We will be looking at:

- The argument that childhood is a social construct
- Examples of the social construction of childhood
- Theories of the social construction of childhood
- The history of the social construction of childhood
- Sociological views of childhood as a social construct

What is childhood?

First things first, it may be helpful to consider what 'childhood' itself is.

Childhood is defined as the state of being a child, often described contrarily to adulthood. The Cambridge English dictionary describes a 'child' as a boy or girl from the time of birth until they become adults. Similarly, the Oxford English Dictionary defines 'child' as 'a young human being below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority'.

Considering the definitions above, it can be concluded that childhood can be determined in two ways: **biologically**, i.e. when one reaches the biological age of puberty, or **socially**, i.e. when society (reflected in the law) decides whether someone is an adult.

In Britain, society has set the age for the beginning of adulthood at 18, when their legal status changes.
Children pick up certain 'legal entitlements' during the transition to adulthood; the legal age to be employed is 14, for sexual consent, it is 16, and the legal age to receive a driving license is 17 in the UK.

The separation between childhood and adulthood

In most societies, there seems to be agreement on the basic differences between children and adults, such as:

- Children are not as physically and psychologically as mature as adults. Consequently, they are not held responsible for their actions as they are in the process of learning and developing.
- Children mostly look up to or depend on adults for biological and emotional needs, which are fulfilled by the process of socialisation. They are vulnerable and dependent on adults.

- Unlike adults, children are not efficient enough to run their own lives.

One of the factors characterising adulthood is biological maturity and the competency to run their own lives. Adults are generally held responsible for their own decisions and are not afforded the protection given to children.

However, this was not always the case; the treatment of children differs across cultures, borders and times. There is a significant disparity in how societies interpret childhood, children's place in society, what they should and should not do, how should children be socialised and finally, at what age should they be considered adults.

Is childhood a social construct?

So, is childhood socially constructed? We will look at the concept of childhood in sociology, specifically, the idea that childhood is a social construct.

The argument of childhood as a social construct suggests that the concept of childhood is **created by society** and not determined by biological age.

Proponents of this argument claim that certain characteristics of childhood are influenced and dictated by society. These include the period of childhood and the attitudes, rights and responsibilities towards children at various stages of their lives.

Let's illustrate this with a few examples below.

Examples of the social construction of childhood

The following are examples of the social construction of our concepts and treatment of 'childhood':

- The idea that children are innocent and in need of care
- The belief that children need the freedom to express themselves and develop as much as possible
- The notion that children should be educated and should not be responsible for working and earning money
- Being "family-friendly" or creating products, goods, services, and experiences aimed specifically at children

Theories of the social construction of childhood

Childhood is a good example of social constructionism as it is something that has a clear presence throughout history. Let's explore this through theories of childhood as a social construct.

Childhood and separateness

Jane Pilcher (1995) argues that the most important and recent idea of childhood is **separateness**. Separateness is the perception of childhood as a distinct and particular stage of life. Pilcher argues that this is a relatively modern, Western idea of childhood.
The separateness of childhood can be seen in many different ways in society.
The separateness of childhood is reflected in 'official' ways, such as laws explicitly protecting children and putting their interests firsts (such as in cases of divorce). However, it is also reflected in everyday life, such as having a 'play area' in waiting rooms.

Non-universal childhood

Stephen Wagg (1992) argues that despite the universality of physical development and growth, childhood is not universal. Different societies and cultures see childhood and adulthood differently.
The transition from a boy 'becoming a man' may be different across cultures; there may be certain characteristics a young boy must possess to be seen as a man.

Similarly, a quinceañera is a Latin American tradition symbolising and celebrating a girl's transition into womanhood at the age of 15.

Cross-cultural differences in childhood

Sociologists argue that there is not just one Western way of viewing childhood. Let's take a comparative approach to the social construction of childhood by reading about cross-cultural differences in childhood.

The following section is a brief overview. For more detail on this section, visit our 'Cultural Differences in Childhood' article!

