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## FROM INNOCENCE TO ENTITLEMENT: A GLOBAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE EVOLUTION OF CHILD RIGHTS

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### Abstract:

Childhood history is an emerging field that sheds light on earlier societies and their relationships to contemporary concerns. It also contributes to a vibrant, multidisciplinary conversation about the nature of childhood and how it differs across geography, socioeconomic class, and gender. While commonly regarded as a natural and timeless stage of life, childhood has always been a dynamic and culturally produced experience. Theorists have been interested in the unusual nature of human development, which has evolved over a protracted period of reliance known as childhood. The article examines how various communities have defined childhood, assigned roles to children, and structured their upbringing and education over time and across different locations. The research explores the role of children in ancient societies, looking at early modern education and labour transitions, medieval Christian perspectives on sin and innocence, and the effects of the Industrial Revolution on children's employment and education. Developments of the 20th century are also examined, including mass education, child psychology, the debate over global rights, and consumer and digital childhoods. It draws attention to how childhood is socially constructed and to its importance in discussions of identity, family, rights, and labour. Later, childhood became the subject of study and was seen as a significant stage in human psychological development. Religious beliefs, women's movements, urbanisation, and industrialisation influence these shifts.

**Keywords:** Childhood, children, ancient societies, family, revolution, labour, industrial revolution

### I. INTRODUCTION

Childhood, which is marked by play, imagination, and innocence, is a critical time in life. This stage of life is socially created, involves play and education, and is frequently shielded from industrial labour, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Children's traits, nature, social role, and purpose are the main topics of childhood theories. However, culture, history, and cultural diversity have all influenced how childhood is perceived. Childhood history research casts doubt on the notion that childhood is a fixed biological period by emphasising the impact of conflict, education, religion, and industrialisation on perceptions of children. We can question current patterns in child labour, education, parenting, and children's rights with knowledge of the past.

The idea of childhood has been shaped by culture and history and has changed over time and across countries. Before adulthood, it is often viewed as a time of innocence, dependence, and development; however, social, economic, and ideological factors significantly shape this perception. Research into childhood history casts doubt on the idea that childhood is a fixed biological stage everyone experiences in the same way. Instead, it illustrates how broader historical influences, such as education, religion,

industrialisation, and conflict, have shaped attitudes towards children. We may challenge contemporary trends in child labour, education, parenting, and children's rights by being aware of this past. The variety of childhood experiences and the ways that race, gender, class, and power interact to shape them are also highlighted.

The work of Philippe Ariès, who maintained that childhood was essentially non-existent in medieval Europe, helped elevate the discipline of childhood history in the 20th century. Later historians, such as Hugh Cunningham, developed and broadened the topic by studying how institutions like the state, education, and the family have influenced children. They stress that children significantly influence childhood, as seen by the growing recognition of their agency in contemporary studies. From the medieval era to the present, this study provides a historical summary of how childhood has been viewed and experienced in Western cultures. Essential themes include work, education, family responsibilities, and children's rights. The last segment examines how globalisation and digital technologies are changing childhood in the twenty-first century.

This study aims to examine how people's conceptions of childhood have changed over the centuries, to understand its notion and importance, and to determine the primary causes of these shifts. The study's data came from various sources, including websites, books, journals, articles, e-books, and e-journals.

## 2. Childhood from Antiquity to Present

Childhood in ancient civilisations, particularly in Greece and Rome, was a transition period centred on adult obligations, roles, and citizenship. Regardless of social expectations, gender roles, education, and status, children were considered family assets, lineage bearers, and partners in maintaining social and political order. Infanticide and child exposure were commonly accepted and institutionalised in both communities as pragmatic remedies to poverty, deformity, and unwanted pregnancies. Infants were checked by elders in Greek city-states such as Sparta, and those deemed weak or unwell were subjected to public scrutiny. In Rome, the male head of the home had the legal ability to accept or reject newborns. Despite these harsh customs, surviving offspring were frequently treasured, particularly men who contributed to political and economic life and passed on the family name. Despite being undervalued, daughters were crucial to domestic chores and helped forge strategic relationships through marriage.

