

## The Twentieth-Century Child

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By 1900, Romantic and Victorian efforts to improve and reinvent childhood had built upon similar movements of past centuries to solidify “The Child” as a figure of central importance to both the family and the nation. As the child’s value shifted from economic to emotional, the gains of nineteenth-century reform encouraged many to anticipate further improvements in welfare and education. In her famous book *The Century of the Child* (1900), for example, Swedish feminist Ellen Key imagined the twentieth century as a time when adults would embrace “the right of the child” as the central concern of modern society. She believed that “all morals, all laws, all social arrangements,” especially marriage and women’s roles, would be constructed out of concern for the health and education of all children. Although Key herself did not fully expect her vision to become reality, her principles continue to inform notions of what childhood and adult responsibility should be as we consider to what extent the twentieth century lived up to its promise. Although universal elementary education has become a reality in America and England, other anxieties have arisen, as people continue to struggle in their efforts to define, control, and protect that slippery being known as “The Child.”

### The Persistence of Child Labor

During the nineteenth century, responsibility for improving and even enabling the child’s existence had shifted from the private to the public realm. As Hugh Cunningham explains, people began to believe that “only state action could secure a childhood for all children,” and the child began to occupy a position “somewhere close to the center of the political agenda of the modern state” (137). By 1900, nearly all Western countries had laws prohibiting or restricting child labor. Nevertheless, the United States census report from this year reveals that nearly two million children—one of every six between the ages of ten and fifteen—was gainfully employed. Moreover, the true number of child workers was probably much higher since many were under ten and/or would “help out” when not attending school.

Britain was a little ahead of the United States in terms of child labor reform; however, after the passage of the Employment of Children Act in 1903, legislation stalled until 1918, mainly due to increased demand created by World War I. In fact, according to one 1914 estimate, there were over half a million children under fourteen employed in the United Kingdom, although by this point the majority of these worked part-time. One reason that legislation on both sides of the Atlantic failed to ease the problem of child labor was the lack of local enforcement. In the U.S., the National Child Labor Committee was established in the early twentieth century, but met with considerable opposition in state compliance until the 1920s, particularly in the south where farming and textile industries created special demand for child labor.

As activists campaigned to free children from appalling working conditions—and from working in general—they also called upon people to pay more attention to the general health and welfare of the young. Despite declines in infant and child mortality rates in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, children continued to die at an alarming rate. Touted in newspapers as “the

great benefactress of childhood,” British educational pioneer Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) was one of the most vocal advocates for reform aimed at improving quality of life for all children. In her widely read book, *Early Childhood* (1900), McMillan identified young people, particularly poor ones, as “a constituency in need of rescue” (Steedman 9). A committed socialist, McMillan fought to ensure that working-class children could enjoy the same benefits as their more privileged peers: freedom from labor, education from an early age, medical attention, and contact with nature. Simultaneously, numerous agencies in Britain and in America targeted various other aspects of child welfare, from educating parents (particularly women) on hygiene and child-rearing, to raising the age for compulsory schooling, instituting school nutrition programs, and recognizing child rights.

### **The Useless Child**

Falling infant mortality rates during the early decades of the twentieth century indicated that such efforts on behalf of the child were bearing fruit, especially as science allowed for improved sanitation and more attention to health issues before, during, and after maternity. Unfortunately, other problems emerged, bound up with economic instability and increasing freedom for women and children. Now that the child lived but did not work, how was his family to provide the means to make him happy and to ensure his future? This question led to heated debate. On one side stood opponents of child labor legislation, including poor families whose living depended upon children earning their bread in the economic downturn of 1929, which lasted roughly until the start of World War II about ten years later. The state had no right, they argued, to prevent children from helping to support their families as they had always done.

On the other side, advocates of child labor legislation argued “true parental love could only exist if the child was defined exclusively as an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production” (Zelizer 72). Obviously this group won, but it took decades of work to persuade the majority of the population that children (long considered an economic asset) should be allowed to become useless—a drain on the family resources rather than a contributor to its survival. A variety of factors, including rising real income, increased demand for educated workers, and stricter compulsory education laws all helped ensure that more and more children began to receive significant schooling. As sociologist Viviana Zelizer has pointed out, the acceptance of the idea of the economically worthless child went hand-in-hand with a growing tendency to conceive of children as emotionally priceless.