Child labour and childhood

In some cultures, children are still treated as economic assets expected to engage in paid work.

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Fig. 2 - Child labour was a common practice in industrial society.
In developing countries, children are seen as a source of cheap (free) labour in factories, on farms, in local shops or in households as helpers or servants.

Samantha Punch (2001), in her study of Bolivian children, found that children as young as five years old were expected to start carrying out work duties both outside and inside the home. There was no perception of children being 'too young' for work.

Child soldiers and childhood

During conflicts, young teenagers, typically boys, are recruited to fight, successfully taking on serious adult responsibilities.

Forced marriage and childhood

Young girls in countries like India and Ethiopia are sometimes forced into arranged marriages without their consent, taking on the responsibilities of a wife or mother at a tender age.

Girls in West Africa have had to go through 'trokosi', a practice where families give away their young daughters to pay for the sins committed by the family members.

The girls are forcibly shipped to a shrine, usually in a foreign country, stripped of their original identities and forced to work as 'servants of God'.

Sexuality and childhood

Sexuality in children is also viewed differently in some cultures.

Bronisław Malinowski (1957) found that the Trobriand Islanders did not try to shield or protect children from exploring their sexuality or exhibiting sexual behaviour.

Gender, ethnic and social class differences in childhood

We will also briefly look at how the concept of childhood differs across various social groups, such as across gender and within social classes.

Gender and childhood

In her study of teenagers, **Julia Brannen (1994)** found that Asian parents are more likely to be strict towards their daughters than other parents.

This example can be used to demonstrate both gender *and* cross-cultural differences in childhood.
Mayer Hillman (1993) found that boys are more likely to be given more freedom, such as going out alone after dark and undertaking potentially risky activities such as crossing the road or cycling.

Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1976) argued that young girls are seen to be part of a gendered subculture called 'the bedroom culture'. This subculture was not the same for young boys, who were more likely to be seen outside.

Social class and childhood

Howard (2001) argues that children born into poorer families are more likely to die young (infancy or childhood), do poorly at school, and are even more likely to be shorter than children from wealthier families.

History of the social construction of childhood

We will explore how the concept of childhood has changed over time. We will look at studies of the social construction of childhood by historian Ariès, and then at how society evolved to become child-centric.

Ariès on the social construction of childhood

By outlining how the institution has developed through time, the social historian **Philippe Ariès'** work has been essential in refuting naturalistic notions of childhood.

Ariès (1960) claims that during the period between the 10th to the 13th century in Britain, the idea of childhood did not exist; children were not regarded as different from adults. He uses the following evidence to support this idea:
- Children were expected to start working at an early age to help the family
- The law usually did not divide children and adults.

- Artworks from the period portrayed children just as small adults (wearing the same clothes and appearing to work and play together).

In addition, **Edward Shorter** (1975) talks about the parenting approach toward children during the Middle Ages. These include:

- Indifference and negligence towards infants due to high infant mortality rates.
- Referring to newborn babies as 'it' instead of naming them. Assigning newborns with the name of a deceased sibling was a common practice.

Ariès claims that the notion that childhood is a **separate phase of life** started to develop from the thirteenth century onwards. He argues that historical developments show that childhood is a social construct because children were not always treated in the way they are now.

Child-centred society

Sociologists argue that we gradually entered a child-centred society in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Society in the 19th century

Jacques Donzelot (1997) argues that towards the end of the nineteenth century, child development theories began emphasising the need for children to be supervised and protected. This is shown through the **1880 Education Act**, which made it compulsory for all children between five and ten to attend school.