Gender and class were essential influences on education in Greek and Roman society. Boys from elite families in Athens were educated in grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, music, and physical training, preparing them for public life and citizenship.

Plato and Aristotle both saw education as a means of cultivating moral and political virtues, with Plato focusing on identifying and training guards based on aptitudes, and Aristotle aiming to produce virtuous citizens. Girls received minimal schooling, primarily domestic, focusing on weaving, childrearing, and household management. On the other hand, Sparta prioritised physical training and education, reflecting its martial and communal culture. Roman education followed a similar pattern, with boys learning Latin and Greek literature, law, and oratory to prepare them for careers in law, politics, or the military.

In ancient Greece and Rome, with their patriarchal, hierarchical family structures, the father had virtually total control over his offspring. They were supposed to respect and obey their parents, who gave them a sense of social identity and financial stability. Early civic engagement and religious rites were part of Roman childhood, and coming-of-age ceremonies marked the passage from youth to adult male citizenship. There were comparable ceremonies of passage in Greece.

History is greatly affected by other disciplines and frequently intermingled with philosophical, theological, and poetic representations of children and family life. These accounts, whether selective or idealised, are essential since they are written and may be the only available information. Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Cicero, Thomas Aquinas, St Anselm, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau provide precise historical sources. The notion of childhood in ancient and medieval history and anthropological sciences implies that it did not emerge with industrialisation or the Enlightenment. Greek philosopher Plato's view of childhood is an example of the discourse that informs modern conceptions of children and childhood. He proposed three stages of biological and psychological development from early childhood to adulthood: the first stage, from birth to the age of three, where the child is vulnerable and requires protection and attention; the nursery stage, or the second stage, from three to six years, for play and storytelling; and education begins at the primary school stage, from six to thirteen years, where children should study various subjects, including numbers, geometry, cubes, morals, music, and gymnastics. The third stage, which lasted from 13 to 16 years, involved more advanced mathematics, dialectics, and the arts courses. Young men were to get military training between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Plato saw play as a directed educational principle that could be applied to any subject or age group, and he proposed that

children should be instructed by play rather than coercion. Statements regarding children as important social agents in ancient history have become popular due to the emergence of childhood archaeology, which articulates the complexity of the concept of childhood in antiquity. A heroic identity is created through depictions of childhood in literature and art, which emphasise admirable traits such as courage, moral rectitude, good looks, and astute creativity. Archaeological research, however, indicates that these pictures and the play and household activities recorded in material culture are incompatible.

While sociologists, anthropologists, and historians contend that there is no universal definition of childhood, it has evolved over time and across space. Western societies have associated childhood with learning, growth, development, and reliance since the 18th century. In the medieval era, children were considered little adults with no specific attire, food, social space, or time, according to the theory advanced by the French academic Philippe Ariès. As a result, learning theory was developed with special attention to childhood.

Van den Berg's *Metabletica* was the first to thoroughly examine the changing lives of children and adults in Western Europe from the medieval to the modern period. By analysing historical and literary sources, he vividly depicted how children in traditional households lived as "little adults" in their unrestricted interaction with the adult world. Van den Berg argued that the contemporary concept of childhood originated in the latter half of the 18th century. Historian Aries later traced the origins of the modern idea of childhood back to the Middle Ages, using Heroard's diary of Louis XIII's youth, which provided the most detailed depiction of a child's environment.

According to Philippe Ariès, childhood is a social construct rather than a natural occurrence. Before the 17th century, he discovered that children were shown as miniature versions of adults in school records, gravestones, paintings, and furniture. The Renaissance saw an increase in creative representations of childhood, but this had little effect on societal attitudes towards children; therefore, historians have increasingly studied childhood in the past. Rousseau defined childhood as a fleeting haven preceding adulthood. Philippe Ariès contends that children and adolescents were not pictured in the minds of ancient societies. When a child was deemed incapable of caring for herself during infancy, she was incorporated into adult circles as soon as she could comprehend her environment. Children were permitted to use profanity, have sex, and die. Although sentiment was not a critical issue and social contact and emotional ties were expanded beyond the family, the family did not serve an emotional or affective purpose.

