What's Happened to Childhood?

Transcript

Date: Thursday, 6 February 2014 - 6:00PM

Location: Barnard's Inn Hall
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What I want to tell you this evening is a story of two narratives about childhood, one progressive and positive, the other negative and depressing.

In 1942 the poet and essayist Sylvia Lynd admitted that we have ‘our temporary misfortunes’, ‘but the story of English children … is a story that moves towards a happy ending’. Try saying that in 2014 - no one now imagines that the story of English children is moving towards a happy ending.

News reporting of the state of childhood is almost uniformly negative.

- Children are obese
- Children suffer high rates of self-harming and mental illness
- Children are ‘couch-potatoes’, slumped in front of screens
- Children suffer from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- Children are materialistic, hooked on consumerism
- An alarming number of children seem to be autistic or to suffer from dyslexia
- Since the 1970s the world which children explore on their own has shrunk by a factor of nine.

This is not a purely British phenomenon but according to what we read, it’s worse in Britain than anywhere else:

- In the 2007 UNICEF survey of children in 21 advanced economies the UK came 21st
- In a report in 2013, 76% of German junior school children were allowed to travel home from school alone, only 25% of British children

In 2006 Sue Palmer published Toxic Childhood – our children are being poisoned, she argued, not only by the food they eat, the drinks they drink, but also by the messages they receive that invite them into a world of consumption and of sexualisation.

So here are the two narratives. I want to show how and why Sylvia Lynd was so optimistic in 1942, how that optimism survived for another thirty years, but then collapsed in the early 1970s to be succeeded by the negative narrative. And I want to suggest that the power of these narratives is such that they form a framework within which we fit everything we hear about children and childhood – further, that we go out to look for ‘facts’ which will reinforce the narratives.

The progressive narrative

The progressive narrative is shaped as a romance, that most basic of human stories. It starts in ‘the olden times’, ‘once upon a time’, when children, like adults, lived in the countryside, helped their parents around the house, in the garden and on the farm, gradually taking on more responsible roles as they grew older. There was no great sentimentality about children – life was too hard and demanding for that. They were treated, so the story claimed, as ‘little adults’ – though that phrase is an imposition on earlier centuries by the nineteenth century. Neither families nor society were child-oriented. The life course was pictured as a triangle – you started at the base as a baby, rose by stages to reach the peak in middle age, and then began the slide down towards old age and death. Childhood as Shakespeare described it consisted of the infant mewling and puking and of the whining boy going unwillingly to school. The childhood years were not, as they were to become, the best years of life.

This world, depicted as stable and hardly changing, was, according to the narrative, disrupted by two forces that came to prominence in the late eighteenth century. The first was Romanticism, the second the industrial revolution.

Romanticism

Until the late eighteenth century there were two main modes of child-rearing. The first, strongest amongst Puritans, saw the baby as born in sin. The task of parenting was to bring the child to a consciousness of sin and to the means of salvation. This was not something that could be left to chance or time; children’s lives were fragile. Isaac Watts in 1715, in his Divine Songs, Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children, taught children to sing:

There is an hour when I must die,
Nor do I know how soon ‘twill come.
A thousand children, young as I,
Are call’d by death to hear their doom.

The second mode of child-rearing, strongly influenced by John Locke’s 1693 Some Thoughts Concerning
Education, placed the emphasis on instilling into children habits and thoughts that would conduce to the emergence of rational adults. Education, as far as possible, was to be made enjoyable, but all to the end of producing the desired adult.

Romanticism was revolutionary. The child moved centre stage, and was far from being tainted with original sin or a mere blank slate. Blake had a two-day-old tell his mother, ‘I happy am; Joy is my name’. Wordsworth in his enormously influential Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood claimed that babies came ‘trailing clouds of glory ... from God who is our home’. Children were messengers from God, imbued with a sensitivity to nature and an inborn morality. They could teach adults how to live. A good childhood became the foundation block for later life, but growing up was a process of loss. Childhood was now seen as the best time of life, the life course thereafter downhill. Childhood should be happy. It is an indication of how pervasive the influence of Romanticism was that in the 1840s Thomas Guthrie, a Scottish evangelical minister, forgetting about original sin, could proclaim that ‘God made childhood to be happy’.

