

CHILDHOOD

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In the Agricultural Age Childhood changed with the advent of agriculture. Children became more numerous, with higher birth rates, usually comprising about half the total population. More social and family attention to children became essential. More important, children developed new utility; they could be put to work at a fairly young age, and while they were not initially productive enough to compensate for their support, they would ultimately prove vital to the family economy, in agriculture but also in the crafts. Many other features of agricultural childhood followed from the primacy of work obligations, most particularly a fairly uniform emphasis on obedience, in the family and community and (where relevant) also in schools. Childhood varied of course by social class, with schooling opportunities, or lack thereof, one obvious emblem. And it varied by gender, thanks to the dictates of the patriarchal system. In most agricultural societies, though play with children was often enjoyed, childhood was not seen as a particularly pleasant state, to be fondly recalled later in life; children who had some adult qualities were admired. At the same time many historians have emphasized that children also had opportunities for play, often in large, ungraded age groups and without much adult interference; they hypothesize that these pure play opportunities were actually greater than in most modern settings.

Variations and Changes Regional cultures dictated additional features of childhood. Chinese children, at least in the upper classes, were trained in elaborate etiquette. While fathers were characteristically seen as rather distant figures, often disciplinarians, there may have been some differences according to culture as well as personality. Children in more complex, extended families, particularly when there were multiple wives or concubines, may have had different experiences from children in more nuclear families. The impact of religion is intriguing. All the major religions stressed the authority of parents; parents could even have disobedient children put to death in Judaism, while Confucian China generated a saying, “parents are always right.” Christianity, particularly in some versions like Protestantism, strongly emphasized original sin, which could encourage unusually strict discipline including physical punishments. American Indians were aghast at the spankings meted out to children by European settlers. Islam did not view childhood so strictly through sin, though more historical work is needed to identify any results in practice. Religious changes overall affected childhood, but not usually in fundamental ways. Several historians have argued, finally, that child labor began to become more arduous in the early modern period, in response to the new forms of Atlantic slavery and pressures to produce more to respond to commercial growth and larger populations.

The Long 19th Century: A New Model of Childhood Industrialization had a massive, if gradual, impact on childhood, beginning of course in the West. Most obviously, new concerns about child labor arose, after a generation or so of factory industry. Children’s work was normal, but factory conditions exposed to new safety, health and moral hazards, and ultimately not only reformers but many working-class parents sought regulation – including even elimination of child labor at least under the age of 12. Laws and enforcement came slowly, but by the late 19th or early 20th century child labor was really declining in the West, not only in the factories but in most other settings as well. In its place came schooling. Schooling might still call for obedience and discipline – the shift did not require complete change. But schooling singled out other capacities; it reduced differences between girls and boys; it might even invite new attention to creativity and imagination. Furthermore, schooling cost parents some money, for books and clothes, and along with the decline of child labor this converted children from economic asset to liability. This in turn prompted the drop in the birth rate, led by the urban middle class but ultimately spreading to all groups. This changed childhood from another angle: fewer children might increase parental attention, perhaps even affection, for individual children. In Western culture children began to be idealized as innocent emotional assets in family life. At the same time, children had fewer siblings to interact with, and this often along with schooling encouraged greater interest in same-age friends. Then came the dramatic decline in infant mortality, which came close to eliminating childhood as a death category, with results that could affect emotional life for parents and children alike. The final basic change, reflected particularly in the rise of education, was the growing interest the state took in childhood, really for the first time; this created some new competition with parental authority, and some recurrent tensions.

Complexities These new forms of childhood were long reserved largely for the West, and there was variations within the West depending on social class and urban vs. rural residence. But as Japan industrialized and introduced new school requirements, it too picked up a new explicit valuation of childhood, while using the state to try to make

sure parents did their jobs properly. Following the West, Japan also introduced the concept of juvenile delinquency, seeking to differentiate younger wrongdoers and facilitate their rehabilitation. The rise of communism, in Russia and then elsewhere, created a distinctive set of changes for children. On the one hand, schooling increasingly placed work (though youth groups might have some work obligations), and the infant mortality rate went down, soon joined by a falling birth rate. On the other hand the communist regimes did organize youth groups, seeking to instill special loyalty in young people and reduce the influence of parents. Childhood changed less, of course, in regions that were not yet significantly industrial, though in some cases reliance on child labor might increase.

Global Changes By the later 20th century most regions of the world were participating in some of the common changes of childhood. Child labor went down except in south and southeast Asia, where it actually grew for a time in response to economic hardship. Schooling levels increased, though of course regional variations reflected differences in resources. Except for a few regions wracked by conflict (including in some cases the use of children as soldiers) or special poverty or disease, child morality went down. And again with regional variation, so did the birth rate. Increasingly, from the 1920s onward, international agencies such as the International Labor Office tried to encourage some of these changes, particularly working against child labor. In 1989, amid great disagreement, a somewhat modest Convention of the Rights of the Child was issued under United Nations auspices. It sought to ban the most exploitative labor, and included interesting phrases about the rights of children to some self-expression. The idea that children had rights was itself an interesting concept, though the main focus was on rights to education and decent health. Regional variations included more than poverty and disease levels. They also included disagreements about whether children's individuality should be encouraged, as perhaps implied by the rights documents, or whether family and community loyalty came first; variations about gender differentiation could relate to these alternatives. Disagreements about physical punishments divided the world: some societies moved strongly against spankings, but others dissented. Most regions officially agreed to conventions that children should not be put to death for crimes, but there were a few dissenters including, until 2006, the United States. Many societies now also emphasized childhood as a consumer category, creating new toys and entertainments for children. By the 1920s Japan and the United States led in devising new toys, and from the United States also came the idea of special celebrations of birthdays, which spread to urban areas in other parts of the world as well. (In earlier Chinese tradition, children thanked their parents on birthdays, rather than receiving special attention.) Something of a global adolescent culture emerged, based on common interest in fast foods, similar music and films; the spread of this culture to Vietnam, early in the 21st century, was signaled by the introduction of a new concept of teenager. But children as consumers and efforts to promote children's happiness also varied with culture and with resources. Global childhood continued to display a mixture of common innovations and regional complexities.

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Suggested Reading:

Childhood in World History. By Peter N. Stearns (Routledge, 2010).

Girlhood: A Global History. B Jennifer Helgren and Colleen Vasconcellos (Rutgers University Press, 2010).

The Global History of Childhood Reader. Edited by Heidi Morrison (Routledge, 2012).

A classic in the field: *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. By Philippe Aries (Vintage, 1965).

Discussion

1. How did the rise of agriculture affect children and childhood?
2. What protections for children existed in Babylonian law?
3. What were the social roles of children in Mesoamerica? How did children contribute to status?
4. How did the major religions affect childhood? Did they create major regional differences in the experiences of children?
5. How did ideas of childhood change from the medieval Islamic era to Ottoman Empire? What global changes contributed to these internal changes?
6. How do historians use infant mortality to learn more about other aspects of society? What does infant mortality tell us about the impact of Industrial Revolution?
7. What changes in punishment occurred in the long 19th century? How did changes in punishment reflect wider changes in the concept of childhood? What wider ideas impacted these two?
8. How did the industrial revolution alter childhood? Were its effects largely similar across the major regions?
9. How has globalization impacted children? What has been the impact on the concept of childhood?
10. What were the major regional differences in childhood during the contemporary period of world history, and what caused them?