Ariès has argued that childhood was not present in medieval Europe, as individuals moved directly from the physical helplessness and dependency of infancy into adult society. They dressed like adults and spent most of their time in adult company, sharing adult conversation, games, and sometimes sexual activities. There was no trace of the modern consciousness of a particular nature of childhood, distinguishing the child and their proper activities and physical and emotional needs from those of the adult. Infants were treated with care and affection, but were hardly regarded as individuals.

In the tenth century, artists could not depict a child except as a man reduced in scale. Ariès argues that childhood does not mean children were neglected, forsaken, or despised. Instead, it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. This awareness was lacking in medieval society, and as soon as a child could live without constant solicitude, they were considered part of adult society.

From the thirteenth century, a new consciousness emerged among the prosperous middle and upper strata of society of the specific nature of childhood, a period between infancy and adulthood that was different from preceding and succeeding age periods. This was first manifested in an attitude towards children as playthings, creatures to be coddled, who were objects of affection and amusement for adults. Childhood in this sense lasted hardly beyond the age of five or seven. It was marked by the emergence of separate dress forms for young children and a conception of children as innocents, unpolluted by adult knowledge. During the same period, another new concept of childhood emerged, emphasising the need for training and discipline before the individual could acquire full adult capabilities, usually in the shape of formal education. The Renaissance, a time of significant change in Europe, occurred between the 14th and 16th centuries, particularly in Florence, Italy. During this time, the concept of childhood was shaped by old ideals and the ideal aristocrat. A Renaissance humanist, Matteo Palmieri, advocated for excellent parenting and early education as essential for developing human attributes that benefit society. Parents took great interest in their children's individuality, with fathers teaching them the alphabet and rewarding them with kisses and laughs. The Renaissance also saw a psychological divide between adults and

children, with religious teaching methods like play, games, and toys. Educational patterns showed social and gender inequalities, with wealthier noble families providing rhetoric and philosophy instruction for males, urban merchant classes opting for a more pragmatic education for boys, and girls being educated at home or in convents. The Renaissance polymath pattern was reserved for nobles, though some lower-class children became intellectuals. Many children had childhoods that differed from the norm due to poverty, parental mortality, or other hardships. However, some lower-class youngsters, like Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1469-1536), became scholars. Despite the sophisticated aristocratic notions of the child's totality, which incorporated civic and personal aspirations for a better future, the idea of Renaissance childhood was consumed by a dialectical conflict between expectations and realities.

Ariès points out that childhood lengthened faster for boys than for girls, and adult life changed more decisively for men than for women. For girls, childhood hardly lengthened between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, when they might still be married and in control of households at 14. Education lasting into the late teens became normal for boys of aristocratic families and increasingly for girls.

Children were viewed as miniature replicas of adults until the end of the Middle Ages because they wore similar clothing and had similar body proportions. At that time, children may have been punished for social disobedience, and there was no such thing as special protection and treatment for children. The Middle Ages saw high infant mortality and a prevalence of incurable illnesses. People thought they should have many children if they wanted only a few, because young children were not supposed to live long. Some parents even called their child "it" until the child was old enough to be likely to survive. Parents were not allowed to become overly attached to their child. The death of a newborn was most likely not the emotional catastrophe that it is now. When a child died in Spain, he or she was most often buried on the property, as with a pet cat or dog. Even the dead children of the wealthy were occasionally treated like paupers, with their bodies stuffed into sacks and buried in common graves.

The most influential work on childhood history is that of Aries, which encouraged historians to create a new field of study on family history. Nonetheless, several of his generalised ideas and his scientific standing have come under fire. According to recent scholarship on the medieval and Renaissance periods, the two life stages of childhood and adolescence were recognised in both periods.

Aries's renowned work on the history of childhood has served as a source of inspiration for historians interested in family history. However, his scientific status and broad assumptions have been questioned. Recent medieval and Renaissance academics have challenged his claim that medieval society had no idea of children. They discovered that the medieval and Renaissance periods recognised the two life stages of childhood and adolescence. This emphasises the importance of exercising caution when making generalisations about the state of childhood and the experiences of previous generations of children. Contemporary scholars have questioned long-held notions and contributed to the distinction between fact and fiction. The modern conception of childhood, as it is understood in Western Europe and North America, dates back to the late 18th century and has since gained widespread recognition and acceptance, according to cultural historians, who now generally agree that it is one of the significant inventions of the Renaissance.