The industrial revolution

The heyday of Romanticism coincided with the industrial revolution which itself became associated with the exploitation of child labour in factories and mines. As J. L. and Barbara Hammond put it in The Town Labourer (1917), ‘during the first phase of the Industrial Revolution, the employment of children on a vast scale became the most important social feature of English life’. Child labour was a denial of childhood as the Romantics imagined it. Coleridge took a leading role in trying to end it. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries John Locke had wanted all children above three whose families sought relief from the parish to be sent to a working school, and Daniel Defoe had rejoiced in reports of children of four or five earning their own keep in the textile trades. Romanticism in combination with evidence of children’s working conditions in the industrial revolution killed such notions. By the 1830s Samuel Roberts, a leading campaigner against the use of boys to clean chimneys, was describing how ‘Ever a toiling Child doth make us sad’. Such children were, it was said, ‘children without childhood’, childhood now painted in romantic colours. For Sylvia Lynd in 1942 ‘The story of the Industrial Age ... is the story of the martyrdom of childhood’. If the progressive story of childhood is a romance, the industrial revolution was the crisis.

Rescue

But fortunately, for both nation and children, rescue was at hand. In the story as it was constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century, philanthropists, Lord Ashley most prominent, took up the cause of the children in mines and factories. He was, as a biography of 1926 put it, ‘our British Abraham Lincoln – the Emancipator of Industrial England’, ‘the Moses who led the children of bondage into their Promised Land’. The ‘Promised Land’ was in one sense ‘childhood’; more mundanely it was school.

Ashley’s concern stretched beyond working children. He took up the cause of street children who were at the forefront of public attention in the mid-nineteenth century. Here, too, school was seen as the remedy, first in the Ragged Schools pioneered in the 1840s, and then in the spread of compulsory schooling in the later nineteenth century.

In the story of rescue there was one further element, the rescue of children from neglect, mistreatment and abuse by adults. Here the NSPCC, founded in 1889 out of an earlier London Society, was seen as playing the crucial role. The NSPCC was supremely successful in constructing a version of history in which children enjoyed no protection under law until it itself provided such protection. The NSPCC version of the past took root – and still predominates.

Government, in harness with philanthropists, played a crucial role in the rescue of children. It passed Factory Acts and Education Acts and what were called Children’s Charters, it set up inspectorates. Arnold Toynbee, vitally important in establishing the industrial revolution as a social crisis, ‘tremble[d] to think what this country would have been but for the Factory Acts’.

Romanticism’s impact and resonance left three lasting legacies. First, childhood, as the best time of life, should be prolonged. The raising of the school-leaving age was the most influential way of doing this. Second, children and adults should as far as possible inhabit separate realms, the adult world defined as dangerous for children. Special spaces should be created for children – schools, playgrounds – and adult spaces, such as the pub, denied them. And third, romanticism provided a story, a narrative of things getting better.

We can see that narrative in place with the reflections on childhood offered on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Diamond jubilee in 1897, the end of the century and then the Queen’s death. The romance was now completed. Children had gone through the crisis of the industrial revolution and been rescued for childhood. The nation could congratulate itself. In 1897 W. Clarke Hall, a barrister who worked with the NSPCC, described how when Victoria came to the throne, the great Juggernaut car of unscrupulous commercialism, private greed, and domestic inhumanity rolled upon its way with none to hinder. Tracing our way back down the dim avenues of the years, we see the white and
mouldering bones of the child victims which its cruel wheels have crushed’. But the juggernaut had now, in 1897, been halted: year by year, ‘the number of its victims becomes more few, the shout of the happy, rescued children more loud and more glad.

