

Examine the arguments and evidence in favour of the view that childhood is socially constructed

Childhood is defined as a childlike state from birth to puberty. The social construction of childhood is a concept that childhood was created by society. Childhood has changed over the years; it is mainly due to industrialisation that the concept of a childhood was invented. Pre-industrial Britain saw children as an economic asset and by the age of 5 they could work and have sex. New industries depended on the skills of the young, and they were an added insurance to the parents as they grew older. Industrial Britain saw a child's economic role become marginalised with restrictions of child labour, as the concept of 'childhood' grew. They were given compulsory schooling and were in need of protection and guidance. And finally in the 20<sup>th</sup> century children needed love and attention, and there was a growing awareness of children's rights and empowerment. Children are now seen as family members and form a growing economic force in society.

Phillipe Aries (1962) stated that childhood is a recent social invention. He claimed that in pre-industrial society, childhood did not exist. Children were 'little adults' who worked as adults, thus proving that childhood is socially constructed. Toys and games did not exist and children were regarded as an economic asset. Investing emotionally in children was hard as their death rate was high, therefore family sizes were big, and so parents knew they would have a few children growing into adult life too look after them.

During industrialisation, working class children were still found working in factories, mills and mines. Aries argued that middle class attitudes had started to change, and the children were now being seen as 'vulnerable'. During this period there was a significant growth in marital and parental love as infant mortality rate fell, due to better health care and food supplies. Social attitudes started to change in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as children were excluded from mines and factories. This is evidence to show that childhood is socially constructed because with the changing attitudes laws were being put in place to stop children working to have a childhood. The working class resisted the new law as they needed their child's wage to support the family.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a distinctive emergence of a child centred society. It was a result of improved standards of health and nutrition, which led to a major decline in infant mortality. The higher standard of living meant that having children was more expensive. So people chose to have fewer and could invest in them in terms of love, socialisation and protection. Consequently, childhood was seen as a separate category from adulthood, and children were seen as needing special attention and protection.

Due to this view of a childhood, the state stepped in. The parent's rearing of children is monitored through the 1980 Child Care Act and the 1991 Child Support Act. The state supervises the socialisation of children through compulsory education. And it also takes economic responsibility by providing child benefit and children's tax credits. The Child Support Act deals with care, bringing up and protection of the children. Thus insuring they have a happy and carefree childhood experience.

There are two approaches that look at the concept of childhood. These are the conventional approach and the alternative view. In the conventional approach, functionalists and new righters see children as a vulnerable group - both under threat from and in need of protection by adults. The approach suggests that successful child rearing required two parents of the opposite sex and that there is a 'right' way to bring up a child. These views blame working single mothers or inadequate parents for social problems such as delinquency. They, also, see children in need of protection from homosexuality and media violence.

The alternative view finds that conventional approaches tend to generalise about childhood, this is dangerous because childhood is not a fixed universal experience. This is because history, locality, culture, class, gender and ethnicity have an influence on childhood. This can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, LEDCs are at risk of early death because of poverty and lack of healthcare. Secondly, Sikhs and Muslims have a stronger sense of obligation to their parents than Caucasian children. Thirdly, middle class children are given more support and encouragement from parents than working class parents. And finally, boys and girls may be socialised into a set of behaviours based on expectations of masculinity and femininity. The alternative view states that childhood experiences can be damaging, and that different types of abuse all have a negative effect on children.

Both these approaches see children in need of protection and care - allowing them to have a childhood. Thus proving that childhood has been created because they wouldn't have had attention and care before industrialisation. In conclusion, Childhood is a prefabricated concept that has recently occurred during the industrialisation. Childhood depends on the nationality, gender, class and ethnicity of the child. There have been major steps towards making childhood and carefree as possible for the child. Britain is unlikely to revert back to pre-industrial times, as a child centred society has been created.