A significant change in thought occurred throughout the seventeenth century with the Enlightenment, a cultural movement. Its defining characteristics were the diffusion of information, secularism, and the conviction that authority ought to be amenable to reason. The Scientific Revolution provided instruments for investigating the epistemological standing of concepts related to education and child rearing. The term "nature" was widely used, but its exact application received little consideration. Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau were among the philosophers who questioned conventional wisdom, promoted free thought, and highlighted human rights. The concepts of Rousseau, like *Emile*, were centred on children's experiences and sought to teach the natural man. He advocated for freedom and love to help children discover their good nature. Rousseau felt that books should play little to no role in a child's education, which should be centred on doing and activity.

In Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau significantly impacted the idea of childhood. Locke thought that, since children are born, parents and educators should mould, train, and educate them. Rousseau popularised a new idea of childhood in 18th-century France, highlighting children's value as individuals and their own patterns of thought and emotion. He praised their spontaneity, purity, power, and delight, believed in their inherent goodness, and created the romantic metaphor of the child as a flower in bloom. In the eighteenth century, childhood became increasingly commercialised, with toys, books, and games designed specifically for children. These toys were invented, produced, and marketed to a minority who were able to buy in Britain as never before.

Ariès stresses the influence of ideological change, particularly the impact of Calvinist religion and the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but offers little explanation for certain phenomena, such as the formal lengthening of childhood, coming earlier to boys than to girls and first to the professional and commercial middling strata.

Western Europe saw a substantial shift from traditional to nuclear families during the nineteenth century, driven by social, cultural, and economic changes brought about by the French and Industrial Revolutions. This resulted in the division of labour, urbanisation, and the dissolution of intergenerational family structures. The modern nuclear family was highly structured, with distinct divisions between adults and children, work and home, and private and public life. Children respected their parents and authorities, and their lives were influenced by moral and religious beliefs. Childhood was regarded as a distinct stage of life, dedicated to education and preparation for adulthood. Separate clothing, toys, and literature were created for children, creating a safe and individual environment. In the European upper classes, children were kept isolated from their parents at home and spent most of their time in nurseries and for tutoring. As affluence grew, the working classes also participated in mass education, resulting in a different world for children.

In England, the Victorian era was known as the "golden age of childhood", with parents, artists, writers, and toy producers focusing more on children. Many writers praised children for their innocence, resulting in sentimentalised paintings of aristocratic and middle-class boys and girls. However, these artworks indicated significant gender disparities between girls and boys. Girls were frequently portrayed as sweet, religious, attractive, quiet, and self-effacing, whilst boys were regarded as more free-spirited, independent, adventurous, mischievous, and assertive. Misconduct, bullying, and even violent behaviour were shown in classrooms and yards. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the luxury of childhood was short-lived or non-existent in the lower classes, with legions of abandoned and destitute children. The struggle of the poor and disadvantaged was clearly illustrated in Charles Dickens' novels *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, which highlighted the gloomy side of the Industrial Revolution.

Childhood patterns changed dramatically in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The first change was to shift the emphasis of children away from employment, with education becoming increasingly essential due to economic changes. This transition was impacted by the labour force's growing literacy and numeracy, as well as the rise of machines in the workplace. The second change was in the birth rate, with families reducing the number of children they wanted as children transitioned from economic contributors to liabilities. This population shift was standard in civilisations transitioning to or preparing for the decline of agriculture, reversing the agricultural family hierarchy. Except for the extremely rich, poorer families had greater birth rates. These changes were linked to a decrease in infant and maternal mortality, leading to significant shifts in family size and expectations that children would survive. Death and childhood have become more distinct than ever before in human history, with children growing up with fewer siblings and schooling encouraging increasingly age-specific social ties.

