

# **'Children are naturally innocent'. Discuss this statement making reference to key debates in the literature**

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## **Introduction**

The notion of innocence will persistently arise when discussing matters surrounding the concept of childhood, however innocence has many different meanings and interpretations. Innocence can be considered to mean an absence of sin, or a lack of knowledge and experience. Whatever our accepted meaning of the term "innocence", it is clear that how we perceive it is 'central to how childhood is understood in all aspects of life.' (Braggs, et al. 2013: 5). This means that it plays a pivotal part in concerning how we understand the meaning of childhood. Mayhew's (1985) account of the young watercress girl is often mentioned when discussing the image of the 'innocent child' and 'implies that children should be protected from the harsh realities of life.' (Kehily, 2004: 5). Mayhew's account reflects a traditional Romantic view of children, which has been disputed in recent years but is still important to consider when discussing matters of childhood.

There are conflicting opinions as to whether children are naturally innocent or naturally evil and conflicting evidence and examples support both sides of the debate. Children have traditionally been seen in conflicting ways, including "little innocence" (whose innocence need protecting) and "little devils" (whose naughtiness need taming) or as adults in the making' (Maconis, 2008: 406). This innocent versus evil debate is key within the study of children and is influenced strongly by the Dionysian and the Apollonian child debate (Jenks, 1996). The Dionysian approach is the understanding that children are corrupt and evil, while the Apollonian approach is the understanding that children are innocent and pure, however our understanding has developed regarding these approaches. This relates closely with ideas surrounding the victimisation of children and the conflicting concepts of children as victims and children as villains. How we view children is essential to consider as it has considerable implications on the way in which children are treated.

Our understanding of the meaning of childhood has evidently changed over time demonstrated clearly by Hendrick (1997). The way we view children today is, therefore,

very different to how they have been viewed in the past. Our understanding of children is influenced by numerous things, most importantly our personal experiences and expectations. Childhood is formed by social constructions and so is not universal. A common debate within criminology is whether children are naturally innocent or evil. This has been brought to the public's attention on numerous occasions as a result of high profile cases such as the Jamie Bulgar case and other incidences of children committing violent criminal acts. This also highlights the psychological debate between the influences of nature and nurture and whether a child is born a certain way or is moulded by society to become who they are and how these influence our understanding of children. Therefore to understand more about the meaning of childhood it is important to consider where children are naturally evil or naturally innocent and in need of protection.

### **What is Childhood?: Discourses of Childhood**

Aries (1963; cited in Jenks: 2005) has often been referred to as the founder of 'childhood' due to his ground-breaking work studying the concept of childhood and what childhood has meant throughout history. He clearly demonstrated how childhood has changed from the medieval concept of the child to our modern understanding. This later led to the work of Hendrick (1997) and many other academics within this field. Aries understood that childhood is a relatively new concept. Whereas in the past children were seen as younger adults, rather than a separate entity to an adult, it was thought that once children were 'able to survive without constant care, medieval Europeans expected them to take their place in the world as working adults.' (Macionis and Plummer, 2008: 404). This has huge implications on the way children were treated, as they were often neglected and had no rights or form of protection, such as children have now. This is evident in the high mortality rates of babies and children during this time and also the risk of pregnancy and childbirth. Our understanding and treatment of children has clearly changed since this time and we now feel a need and responsibility to protect children who are treated distinctly different to adults, in most cases. Jenks describes how Aries also understood that children are the reflections of the 'particularities of particular socio-cultural contexts' (Jenks, 2005: 121) and so represent the society of which they are a member. This is why our understanding of children has changed so dramatically over time, as over society has developed into this post-modern era.

The work of Aries led to the development of the work of Hendrick (1997) who identified the discourses of childhood, including the image of the natural and romantic child which demonstrates how society idealised children and how the Victorians had a notion of all children possessing a natural innocence. The Romantic discourse claimed 'that children embody a state of innocence, purity and natural goodness that is only contaminated on contact with the corrupt outside world.' (Kehily, 2004: 5). Children were seen as a gift from God and a blessing, which could be seen as a reaction to the high infant mortality rates as children were seen as precious and fragile. These images were often portrayed through artwork and poetry, which is where a great deal of our preconceptions regarding children emerges from. Even though, children were viewed as innocent, they were exploited throughout this period of history by working in factories and having very few rights. The idea that children are naturally innocent is therefore prominent throughout history.

