

Examine the view that childhood today is not a fixed universal experience  
(20 marks)

The definition of "childhood" is 'a state or period of being a child'. Many children in society today do not experience this and in the past did not either. Phillipe Aries (1962) suggested that what we experience today as childhood is only a recent social invention. Children in pre-industrial society were "little adults" who took part in the same work and play activities as adults. Toys and games did not exist specifically for children. Children were seen as an economic asset rather than as a symbol of people's love for one another. The death rate of pre-industrial society was so high that investing emotionally in children was difficult.

After industrialisation working class attitudes were similar to those above. Working class children were frequently found working in mines, factories and mills. However, according to Aries, middle class attitudes started to change around this time. There was a growth in marital and parental love in middle-class families as the infant mortality rate decreased.

Social attitudes started to change towards children in the nineteenth century. Children were excluded from factories and mines as it was too dangerous and sometimes fatal to work in the conditions there. Some working class parents however, resisted these moves as they were the ones that depended on their children's wages.

Many nineteenth century campaigners were concerned about juvenile delinquency, beggars and child prostitution, and therefore wanted children off the streets. Child prostitution and abuse were common features of most cities at this time. It was only in the early 1900's that the age of sexual consent was raised to 16.

Moving into the twentieth century, a child-centred society emerged. The standard of living improved and the infant mortality rate continued to decline. Children are very expensive and due to this people chose to have fewer children and invest more in love, socialisation and protection. Attitudes of children changed and their need of special attention and protection were obvious.

The Child Care Act (1980) and Child Support Act (1991) monitored the parents' rearing of their children. Children were being recognised as individuals with rights. The Child Support Act protects children, deals with the care, bringing up and protection of them. This act also protects them when parents are going through divorce or separation.

In less economically developed countries, many children are confronted with experiences where they have no choice but to learn to cope with and face them. For these reasons, their childhood may not be a fixed experience. Many children live in countries facing war and disease. When a child faces the early death of a parent because of war it leads to the decrease of protection from parents. These children are forced to grow up and be independent at such an early age. Some children are faced with the high risk of disease and so their childhood becomes one of fear.

In today's society, child abuse and neglect are elements that are becoming more common. But as attitudes have changed since pre-industrial society, children are seen as individuals with rights and The Children Act was set up in 1989 which protects children against neglect and abuse. Local authorities have the power to take children into care.

Amanda Tan

Childhood today is not a fixed universal experience due to different situations that face less economically developed countries. However, there are many acts and laws that protect children, which show that people's attitudes and views about children have changed for the better.