

The Meaning of Childhood

What do we mean by a 'normal' childhood? It really depends on the period when a person was born and where they live. If you asked a parent in Britain today, they would probably say that childhood should be the happiest time of a person's life: a time when the child is loved, kept safe and is free to play.

However, even within the same culture, ideas about childhood have changed dramatically within a short period of time. British children growing up in the 1960s or 1970s seem to have had more freedom than children in the early twenty-first century. They were allowed to go about more freely, walking to school or to visit their friends, or using public transport. They were also more likely to be asked to do things like clean floors and wash the dishes and to look after younger brothers and sisters.

Today, parents are far more protective. They worry more about the dangers their children might face, and some parents also involve themselves excessively with their child's experiences and problems. These are the 'helicopter' parents. They are called this because, like helicopters, they continually hover over their child's head. Childhood also ends later than it used to. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a twelve-year-old girl might have been sent off to work in a factory or as a maid for a wealthy family. She would have earned money and sent some of it back to her family. Twelve-year-old boys often become apprentices and learnt a trade, and in the countryside children worked in the fields and looked after animals almost as soon as they could walk.

The further back we go in history, the more difficult it is to have an accurate picture of attitudes to childhood. We know very little, for example, about the attitudes of mothers in eighteenth-century Britain. For example, what sort of mother could send her son, still a child, to join the Royal Navy, where he could expect a tough life, bad food and constant danger? Was she indifferent, cruel, or did she simply have no choice? And yet, boys as young as ten were sent away to sea. And it wasn't only the sons of the poor; wealthy families sent their sons, some as young as eight, to join the navy. Incredibly, they were put in charge of men who had many years of experience at sea.

So how have things changed? In some societies people are having fewer children. Does this fact alone mean that children are more precious to their parents and that therefore they have more of a 'normal' childhood? There is a concern that in a family with an only child, the parents and grandparents give the child a huge amount of attention and spoil them by buying them anything the child wants. The result of this is that the child expects their parents to do anything they tell them to, which creates problems for the child as they start to grow up.

A childhood in the slums of Bangladesh or on the war-torn streets of so many parts of the world remains what it has been for most children for much of history: a time of physical hardship, danger and little opportunity to get an education.

Questions 1-8

Do the following statements agree with the information in the text?

Write:

TRUE if the text confirms the statement

FALSE if the text contradicts the statement

NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to know from the text

Statements

- 1 Sixty years ago, children were expected to help around the house.
- 2 Today the world is a more dangerous place.
- 3 Helicopter parents love their children more than other parents.
- 4 People today have shorter childhoods than children in the past.
- 5 In the past children who lived in the country worked out of doors.
- 6 Eighteenth-century mothers were cruel or indifferent to their children.
- 7 Children serving in the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century might find themselves in charge of adults
- 8 Modern Western ideas about childhood are probably considered unusual in other cultures