

Historical Changes in Conceptions of Childhood

Professor Keith Sawyer

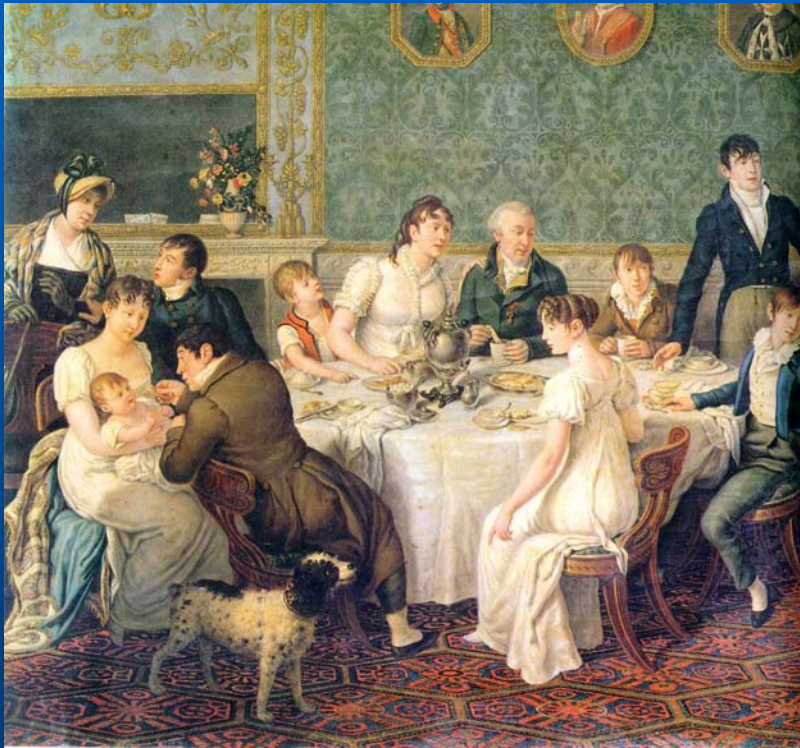
Philippe Aries

“In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist....[the] awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult.”

1962 (1960), *Centuries of Childhood*, p. 128



Aries' Evidence



- In medieval art, children are rarely present
- When they are, they are represented like miniature adults
- Society shifted from extended families to nuclear families
- Age-graded schools were founded and spread

Stages of the Construction of Childhood

- 13th century: paintings contained *putti*, naked children, indicating the beginning of an interest in childhood



Stages of the Construction of Childhood

- 16th century: the *coddling period*. Childhood was seen as a time of innocence
- 16th-18th centuries: the *moralistic period*



Children Lost Out...



- Aries thought that due to this history, the modern world is “obsessed by the physical, moral, and sexual problems of childhood”
- The child was removed from adult society; this “deprived the child of the freedom he had hitherto enjoyed among adults. It inflicted on him the birch, the prison cell”

Or did they?

- **Other scholars have argued that historical changes made things better for children.**
- **deMause (1974): conceptions of childhood result from parents working out their own anxieties in their interactions with children**
- **“The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused”**

Evidence from Direct Sources

- **Linda Pollock: studied diaries, autobiographies, and newspaper accounts of child abuse court cases**
- **500 diaries and related sources were examined**
- **Pollock claimed this gives a much more positive picture of childhood in the past**
- **Pollock claimed there was little support for Aries or deMause**

The Twentieth Century



- “The century of the child”
- Progressive educators and reformers. The goal: to “educate the public” and continue the “progress of humanity”

Experts in 1900

- Dr. L. Emmett Holt. His manual: *The care and feeding of children*. The stern one.
- Dr. G. Stanley Hall. Taught mothers and teachers to study children and collect data.
- For the first time, scientists began to replace mothers and ministers

Gender Issues

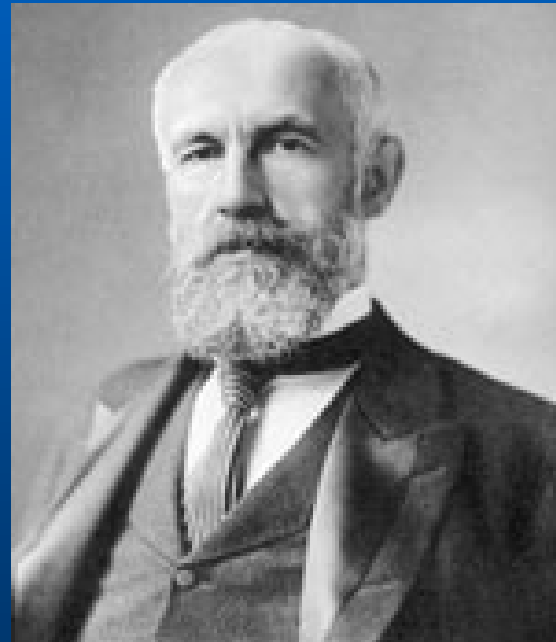
- **Childhood was a woman's domain: the "helpmeet" role**
- **Men were the "breadwinners"**
- **Scientists were all male**
- **When science turned to children, men entered a traditionally female sphere**

Two Perspectives on Child-Rearing

- **Dr. Holt: the parent-centered approach, focused on rational discipline and self control.**
- **Dr. Hall: the child-centered approach, focusing on the child's natural impulses and imagination.**

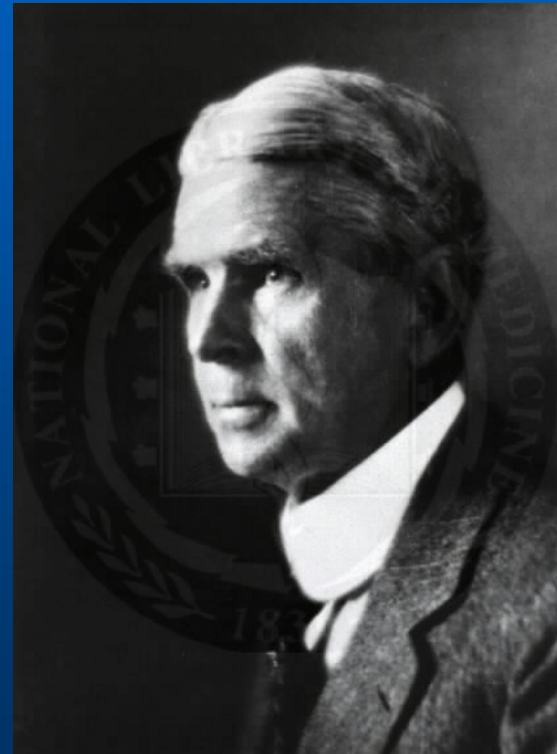
G. Stanley Hall

- **Highly introspective, telling inspirational stories about his own childhood**
- **A Congregationalist from Massachusetts**
- **Focused on “new education”**
- **An early American admirer of Freud**



L. Emmett Holt

- Born in 1855 on a New England farm
- Devoutly religious
- Diet was critical. Breastfeeding was unsanitary and unsystematic, unpredictable
- His expertise was digestion and cow-milk formula
- He founded a school for private nursery maids



What's a Parent to Do?

- **Holt and Hall seem total opposites**
- **Holt emphasizing authority and structure,**
- **Hall emphasizing intimacy and child-centered pedagogy**

The New History of Childhood

- Children are considered active agents
- Scholars study interactions between parents and children, not only adult's conceptions of children



A Focus on Peer Culture

- Children do not develop only as individuals; they collectively create peer cultures, and they contribute to the reproduction of society
- Example of *interpretive reproduction*: the “newsies”