Society in the 20th century

The evolution of a child-centred society in twentieth-century Britain resulted from various developments.
- **Improved living standards,** including higher wages, better quality housing, hygiene, and advancements in maternal health care have brought about a major fall in the infant mortality rate.
- As societies were developing, children were no longer regarded as economic assets, and raising them became more expensive. As a result, parents chose to raise fewer children and instead focus on providing the **best quality of life** for them.
- Industrialised societies needed skilled and educated workers, which meant that it became necessary for children to attend **school** and gain skills and knowledge.
- The increased availability of **contraceptives** has also allowed people to choose to have fewer children.
- The **media's representation** of childhood and adolescence as two separate groups from adulthood changed the cultural outlook regarding childhood. Childhood was viewed as 'special' in terms of parents' responsibilities to children during that period - the level of affection, socialisation, and attention devoted to children.
- The **state** became more involved in the supervision, socialisation and protection of children e.g. establishing compulsory education from 11 years. Social services and social workers became more engaged in monitoring and supervising the families

where children are thought to be at risk. Additionally, the government undertook specific **economic responsibilities** - giving parents child benefits (monetary help).
- **The Children Act (2004)** initiated the influential policy of 'every child matters' that focused on the well-being of people from birth to 18 years old. This emphasises 'better outcomes' for children, namely a healthy, safe and economically sound life. An earlier version of this Act was brought in place in 1989.

Characteristics of childhood in the 20th century

Hugh Cunningham (2006) suggests that the social construction of childhood in the twentieth century was associated with three major elements:

1. Childhood was the '**opposite**' of adulthood – children were seen as needing protection and prevented from labour to be dependent on adults instead.
2. Two **separate worlds** for children and adults - the home and the school being the ideal places for children instead of adult spaces like workplaces, as the children were often banned from these spaces.
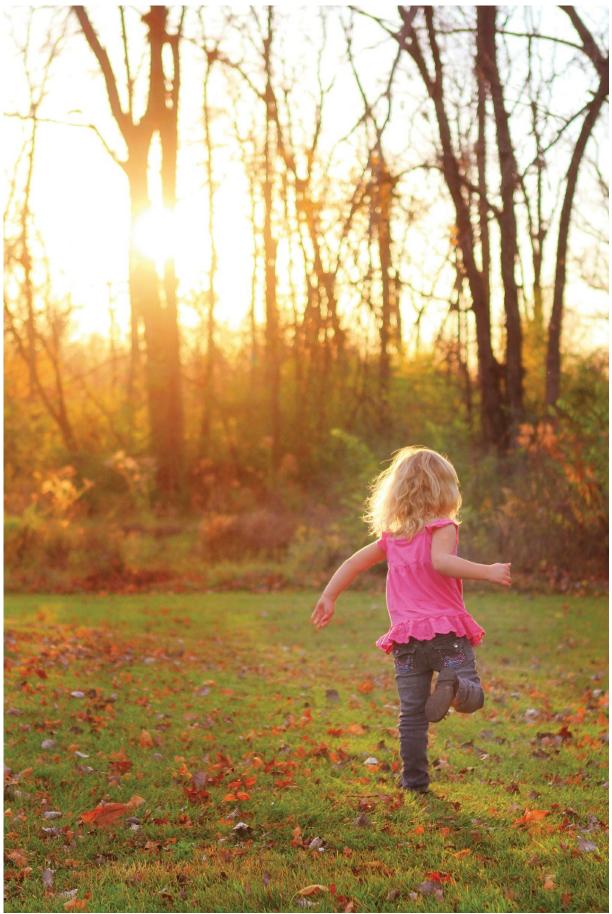3. Children were seen to have the right to happiness, safety and the freedom to play and enjoy childhood.

Fig. 3 - The concept of childhood as we know it came about in the 20th century.

Sociologists argue that this represents a 'march of progress' for children and childhood. This is because children are protected and generally live better lives.

Childhood as a social construct: sociological views

Now, we will be looking at sociological views on childhood, including how sociologists perceive the nature and experience of childhood.

The disappearance of childhood

According to **Neil Postman** (1982, 1994), television has exposed children to the adult world. Childhood is "disappearing at a dazzling speed" due to early access to media. Children are exposed to information not appropriate for them, diminishing their innocence.