The two later discourses of childhood proposed by Hendrick (1997) were the 'Child of the Welfare State' and contemporary childhood. Both of these discourses are important in the consideration and understanding of how childhood has changed over time, and therefore how our understanding of childhood innocence has changed. The Child of the Welfare State consists of two identities, the child as a family member and the child as a state responsibility in need of protection and care. Children become state responsibilities when their parents are unable to care for them, for example due to their abusive family experiences. This development in our understanding of children shows a deep concern of child wellbeing and a responsibility towards their care, suggesting them that children are understood to be the innocent victims of their circumstances. This development led the way for the establishment of contemporary childhood, involved with the emergence of children's rights and developments of our understanding of children, for example with regard to cases of child abuse and the sexualisation of children. In his discussion of the contemporary child, Hendrick states how there is a growing concern regarding 'the so-called end of innocence (or "fall" of childhood)' (Hendrick, 1997: 58) through a sexualisation of childhood and the influence of cases like the Jamie Bulger murder.

Leading on from the work of Aries and Hendrick, James (2004) notes themes which have shaped the way we understand what childhood means. These include the fact that children are distinctly separate from adults because of their age, that they have a special nature, that they are 'vulnerably dependent' and that 'the child is innocent' (Jenks, 2005: 122). These

important themes have been debated with regard to the behaviour of children. This shows how central morality is to the understanding of childhood and the notion that they are dependent upon adults for protection because of their vulnerability.

### **Children Are Naturally Innocent**

A belief in innocence is often a key theme within discussions regarding children, with examples of child abuse and child trafficking where children are often considered to be innocent victims. However this is not always the case. It seems that society only accepts a certain type of child as a victim and it is these cases which are often prominent in the media. These cases often involve the idea of 'stranger danger' or drastically violent crimes. The crimes that are often neglected are those which are committed within the private realm of the home, such as cases of child abuse committed by the child's family members or the use of corporal punishment, which is still legal within the home in the UK. Children's rights are not the same as those held by adults, however these rights must still be upheld in order to protect the children. An approach based on children's rights suggests that children are in need of protection and that they would not need this protection unless they were an innocent party. Serious cases of child abuse often appear in the media and receive public outcry and 'the modern child has become a focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical and moral danger, to ensure its "normal" development.' (Jenks, 1995: 83) These cases cause such emotional responses because the public are outraged that children can be treated in such undeserving ways. Children are often thought of as innocence and people are shocked when they are treated badly through acts such as physical or sexual abuse of child trafficking. Nevertheless, many of these cases do not come to the attention of the media. These acts against these children are punishable as they violate the child's rights and also go against criminal law put in place to protect citizens, but they also go against the ideas which have been constructed regarding children. Children are sexually innocent and society attempts to keep them this way using strategies of protection and control. This opens up questions regarding the sexualisation of children which has been prominent throughout history. And yet children seem to be more sexualised now than ever before through the media etc., and the risks that this sexualisation poses to how children's innocence is perceived.

Certain work has highlighted the influence of the environment surrounding the child in determining their nature, as opposed to the child being innately of a certain nature. This

work suggests that children may well be born innocent and that it is their upbringing which changes their behaviour, perhaps bringing about deviant and even criminal act. The work of the Chicago School suggests that our understanding of youth cultures should involve a close look at the environment in which the crimes take place and socialisation processes involved. Evidence to support this idea includes research which shows that crime delinquency was highest in poorest areas of the city, and later research has found similar findings. Edwin Sutherland (1956; cited in Carrabine, et. al., 2009) worked closely with the Chicago School and his work has been very influential towards our understanding of the influences of the environment upon our behaviour. Carrabine et al. described how Sutherland understood that:

...any person's tendency towards conformity or deviance depends on the relative frequency of associated with others who encourage conventional behaviours or as the case may be, norm violation. (Sutherland, 1956; cited in Carrabine, et. al., 2009: 56).

