



**A/S Level  
Study  
Pack**



**Craig  
Chester**

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

### **(5a): Social Construction of Childhood – Modern Childhood: Issues & Debates**

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**Key Concepts**

**Separateness:** Making a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood  
**Rite of Passage:** Any important act or event that serves to mark a passage from one stage of life to another  
**Age Patriarchy:** Is the notion that there is a hierarchical relationship between parents and children. The unequal relationship allows mothers and fathers to oppress their children in a similar fashion to the way that men dominate women through patriarchy.  
**Pester Power:** Is what children do to their parents. A child wants something whether this is because his/her friend has it or s/he has seen it advertised and proceeds to nag or generally act in an unpleasant way until the parent succumbs and get him/her one.

**Introduction**

The previous section revealed how the socially constructed nature of childhood has changed over time. This section will review the issues that pertain to contemporary childhood. The first debate centres on the relationship between the law and our perception of childhood. The following table shows that biological age seems to have little correlation to when one is allowed to do certain things and this supports the idea that childhood is socially constructed.

<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">14</p> <p>Get part-time job; Buy soft drinks in a bar</p>	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">15</p> <p>Work up to 8 hours on a Saturday; Be put in a young offender institution</p>
<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">16</p> <p>Give medical consent; Leave school; Have consensual sex; Get married with parental consent; Buy cigarettes</p>	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">17</p> <p>Drive a car; Fly a plane or helicopter; Own a gun; Be interviewed by police without an adult being present;</p>
<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">18</p> <p>Vote; Serve on a jury; Buy pornography or fireworks; Get married without parental consent; Open a bank account</p>	<p style="font-size: 2em; font-weight: bold; margin-bottom: 5px;">21</p> <p>Adopt a child; Supervise a learner driver; Fly commercial planes; Drive heavy lorries;</p>

Secondly, some sociologists have claimed that distinction between childhood and adulthood has disappeared. This can be supported by the fact that many companies now run parties where girls as young as six have a makeover. Also the ease of access that young children have to the media has done much to blur the boundaries between what adults and children consume.

The modern child can access ‘adult-orientated’ media products through their mobile phone; their PC; cable TV and even the most puritanical of parents would find it difficult to stop them doing it. However, others just think that definitions of childhood have been socially re-constructed!

## Key Theorists

### Writer Our socially constructed perception of childhood centres around:

Pilcher	the laws that make it distinct from adulthood
Stainton-	creating social policies that allow children to enjoy their innocence
Rogers	whilst also making laws that punish those who act in a wicked or selfish way
Gittens	the need to control children
Postman	a distinction between childhood and adulthood that no longer exists
Lee	the fact children are both dependent and independent of their parents

## Summary

**Jane Pilcher:** The table on the previous page encapsulates her ideas in that it demonstrates the idea of **separateness**. As a society, we have used legislation to mark what a child *can* do (be free from responsibility), *cannot* do (vote) and *has* to do (go to school). However, the age at which one passes through one of these **rites of passage** is arbitrary and has no correlation to one's date of birth. This is shown by the fact that the government plans to raise the age at which someone can buy cigarettes to 18 or that English 'children' have eloped to Gretna Green (in Scotland) so that they can marry at 16 without their parents' consent.