The child labour reform movement began an unsuccessful struggle to regulate and eventually end industrial child labour because it saw young labourers as helpless victims of industrialisation. The implementation of universal education and the fight against child labour in the 19th century recognised the importance of protecting children and their rights. As regular schooling became mandatory in Europe in 1900 and school largely replaced labour, ideas regarding the role and place of children also evolved. The 19th century is called the "child-saving" age since it saw an expansion of children's rights to protection and services from their parents, employers, and other adults. Over time, children were no longer seen as property but as a distinct class. The idea that children are a special group that society has an obligation to preserve and shield from the myriad threats to which they are exposed started to replace the belief that they are only of economic worth.

During the 19th century, industrialisation expanded working-class children's capacity for material independence, enabling them to support themselves and negotiate with their parents. However, more attempts at social and family control followed this independence, so literature began to treat adolescence as a "problem". Organisations and youth clubs arose in the 1890s to regulate this newly independent age group. When their court system failed, parents even turned over problematic children to the police, using the magistrate's court. A conflict between older adolescents and adults in the late 19th century resulted in the recent lowering of the legal majority age to 18. The state grew more involved in matters of childhood than ever before, often diminishing the influence of religious groups. Governments now require education,

regulate labour, provide health care, offer parenting guidance, address troubled children, and remove children from unsuitable households.

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The 19th century is called the "child-saving" age because it saw an expansion of children's rights to protection and services, including access to their parents, employers, and other adults. Over time, children were no longer seen as property but as a distinct class. Britain enacted protective legislation in the late nineteenth century to shield disadvantaged children from adult jobs, judicial processes, and brutality. These policies were inspired by generosity and the realisation that maximising future generations' physical and mental health is essential to Britain's economic and military prosperity. However, these measures frequently left critical decisions in the hands of parents and the state, rather than giving the child a voice or representation. These acts can be extensions of the state's long-standing right to intervene on behalf of more vulnerable citizens. Children were more susceptible to adult authority because they were younger, physically weaker, and knew less about the world than adults. The state has a long history of stepping in to protect the weaker members of society, and issues of a minor's welfare are now decided by parents or guardians.

A significant change in how childhood was conceptualised occurred in the early 20th century, when urbanisation, industrialisation, and immigration were seen as endangering children. This gave rise to a new agenda about the status of children and the notion of their protection and rights. Industrial child labour, which was seen as a social issue because of the dangerous working conditions and moral harm that children in factories endured, was the first development in the field of children's rights.

Society introduced four significant changes in childhood patterns in the 19th and 20th centuries. First, the emphasis shifted from employment to education as industry and commerce expanded and required a more literate workforce. Children were therefore less motivated or helpful in their employment, and new laws began to limit child labour. Second, as families decreased the number of children they desired, the birth rate changed significantly, influencing family size and survival expectations. Death and childhood became more separate as the number of siblings decreased and the importance of age-specific social ties increased. Increased government involvement in matters of childhood was the third change. Families and religious institutions were responsible for caring for children in premodern societies, and there was relatively little direct interaction with them.

The government started to regulate labour, mandate health care, mandate education, deal with troublesome kids, and even remove children from families that weren't thought to be able to care for them. Increased state involvement in matters pertaining to childhood was the fourth change. In premodern times, families and religious institutions were responsible for caring for children, and states had relatively little direct contact with them. Governments began to enforce laws pertaining to education, regulate employment, provide health care, offer parenting advice, deal with troublesome children, and even take children away from households that were judged unable to care for them. Even if there are notable differences, these four related changes might have other effects. Gender segregation of the kind found in rural villages would be studied. The decline in birth rates suggested a change in the training-for-motherhood strategy, which reduced the gap with boys and shifted to formal or informal schooling for females. Young women began to fight for gender equality as access to education improved for both sexes. Nonetheless, traditional gender roles in childhood persisted, with boys being preferred over girls in Chinese and Indian society. This may have contributed to the rise in female infanticide and the number of girls living in orphanages. In Islamic societies, there was also resistance to women's education, with extremists attacking educational institutions and students. However, when agricultural patterns altered, gender factors in childhood declined. Growing studies on children contributed to the emergence of adolescence in the West in the 19th century, characterised by longer school years and a higher dependence on teens. Some features of adolescence transcended cultural boundaries as a result of the rise of an adolescent consumer culture that pushed cheap, sensationalist music, videos, and books. As a result, pregnant women received better medical treatment, and standard regulations that extended beyond school attendance were established.