The work of the Chicago School suggests that we are not born a certain way, but are easily influenced by others and social situations. This theory takes a similar stance to other theories such as labelling theory. Both these suggest that we are malleable by society and some individuals are more likely to exhibit deviant or criminal behaviour because of the environment in which they are brought up. Therefore, children are not born evil, however they are not born innocent either, but are a “blank slate”. This idea of a blank slate was developed by theologian John Locke who believed that children required guidance and training in order to develop into responsible adults, as Kheibly describes: 'it is the responsibility of adults to provide the appropriate education and control enable children to develop into mature and responsible adults.' (Kheilby, 2004: 6). Still, this idea that children are not pre-determined is a key idea within sociological and psychological theories, but goes against other theories such as Positivism which dictates that we are biologically pre-determined and our behaviour is driven by these biological and psychological influences. There are numerous conflicting ideas regarding the nature of children's behaviours.

### **Children Are Not Naturally Innocent**

The idea that children are naturally evil has also been a prominent idea throughout history with many cases in the media of children who have committed horrific crimes which have completely gone against the ideas that we have of children being innocent and needing protection, instead highlighting what children are actually capable of. An obvious case to support this point is that of Jamie Bulgar who was murdered by two young children in a

most brutal way which completely shocked the nation (Kehily, 2004: 16). No one believed that children would be capable of such sadistic crimes. Also, the way the public and the media reacted to the brutal crimes committed by these two boys suggesting a hardening of attitudes towards children based on the idea that some are just naturally evil and 'the case opened up an enormous public debate over the nature of children and childhood' (Kehily, 2004: 16). However, it is difficult to then determine whether these children were born evil or whether they were made that way by the circumstances of their childhood. It was well-known that the two boys who murdered Jamie Bulgar came from destructive home and had previously exhibited signs of violent and aggressive behaviour. However many children come from destructive homes like this and not every child commits crimes such as these. Mariana Warner (1994) observed that the way in which we view children has changed considerably and that the child 'has never been as such a menacing enemy as today' which 'excite repulsion and even terror' (Warner, 1994: 43) from the general public.

There have been other events that the media have brought to the public's attention which have highlighted negative youth behaviour, events such as hooliganism, drug culture and knife crime. Events such as these have caused moral panics in communities as they go against these pre-conceptualised ideas we have of youths, but also they produce fear regarding these children's deviant potential. It seems that society views children very differently to how they were viewed in the past, which is demonstrated by the treatment of children in the Criminal Justice System, but also within society as a whole. Deviant children are thought to be in need of punishment, whether that is punishment in detention centres or simply within the home, as corporal punishment, it is still considered widely acceptable and lawfully just in the UK, as long as "reasonable force" is used. This shows that we see children as in need of punishment to deter them from "bad" behaviours. This suggests that perhaps we do not see them as naturally innocence, but rather in need of discipline and control to become useful members of society. It often seems that we treat children a certain way until they behave in a way which goes against our preconceptions and then we reject them.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that throughout history our understanding of childhood has changed alongside political, economic and social changes within society. Children are not viewed in the same way as they were one hundred years ago, or even twenty years ago, therefore the way we

treat children has also changed. There has always been a debate as to whether children are naturally innocent or not, with key debates developing regarding this matter. In my opinion, I believe that children are naturally innocent and it is the society and the culture that surrounds them which influences what they will become, however before corruption happens a child is innocent, vulnerable and in need of care and attention. This idea of innocence is based on the commonly held concept that children are distinctly separate from adults. I think this is clearly demonstrated by society's approach to child protection and child trafficking and our desire to protect children from harm. If we, as a society, were not to view children as naturally innocent then I believe that this would have major implications on the way we treat children. For example, there would be questions raised as to whether children are in need of protection from harm, such as child abuse and child trafficking.

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