The Eighteenth-Century Child

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Some histories of childhood and family life, such as those of Philippe Ariès and Lawrence Stone, have pointed to the “long” eighteenth century (c.1688-1832) as the period in which children took on the attributes and qualities we tend now to take for granted. During this time, they argue, people began to define children as inherently different from adults: as impressionable, unformed beings who require much protection and attention from adult caretakers, who are in turn expected to regard youngsters with deep affection and nostalgia. The explosion of books, toys, games, schools, and services directed at children led historian J. H. Plumb to characterize eighteenth-century England (particularly the second half) as a “new world of children.”

Recently, though, critics have usefully questioned both the idea that childhood was “new” to the eighteenth century and that children were generally neglected in earlier historical periods. Not all the attitudes Plumb describes were new, and the kinds of goods and services he describes were available mostly to a more affluent and male minority of children. Moreover, the “old” problems of abuse, neglect, and child labour by no means vanished in the face of this kinder new world. The more copious expressions of interest in children, their maintenance, and their future prospects had more to do with the dissemination of Enlightenment modes of thought, and a social order being transformed by an emerging middle class, than with a sudden discovery that children were worthy of attention. Enthusiasm and optimism for how the newly rationalized sciences could “enlighten” humanity suggested the possibility of a brighter world in which the next generation would live; the greater wealth and leisure time enjoyed by a growing middle class resulted in more resources—of both time and money—being devoted to their young. As the figure of the child became associated with progress, possibility, and mobility, actual children enjoyed or were subjected to (depending on your point of view) unprecedented adult efforts to educate, reform, and improve them.

Education

The eighteenth century has been described as “the age of” a number of things: reason, change, enlightenment, and sensibility, to name but a few. Germans described the eighteenth century as a pedagogical age, and this moniker seems particularly apt in the context of both attitudes toward children and the experience of childhood. Educational treatises abounded in the period, and many at least attempted, in the Enlightened spirit of the age, to render the education of children systematic and scientific. In her introduction to Practical Education (1798), Maria Edgeworth hailed the elevation of children’s education to “its proper station in experimental philosophy.”

While educational materials for children (primers and hornbooks, for example) had existed well before the eighteenth century, the trend was, increasingly, toward ensuring
everything for children had some sort of didactic value. Even children’s play, condemned by some puritan writers of the seventeenth century as not just frivolous but wanton, came to be evaluated for its potential as a teaching tool. Horace’s motto about the object of poetry, “instruction with delight” (delectando monemus), appeared on the frontispiece to A Little Pretty Pocket Book (1744), the first book by the first commercially successful children’s publisher, John Newbery, and this became the constant refrain of children’s writers and pedagogues (see figure 1). The eighteenth century saw the opening of the first toy stores in London, and their shelves were stocked with “rational amusements”—child-sized microscopes and gardening tools, for instance. Children’s books often portrayed their protagonists engaged in improving and educational games. The children in Lady Eleanor Fenn’s Rational Sports in Dialogues Among Children, for example, play games in which they name the chief exports of various colonies and describe the activities associated with different professions; this was one among many similarly titled and designed books for young readers.

Locke and Rousseau

Many educational writers took their cues from John Locke’s seminal Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693), which was cited ubiquitously, even in the prefaces of children’s books. Locke famously argued against the physical punishment of children for their little transgressions, except in cases where a child evinced a “manifest Perverseness of the Will.” He suggested children would learn better and correct themselves when their behaviour was disciplined by a system of reward and shame, and while physical punishment was doubtless still widespread, most writers for and about children adopted Locke’s position. For some critics and historians, Locke’s system provides the child with the kind of autonomy and self-discipline needed to become a successful and socially responsible modern individual; others see in Locke’s method of child-rearing an almost insidious internalization of authority designed to produce docile and compliant subjects.

Another political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was arguably just as influential as Locke on the various discourses of childhood in the latter part of the eighteenth century. His account in Émile (1762) of the “natural” education of the fictional titular character was controversial, considered even irreligious by some critics. The method of education he outlined was also quite impracticable, as it involved the veritable isolation for years of the boy and his tutor in the country, far from the rest of society, where he could learn from nature and for himself. Like Locke, Rousseau was interested in education as a means of producing self-sufficient individuals who would make good citizens in a new society. To become the good adult citizen, however, the child Émile must endure the invasive and constant supervision of his tutor. Further, Rousseau’s model of education and citizenship is only intended for males. Nonetheless, the idea that children were by nature good and were only corrupted by exposure to society became a staple of Romantic thinking.

Émile inspired some fairly odd pedagogical practices, including Thomas Day’s discharging of a pistol beside his son’s head to accustom him to loud noises, but
Rousseau’s model of experiential learning was widely taken up. Eighteenth-century pedagogues and children’s writers agreed that children learned better by experience than by rote or by listening to “sermons;” as Anna Barbauld wryly remarked: “if you would know precisely the effect…set discourses have upon your child, be pleased to reflect upon that which a discourse from the pulpit . . . has upon you.”

Certainly, the more intense scrutiny under which children found themselves as a result of changing educational practices must be considered as part of an effort to regulate and control the potentially unruly state of childhood. However, underpinning both Locke’s claim that children should recognize and correct their own miscarriages in judgment or behaviour and Rousseau’s ideal of learning from nature on one’s own is the Enlightenment tenet that knowledge and truth can only be derived from the action of one’s reason on individual experience and observation. Also at the heart of this pedagogy are the ideas of personal responsibility and of society not as a fixed hierarchy or “great chain of being,” but as a “race fairly run,” in which the individuals who worked hardest at improving themselves should succeed. Both of these ideas were central to an emerging middle-class ideology in the period. What is perhaps new here to the eighteenth century is that Locke, Rousseau, and indeed most of the pedagogical writers who followed them, recognized in education its potential not just for passing on old knowledge but for generating new ideas and technologies needed to reform and improve society.

