

Key Concepts in Childhood Studies

often the needs of adults, rather than children, that are being met through the provision of segregated spaces for children. The provision of such child-friendly spaces may, for instance, work to calm adults' fears about children's safety and need for **protection**, or may serve to occupy children with games and **play** activities, thereby freeing up parents' time through providing some temporary relief from care-giving.

In a study of the provision of commercial birthday parties for children, McKendrick et al. argue, for example, that many of the leisure spaces which offer such facilities can be seen as serving 'a useful function for adults' through providing a safe place for children and relieving adults of the necessity to hold a party at home (2000: 113). However, they also observe that in providing a **child-focused** approach to play, such commercialised venues may serve to free children from their confinement within the home and help extend the environments in which children can participate. In this sense, they can also be seen to be meeting children's needs, albeit that some children may not have access to them for social or economic reasons.

Being child-friendly is, therefore, not simply about making places safe for children or ensuring that children have specific services. It is about recognising that children's requirements may be different – or the same – as those of adults and that the best way to assess what these are is to enable children to be involved in their design and implementation.

FURTHER READING

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- McKendrick, J., Bradford, M.G. and Fielder, A.V. (2000) 'Time for a party! Making sense of the commercialisation of leisure space for children', in S.L. Holloway and G. Valentine (eds), *Children's Geographies*. London: Routledge.
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- See also: UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre: www.childfriendlycities.org.

Childhood

The early part of the life-course; the institutional arrangements that separate children from adults and the structural space created by these arrangements that is occupied by children.

At its simplest, childhood is understood as the early phase of the life-course of all people in all societies. It is characterised by rapid physiological and psychological development and represents the beginning of the process of maturation to adulthood. In this sense, it is common to all children, irrespective of culture. However, as Woodhead (1996) has suggested, these biological 'facts' of growth and development are **culturally relative**; they are interpreted and understood in relation to ideas about children's **needs, welfare and best interests**, which vary between cultures. Thus, beyond children's basic needs for things such as food and water, childhood per se does not impose, necessarily, constraints upon what children can do or what they need once infancy is over.

Such views represent an alternative perspective on childhood, one which suggests that the conceptualisation and experience of childhood are not universal, but rather that they vary across time and space. Thus, for example, the historian Aries (1962) claimed that in medieval society childhood did not exist. Taking his evidence from pictures of children in art, he argued that few distinctions were made to mark out childhood as a distinctive phase of the life-course and that, when no longer babies, children participated in society much as adults did. While this radical claim has since been disputed by other historians, Aries's observations about the **social construction** of childhood were important, since they drew attention to the different ways in which childhood is experienced by children in different societies and cultures. Indeed, these differences are core to the **cultural politics of childhood** (James and James, 2004).

A second important definition of childhood relates to childhood as a social structural **space**. Qvortrup (1994) reminds us, for example, that childhood is a constant feature of the **structure** of all societies so that although children grow up and out of childhood as they develop into adults, in terms of the institutional arrangements of any society, 'childhood' remains – it is a space occupied by the next **generation**. In this sense, childhood is a universal feature of all societies, although each will separate 'children' from 'adults' in different ways. This constancy of childhood as a generational location within the social structure of any society is why Qvortrup (1994) argues that, despite cultural variation in children's experiences, the term 'childhood', rather than 'childhoods' in the plural, should be used. However, while this social space *does* remain, its historical character will change over time, shaped by, for example, changes in laws, policies and social practices. This returns us to the argument that childhood is not universal since its social, cultural and historical location will vary.

An additional dimension of the debate about the universalism or particularism of childhood relates to its **disappearance**. Postman (1983) and Elkind (1981), examining children's everyday lives in contemporary western cultures, argue that because of changes in technology and children's increased access to consumer goods, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are dissolving and, in their view, this collapsing of the generational boundary is detrimental to children's well-being. Others, such as Buckingham (2000), dispute this claim. In his view, since childhood is of necessity defined in and through an oppositional relationship to adulthood, it is simply changing its form, rather than disappearing.

These arguments about the changing nature of childhood are further developed by Lee (2001), who explores childhood as a relational concept through the ideas of 'being' and 'becoming'. Childhood, he argues, is traditionally associated with ideas of dependency and **futurity**, with adulthood being seen as the end-point of growing up. However, according to Lee, since in the modern world 'adulthood' can never be regarded as a complete and stable state, then the distinction between mature adults and immature children is no longer useful. In an era of uncertainty about the nature of adulthood, childhood becomes a more complex and ambiguous status that cannot be characterised as a state of dependency and incompleteness as once it was.

The traditional **representation** of the relational and generational character of childhood that Lee criticises is one which encompasses the idea of childhood as the period in the life-course when children undergo the **socialisation** process as part of their preparation for future adult status. Other theorists have also challenged this idea by arguing that such a model of growing up is rather one-sided, since it neglects children's **agency** as **social actors**. This leads Corsaro (1997) to suggest that children are active interpreters of the social world. During childhood children learn about society and contribute to it through a process of what he calls **interpretive reproduction**.

'Childhood', then, is a term that glosses both the biological phase of early human development and the ways in which different societies classify and deal with this by providing institutions and services that are designed specifically for children – the incumbents of childhood. This has led some to argue (Prout, 2005) that to understand childhood fully, future researchers will have to address both its biological and social aspects and, importantly, the interconnections between these. In this sense, **childhood studies** is well placed to undertake such a task, given its interdisciplinary remit.

FURTHER READING

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