftovers that his mother had cooked, watched TV game shows and listened to Radiohead and Nirvana. 'Anything,' he said, 'that was dark and sounded desperate.'" Jones M. NYTimes, January 15, 2006)

Hikikomori (pulling inward, being confined) is a Japanese term to describe a severe form of social phobia common in Japan. Adolescents (and adults) with this condition refuse to leave their house, attend school or participate in social activities.



"I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to do anything. I don't even have the will to pick up the phone. Just what am I supposed to do?"

Welcome to NHK! was a novel, comic book and cartoon about the life of a *hikikomori*. (Copyright Tatsuhiko Takimoto 2004, Kendi Oiwa 2004. Published by Kadokawashoten.)

in generating a higher incidence. Rates in industrializing settings like Mexico and South Korea rose particularly rapidly after 1960. While children were not initially a key group for depression, diagnosis began to become increasingly common by the later 20th century – and with this, another source of increasing medication for those who suffered. For reasons less clear – though more careful diagnosis was surely involved here as well – rates of autism and related disorders also increased (Kleinman & Good, 1986; Stearns, 2012).

- Modern psychological issues of this sort shaded off into almost certainly increasing *suicide* rates for a troubled minority of children,

specially adolescents. Japan, South Korea and the United States showed particularly high growth in suicide rates, though in some cases, after the 1980s, improvements in awareness and in counseling services seem to have helped to stabilize this problem.

The modern history of childhood thus displayed complex patterns of change, in which some widely-hailed benefits, such as the reduction of mortality, operate amid an impressive array of new signs of distress, physical but particularly mental.

GLOBALIZATION AND CHILDHOOD

Many of the trends in modern childhood reflect increasing global contacts and active imitation of developments like extensive schooling or public health. Arguably, however, contact patterns intensified from the second half of the 20th century onward in the network that came to be called globalization. This resulted from new technologies, like satellite communication and jet travel; but also from new policies, from the establishment of a somewhat more effective international body, the United Nations, to agreements on monetary coordination. Increasingly, virtually all societies decided to participate in the growing array of contacts; by 2014 only North Korea really held out.

Globalization had two additional impacts on childhood besides encouraging some common health provisions and educational measurements. Though not entirely new, a system of global consumerism that embraced children actively arose, and the expanding human rights movement began to include rights for children, despite the many barriers involved.

Children's consumerism expanded in new ways from the late 19th century onward. Even earlier, materials expressly designed for children began to emerge in industrial societies, for example in the category of children's books. In the late 19th century the practice of giving children allowances began to develop in the West, which in turn encouraged various commercial agents to seek to sell some goods to children directly; at the same time, middle-class parents began to feel a need to buy more items for their offspring. Early in the 20th century, the practice of providing dolls or other items, even to infants, came under some debate, with conservatives warning against encouraging too much reliance on the acquisition of things; but consumerism continued to expand.

Global elements emerged by the 1920s, as export-minded producers began to expand their market. By this point Japanese and United States manufacturers led the world in the creation of new toys and games, a position these nations have maintained ever since. The establishment of companies like Disney, also in the 1920s, led to the marketing of movies for children. After World War II, Disney Worlds would provide yet another target for child-centered family consumerism. The parks became beacons for international tourists.

Consumer fads for children developed, again across national boundaries though conditioned of course by available wealth. Items like Barbie dolls (US) or Hello Kitty (Japan), or related imitations, were widely sought. Television shows such as Sesame Street were widely disseminated and translated, winning substantial audiences, for example, in countries like Egypt.



[Click on the image to hear Professor Christopher Carlsmith summarise the history of childhood \(9:10\)](#)

Global consumer standards bore particularly on teenagers and young adults. The proliferation of American-style fast food outlets gave this group a social outlet independent from parents, a place to feel connected to global culture. This was precisely the benefit a Shanghai teenager noted, as he explained his preference for McDonalds – not the food itself, which he admitted he didn't like as much as home cooking. Music styles for teenagers similarly spread widely, encouraged by global concert tours and satellite television. South Korean and Japanese, as well as British and American groups won ecstatic audiences. Varying to some degree with regional culture as well as with levels of economic development, attachment to a global consumer community became an important aspect of later childhood.

The consumer evolution had interesting implications for parents and other adult authorities. Most obviously, commercial productions for children provided signals often independent of family control. They promoted the consolidation of age-based peer groups. Parental, government and religious authorities developed substantial anxieties about these outcomes, and various measures were introduced to limit the external influences, but tensions persisted.

Advancing consumerism also promoted (and ultimately reflected) a growing belief that children should be actively entertained as part of responsible parenting. The spread of birthday celebrations was a revealing symptom. “Happy birthday”, an American tune devised in the 1920s, was widely translated, and middle-class urban families in many countries began to lavish increasing attention on related parties and gifts for their offspring. This was a dramatically new tradition in many cultures, as in China, but it gained ground among consumer-minded parents. Commercial agencies sprang up in cities in China, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere, to assist parents with the festivities. Overall, the increasing attention to children as consumers responded to international example: it could be to compensate children for the effort they were meant to put into their studies, and it became a means of demonstrating affection. Reductions in birth rates facilitated more spending on the individual child and, at the same time, may have made the individual child more precious (Cross, 1997; Cross & Allison, 2006; Skelton & Valentine, 1998; Stearns, 2010).