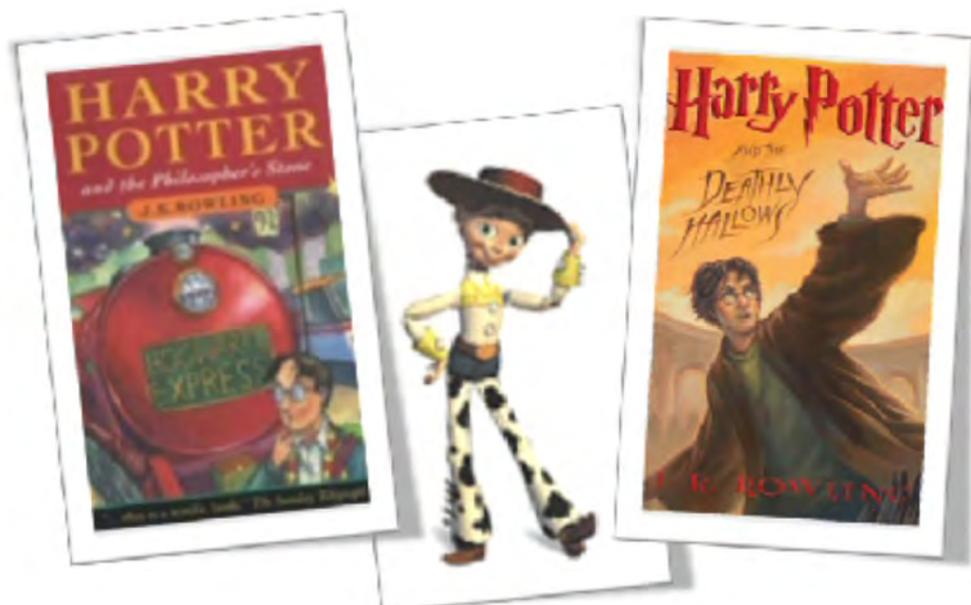
**Wendy Stainton-Rogers.** She took a slightly different tack to **Pilcher** in that rather than focusing on how the law separated the world of adults and children, **Stainton-Rogers** looked specifically at how the law defined two types of children: innocent or wicked. Her ideas can be supported by an analysis of some of the laws that pertain to childhood. The **Every Child Matters** agenda of the New Labour government is the latest in a long-line of policies that try to preserve this innocence. It forces any institution that is responsible for looking after children (including schools and colleges) to ensure that 5 key objectives (e.g. *to be healthy*) are met. **Stainton-Rogers'** views can also be supported by looking at what happens to children who act in an inappropriate or *wicked* way. For example, the use of the cane in schools (corporal punishment) was allowed until as recently as 1987! In the most recent Children Act (2004), the New Labour government tried to make smacking of any kind illegal but was defeated. Instead, according to the law "a parent can reasonably chastise (*hit*) their child but any punishment which causes visible bruising, grazes, scratches, minor swellings or cuts can face action" (prosecution).



**Diana Gittens** (radical feminist): In many ways she developed what **Stainton-Rogers** said about the need to control children with her concept of **age patriarchy**. **Gittens** argues that just as the patriarchal system allows men to dominate and control women, mothers and fathers use these same techniques (physical, mental and sexual abuse) to oppress their children. Moreover, as revealed above, such abuse is often perfectly legal and even if a child did try to prosecute his/her parents the judges would be biased in favour of the parent in the same way as they tend to believe men rather than women in rape cases.

**Neil Postman**: Childhood has disappeared because there is no longer a strict separation between adulthood and childhood. In the 1970's when no one had videos, DVDs or home computers, kids did not have TVs in their bedrooms and there were only 3 TV channels,

parents were able to prevent their children from being exposed to certain things and, thereby, create the separation that **Pilcher** described. Now, children are no longer shielded from the 'secret' world of adults because of increased access to the mass media and, particularly, television. As the boundaries have become blurred Postman contends that 'childhood' is disappearing. This view is encapsulated by the much used statement – *kids today just grow up too fast*. Indeed, the growth of new media technologies such as downloads to your mobile phone and the fact that cable & satellite TV stations do not have to conform to the watershed mean that if anything it will become harder for parents to police what their children watch and childhood will totally disappear. Ironically, he also argues that the change works the other way around in that adulthood is also disappearing – in that it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the difference between what media adults and children consume. The success of media like the Pixar animated films (such as Toy Story) and the Harry Potter books (with their different covers for children and adults) amongst adult audiences illustrates this.



**Nick Lee:** He believes that **Postman's** analysis is too simplistic and that it is wrong to say that childhood has disappeared. He supports this by examining the importance of childhood to modern capitalism. In a similar vein to **Zaretsky**, **Lee** analysed how modern businesses have identified different market segments and as a result of their research produce different products to suit each one, e.g. the teen market and mobile phone screensavers. Consequently, advertisers target individuals in these segments to encourage them to buy more goods and services. Indeed, targeted advertising to young children has become so prolific that the TV watchdog **OfCOM** has said it will ban junk food advertising during TV shows aimed at under-16s. The irony of all this is that children themselves do not have the resources to buy what they are encouraged to want and, therefore, pressure their parents into buying it for them – **pester power**. Children are still dependent on their parents because of the economic situation and yet they are consumers in their own right. It is for this reason that Lee states that it is wrong to say childhood has disappeared. Instead, our current socially constructed child is dependent and independent at the same time.

