



Read the text, then choose the correct answer for each question (1-7).

1. In paragraph 1, we learn that ____
 1. children cannot be charged with a crime.
 2. a 10-year-old criminal will face different treatment in the UK than in Belgium.
 3. child crime is worse in England than in Belgium.
 4. children are not prosecuted in the USA.
2. In paragraph 2, what do we learn about the age of criminal responsibility?
 1. It is meant to be the age when children know if what they do is right or wrong.
 2. It causes a lot of fighting between countries.
 3. It should be the same in every country.
 4. It lets children know there is a difference between right and wrong.
3. Setting an age for criminal responsibility is hard because ____
 1. the law is very complicated.
 2. children cannot predict their actions.
 3. difficult questions must be answered.
 4. children are naturally naughty.
4. In countries where the age of criminal responsibility is low, ____
 1. many people are happy it is low.
 2. children mature faster.
 3. adult prisons are full of children.
 4. most people want it to be higher.
5. People who support a low age of criminal responsibility do so because ____
 1. children are responsible at a young age.
 2. children think committing a crime is funny.
 3. crime might increase if it is raised.
 4. the law isn't taken seriously by children.
6. In medieval England, ____
 1. children faced the same punishments as adults.
 2. A serious crimes were rare.
 3. stealing animals was a common crime.
 4. child crime was a very big problem.
7. Today, most child criminals ____
 1. are typically not found guilty.
 2. develop their criminal behaviour from adults.
 3. can expect authorities to attempt to rehabilitate them.
 4. can expect to be tried as adults in courts.

Age and Criminal Responsibility

In countries around the world, a child must be above a certain age before they can be charged with a criminal offence. This 'age of criminal responsibility', varies considerably. For example, in England, children are considered responsible for all illegal acts once they reach the age of 10. In Belgium, individuals are 18 before they reach the age of criminal responsibility. In the USA, it is up to a judge to decide whether or not a child can be held responsible for a crime.

How is an 'age of criminal responsibility' decided? Well, roughly speaking, it is taken to be the age when a child knows the difference between right and wrong. Every country agrees that children are not capable of understanding the difference between right and wrong below a certain age. But they strongly disagree on what this age is.

Pinpointing the age at which children have learnt the difference between right and wrong is difficult. For example, how old are children when they understand that something is seriously wrong as opposed to simply naughty? Moreover, how old are children when they are able to understand the consequences of their actions? This is important because the law states that a person must understand the possible consequences of an action in order to be held responsible for it.

In countries like England where the age of criminal responsibility is low, many people argue that it should be raised. They point out that it does not make sense to say that a child is mature enough to be put into an adult prison at the age of 10, but is not mature enough to drive, marry or vote for another 8 years.

By contrast, people who want the age of criminal responsibility to stay low say that raising the age would lead to higher levels of crime. They also argue that a low age of criminal responsibility makes children realise that committing a crime is a serious offence.

Historically, one of the main reasons for introducing an age of criminal responsibility was that severe penalties were handed out for even the smallest of crimes. In medieval England for instance, a person could be hanged for stealing a sheep. As children were also treated in the same harsh way as adults when they broke the law, it was thought necessary to protect them from inappropriate punishments.

Today, even in countries with a low age of criminal responsibility, it is rare for a child to be tried in an adult court. What is more, a child found guilty of a crime will rarely be sent to an adult prison. Most countries have realised that if a child goes to an adult prison and mixes with adult criminals, not only will he be physically unsafe, but he will likely leave prison with an increased criminal knowledge. And the aim of most countries is to try to turn a child away from a life of crime.