Happy children themselves learnt the story. In the elementary schools they sang a song entitled ‘Oh Happy English Children’. And here is how the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’s City Sparrows, the magazine of its junior branch, the League of Pity, told the story:

Sixty years ago, when [Victoria] came to the throne...the children of the nation were, in thousands of instances, being done to death, morally and physically, in wretched homes, in which they slowly pined and starved to death; in factories closely confined, and set to watch the droning, turning wheels, until released sick and faint at night, they crept wearily home with no heart to rejoice in their childhood - no thought but to rest. And worse still, down in the dark mines underground, little, helpless, naked children toiled in the coal-pits. Think what that must have been, you children who love the bright sunshine and the green fields.

But the rescue happened and was on-going: since the Queen’s accession ‘107 Acts of Parliament have been passed relating to child-life and child-suffering...And now, you happy children throughout the length and breadth of Scotland, we would appeal to you to commemorate the glorious sixty years’ reign of our Queen by joining the League of Pity, and so helping to carry on the work for suffering children she has done so much to further.’

Sustaining the story

There was no significant challenge to this narrative in the first half of the twentieth century; rather it became embedded. In 1903 the author of a standard text-book, H. de B. Gibbins, summarised his account in the words: ‘Only think of the triumphs that have been won in this generation for the children of England’. Move forward a century and imagine yourself saying that in 2003. In the inter-war years the journalist and suffragist Evelyn Sharp described how as a young girl in the 1880s she ‘had no idea that she stood at the dawn of a new age that was going to revolutionise all childhood’ – and for the better. In 1930 Sir George Newman, Chief Medical Officer at the Ministry of Health, lecturing to the Shaftesbury Society, could rejoice that ‘one of the darkest chapters of our social history was over, ’the long and shameful story of cruelty and oppression is ended’. Children, it was frequently said, had a right to health and happiness, and increasingly they enjoyed both. Sylvia Lynd celebrated that achievement in 1942.

Progress was not confined to Britain. The principle behind factory legislation, claimed Sidney Webb in 1910, ‘has spread to every industrial community in the Old World and the New’. If in the 1830s Britain had an unenviable notoriety for its use of child workers, by the early twentieth century it was priding itself on setting the path of progress.

This narrative kept going into the 1970s at both national and international level. Let me give you three markers.

• 1973 Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt published the second of two volumes on Children in English Society. They open with a chapter on ‘Childhood without Rights and Protection’, children in the eighteenth century. seen as ‘little adults’. They end the volume with the Children Act of 1948. It’s a story of progress.

• Lloyd de Mause’s The History of Childhood (1974). Parent-child relations, he argued, have proceeded through 6 stages: the infanticidal, the abandonment, the ambivalent, the intrusive, the socialisation, and finally from the mid 20th c, the helping. The further back in history you go, ‘the lower the level of child care, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized, and sexually abused’.

• The optimism was worldwide. In 1973 the ILO passed its Minimum Age Convention, setting 15 as the age below which no child should work.

The 1970s and 1980s

1974 saw the first sustained attack on the story and what it implied for children, John Holt’s Escape from Childhood. Childhood was portrayed as an ‘institution’, a kind of prison with powers to ‘lock the young into eighteen years or more of subserviency and dependence, and make of them...a mixture of expensive nuisance, fragile treasure, slave and super-pet’. Childhood, he announced, ‘goes on far too long’. ‘What is both new and bad about modern childhood is that children are so cut off from the adult world’. This was the first frontal assault on the image of childhood that had been built up in the nineteenth and first three-quarters of the twentieth century.

But it would be naïve to place too much emphasis on Holt and the short-lived movements for child liberation. Larger factors were involved in the dismantling of the progressive narrative and its replacement by the one we know today – and at root they had little directly to do with childhood. The oil crisis of 1973 seems to me the great turning point in the history of the post-war world in the west, the moment when optimism about the future shrivelled. It opened the way for Reaganomics or what has come to be called neo-liberalism, the belief in the justice and virtue of the market and the demonization of welfare states as a drag on economic progress.