The proliferation of American-style fast food outlets gave teenagers a social outlet independent from parents, a place to feel connected to global culture.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The effort to promote children's rights as part of a larger global human rights agenda expressed a different facet of globalization, gaining great attention but possibly with less direct impact on actual childhoods than consumerism had generated. The idea of children's rights clearly challenged many of the basic standards of agricultural societies, which had insisted on the primacy and independent authority of parents. Of course this authority had been limited somewhat by religious rules – as in Islamic protection of the property of orphans, or the efforts by all the missionary religions to prevent infanticide – and even more by community oversight, which often guarded against abuse. But the notion that children have rights was novel and, not surprisingly, it developed both gradually and incompletely.

The first reference to children's rights came in a pamphlet by the British radical Thomas Spence, in the 1790s; children deserved protection against poverty and abuse. The idea of rights advanced somewhat in the 19th century, particularly

in industrial countries, attached to laws against child labor or requirements for education. Thus Horace Mann, the American reformer, declaimed that “a human being is not attaining his full heights until he is educated.” Ideas about special treatment for juvenile delinquents could imply another category of rights. Reform movements in other countries – for example, the growing movement in China against footbinding, which gained ground from the later 19th century, also reflected an expansion of the range of protections offered to children.

It was not until the 20th century, however, that notions of children’s rights became more formal and began to extend, at least in principle, across national boundaries. Ellen Key, a Swedish school teacher, published a book called *The Century of the Child* in 1900. Widely translated, the book essentially called attention to the many ways that even leading societies were falling short in what they owed their children. Growing concern stimulated global campaigns against child labor: this became a key theme of the *Save the Children* movement launched by the Englishwoman Eglantyne Jebb, initially inspired by the horrors of World War I. The new International Labor Office, linked to the League of Nations, began an arduous effort to win agreement on banning work for all children under age 15 (Alaimo & Klug, 2002; Christina, 2009; Mason, 1996). Jebb herself sponsored a pioneering *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, in 1923. This stressed that children should have the first call on relief efforts in any kind of disaster; they should be protected against poverty and ill-health; delinquents should be redeemed; children generally should be educated and shielded from exploitation. Other rights statements emerged in the interwar decades, spurred also by the commitment of the Soviet regime to children’s rights in areas like schooling (part of the Soviet constitution of 1936). In 1943 Franklin Roosevelt included children’s rights, particularly to education, for the first time as he sketched the American vision of a postwar world.

Various international programs to provide relief to children during and after World War II, and the establishment of the United Nations, furthered the movement. The General Assembly expanded on Jebb’s declaration in 1959, while proclaiming a Universal Children’s Day. Children had rights to medical care, material and mental development including free primary education; they should not work “before an appropriate age”; they had, interestingly, the right to be happy and to be loved.

Many new national constitutions now included statements on children’s rights. A growing movement won the abolition of the death penalty for children convicted of crimes (the United States adopted this measure only in the 21st century, noting the new international standards). Other rights provisions insisted that children not be forced to marry without their explicit consent (a provision that the People’s Republic of China had pointedly inserted in their constitution).

Repeated attempts to win global agreement on a firmer rights statement long failed, particularly because several countries worried about the implications of a ban on child labor. The United States, nervous about binding international agreements in general, wanted to preserve the child labor of migrant agricultural workers; India opposed systematic measures. Only in 1989 was a United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child finally adopted. It was a compromise measure, highlighting more extreme abuses. Thus it attacked sexual exploitation of



Thomas Spence

Thomas Spence (1750-1814), one of nineteen children born to a poor Scottish family and without formal education, was the leading English revolutionary of his day, spending long periods in prison. He had a strong commitment to individual and press freedom and the common ownership of the land, and is credited with being the first to raise the issue of children’s rights in his booklet “[The Rights of Infants](#)”.

children, capital punishment for children, the use of child soldiers, sale of children to pay off family debts, or more abusive forms of work (but not work in general). Still, supporters noted the importance of establishing that children did have rights as individuals, even against parents. And a really interesting provision, Article 12, sought to assure children “the right to express his or her own views freely” and be heard in any decision affecting the child. By 2012 all but three nations (Somalia, the United States, and South Sudan) had signed the Convention and most had also agreed to a modest further expansion in 2000 (see Chapter J.7).

CONCLUSION

The past two centuries have seen massive changes in the nature of childhood and in the lived experiences of many children. The rapidity and recency of change apply even to countries where the process of altering agricultural practices began early; key issues still require adjustment, for example in the area of gender standards as part of the socialization of children. At the same time, regional differences of various sorts continue to complicate generalizations about the nature and impact of change. And the downsides of change, the emergence of new and often unexpected problems, obviously complicate evaluations as well.



Eglanynne Jebb founded the *Save the Children Fund* in England in 1919 to aid children in war-ravaged central Europe.

- Do you have questions?
- Comments?

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PLEASE GO TO APPENDIX J.9.1 FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISES

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Appendix J.9.1

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING EXERCISES

For each of the following questions sketch a one-page response

1. What are the most obvious problems and deficiencies in current historical work on children and childhood? Can some of the problems be better addressed?
2. What are the most important things to know about the history of childhood for a non-historian professional dealing with children?
3. Does modern history help explain some of the key problems facing children in modern societies? Does it help suggest solutions?
4. What are the main divisions among children in world history, taking into account regional, social class and gender factors?
5. Are childhoods likely to become more or less similar in future? Give three reasons for your response.