### **The Companionate Family**

Other structural and societal changes also helped to heighten the emotional intensity of family bonds. By the 1920s, women had the vote and were working in greater numbers, which meant new ways of thinking about marriage and parenting. The Victorian household in which the husband reigned supreme gave way to a more democratic ideal, which scholars refer to as “the companionate family.” The term comes from “companionate marriage,” which first appeared in *Revolt of Modern Youth* (1925) by Denver Juvenile Court Judge Ben B. Lindsay and Wainright Evans. Although in the first decades of the twentieth century, marriage still hinged upon money, religion, and social status, especially for immigrants, couples with the luxury to do so increasingly counted love as a key motivator.

Yet even as family was coalescing into an affectionate, close-knit unit, social scientists and educators advocated that the child should be given “greater freedom from parental control, greater latitude in expressing their feelings, and increased interaction of adolescents with peers” (Mintz and Kellogg 114). After World War I, it became increasingly common for children to spend their days at school, with peers, or on their own rather than with parents. For some, the financial hardship of the 1930s somewhat counteracted this tendency, since a lack of money and space required households to include extended family members, encouraging intimacy and giving children numerous adult caretakers at home. A Second World War complicated matters, though; sending fathers to the Front and mothers to work, or at home tending younger children while those siblings who could were required to support the family. Fathers unable to provide because of war casualty, injury, or lack of work, and mothers who enjoyed the autonomy of earning, often left children unattended. Character-shaping influences increasingly came from outside the home, creating new questions and concerns.

### **Juveniles on Trial**

By the 1930s, decreased parental supervision was already causing anxiety about moral development. Essentially an American creation, the juvenile court system emerged in response to “adult concerns about the threats posed by the very adolescent peer cultures that public policy’s separations of children into age-specific categories encourage[d]” (Sealander 20). With most children attending school at least until sixteen, age-based grade levels defined stages of maturation. The law responded to the perceived threat of the “juvenile delinquent” by following education to expand the chronological definition of childhood according to age-based levels of accountability and punishment, depending on the crime. On a more positive note, legislation at this time also built upon past reform “to extend and elaborate on children’s property rights and apply new principles that cushioned children from the common law” (Kline 47).

The juvenile court system was founded on the belief that a child would not be inherently capable of committing a crime, so that the few who did would receive treatment rather than punishment. Thus, the courts became a venue for protection as well as for punishment, fulfilling what was once thought of as a parental role. In Britain, The Children and Young Persons Act of 1933 amended the procedures of the juvenile court system and endorsed detention centers based on the idea that child offenders required special care and protection. However, as the century progressed, especially in the United States—where access to guns still today remains much less restricted than in Britain—the scope and seriousness of crimes by adolescents meant that more and more prison inmates were under eighteen. While the law did start to distinguish between children and adults in terms of punishment, debate continues to rage today over the age and circumstances for trying an adolescent as an adult. Around mid-century rates of confinement for teenagers decreased, despite the fact that adult suspicion about the potential for misbehavior intensified.

### **Post-War Optimism and the TV Generation**

In the mid-1940s, the birth rate rose to an unprecedented height, creating the famous “Baby Boom” generation, and making “The Child” even more central to Anglo-American society.

Parents and educators encouraged children to express their own individuality through creative play. At the same time, mechanization, improved in wartime, made toy production inventive, plentiful, and profitable. Generally speaking, the standard of living for most families rose in the aftermath of World War II. More money allowed parents to indulge children with material possessions and to focus more attention on emotional needs and cognitive development. Neil Postman sees this period as a “high watermark of childhood . . . in which parents developed the psychic mechanisms that allow for a full measure of empathy, tenderness, and responsibility toward their children” (67).

For Postman and others, the arrival of television seriously undermined this positive relationship. Common in American homes by the 1950s, television was at first praised for promoting family “togetherness,” a term coined by *McCall’s* magazine in 1954 (Spigel 37). Yet it also came under fire for a variety of reasons. People worried that viewing was a completely passive process that would turn children into mindless drones; that irresponsible mothers would use the box as a babysitter; that seductive commercials for everything from sugary cereal to dolls and fire trucks would undermine children’s health and transform them into greedy materialists. Initially, TV programmers and advertisers saw the adult as the one responsible for making viewing and purchasing choices, but they soon recognized the value of appealing directly to children. As early as the 1930s, government committees and parenting magazines in America had recommended that children receive a regular allowance, and as the century progressed young people became an increasingly prized consumer group.