The twentieth century was marked by concern and attempts to define and secure children's right to nurture. The idea that children were either passive, weak, and fragile beings in need of protection or that they were threatening and unruly beings in need of control was the foundation for the global acknowledgement of children's rights. The notion of "saving children," which was embraced by society, grew significantly throughout the 20th century. The position of children received tangible backing in the latter part of the 20th century, which justified their rights to protection and, for the first time, to self-determination. Creating a framework for children's active involvement in civil society became the main focus. The U.S. Supreme Court acknowledged minors as "persons" under the Constitution in 1967, ruling that constitutional rights do not automatically develop until a person reaches the state-defined age of majority. The phenomenological study by Edelstein demonstrates the continuous global shift from traditional to modern families and childhood. In Iceland in the middle of the 20th century, traditional sheep-raising households were characterised as transparent, stable, cyclical, and orderly, with children directly participating in the experience. The contemporary system, however, substituted an unstable, linear metaphor of gradual growth and change for this, with its division of labour and the dissociation of generations. Similar cultural shifts are taking place in South Africa, where a large number of Africans who were raised in traditional farming villages are now residing in contemporary urban areas. Children are not fully recognised as active participants in their own lives, and most rights are still associated with child protection. Compared to adults, children might not get the same respect or attention for their integrity and dignity. Children's working circumstances are not protected by law, but adults are. Generally speaking, children's legal rights are indirect; parents or guardians have rights on their behalf, and explicit rights are subject to restrictions or are subject to state control. Early social scientists believed that the contemporary nuclear family and the acceptance of childhood as a distinct period of life were signs of our belief in progress and our highest level of development. However, the reality of World War II destroyed the notion that childhood was a distinct, safe area. Up until the middle of the 20th century, modern ideas of family and children were still fairly prevalent in North America, where the effects of Western modernisation were less noticeable. In conclusion, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw huge changes in childhood patterns, with education becoming more essential than ever and the birth rate falling.

Throughout the 20th century, children's rights expanded internationally and gained more formality. The Century of the Child by Ellen Key exposed the failures of powerful societies to protect their children's rights. As a result, there were international movements against child labour, including the Save the Children movement, which was started by Eglantyne Jebb. The International Labour Office, affiliated with the League of Nations, prohibited children under 15 from working. The Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which Jebb sponsored in 1923, emphasised children's rights to education, delinquent rehabilitation, protection from poverty and illness, and relief activities. The Soviet government's dedication to children's rights in sectors such as education was among the other rights declarations that emerged during the interwar years. In 1943, Franklin Roosevelt incorporated children's rights—especially the right to education—into his postwar agenda. The movement was advanced through international initiatives and the creation of the United Nations. Expanding on Jebb's declaration, the General Assembly in 1959 acknowledged children's rights to freedom of movement, education, and health care. Declarations on children's rights, such as the repeal of the death penalty for minors found guilty of crimes, were incorporated into numerous new national constitutions. Children shouldn't be coerced into marriages without their express consent, according to other rights requirements. Several nations were worried about the ramifications of a ban on child labour, despite efforts to secure an international consensus on a stronger rights statement. India resisted systematic efforts, whereas the United States sought to protect migrant agricultural labourers' underage labour. When the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified in 1989, it brought attention to increasingly severe violations such as child labour, sexual exploitation, the death penalty, and child soldiers. Proponents stressed the significance of securing children's independent rights, even in opposition to their parents. The Convention's Article 12 guaranteed children the freedom to voice their opinions and to be included in any decision that impacts them. The majority of countries agreed to a limited additional extension in 2000, and by 2012, all but three countries—South Sudan, the United States, and Somalia—had ratified the Convention.

