

This Was Your Life: Studying the History of Childhood

Students who learn how children lived in other eras may be less pessimistic about the present and the future.

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Currently there is much pessimism, even cynicism, about our lives, our times, and the fate of humanity. It is common for people to have the "fall from grace" or "golden age" view of history—the view that life in the past was more genial and gentle, that people were happier and more humane. Nostalgia for "the good old days" and its consequent defeatist attitude interfere with our capacity to work for change. This pessimism results, in part, from the lauded view of history presented in schools.

To counter this negative view of our time, educators should present the past as it was, in a way interesting and significant for students.

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Teach young people their own history—the history of childhood. (Of course, to do this teachers must themselves study that fascinating history; see the brief annotated bibliography at the end of this article for further exploration.) In this article I'd like to provide just a brief look at the lives of children in the past, to indicate how teachers can use this material to help students cope with today.

The study of the history of childhood, a field almost nonexistent before the appearance in 1962 of Philippe Aries' book, *Centuries of Childhood*, is flourishing. Aries hypothesizes that childhood as a distinct time of life is a recent invention. Previously, as soon as children could get along without constant care—that is, between the ages of about five to seven—they entered the adult world; and this is still true for the most part in preliterate and technologically simple societies. Aries and others feel that the invention of childhood deprived children of much that was valuable, including their freedom.

More recent research indicates, however, that the journey of children through time has been a sad and sorry one, providing tales of horror that make today's lurid stories of mistreated youngsters, so popular in the media, seem quite tame. More infants in the past died than survived, and most of those who managed to hang on struggled to reach adulthood. Since life was difficult for most people through much of history, children were often unwelcome to begin with. Infanticide was extremely common, practiced either directly or indirectly through neglect. Wet nurses, known as "angel makers," were widely used for centuries in Europe by both rich and poor, often, it seems, because they could, with impunity, make angels. Children were often undesirable and unsupportable because there was not enough food to go round, because women were worn out from childbearing, and because mothers of children born out-of-wedlock were severely punished both physically and psychologically while at the same time having little protection from the men who impregnated them.

Throughout history severe beatings of children, which we would now regard as indicative of psychotic behavior, were considered normal. With the coming of industrialization, children as young as five helped run the mines and mills, working up to 16 hours a day. In New York City, well into the 1900s, hundreds of homeless children slept in the streets.

Actually the history of childhood is extremely complex. Certainly not all children were mistreated; many were cherished and treated with kindness. But a reading of the past makes quite clear that humans do not automatically protect their young, and as the weakest, most defenseless group in the course of a history that has been difficult for vast numbers of humans, the hardest times of all came to children.

I do not point to the intolerable conditions under which many children lived in former times to excuse the dreadful lot of many

children today, particularly the children of the poor throughout the world, nor to encourage passivity toward any continuing neglect and mistreatment of young people. Rather, I think we should understand that conditions have improved for children in general and recognize that for the first time in history children are regarded as people who have rights.

Familiarity with the history of childhood can encourage young people toward a more realistic view of human accomplishments and perhaps, in the process, give all of us a better perspective on current events and some needed encouragement to continue these accomplishments. □

Annotated Bibliography

Aries, P. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962. A classic in the field. It examines children's dress, schooling, games, and family life in the *ancien régime*.

Bettmann, O. *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible!* New York: Random House, 1974. A popular book with many pictures that covers what we usually refer to as the "good old days"—from the end of the Civil War to the early 1900s. The title explains the book.

de Mause, L., ed. *The History of Childhood*. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. A history of childhood in the Western world written by a group of historians with a psychoanalytic bent. It presents a particularly "mournful story."

Piers, M. *Infanticide Past and Present*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1978. A short and fascinating book on a topic that has special meaning for us now that legalized abortion is an important and controversial issue.

Riis, J. *How The Other Half Lives*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971. A reissue of the 1890 book, with photographs, which helped to bring about major reforms in New York City.

Skolnik, A., ed. *Rethinking Childhood: Perspectives on Development and Society*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1976. A fine book with contributions by historians, educators, psychologists, anthropologists, and leading thinkers. The aim is to examine what actually shapes childhood and the development of children.

Sommerville, C. J. "Toward a History of Childhood and Youth." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1973): 439-447. An excellent discussion, interspersed with a large bibliography, of what has been done and might be done in the writing of the history of children and youth.

Takanishi, R. "Childhood as a Social Issue: Historical Roots of Contemporary Child Advocacy Movements." *The Journal of Social Issues* 34 (1978): 8-28. A fine article that discusses exactly what the title indicates.

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