The impact of these developments on children was dramatic:

• In Britain in the 1980s and 1990s the proportion of children in poverty rose from 1 in 10 to 1 in 3, a statistic
that fed easily into a negative narrative.

• In the developing (and also in the developed) world child labour began to increase. The facts began to impinge on world consciousness through the pamphlets published by the Anti-Slavery Society between 1978 and 1988.

• In the developed world the transition from childhood to adulthood which in the late 1960s and early 1970s had become concentrated in a few short years in the late teens and early 20s, now stretched out over a decade or more. This was largely due to youth unemployment which has dogged the western world ever since.

We can see the collapse of the old confidence about what constituted a proper childhood and about the direction in which society was moving, taking root from the early 1980s. The keynote was now not optimism but anxiety.

• Within ten years of John Holt’s demand for an escape from childhood, Neil Postman, in 1982, was lamenting The Disappearance of Childhood. His was one of a number of books arguing that the barriers that properly existed between childhood and adulthood were being dangerously lowered. Children were ceasing to be children. Postman had many successors in laments about the undermining of childhood and in campaigns to hold on to it or bring it back.

• In 1983 Linda Pollock’s Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900 marked the change in the view of the past. The story of progress was ruthlessly dismantled. Far from being a hell, the past was now a country where parents had always done the best for their children. Pollock rigorously avoided nostalgia, but readers might well wonder whether 20th c. parents were doing as well as their forebears.

• At the same time economic historians were dismantling and questioning the industrial revolution, stressing evolution, and quietly dropping child labour from its previous central position both in academic history and in the progressive narrative. Without child labour the progressive narrative was undermined from within.

The emergence of a new narrative

In face of all this a new narrative began to emerge, and it’s one which people of my generation love to tell. We were taught the progressive narrative, and we’ve seen it disintegrate. Our story begins with our own childhoods in the middle years of the twentieth century and ends in the present. In our childhoods, we say, we had freedom to explore our world without constant adult supervision. Depending on our social background and where we lived, our mothers might turn us out of doors after breakfast and tell us not to come back until teatime, or we might have the freedom to roam in the countryside – an Arthur Ransome childhood. No one talked about ‘health and safety’ or about ‘risk assessment’. Autism, dyslexia, self-harming, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, eating disorders, the things parents and children worry about now, none of these featured in our lives or so far as we knew in those of our parents. In these childhoods it’s always summertime. We had scrapes and knocks, probably some sad old man in a mac exposed himself to us, but we took this in our stride. I sometimes think we ought to factor in boredom into these stories of our childhoods, but even that wouldn’t alter the overall conclusion: our childhoods were happy, they were proper childhoods.

I’ve come to associate this pessimistic narrative with the Daily Mail. In 2006 I was asked to write something for the Daily Mail on the history of childhood. At about £1 a word, and 2,000 words to play with, it was an offer that was difficult to refuse. But, I was told, Paul Dacre would take a particular interest in what I wrote and unless I could show that childhood had got worse since the 1950s, he wouldn’t publish it. I did my best, but not enough – it remains in the archives. It could be said that the narrative has such a hold on us that it’s difficult to find any space in which to challenge it. Few of us probably would wish to be thought to have a Daily Mail version of childhood, but that is in essence what we have got.

The pessimistic narrative gains much of its potency from names, the names of children who have died through neglect, or been murdered, or abducted: Maria Colwell, killed by her stepfather in 1973, despite, in the last nine months of her life, thirty complaints about the way her mother and stepfather treated her; Jasmine Beckford, starved and battered to death in 1984; James Bulger, murdered by two other children in 1993; Sarah Payne murdered by a paedophile in 2000; Victoria Climbie, dying of hypothermia in 2000, after months of neglect and abuse; Madeline McCann, abducted in 2007; Peter Connelly, Baby P, dying in 2007 after neglect by his mother and her boyfriend; you can continue the ghastly roll-call. In the negative narrative the world is far from being a safe place for children. In these childhoods it’s always summertime. We had scrapes and knocks, probably some sad old man in a mac exposed himself to us, but we took this in our stride. I sometimes think we ought to factor in boredom into these stories of our childhoods, but even that wouldn’t alter the overall conclusion: our childhoods were happy, they were proper childhoods.