Childhood, which is acknowledged as a unique stage for play, development, and learning, is a complicated and contentious stage of human life in the twenty-first century. It is influenced by worldwide factors like environmental catastrophes, economic inequality, and the rapid advancement of technology. Since the twentieth century, family life has undergone tremendous change as a result of gender roles, growing parental investment per child, and decreased birth rates. Even though parenting is becoming more demanding, middle-class expectations and conventions frequently influence it. With the advent of the digital revolution, play and socialisation have changed, creating new opportunities for self-expression, education, and creativity. However, there are concerns associated with screens and social media, including excessive screen time, exposure to dangerous content, cyberbullying, surveillance, online exploitation, and the decline of unstructured, outdoor, physical play. Childhood has been extended, and education has increased, but access to high-quality education is still uneven. These disparities were made more apparent by the COVID-19 pandemic, making millions of children in underdeveloped areas lack the technology and connectivity required for distance learning. While health, well-being, and other aspects of life have significantly improved in many parts of the world, they also present new challenges. For example, in wealthy societies, the prevalence of childhood obesity, mental health issues, and lifestyle-related chronic diseases is on the rise; in lower-income regions, persistent malnutrition, preventable diseases, and inadequate healthcare are among the new challenges. Millions of children worldwide continue to suffer from poverty, exploitation, displacement, conflict, and climate-related calamities, despite international accords that uphold children's rights. Girls experience inequality as a result of a lack of educational opportunities, customs and gender discrimination. The future of childhood and the climate catastrophe pose important questions about the kind of world today's children will inherit and how society can safeguard their ability to play, learn, and flourish in an uncertain environment. As a result, childhood in the twenty-first century both illustrates the progress societies have made in acknowledging the rights and welfare of children and the work still to be done. The study of childhood in our day and age reveals a straightforward yet significant truth: infancy is a reflection and gauge of society's values, priorities, and compassion. The moral and cultural fabric of the world that children will inherit—and subsequently remake—will be shaped by the way we raise them today.

## **CONCLUSION**

Childhood is not a universal biological fact; rather, it is a social construct that has changed over the centuries and differs significantly across cultures. At various points throughout time, play, employment, education, leisure, and caring have all marked it. It is fundamentally a lens through which all societies convey their ideas about developing, learning, and reaching full human potential.

Children were typically seen in ancient Greece as a temporary, inferior stage in the family and the polis. Plato and Aristotle, among other philosophers, viewed childhood as a state of incompleteness in which children lacked independent rights and legal personhood but were future citizens in need of moral and physical instruction. Athens placed a strong focus on civic duty, philosophy, and rhetoric, but the patriarchal household still had the final say over a child's position.

Childhood in Rome reflected the patriarchal structure even more starkly. The father had complete authority over his children, and infanticide, particularly of girls and disabled infants, was legally and culturally acceptable. Children were considered both an economic investment and an extension of family honour, prized for their future contributions more than any inherent rights.

The medieval era maintained much of this consistency going forward. In his well-known argument, Philippe Ariès claimed that medieval societies did not recognise childhood as a separate stage of life. Although later historians have disputed this assertion, it is undeniable that children in the Middle Ages seamlessly transitioned into adulthood by working at a young age, sharing spaces with adults, and being swiftly assimilated into the economy. The Church's theory of original sin, however, presented children as morally dubious from birth and demanded baptism and rigorous moral supervision in order to lead them to redemption. The idea of infant depravity was supported by educated opinion, and parents frequently tried to "toughen up" their children for religious and professional discipline. Families, however, also had a strong concern for their children within this moral system. Parental love, mourning for lost children, and the slow development of more age-specific traditions suggested an increasing understanding of childhood as a valuable but inferior stage of life.

This cultural and moral code started to change during the Renaissance and Reformation. Humanist educators opposed the harshness of medieval pedagogy by supporting kinder instruction and

acknowledging that children required time and nurturing to develop into moral individuals. The Reformation strengthened the belief that parents, not merely priests, were responsible for forming a child's soul. Calvinism placed a strong emphasis on infant depravity, emphasising how children differ from adults morally and psychologically. Paradoxically, this stern theology strengthened closer family ties as parents took on more responsibility for their child's moral development.

