

Discuss the view that childhood is socially constructed

Social construction is the way something is created through the individual, social and cultural interpretations, perceptions and actions of people by society. I am going to discuss whether this is the case with childhood.

Childhood has changed in the last few centuries; there are many historical changes in the conception of childhood. Before 1600, the child of 5 years old belonged to the adult world of work, leisure and sex, but the interpretation from paintings used as evidence has been challenged. From 1700 to 1800 children were in economic asset. Their wages, although small, were an important financial asset to the family. New industry depended on the skills of the young. In the family they were seen as a form of insurance, and weren't greatly loved or given affection. From 1800 to 1900 children had compulsory schooling and there were restrictions on child labour.

Over the next 50 years children became economically dependant. They needed love and attention children have their own culture that is impenetrable to adults. Childhood is now idealised, as a magical time of innocence and fun. From 1950 up until the present day there is a growing awareness of children's rights and empowerment. Children are seen as active members of the family and even contribute to the domestic chores. Children are consumers.

Philip Aries feels that modern childhood is socially constructed not biological. He argues that industrialisation changed the position of children. For centuries children were seen as entering the workforce around the age of seven. From then on they dressed as adults, lived in the adult community, were expected to be part of the working world and nothing was hidden from them. They had little education and learned their skills from their family.

Parents did not seem to become quite as attached or affectionate to their children, many children died young as infant and child mortality was high. Philip Aries feels that in post-industrialisation we are obsessed with the physical, the moral and the sexual problems with children.

Children now have 10- 12 years of formal education, this could be giving childhood a certain time length, which could thus mean childhood is socially constructed.

A cross cultural variation is the IK people of eastern Africa, who treated their children harshly in the hope they would die so that they would have one less mouth to feed. At 3 years old they were thrown out of home. This shows that their childhoods are socially constructed (probably to be a lot shorter).

Childhood labour is widespread in the developing world where it is estimated there are 145m children involved in commercial production street children are also a feature of poorer societies. The legal age of marriage, for example in Turkey a young person can marry at 14.

There is a greater awareness of child abuse, etc in the home, possibly due to the fact that there are such organisations as the NSPCC, which help children to open up and make them more aware, this could tie in with the claim that the media is so obsessed with the abuse or well-being of children.

Childhood is much longer nowadays- possibly because of the Education Act? Showing more childhood construction.

The democratic republic of Congo has more than 30,000 child soldiers fighting in militias and acting as bodyguards for government army commanders. This shows just how different the norms and values of a lot of children in the democratic republic of

Congo, is to that of England. This also shows how the children in the Congo's childhood is socially constructed, as they are made to work.

The law tries to protect children, as there are different ages which allow you to do different things. At 5 you can drink alcohol in private.

At 7 you may draw money from a bank account.

At 10 you can be convicted of a criminal offence.

At 12 you are able to buy a pet without a parent.

At 13 you can work a restricted number of hours.

At 14 you can go into the pub but not drink alcohol.

At 15 you can see a '15' film.

At 16 you can buy a lottery ticket, leave school, and have sex.

At 17 you can drive a car and be sent to prison.

At 18 you can vote and drink alcohol legally.

This could show that childhood is not socially constructed, as there is no clear age where childhood ends, it is rather blurred when it comes to the 'end of childhood' in the law. This is an argument against the claim that childhood is socially constructed.

Criticisms of Aries are also arguments against the claim that childhood is socially constructed. They are that he ignores the brutality of many children's' lives pre-industrial revolution. He also tends not to look at serious child abuse issues of today.

From discussing the view that childhood is socially constructed I have found that childhood seemed to change in different cultures and has changed throughout history. I have argued many reasons for childhood being socially constructed, and a couple against the claim. For the claim I found that children became economically dependent on their parents when they were no longer allowed to work and have compulsory schooling. Against the claim I found that the laws make it blurred as to which age childhood is over.

Society tries to make us believe that childhood is biologically, not socially constructed; however it is socially constructed as it has changed as society has changed. If it was biological- it would have stayed the same. Childhood also differs from country to country, and historically, which also shows that childhood doesn't just naturally occur. Perhaps childhood is not the only thing people are socially constructed into.