So there are the two narratives. The most obvious question to ask of them is, are they true? I will make some attempt to answer that. But I want also to consider the implications of narratives of the kind we have had both for childhood and for children.

If we ask if they’re true, the answer has to be yes and no. Take the progressive narrative. It is difficult to deny that on key measurements like life expectancy, health, standard of living, level of education it was indeed a story of progress. Even on these issues, however, there was a degree of over-egging. Sir George Newman, whom we encountered earlier, went to great lengths to deny evidence of children’s poor health in the north-east of England in the inter-war years. Similarly the Home Office constantly downplayed the existence of child labour in the first half of the century.
It’s when we widen the focus to look at some of the policies set in place for the rescue of children that the progressive story begins seriously to fray. The NSPCC version of history was, it has to be said, false. The Times between 1785 and 1860 reported 385 cases of child neglect and sexual abuse, only 7% resulting in a ‘not guilty’ verdict. There is considerable evidence of neighbourhood sanctions against parents who were perceived to be cruel. But all of this was forgotten as the NSPCC version of history took root. There were further problems with the rescue narrative. For many children it meant living in an institution and we have become aware of the inhumanity that could be embedded in them. Other rescue policies were more far-reaching, especially the emigration of children overseas, to Canada and then to Australia. There might be good intentions behind some of these policies but that does not defend them against accusations that they seriously infringed the rights of those children who were emigrated. In short, the invocation to children to be happy, to acquire, as Evelyn Sharp urged, ‘the habit of happiness’, was asking a lot of children who experienced nothing that might make them happy.

As to the negative narrative, there is again much truth in it. But the negative narrative, too, has been built on some shaky foundations. The thing that strikes me about much of the so-called evidence is a very basic confusion between a correlation and a cause. For example, children who watch a lot of television are rated more materialistic than those who watch less — but you can’t jump from that correlation to say that it’s watching too much television that makes children materialistic. It might equally well be the other way round, or there might be other factors altogether that intrude. And how interesting that ‘materialism’ — at the heart of politicians’ appeal to the adult public — is thought unacceptable for children.

Are there any reasons to be cheerful? When UNICEF in 2013 published a further study of children’s well-being in the richer countries, the headlines and articles had in some sense been written before the report emerged: we knew it would be bad news, the negative narrative demanded that. It was in fact even on the most cursory look better news than in 2007 — Britain had climbed out of bottom place to being 16th out of 29 countries. But, while grudgingly accepting this, most reporting highlighted the negative. You wouldn’t have known that the report showed improvement on the following indices: infant mortality and poverty and, amongst 11, 13, and 15-year-olds, being bullied, fighting, drunkenness, cannabis use, being overweight. There was also for 11-15-year-olds a significant rise in self-reported life satisfaction which now stands at 86 per cent. The 2006 Youth Survey of the British Household Panel Survey showed that 87% of 11-16 year-olds rated their life as a whole as happy rather than unhappy, 9% were neutral, leaving only 4% unhappy.

Moving beyond the question of the truth or otherwise of the narratives, what are the implications of having narratives of this kind at all? In essence the new narrative is as infected by Romanticism as the old. At its heart lies a belief in the desirability of the separation and distinctiveness of adulthood and childhood. This suggests to me that the power of the narratives has as much, if not more, to do with adulthood as it does with childhood.

