

Historical Changes in Childhood and Child Rearing in American Society

Posted on September 17, 2018

View this essay online:

<https://academic-master.com/historical-changes-in-childhood-and-child-rearing-in-american-society/>

Introduction

Childhood and child-rearing practices in the United States have changed substantially because families respond to mortality, work, schooling, religion, law, medicine, race, gender expectations, technology, and economic conditions. Childhood is therefore both a biological stage and a social category whose boundaries are organized differently across historical periods. Earlier American children were not simply “miniature adults,” nor were parents necessarily less loving because children worked earlier or mortality was higher. Families mourned, protected, disciplined, taught, and depended on children in ways shaped by the resources and beliefs available to them. The modern ideal of a long, protected, school-centered childhood emerged gradually through industrialization, compulsory education, child-labor reform, public health, developmental psychology, and changing family structures. That development was also unequal. Enslaved children, Indigenous children subjected to colonial institutions, poor laboring children, and children in segregated schools experienced very different forms of childhood from those described in middle-class advice literature. Historical study therefore helps explain both the gains of modern childhood and the inequalities that continue to shape who receives protection, autonomy, and opportunity.

Colonial Childhood, Family Work, and Mortality

Colonial childhood varied by region, religion, class, race, and community. In many European settler households, children performed economically useful chores while learning practical skills and religious expectations within the family. Puritan communities emphasized literacy for scripture, obedience, moral discipline, and deliberate spiritual formation, but other colonial traditions organized authority differently. Enslaved African children lived under a fundamentally different legal order because slaveholders could compel labor, separate families, and sell children away from parents. Indigenous nations also had diverse child-rearing traditions involving extended kin, oral teaching, participation in communal work, and learning through observation, yet colonization disrupted those systems through violence, land loss, missions, and later boarding-school policies. High mortality affected all families, but it should not be interpreted as proof of emotional indifference. Diaries, letters, gravestones, sermons, and family records document profound grief after children died. What changed over time were the conditions under which attachment was expressed. Epidemics, poor sanitation, limited

medical treatment, and dangerous childbirth made death more common, while later vaccination, public health, and medical care increased survival and changed parental expectations about the future.

Developmental Ideas, Industrialization, and Schooling

Enlightenment and nineteenth-century ideas gradually strengthened the notion that childhood involved distinctive developmental needs. John Locke emphasized the importance of experience, habit, and education, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that children should not simply be treated as incomplete adults whose development could be rushed. These ideas influenced elite educational thought, print culture, advice literature, and eventually wider expectations about age-appropriate learning. Industrialization then made the status of children a major public issue. Children had always contributed to household and farm economies, but mills, mines, factories, canneries, street trades, and workshops exposed many to long hours, dangerous machinery, dust, chemicals, and disrupted schooling. Reformers increasingly distinguished useful age-appropriate work from labor that endangered health or replaced education. Compulsory schooling expanded at the same time, organizing childhood around age-graded classrooms, attendance requirements, peer groups, and academic progression. By the early twentieth century, the “normal” child was increasingly imagined as a student rather than a full-time worker. That transformation created important protections while also allowing schools to impose dominant cultural norms on immigrant, Indigenous, Black, disabled, and poor children.

Protection, Child Labor Reform, and Unequal State Power

Progressive reform and federal labor law institutionalized the idea that children required special legal protection, but protective systems could be both supportive and coercive. Juvenile courts distinguished youth offending from adult criminality, public-health campaigns targeted infant mortality, settlement houses provided services, and reformers documented dangerous child labor. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 eventually established durable federal restrictions on hours, wages, and hazardous employment for minors, although important exemptions remained, especially in agriculture. Child welfare systems also expanded, but interventions were not culturally neutral. Poor, immigrant, Black, and Indigenous families could face surveillance or child removal when middle-class standards were treated as universal. Native American boarding schools represent one of the most severe examples because children were removed from families and communities in efforts to suppress language, identity, and cultural practice. Segregated schools likewise denied equal resources to Black children long after public education had become a defining institution of childhood. The history of “protection” therefore requires attention to due process, family voice, race, and power

as well as to the genuine benefits of safety regulation and education.

