



**A/S Level  
Study  
Pack**



**Craig  
Chester**

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## **5: The Sociology of Childhood**

### **(5a): Social Construction of Childhood – Historical Overview**

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## Key Concepts

**Social Construction:** Is the belief that what people perceive to be true or the way to do something is dependent on the time, the place and the people concerned rather than being based on any intrinsic facts. For example, male clothing. In Fiji, men wear an item of clothing called a *sulu* (which looks like a skirt) whereas in England David **Beckham** was ridiculed for wearing a sarong.



## Introduction

In contemporary society, we believe that the day-to-day lives of children should be distinct from those of adults. These differences are manifested in any number of ways from the clothing to leisure activities to what each is legally permitted to do. However, the clearest difference between a child and an adult is that children are not legally allowed to work.

Today, we are disgusted to hear stories of multinational corporations using child labour in countries such as Bangladesh. We proudly point to the fact that as early as 1880 British children were legally obliged to attend school up to the age of 10 and that state education has been free since 1891.

Over the past century the minimum school leaving age has risen and it is a stated policy aim of the government to raise it to 18 by 2013. However, both before and immediately after the industrial revolution, particularly for working class children, child labour was the norm and would suggest that what it means to be a 'child' varies according to where you live and at what point in history you grew up – that is to say childhood is socially constructed. The images below are designed to demonstrate that childhood has little to do with age and everything to do with the time and place you live in.





## Key Theorists

Writer	Reveal how childhood is socially constructed by analysing:
Briggs	infancy in a modern Inuit society (comparable to life in pre-industrial Britain)
Shorter	the effect high infant mortality rates had on attitudes towards children in medieval times
Ariès	how the institution of childhood has evolved since the 13 <sup>th</sup> century
Parsons	what it meant to be a child in industrial as opposed to pre-industrial societies
Oakley	how the creation of childhood helps to preserve patriarchy

## Summary

**Jean Briggs:** Conducted anthropological research into Canadian Inuit communities (Eskimos) with specific reference to their concept of childhood. Newborn Inuit babies are subject to constant love and affection, however, as soon as a younger sibling is born, the elder child will be completely ignored. Eskimos claim that this allows the infant to develop group loyalty rather than be selfish and egocentric. In the harsh Arctic climate, the community can only survive if everyone works together as a part of a team, particularly if they are involved in whale hunting.

This 'tough love' would have also been a feature of family life in pre-industrial Britain, however, the same behaviour in today's society would be deemed as child abuse. **Briggs'** research clearly supports the idea that the way a child is raised depends on family and community values rather than biological imperatives.

Moreover, if those needs change over time, so too will the socially constructed definition of childhood.



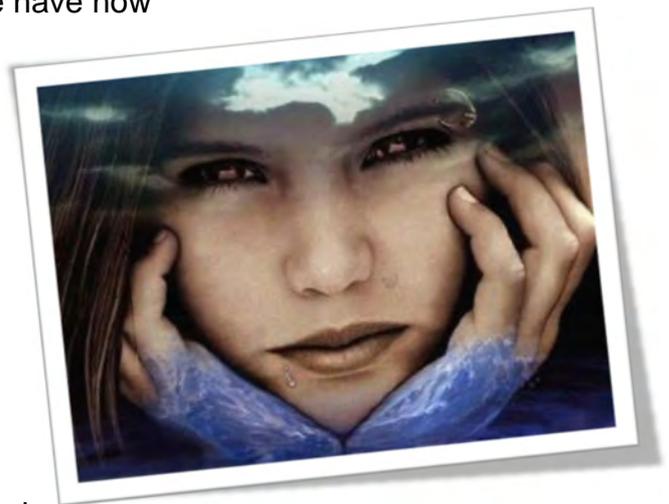
**Edward Shorter:** Attempted to evaluate parental attitudes towards children in medieval Britain. Families in the Middle Ages had to endure several stillborns and high infant mortality rates. Consequently, parents could not remember how many children they had had! A child was often given the same name as had been given to an elder sibling that had died. The emotional attachment that we now have to our children simply did not exist. Such was the likelihood of an infant dying that parents simply could not see the point of wasting their energy on their offspring. Again we would now regard this as neglect. This indifference has similarities to the Inuit in **Briggs'** research.