Although this recognition turned the child into a target for manipulation, many viewed television as a positive factor in development. Educational programming, which greatly expanded in the 1960s and 70s, supplemented classroom learning, making the time spent in front of “the tube” relatively productive. Indeed, the first large-scale study of North American children and television—conducted from 1958 to 1960—revealed that preschool children who watched television started school with bigger vocabularies and more knowledge about the world around them than their TV-deprived peers. Moreover, cultural commentators like Ellen Seiter have insisted that it is a mistake to view marketers as evil brainwashers and children as naïve innocents, since young people often function as active recipients of consumer goods and media, appropriating material from a variety of sources and using it as the basis for conversation and creative play.

### **Misplaced Anxiety**

Controversy about television and other new media raged on, despite the lack of evidence that they had harmful effects on children. Indeed, according to Peter N. Stearns, irrational anxiety of this kind was the hallmark of twentieth-century parenting. Although children were statistically far less likely to die or be orphaned in this period than in ages past, levels of parental anxiety soared. A parade of (mostly male) experts caused parents to question their own child-rearing techniques, even as the popular press whipped up concern about statistically insignificant problems. For example, the century was marked by frequent outbursts of panic that children were being abducted and molested by strangers. In fact, the odds of this happening were tiny; children were far more likely to be abused by their own family members.

As Paula Fass points out, our continued willingness to focus attention on such comparatively rare risks is problematic considering that other more pressing and preventable problems remain unsolved. While the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s struck down segregation, many poor and minority students even now have no choice but to attend under-funded and unsuccessful schools. Politicians who spout rhetoric about “saving the children” are often the very ones who cut money from programs like Head Start or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Poverty and lack of adequate health care, issues that became especially prominent in the 1980s with decreases in government funding, affect millions of children. Globally, many young people are starving, dying of AIDS, or succumbing to preventable diseases. With major crises like these, it seems especially absurd that politicians continue to focus on non-issues like whether or not video games promote violence.

### **Milestones of Children’s Literature**

Despite these problems, the Civil Rights and Women’s Movements of the 1960s and 70s had positive effects on children’s lives, widening options open to them. Changes in children’s literature and culture reflected these gains. A century that began with Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1900), L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), and P.L. Travers’ *Mary Poppins* (1934), gave birth to Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963), Judy Blume’s *Are You There God, It’s Me, Margaret* (1970), Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), and, of course, J.K. Rowling’s stories of the boy wizard, Harry Potter.

Two major trends emerged as the century unfolded. First, children’s books more realistically represented and spoke to a more diverse audience, often about previously “taboo” topics, including death, divorce, race, and religion. Gender roles became less suffocating for both sexes, and children of color saw themselves represented in other than stereotypical or condescending ways. Even the Walt Disney Company, known for turning classic folktales into musicals with doe-eyed princesses and blonde prince charmings, began to portray a wider range of characters in films like *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). Second, authors experimented with language, characterization, and plot. Resisting the tendency to adopt an idealized picture of children as naïve innocents, writers like Roald Dahl, Virginia Hamilton, Jon Scieszka, and Lemony Snicket pushed the envelope with their irreverent, dark, and linguistically sophisticated stories.

### **Definitions in Flux**

Although perhaps not in the way she might have hoped, Ellen Key’s predictions for a “Century of the Child” have come true to an extent, in that most people today fully support programs aimed toward improving children’s lives and helping them to become productive, happy adults. Yet even after centuries of efforts to define and protect childhood, the dividing line between child and adult still seems remarkably fuzzy. Many worry that children in contemporary culture are being pushed into acting like adults too soon, whether by donning make-up and high heels to compete in a beauty contests, or achieving academically from an early age while juggling countless extracurricular activities. At the same time, adults in our youth-obsessed culture take extreme measures—plastic surgery, anorexia—in an effort to appear younger. When does childhood end? What constitutes a family? Should we continue to define childhood in terms of

innocence, as our Romantic predecessors did? Is the state doing enough to protect the rights of children, locally and globally? These questions remain as pressing now as they have in ages past.

### **Recommended Reading**

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