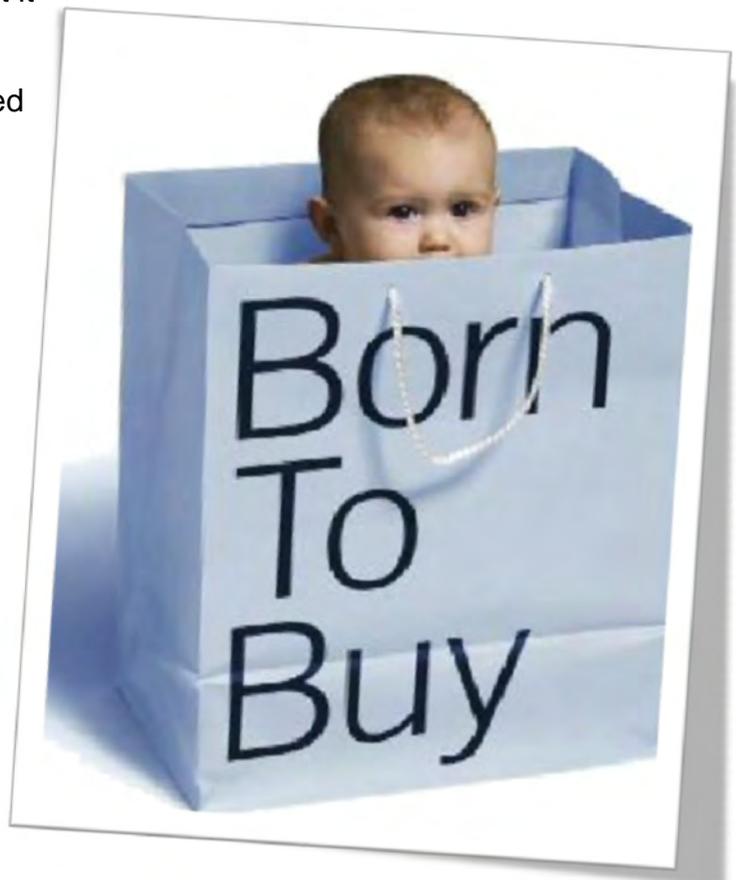


## Evaluation

One only has to examine the laws of our society to see that there is a clear demarcation between what young people are and are not allowed to do.

One such law concerns the age at which children can buy alcohol. The fact that it varies enormously from country to country must help to demonstrate that childhood is socially constructed and that it is separate from adulthood. Moreover, the fact that **Postman** and **Lee** are engaged in a debate as to whether childhood has disappeared clearly demonstrates that it is not a fixed entity.

A final thought is that it is probably true to say that each generation bemoans the fact that the next generation is growing up too fast and that we didn't drink or smoke (or whatever else...) as young as this lot do – i.e. our definition of childhood changes over time (it is socially constructed!)



**20 Questions**

1. Explain what is meant by rites of passage
2. What is the relationship between biological age, the law and childhood?
3. Explain what is meant by separateness
4. Identify an example of what a child can and cannot do
5. What is different about marriage in England and Scotland?
6. According to Stainton-Rogers the law defined 2 types of child: what were they?
7. Identify a policy that attempts to preserve childhood innocence
8. Explain what is meant by corporal punishment
9. When was corporal punishment finally banned?
10. What did New Labour try to do in the 2004 Children Act?
11. Whose earlier ideas did Gittens build upon?
12. In addition to allowing men to control women, who else is control led by patriarchy?
13. According to Postman, what is becoming increasingly blurred?
14. Why was it easier for parents to 'police' children in the 1970s?
15. Identify three devices though which children can access adult media content.
16. Who are becoming more like children?
17. Who contended that Postman's analysis was too simplistic?
18. Which earlier sociologists ideas are reflected in Lee's analysis?
19. What do advertisers attempt to do?
20. Is childhood still socially constructed?