Postman also states that the lack of supervision over children when they play video games is a trend that blurs the line between childhood and adulthood. Additionally, children now commit 'adult' crimes such as murder due to the knowledge they possess from the media.
Iona Opie (1993) argues that childhood is not disappearing but merely changing into a separate culture of childhood. She argues children still have distinct media and culture, such as children's games, toys and movies.

Toxic childhoods

In agreement with Postman, **Sue Palmer (2006)** states that children are now experiencing toxic childhoods - physical and psychological damage due to changes in parenting. Modern parents encourage the use of television, electronic games and junk food to keep children busy or quiet, as parents themselves are too busy or distracted in their own lives by consumerism. Due to this, they cannot offer children a traditional childhood and family life. Palmer highlights some key features of a toxic childhood:

- Little to no outdoor play or activities
- Too much screen time, which reduces interpersonal interactions
- Increased anxiety in children through strict academic tests and targets

Palmer is therefore critical of the 'march of progress' view on childhood.

Allison Pugh (2002) claims that parents engage in 'consumption as compensation', which points to parents who are rich but cannot devote enough time to their children. Instead, they spend more money to buy children whatever goods they desire out of guilt for not spending time with their children.

Children, consumption, and the influence of media

Sociologists are also alarmed by the fact that the media are targeting children as consumers.

Children from the age group of 7–11 years are worth about £20 million annually. This has led to advertisers encouraging children to use 'pester power' to manipulate their parents to buy consumer goods in return for love and status.
Philippe Ariès holds an extreme view of the social construction of childhood. He believes that media and peer groups have a stronger influence than parents.
Ariès thinks that exposure to media, such as magazines aimed at young girls, pop music videos and television is an issue. According to him, these encourage young girls to view themselves as sexual beings.

He further argues that the increase in social problems like suicide, eating disorders, depression, consumption of drugs/alcohol, etc., among children is also an outcome of this process.

Childhood as a Social Construct - Key takeaways

- Childhood is defined as the state of being a child, often described contrarily to adulthood.

- The argument of childhood as a social construct suggests that the concept of childhood is **created by society** and not determined by biological age. An example of the social construction of childhood is the idea that children should be educated and should not be responsible for earning money.

- Theories of the social construction of childhood include the idea that childhood is a separate stage of life, that it is non-universal, and that it is subject to cross-cultural differences.

- Theorists like Ariès illustrate the history of the social construction of childhood and how attitudes towards children, their nature, roles, and responsibilities have shifted over time.

- There are various sociological views on childhood as a social construct, including the idea that childhood is now disappearing, that it has become "toxic", that children are treated as prime consumers, and that the media is damaging towards children.

References

1. Fig. 2 - Child labour was a common practice in industrial society (https://flickr.com/photos/67331818@N03/8529268682/in/photostream/) by Lewis Wickes Hine (https://flickr.com/photos/67331818@N03/) licensed by CC BY 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Frequently Asked Questions about Childhood As A Social Construct

Explain the idea of childhood as a social construction.

The argument of childhood as a social construct suggests that the concept of childhood is **created by society** and not determined by biological age.

What is childhood as a social construct?

"Childhood as a social construct" refers to the idea that our beliefs and attitudes around childhood are socially constructed, not "natural". An example of the social construction of childhood is the idea that children are innocent and in need of care, or that they need the freedom to express themselves and develop as much as possible.

Why is childhood considered a social construct?

Childhood is considered a social construct because certain characteristics of childhood are influenced by society. These include the period of childhood, the point where a child becomes an adult, and children's rights and responsibilities. These can vary depending on society and moment in history.

Why is childhood a good example of social construction?

Childhood is a good example of social constructionism as it is something that has a clear presence throughout history. Children and childhood have been treated very differently through different periods in time.

Who said that childhood is a social construct?

While several theorists have shaped the theory of childhood as a social construction, social historian **Philippe Ariès'** work has been essential in refuting naturalistic notions of childhood.