Developmental Science and Changing Family Structures

Twentieth-century developmental psychology expanded the authority of pediatricians, psychologists, educators, social workers, and parenting experts. Research on cognition, attachment, behavior, adolescence, and family relationships improved understanding of development and challenged some harmful practices, but advice changed repeatedly as theories and cultural expectations shifted. Parents were variously encouraged to impose rigid schedules, avoid excessive affection, promote permissiveness, intensively supervise achievement, or prioritize self-esteem. Contemporary developmental science is more cautious about one universal parenting formula because children differ in temperament, disability, culture, and circumstance, and family relationships are reciprocal rather than one-directional. Family structures also became more openly diverse as women's paid employment, divorce law, reproductive autonomy, migration, and changing gender expectations transformed caregiving. Single-parent households, blended families, adoptive families, multigenerational households, transnational families, and [same-sex parents](#) all raise children. The quality of care depends more on stability, responsiveness, safety, resources, and relationships than on whether one specific household form matches a historical middle-class ideal.

Children's Rights, Voice, and Digital Childhood

Modern childhood increasingly recognizes children as people with perspectives and developing capacities rather than solely as dependents under adult authority. Legal and professional practices in education, disability, healthcare, custody, abuse prevention, and juvenile justice have created greater attention to children's voice, consent or assent where appropriate, and procedural protection. This does not mean that children possess the same decision-making authority as adults in every context. A developmentally appropriate model balances protection with increasing autonomy, allowing children to participate more as their skills and judgment grow. Digital technology has created a new setting for this negotiation. Connected devices give children access to education, entertainment, friendships, creativity, and public audiences while also exposing them to cyberbullying, privacy loss, commercial surveillance, sexual exploitation, misinformation, sleep disruption, and algorithmically selected content. Parents can no longer control every source of information entering the home, making guidance more important than either total surveillance or complete freedom. Digital parenting includes modeling responsible behavior, discussing consent and credibility, protecting personal data, maintaining sleep and offline relationships, and adapting boundaries as children mature.

Conclusion

American childhood has changed through a long interaction among family economies, mortality decline, schooling, labor law, developmental science, civil rights, gender roles, family diversity, and technology. Earlier children were not uniformly unloved miniature adults, and modern children are not automatically better cared for simply because they spend more years in school or under adult supervision. The most important historical change has been institutional: childhood became increasingly separated from full-time economic production, organized around compulsory education, protected through specialized law, and recognized as a developmental period in which children gradually acquire greater voice and autonomy. Those protections have never been distributed equally. Enslavement, racial segregation, Indigenous child removal, poverty, disability discrimination, housing instability, and unequal schools have repeatedly shaped who receives safety and opportunity. Contemporary families also face new pressures from intensive parenting expectations and digital technology. Historical perspective prevents romanticizing either the past or the present. It shows that raising children is never a purely private activity because laws, workplaces, schools, healthcare systems, media, and public resources all help determine whether families can provide security, belonging, education, and meaningful participation.

References

- Ariès, P. (1962). *Centuries of childhood: A social history of family life*. Vintage.
- Fass, P. S. (Ed.). (2013). *The Routledge history of childhood in the Western world*. Routledge.
- Holloway, S. L., & Valentine, G. (2000). *Children's geographies: Playing, living, learning*. Routledge.
- Lamb, M. E. (2000). The history of research on father involvement: An overview. *Marriage & Family Review*, 29(2-3), 23-42.
- Library of Congress. (n.d.). *Child labor*.
- Mintz, S. (2004). *Huck's raft: A history of American childhood*. Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Department of Labor. (n.d.). *Child labor provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act*.