

The Causes of Childhood Disappearance and the Reformatory Role of Child Protection Laws

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Is Childhood Disappearing?

There is a debatable argument that childhood is shifting from how it used to be long ago. Childhood as we know it is disappearing as evidenced by difficulties experienced when distinguishing between childhood and adulthood. In his book, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman (1994) believes childhood is “disappearing at a dazzling speed”. To make his point, he identifies the similarities experienced by both children and adults concerning modes of dressing and the manner in which the various constitutions accord both these parties equal rights and freedoms.

He went ahead to disclose the fact that children in today’s world were placed in a position where they would be charged with adult crimes such as murder and rape. Postman’s argument is formed around technological advancements, claiming that technology is responsible for shaping [today’s society](#). Just like his counterpart, Aries, he suggested that most individuals in middle age were neither able to write meaning that their only means of communication was dependent on speech making it difficult to distinguish between adults and children (Aries, 2014). In his opinion, Postman observed that education and literacy levels were the main distinguishing factors between adults and children. This division occurred because education was perceived as a progressive process, meaning it took several years to become efficient in [reading and writing skills](#) (Postman, 1985). However, in the current world, both scholars agree that technology, as well as things like television and the internet, have made it easier for children to access the adult world thus resulting in the disappearance of childhood as we know it. In essence, the scholars believed that childhood was a socially created stage in young minds as they grow up.

The thesis that rendered social influence as the basis for the construction of childhood was engineered by Philippe Aries in his book “*Centuries of Childhood*” where he claims that childhood only began after the Middle Ages had ended. Mainly working from French iconography and manuscripts, Aries argued that there was no form of awareness about the nature of childhood or the particular life of being that distinguishes an adult from a child (Aries, 2014). Children between the ages of 5 and 7 were considered ready to survive physically independently without supervision (Doherty, 2014). These children would be launched into the great community of men without necessarily having a transitory period from childhood to adulthood. Despite the ambiguity of Aries’s thesis and his modest claims, Postman buys into it wholesale. This has, in turn, led many historians of childhood to believe

that childhood is a universal stage that was even recognized in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, Postman's approach sees the spread of literacy as the leading cause for the distinction between children and adults. This was particularly so in aspects to do with sexuality and the horrors associated with diseases or death (Privitera, 2016). However, this difference may soon be curtailed due to the introduction of visual culture in the 20th century, which seems to threaten and ultimately bring about the disappearance of childhood (Wells, 2015). Following the arguments by both scholars, it is clear that Postman is more of a pessimist than Aries as he overstates the decline to an extent he threatens the disappearance of childhood and speaks of it as if the world would pot. In truism, if he had lived longer to see the age of Facebook, surely he would feel much better.

Going forward, Postman is a bit sloppy compared to other scholars who have engaged in the same study as himself and have also come up with talks about the social construction of childhood. All these authors seem to agree that there would be no childhood constructed in any other way other than social development (Mukherji, 2015). To an extent, this statement is true, but from Postman's perspective, the message is perhaps more intuitive than is controversial. In other words, the practices that remain memorable throughout childhood experiences are sensitive to social institutions' social norms and designs where children pass and acquire the content that constructs them socially (Privitera, 2016). As much as childhood may be described as a universal stage, children's experiences which form part of their childhood are not.

Onwards, sociologists attribute the "disappearance" of childhood experiences to the fact that children are nowadays valued and protected by the law. Due to the enactment of particular laws, children have become more secure regarding security and healthcare, and they are given special treatment, which is better than for adults. However, a contradicting theory, the conflict theory, argues that nothing has exchanged because inequalities still exist such as children are oppressed by adults who instil physical and emotional wounds through acts such as sexual harassment. In the medieval period, adults were differentiated from children because they were treated the same (Swain, 2017). According to Neil Postman, there was no way to separate these two age groups. For example, communication was done by messengers who acted as town speakers and through gossip meaning that children were involved each step of the way thereby taking their naivety and innocence. Moreover, the increased mortality rate meant that there was no strong attachment between the parents and their children (Doherty, 2014). It wasn't the 15th century when public communication was placed under censorship, resulting in children being treated differently from adults. Like his colleague Postman, Aries concurs that childhood has dramatically improved compared to the Middle Ages. For instance, children were allowed to contribute to household and workplace deliberations thus giving the same power as adults (Keenan, 2016). Besides, the law treated them equally to adults, for example, they would be charged and punished for committing crimes. In truism, it has come to people's realization that children should be treated differently and separately to maintain their innocence. The law has passed laws that protect and necessitate proper care of the children. For example, the Child Labor Act of 1938 protects children from engaging in employment at an early age and prosecutes the guardian(s) when they fail to adhere. It also provides for the "goodies" and enjoyment that come with childhood (Mukherji, 2015). The other act is the Child Protection Act of

1889, which aims to safeguard the innocence and welfare of children. In 1870, it was decided that education should be made compulsory for all children (Reed, 2017). This, in turn, gave children opportunities to make better futures for themselves as they all had equal chances. The results of these laws are that they have made parents more children-centered than before.

However, the conflict sociologists insist that the view of the march of progress has failed to observe that massive inequalities exist to date in childhood. They argue that more children are still vulnerable and are unprotected and uncared for (Wells, 2015). Studies by this group of critics indicate that $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total young adults faced difficulties coping with their childhood (Penn, 2014). Other factors such as gender and social status affect children's childhood experiences. This can be illustrated by the fact that poor women were more likely to give birth to underweight and unhealthy babies (MacBlain, 2017). Furthermore, [gender discrimination](#) in society results in situations where male figures are better placed than female figures when it comes to the job market.

Child liberationists such as Holt and Firestone argue that parents take advantage of the fact that they are guardians and thus turn their dominance into weapons which they use to oppress the children. For example, data taken in 2006 indicated that approximately 31,500 children were under protection because they faced significant harm at their homes (Edwards, 2015). These figures display the [dark side](#) of our society where parents have full control of their children. Children are not allowed to work and are therefore dependent on their parents. Those from poor backgrounds also pass through this stage and are forced to persevere and face the situation as it is. Postman reaffirms that childhood is being spoiled by adulthood, for example, girls nowadays wear short skirts and dresses that you normally expect an older woman to put on. Moreover, it is all over the news that children are now committing adult crimes such as murder. This may be attributable to visual media such as games and TV which expose children to violent behaviors thus influencing their actions.

From the precedent, it is clear that childhood has improved since middle age. Society has come to terms with the fact that children must be treated differently from adults. As much as more laws have been passed to increase the protection of children, it is entirely the parent's responsibility to watch over the behaviour of their children. By so doing we can reduce cases of street children or instances where mothers leave their kids out in the streets. Luckily, society is becoming more aware of such dangers and is thereby prepared as can be seen by the formation of charity groups and organizations such as NSPCC which take care of such cases.

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