

# THE INVENTION OF CHILDHOOD

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What does it mean to be young? In agrarian societies, babies often weren't named until they were toddlers. Artists in the Middle Ages painted children as miniature adults (if they painted them at all). And the Victorians put them to work in coal mines. With help from historical treatises, children's books and Mister Rogers, Katie Calautti explains why "kids will be kids" has meant so many different things over the centuries.

In recent years, "intensive parenting" has replaced tiger moms and helicopter dads as the most talked about trend in child-rearing. Intensive parents don't just demand academic perfection and hover around in an effort to mitigate risk—they also plan their child's extracurricular activities down to the minute, play with them and encourage them to communicate about everything happening in their heads. Think: parent as professor, personal assistant, playmate, therapist and disciplinarian. And while some believe this approach paves a smoother path to success for little ones, others say it's robbing them of their self-reliance.

Experts lament the hothousing of childhood and the pressures placed upon the young right from birth. But when we decry childhood as "lost," what exactly are we referring to? The idea of life beginning with a period of care-free playfulness has, in fact, only recently been found. Perhaps it was even invented.

It all began with the 1960 release of *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* by French historian Philippe Ariès, a self-dubbed "anarchist of the right." His explosive stance—that, prior to the 17th century, childhood effectively didn't exist, and children were simply treated as small adults—ignited a firestorm of research by anthropologists, sociologists, behavioral psychologists and historians. This was the 1960s: the dawn of an era of political activism and reproductive freedom, of sex, drugs and rock and roll. The family unit was poised

to shift, but—according to a 2014 Council on Contemporary Families survey—in 1960, 65 percent of American children lived with married parents where the father worked and the mother stayed home. As such, it was a particularly loaded decade for a historian to claim that children had not always been uniquely nurtured, prized members of a family.

American children's book author Shel Silverstein once wrote, "There are no happy endings. Endings are the saddest part, so just give me a happy middle and a very happy start." He, like most children's authors, understood childhood in the way that has become commonplace in America: that children are the most valued members of society, and that the beginning of life should be a precious cocoon in which the child's every need is catered to. Anthropologist David F. Lancy coined a term for this approach: neontocracy. The opposite of this—and the more prevalent system, historically speaking—he calls a gerontocracy, which emphasizes its oldest members.

Lancy posits that gerontocracies approach children as "pick-when-ripe": they aren't fully recognized until they master adult actions and thinking. In neontocracies, children are "pick-when-green": personhood is recognized immediately, then carefully cultivated. And though most of the modern world is ruled by the urge to shape and speed ripening, history seems to suggest we should let nature take its course. As historian Peter N. Stearns puts it in *Grow-*

*ing Up: The History of Childhood in a Global Context*, children were considered "economic liabilities" in early human economies such as hunter-gatherer societies. Small children exercised autonomy—they weren't separated by age groups or sheltered from adult experiences. They learned by watching and exploring, and the parental approach was decidedly hands-off. A child walked too close to the fire and burned herself? She never did it again. He picked up a knife and cut himself? He quickly understood the meaning of the tool.

When societies transitioned to early agrarian economies, the difficulties of being a child doubled. Along with struggling to be fed and nurtured, they became an integral part of the workforce. Now, a family's worth and survival were dependent on how much land they had and the harvest it brought them—so children worked in the fields. These days, a five-year-old is relegated to playing with age-appropriate toys; back then, he would've been running atop newly seeded soil with drums to scare away birds, weeding, or helping with the harvest.

Before the advent of modern medicine and sanitation, mortality rates for children ranged from 30 to 50 percent; death was an expected quotient in the family planning calculation. As a result, infants were often left in a state of probation, not named until they were years old—and so likelier to go the distance—or instead bequeathed the monikers of their deceased siblings. Committing affection and resources

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TEXT:  
KATIE CALAUTTI

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to a child wasn't practical until its survival was guaranteed. And even when it was, surplus children were often abandoned, hired out or given to other families—anything to even out resources. Late-in-life children were afforded one new function, though: They were planned by parents so they could stick around and take care of them in their old age.

It wasn't until the Enlightenment that childhood as we know it found a foothold. Familial love and nurturing was officially in vogue and art reflected the changing attitudes toward children. “Childhood, like all the concepts that govern our sense of who we are, is constantly evolving,” says Anne Higonnet, chair and professor of art history at Barnard College of Columbia University. “Artists are always trying to express the values of their moment.” Whereas medieval works rarely pictured children (and if they did, they looked like small adults), works created during the Enlightenment celebrated children as individuals. Ariès notes an uptick in family portraits with children prominently displayed, underscoring their integral part in the unit. He also mentions a trend toward portraits of dead children, which rose as the infant mortality rate fell. Child death was becoming an exception instead of a rule and families valued lost children enough to commemorate them.

The 18th-century French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin was one of the first to focus on painting individual portraits of children as they now were: immersed in play. His thoughtful depictions of everyday actions—a child blowing a soap bubble through a straw, playing with a spinning top, dealing a deck of cards—contributed to the public perception of the young having an interior life. “Chardin not only represents children engaged in occupations specific to childhood—like playing games—but he shows them as middle-class children,” explains Higonnet. “[They're] iden-

tified by new consumer goods invented in the years 1680 to 1720, like personal furniture and cotton clothes, which help us understand that childhood was a modern, European invention, a key aspect of the new individualism of the Enlightenment.”

