

### **Question: To what extent is childhood a social construction?**

Childhood is believed to be a social construction, which has made a big change from the medieval times through to the twenty first century. Life has become more child-centred through TV and the state.

In pre industrial society being a child was the same as being an adult. A child would often work and be seen as an *economic asset* according to Phillipe Aries. He also argues that it was difficult for parents to love their child as the death rate was high, many historians agree with this view and so there are very little criticisms. A child who was considered as pleasant would often have to work in the fields. This shows that ALL children had to work, whether in the mines or the factory; supports Aries view that children are seen as economic assets. A child had to work from five and was included into the adult world of work, leisure and sexuality. Children were seen as tiny adults as mature, they knew everything about sex and there was no such thing as the wife saying “No, not in front of the children”. Attitudes continued and only in the eighteenth century did society slightly change their views about children: “Babies are good when born but society makes them evil.”

Aries argued that there was a growth in marital and parental love as the infant mortality rate declined.

Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did attitudes towards society change:

- ❖ It was made compulsory for children to go to school
- ❖ Children were excluded from working in mines
- ❖ Students who went to school were taught about honesty, habits and behaviour.
- ❖ There were improved standards of living and nutrition.
- ❖ People had fewer children and gave them more love socialisation and protection.
- ❖ In modern Britain the physiological immaturity of children’s’ bodies is now understood as a sign of their vulnerability.

Peter Burger discovered that adults want childhood and they created childhood as they wanted it to be, in contrast to children who want to be adults.

Aries identifies childhood as socially constructed rather than biologically structured. Many commentators suggest that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is thought to be increasingly child-centred. There are many reasons for life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century becoming child centred.

One of these is the fact that there is a decrease in amount of children being born. As a result; children get more spoilt, they get more love, socialisation, protection and attention.

The state doesn’t have much control in families than they do now; this is due to the support networks children have to avoid abuse such as NSPCC. Children have been recognised as individuals with rights ‘child support act 1991 ’ this deals with the bringing up and protection of the child. The emphasis is that the prime concern of the state should now be the child.

A whole set of laws say what children need to do and what they are authorised to do.

Ennew 1986 Archard 1993, he argues that separateness arises from beliefs that children have a special nature which clearly and distinctly sets them apart from adults. They need a world different for adults; as a result they are viewed as vulnerable, dependant and in need of adults.

James and Prout however argue that meanings to immaturity are not biologically determined but are derived from culture. The concept of childhood is believed to be changed historically and varies from culture to culture.

Fortes (1984) argue that in western societies, dating and numerical counting of age is based on literacy, numeracy and techniques of science. It should therefore be seen as conceptualising time and measuring of age. The counting system is clearly a social construction as for someone to find their age, they also find out if what they are required to do and what they are authorised to do. For example a child is 10 ye ars old, and should be experiencing childhood.

The media has a big impact on the vulnerability of children. There are three specific 'evils' that children are believed to be vulnerable to. These are sex, violence and commerce. Until the 1950s broadcasting for children was based on the view that has been based on the notion of a separate and protected childhood. Children were seen to be active as to read books and improve their creativity. Some of BBC's children program makers were very worried as they thought that some TV programme makers saw children as a market and were less worried about children's vulnerability. Blue Peter was worried about this and so they started their TV programmes to 'protect children from commercial protection'. The most political development has been in broadcasting act of 1990 where there has been an increase in TV channels.

Looking at all the research and evaluating it, it is clear that childhood is socially constructed through TV and the state. The chronological age counting system makes a big difference to the age.