Class

In large part, the lived experience of childhood and the attitudes toward children and education I have been discussing so far can be described as “middle-class.” The emerging middle classes of the period recognized that they stood to gain most from the possibilities of social mobility afforded by children’s education. In fact, those elements of the middle classes who were advocating the most radical, even anti-monarchical, social reforms were often most concerned with children and education: Joseph Priestley, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Catharine Macaulay and others wrote educational treatises, or books for children, or both. Wollstonecraft’s highly acclaimed *Original Stories from Real Life* (1791), for example, charts the progress of two young girls under the care of their governess along the path from childish irrationality to reason.

This is not to say that members of the upper and lower classes were not interested in children and their upbringing, but for the former, social advancement was less of a concern, and for the latter, the resources of time and capital needed to invest in a child’s future were less available. Since writing for, teaching, entertaining, and attending to the medical needs of children became, increasingly, professional activities in the eighteenth century, most of those engaged in these activities were from the middle classes. Schooling for children, though haphazard and unregulated, was widespread and reached down the social ladder to families of quite modest means.

The distribution of education was far from equitable in terms either of quality or quantity. The middle-class child was expected to gain the skills and knowledge needed for success and advancement, but these prospects were often denied the lower-class child. For the
children of the poor, Sunday Schools set up by evangelical and dissenting congregations became quite common by the 1780s. Some critics of this charitable project worried that teaching the poor to read would render them unfit for manual labour and service, but as Sarah Trimmer’s Economy of Charity (1787) and The Charity School Spelling Book reveal, the Sunday School program was meant to give only basic literacy (enough to read one’s Bible, as was often remarked) and usually contained lessons designed to teach poor children contentment with their low station.

**Children’s Literature**

The new children’s literature industry reinforced this sense of class stratification. Since much of the reading material relegated to the nursery had perennially been for plebeian tastes—chapbooks, folk tales, and jestbooks, for example, which were short, simple and usually illustrated—a considerable overhaul of children’s literature became necessary in the eighteenth century to accommodate and promote middle-class interests. While the fantastic narratives of Valentine and Orson, Fortunatus, Cinderella, and Jack-the-Giant-Killer remained popular, the trend in the second half of the century was to try either to weed out or sanitize what many saw as potentially dangerous plebeian narratives in the nursery. Such stories risked inflaming superstition in the young of the middle classes, and threatened to give the children of the poor false ideas about success through luck or beauty, rather than hard work. The new books for children not only imagined the “rational sports” described above, but mapped out proper class relations, depicting children engaged in small acts of charity toward the deserving poor, and receiving humble gratitude in return.

Proper class relations occupied not only the pens of writers of children’s fiction, but those of pedagogical theorists and even medical writers as well. Most experts on childhood warned parents and guardians about the dangers of allowing too free a contact between children and domestic servants. Locke, near the beginning of the century, argued that children would suffer “the Influence of Ill Precedents” from associating with servants, while Godwin, at the end of the century, likened leaving one’s house and children in the hands of servants to leaving them to the care of “rats, and pole-cats, and serpents, and wolves.” Physicians like James Forrester and William Buchan attributed the influence of plebeian superstition to both mental and physical weakness in children; the ghost stories they heard from nurses and maids could actually make children ill.

**Health**

While the term “pediatrics” would only be coined by the mid-nineteenth century, what was often called the “medical management” of children became an increasing concern over the course of the eighteenth century. Health practitioners from all levels of the medical profession produced treatises and manuals on the diseases to which children (and sometimes mothers) were subject. These ranged from “self-help” books designed for parents and other lay readers to elaborate medical texts filled with diagrams, footnotes, and the rest of the textual apparatus usual to medical discourse. The proliferation of such medical texts devoted specifically to children in the period reflects, in part, a greater
recognition of the child’s difference from the adult than had been articulated before. (Indeed, this can be said about the children’s literature and pedagogical writing of the period generally.)

As with the pedagogical writers, Locke’s influence on the medical discourse of childhood was powerful. Most medical texts reiterated Locke’s recommendation that children be dressed in cool, loose-fitting clothes, that their diet should be simple, and that they should be exposed—within reason—to the cold to make them hardier. It was, however, Locke’s notion of the new-born child’s mind as tabula rasa, which could take any impression from the information it received from the five senses, that had the greatest impact on the medical management of children. That children were born with no innate ideas meant they had great potential, but it also put them at tremendous risk. In the materialist psychology of the age, the mental and physical were inseparable; disturbances in the brain could have severe physical consequences and vice versa. Children were particularly susceptible to the mental and physical effects of erroneous or detrimental influences and stimuli, for, as James Long (following Locke) remarked, “young and tender Minds can take any Sort of Impressions.” Once a certain impression was fixed on a child’s mind, it was almost impossible to dislodge it.

David Hartley, the famous philosopher and early theorist of neurology, summed up the attitudes towards childhood’s difference from adulthood that characterized the age. In his Observations on Man, his Frame, his Duty, and his Expectations (1749), Hartley lumped together the insane, idiots, drunkards, criminals, and children as subjects all prone to “Erroneousness of Judgment,” and all deficient in “the Perfection of Reasoning natural to Adult.” The difference between children and the other groups on this list was, of course, that children could eventually be brought to the state of reasoning perfection. The cultivation of regular habits, epitomized by a more systematic approach to learning and by the various physical regimens advocated by medical experts, became not just personal concerns but social ones. The formation of new subjects for a changing society demanded a pedagogy of both the mind and the body for children.

Further Reading

Kramnick, Isaac. “Children’s Literature and Bourgeois Ideology: Observations on