Literature, too, had a widespread effect, especially on the burgeoning idea of mass education. John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689)—and specifically his *tabula rasa* or “blank slate” theory—was influential. “[It] popularized that we are all the products of our environments and the way we are nurtured, rather than being born with a particular personality,” explains Matthew Grenby, professor of 18th-century studies at Newcastle University. “This argues for the importance of education as the thing that makes us what we are.” Locke's groundbreaking theories carved out childhood as a time for becoming. “The possibility of raising oneself through learning and hard work was something that suggested the importance of investing in education,” says Grenby, who cites the growth of children's literature as one example of this evolution.

Victorians, predictably, dressed this new idea of childhood up in some very pretty shapes, embracing what we know now as youth culture. They became obsessed with the cherubic vision of childhood, outfitting themselves in a manner that emphasized their youthful features. Children were primed to fit an androgynous ideal, becoming small pink-cheeked angels that parents increasingly looked to as sources of emotional comfort. Babies were paraded on the streets in bassinets, images of chubby, wide-eyed children were plastered on advertisements and in magazines, and child actors dominated stage performances.

But Victorian and Edwardian literature unearthed a wide rift between the reality and fantasy of childhood. At the time, many young victims of the Industrial Revolution worked in

perilous conditions at textile mills and coal mines or walked the streets in rags as hawkers. Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning described deplorable conditions plaguing poor children in Victorian-era cities. They were leading the way for greater understanding of class inequalities and, eventually, social reform and child labor laws. In her 1843 poem “The Cry of the Children,” Barrett Browning wrote, “For oh, say the children, ‘we are weary / And we cannot run or leap— / If we cared for any meadows, it were merely / To drop down in them and sleep.’” Meanwhile, J.M. Barrie, Lewis Carroll and many others spun a fanciful vision of childhood. As Peter Pan tells the children in J.M. Barrie's famous novel half a century later: “Even though you want to try to, never grow up.”

Two World Wars swung the pendulum the other way, presenting a more somber picture of childhood. As in agrarian societies, death was at the forefront of a child's life; a famous World War I-era image shows a French child helping her mother in the kitchen while both wear gas masks—a disturbing juxtaposition of the mundane and the horrific that represents generations whose carefree youth was cut short. After the turbulence of war, 1950s America ushered in the short-lived invention of the traditional family: the white picket fence, the 2.5 kids, the mom who spends all day keeping house and has dinner on the table at 6 p.m. sharp, the dad who rushes in the door and stashes his briefcase just in time to sit down for grace. As social psychology professor Dr. Eli Finkel recently commented on the *Curiosity Podcast*, the purported domestic bliss of that decade was “an eye blink in history.”

And then came Ariès, and our growing fascination with childhood development. The groundbreaking American children's television show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* hit national airwaves in 1968. Its compassionate

host struck a chord when he said to his audience, “There's no person in the whole world like you, and I like you just the way you are.” *Sesame Street* followed the next year; it's now the most-watched children's educational television show in the world, reaching over 150 countries.

The culture of childhood was here to stay, but the commodification of it was just beginning. Stearns writes, “At some point in the twentieth century, parents in most places began to believe that providing goods and enjoyment to their children was a vital part of their role and began to experience real guilt when their capacity was inadequate.” In sharp contrast to a time when people didn't even record their own ages (prior to the 18th century, Ariès notes, most did not care to know, let alone celebrate, this fact), the American song “Happy Birthday” has been translated and integrated into nearly every language. On a global scale, we've moved so far from medieval thoughts about age that we celebrate it once yearly, with much financial fanfare; the birthday party industry is a booming business. As Lancy writes, “Parenting has become the ultimate hobby.”

“It was thought for a long time that children are incapable of many things,” says Dr. Matt Johnson, professor of neuroscience at Hult International Business School. “That we need to have these certain things somehow encoded in our genetic endowment, and therefore it didn't really make a difference whether or not we interacted with children because they either had this compassion gene, or they had this personality or temperament gene, or language gene, or they didn't... it was all essentially predestined.” But, on the heels of shifting attitudes after the Enlightenment, modern neurodevelopmental studies have firmly swung the pendulum the other way. “The emphasis is on learning. This led people to respond that yes, we actually do need to take care of these

little creatures. They are developing, and yes, genetics is important. But how we care for them, and how we include them in our family, and how we interact with them generally really has a massive effect on their long-term outcomes.”

Children living in the first world are often coddled to the point of barely leaving the house, based on an array of parental fears. Computers and televisions have become a secondary caretaker; toys and technology are compensation for the lack of freedom. Alongside this commodification of childhood comes the phenomenon of prolonged adolescence: Demographers have identified a new group of “emerging adults,” who rely on their parents well into their 20s. Meanwhile, many children in the developing world still struggle to survive. The technology held in one child's hands has been assembled by those of another in a far different society.

As many societies classify children by ages and abilities, sheltering them from experiences, providing largely impractical toys that are regulated by age appropriateness and curating their education—sometimes even before they're born—it can seem like we're moving further away from allowing children to explore and understand the tools they'll be using for the rest of their lives.

Was childhood as we currently know it invented by any one society? Its roots seem to have sprouted in 17th-century Europe; sometime in that era, children moved from the outside of the circle of family life to its center. “Everyone tends to believe that ideas as deep as childhood are forever ideas. But really, even the most basic ideas about how to organize society keep on changing,” says Higonnet. From hands-off to helicoptering, maybe society's latest parenting innovation is manufacturing needs to replace fundamental requirements. Only time, a host of attentive experts and legions of intensive parents, will tell.