

## **Examine the extent of and the reasons for changes in the position of children since industrialisation.**

Before the 1600, children of 5 years belonged to the adult world. They were considered to be adults and therefore must make their way in the world like adults, by working. Toys for children did not exist, and they were considered economic assets, rather than a symbol of people's love. They were also criminally liable, meaning that they could be hung at the age of 7 for theft. In this time period there was no childhood after 5 years of age. Social construction means when something has been created by society. Children could be said to have been created by society in the pre 1700, and Neil Postman (1977) supports this view, he says that childhood is invented and that it is slowly disappearing and that's wrong. He points trend towards giving children traditional unsupervised games, the growing similarity of adult and children's clothing and even to cases of children committing adult crimes such as murder. In his view the cause of both of the emergence of childhood and now its disappearance lies in the rise and fall of print culture and its replacement by television culture.

There are many reasons for the changes in the position of children. These include the following changes during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Laws restricting child labour and excluding children from paid work. From being economic assets who could earn a wage, children became an economic liability, financially dependent on their parents. Another reason would be that the introduction of compulsory schooling in 1880 had a similar effect. Especially for the children of the poor (middle- and upper-class children were already receiving education) the rising of the school leaving age has extended this period of dependency. Child protection and welfare legislation, such as the 1889 prevention of Cruelty to Children Act. Exactly a century later the 1989 Children Act made the welfare of the child the fundamental principle underpinning the work of agencies such as social services. Another very important reason is the growth of the idea of children's rights. For example, the children act defines parents as having 'responsibilities' rather than 'rights' in relation to children, while the United Nations convention on the rights of the child (1989) lays down basic rights such as entitlement to healthcare and education, protection from abuse and the right to participate in decisions that affect them, such as custody cases.

Sociologists have also found that there is a decline in family size and lower infant mortality rate. These have encouraged parents to make a greater financial and emotional investment in the fewer children that they now have. This is known as a child-centred family. Also children's

health and development became the subject of medical knowledge. Jacques Donzelot (1977) observes how theories of child development that began to appear from the 19<sup>th</sup> century stressed that children need supervision and protection. There are also more laws and policies that apply specifically to children, such as minimum ages for a wide range of activities from sex to smoking, have reinforced the idea that children are different from adults and so different rules must be applied to their behaviour. This shows us that children have less control over their own bodies and their resources. Their parents have the control over them now. Adults exercise enormous control over children's bodies, including how they sit, walk and run, what they wear (sun hats, make-up, glasses). Although the state pays child benefit this goes to the parent not the child which is another classic example of how children are controlled by adults.

Most sociologists agree that the process of industrialisation, the shift from agriculture to factory production as the basis of the economy, underlines many of the above changes. For example, Modern industry needs an educated workforce and this requires compulsory schooling of the young. Similarly the higher standards of living and better welfare provision that industry makes possible lead to lower infant mortality rates. Industrialisation is thus a key factor in bringing about the modern idea of childhood and the changed status of children.