By the seventeenth century, interest in children had developed into methodical research. Childhood was drastically rethought by philosophers such as John Locke, who maintained that a child's mind was a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, moulded by education and experience. Therefore, it was the adults' great responsibility to shape youngsters into decent, wise adults. With this new perspective, the discussion switched from inherent wickedness to the potential for growth and nurturing.

The Enlightenment supported this tendency in the eighteenth century. Although enlightened thinkers acknowledged that children are inherently ignorant, they also viewed this as a chance for moral development, education, and reason. Jean-Jacques Rousseau took this a step further, contending that children were inherently virtuous and innocent, and that they were only tainted by the artificial limitations imposed on them by society. The concept of a child's innocence, curiosity, and inherent goodness was romanticised. However, when impoverished and working-class children continued to toil in factories, farms, and homes, this idealistic vision frequently collided with harsh realities.

In Western countries, social and cultural transformation gained traction starting in the seventeenth century. Scholars, poets, novelists, educators, physicians, and reformers stocked libraries with new writings on education and child welfare.

This conflict reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. Reformers were appalled by the Industrial Revolution's ruthless treatment of children, which included long hours in factories, hazardous working conditions in mines, and child labour in urban slums. By humanising the exploited youngster, Dickens and others sparked public compassion. Arguments about whether children were born good or evil gave way to pragmatic calls for universal education, child welfare, and legislation against child labour.

It was post-Darwinian psychology that provided secular explanations for the uniqueness of childhood. According to developmental psychologists like Piaget and psychoanalysts like Freud, children's minds and emotions develop in discrete stages and are essentially different from those of adults. This scientific framework reinforced the need to preserve childhood, not minimise it or disregard it.

Childhood was firmly established as a stage of sentimentality and protection in the contemporary industrialised West by the 20th century. One of the defining characteristics of modern governments is universal primary education. Child labour became more and more illegal. Welfare programs were created to protect the mental and physical well-being of children. Families became increasingly focused on the child: children, who had previously contributed financially, were now invaluable emotional assets. These changes were documented by the discipline of children's history, which saw how conceptions of childhood expanded globally in tandem with Christian missions and modernisation initiatives.

However, not all challenges were eliminated by this contemporary worldview. The wars, depressions, genocides, and forced migrations of the twentieth century exposed millions of children to exploitation, violence, and starvation. Forced labourers, child soldiers, and street children continued to exist. Children worldwide are entitled to safety, education, and a say in how their lives are shaped, but this recognition was only granted in 1989 by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Childhood continues to be a changing mirror of societal change in the twenty-first century. Children nowadays are raised in an era of unparalleled abundance for some—schooling that lasts into adulthood, leisure that frequently morphs into a dependence on technology. These days, displays and microprocessors influence play and daily life, but they also bring up new privacy, monitoring, and overprotection issues. Some worry that children are being sheltered in dependency by the length of modern childhood, while others fear that hyperconsumer culture is forcing them to mature too quickly.

Meanwhile, glaring disparities persist: the futures of millions of children are at risk due to global poverty, war, forced migration, and climate disasters. Automation and artificial intelligence are two examples of new technologies that have the potential to drastically alter economies in ways that humans can hardly comprehend. The classic arguments concerning protection, freedom, discipline, and innocence continue in new ways. For example, how can we defend children's right to play and wonder in a world that is so technologically advanced? How do we balance regional customs and severe global injustices with the universal promise of children's rights?

Thus, the history of childhood ultimately serves as a reminder of a timeless truth: infancy is a reflection and a gauge of our humanity. This is true of everything from ancient Greece and Rome to mediaeval Christendom, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment philosophy, industrial exploitation, and contemporary rights-based frameworks. It clarifies every community's moral standards, economic priorities, and aspirations.

The tale is hardly one of straightforward advancement. It has never been quick or simple to change, and every solution presents new issues. But it's a monument to how far our cultural imagination has advanced that we now refer to children as bearers of rights—not property, not labourers, but individuals. The unresolved childcare task remains crucial to our future together. Examining the development of childhood means realising that each generation must choose how to raise the next one, striking a balance between freedom and protection, play and discipline, and independence and dependence. We see not only the past but also our greatest hope in this: that by providing for children, we are also taking care of the planet's future.

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