**Philippe Ariès:** He traced the evolutionary development of childhood over the past 700 years and demonstrated how childhood is defined in reference to time, place and social class i.e. it is socially constructed. He found four distinct phases in the evolution of childhood:

- ▶ 13<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> Centuries: childhood did not exist, as soon as a child was weaned it became legally, culturally and socially an adult.
- ▶ 17<sup>th</sup> Century: the upper classes started treating children differently (special outfits / schooling) and childhood, as we now know it, began to emerge.
- ▶ 18<sup>th</sup> Century: the middle classes started to read 'child-rearing' manuals and distinguish childhood from adulthood, copying the upper classes.
- ▶ 20<sup>th</sup> Century: **Ariès** stated that we have now come to a time when the needs of children are put before anything else. He says that all social classes now embrace the childcentric ideology of *the cult of the child*.

**Talcott Parsons** (functionalist): Childhood had to be invented to fit the needs of industrialised societies, which were different to those of pre-industrial times.



After urbanisation, the husband earned a family wage and, therefore, his wife and children no longer needed to contribute to the household economy. A new sexual division of labour was formed whereby the expressive mothers would have time to love and cherish their infant children.

In pre-industrial society, schools only previously catered for the children of the middle and upper classes because working class families could equip the next generation with the skills-set they needed to work in the fields. Hence, after industrialisation the state took a far greater role in education and took this burden away from ordinary families. Social policies were subsequently created to formalise this new arrangement where by childhood was legally demarcated by, for example, banning child labour and forcing children to go to school. One can clearly see that this supports the idea that childhood is a social construction rather than a biological stage of the life course.

**Ann Oakley** (radical feminist): She argues that the creation of childhood and age patriarchy (by banning women and children from the workplace) enabled individual men to strengthen their patriarchal position as head of household. Such changes made women and children financially and emotionally dependent upon men by socially constructing three different roles: mother; father and child. Each family member had a place in this new patriarchal hierarchy with infant children being at the bottom of the structure. This was very different to the pre-industrial family where women and children had an active role in the work side of the sexual division of labour and, consequently, had more influence over decisions in the family. In conclusion, **Oakley** would state that our definition of what it means to be a child was constructed to preserve patriarchal power and one would therefore assume that if patriarchy ever disappeared then so too would our perception of childhood.



## Evaluation

All sociologists would seem to accept the idea that childhood is socially constructed and that one of the biggest factors that changes what it means to be a child is the historical time period.

Clearly, before the industrial revolution and in its immediate aftermath there was little to distinguish between the day-to-day lives of children and adults from the working classes, whereas over the twentieth century a clear separation has been made between being an adult and being a child.



As with everything in Sociology, the point of conflict occurs when one analyses why childhood has been constructed in a particular way and who benefits from the chosen model.

To answer this question, one must examine the ideological beliefs of the researcher!

**20 Questions**

1. Explain what is meant by social construction of childhood
2. What should the day-to-day lives of children be in contemporary society?
3. In what year were British children first legally compelled to go to school?
4. What will happen in 2013?
5. What people did Briggs research?
6. What happens to a newborn child when it is born?
7. What happens to an elder sibling when a new-born baby arrives?
8. Is there a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood in Inuit society?
9. Explain what is meant by infant mortality rates
10. What two things did Shorter claim about parents in the Middle Ages?
11. What do modern parents have that medieval ones did not?
12. Was there a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood in the Middle Ages?
13. What are the four phases of childhood that Ariès identified?
14. Why did Parsons claim childhood had to be invented?
15. Why did wives and children no longer need to contribute to the household economy after industrialisation?
16. What were parents unable to give their children after industrialisation?
17. Why did Oakley claim that childhood was invented?
18. Explain the place of men, women and children in the patriarchal hierarchy that emerged after industrialisation
19. Characterise the sexual division of labour in the pre-industrial family
20. Is there a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood in industrial society?