A few years ago I spent some time on an assessment panel set up by the DCSF to look at the impact of the commercial world on children’s wellbeing. We were asked to compare the present with the past (well, with the past fifty years) which was why I was there, and we were urged to look for positive benefits of the commercial world as well as negative ones. But of course the panel had been set up precisely because of concerns about the negative impact. The commercial world (and what part of our world, I kept asking myself, is not now commercial?) is conceived as an adult world, adults buying and selling as equals. But pose the commercial world against children, and you are likely to think of advertisers and marketers manipulating children’s innocent and naive minds. Children need to be protected against it. If we think of children as obese, if we think of them constantly searching inappropriate parts of the internet, if we think of them as prematurely sexualized, if we’re bothered by pester power, the commercial world surely has much to answer. Children, we might say, have a right to a life without any of these things. Children, and I think it’s a very telling word, are seen as ‘vulnerable’. Adults, by contrast, also obese, also searching inappropriate parts of the internet, their whole world sexualized and eroticized, their insatiable desire for material goods what makes the world go round, adults can survive without protection. We don’t like this adult life, we’re perhaps rather ashamed of it, but at least we can spare children from it: life is downhill.

We often say that childhood has been shortened, that children grow up too quickly. To a historian this looks nonsense. On the contrary it has been extended. It lasts up to eighteen. One sign of the lengthening is the shift in the cash flow. Until roughly the mid-twentieth century, children typically tipped up their earnings to their mothers who gave them back something for spends: cash flowed from children to parents. Would that that were still the case, you may be saying. As many of us know to our cost, cash now flows the other way, from parents to children, and there seems no age at which it will or should end. If one sign of being an adult is to be financially independent, then children in their 20s and 30s have yet to attain that status.

But if childhood has been extended, it has also been, and this will sound a contradiction, shortened. We constantly hear of children doing things at an age much younger than adults now in their middle age ever did them. Children today may not be able to cross a road on their own, but they are integrated into a world of social media, fashion and celebrity in ways older people were not. What has happened is that the boundary fences between childhood and adulthood have broken down, so-called adults behave like children, and children behave like adults.

If we ask why this has happened, one answer is that the prospect of adulthood is pretty bleak. Adulthood means
work, and work means stress. For many it means paid work plus childcare, a recipe for even more stress. I’ve
heard many people say that they had ‘an idyllic childhood’, never anyone claiming to be enjoying an idyllic
adulthood. Of course the idyllic childhoods are constructions made by adults; they are pointers to how adults
see the life course.

Narratives make sense of the world but they do not necessarily reflect the world as it is. The narratives I’ve
considered are extremely powerful, in effect mind-sets that can incorporate into the story anything that is
thrown at them. Huge numbers of adults in twenty-first century Britain have bought into the negative narrative
and internalised it, clinging onto a Romantic and idealised view of childhood.

If there are lessons we might learn I think they come from the Scandinavian countries which, to no one’s
surprise, do well in the UNICEF surveys. Why? First, it has something to do with greater equality. If we ask why
Britain came bottom of the 2007 UNICEF report, there may be a clue in the country that came second bottom –
it was the United States. The United States and Britain on almost every count are among the two most unequal
societies in the developed world, and I think that has much to do with children being discontented. Inequality
feeds social exclusion and damages children’s sense of their well-being. And it’s not only the poor who suffer
from this. Parents are all too aware of how their children’s future is dependent on school success, and of course
convey this to their children. We want our children to be happy, but perhaps even more we want them to
achieve.

But, second, besides being less unequal, Scandinavia also has a rather different view of children than in Britain.
In Britain they’re seen as vulnerable, and basically deficient in the qualities and aptitudes that would enable them
to survive in the world without adult supervision and helicoptering parents. In Scandinavia the attitude is more
that children are basically competent and can be trusted to be sensible.

Encouraging competence sounds a rather unexciting aim for childhood. It is at the opposite pole to the romantic
conception of childhood. I think that would be all to the good. It might even mean that the issue of childhood
became less fraught, discussions of it less emotional. We might be able to change the narrative or even do
without one.

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