

# Western Concepts of Childhood, 1500-Present

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# Childhood as a Culturally- and Historically-Contingent Construct

- What we conventionally consider a “normal” or “natural” childhood – for example, one marked by innocence and by easy access to time, space, and material goods – is not so much a reality as it is *an idea* or *ideal* that is so widely held (and felt) that it comes to be regarded as “natural” or “normal.”
- Childhood is a culturally- and historically-contingent construct.
- Notions of childhood are internalized and performed by both children and adults.
  - Such practices of internalization and performance make possible the *reproduction* of certain ideals of childhood in specific historical eras and cultural contexts.





# Shifts from Medieval to Modern Views of Childhood

- The invention of the printing press in 1440 allowed for a rise in literacy rates.
- In turn, rising literacy increased the demand for education.
- The rise of the middle class changed living arrangements and experiences of nuclear family life.
- Decreasing rates of child mortality influenced new, more sentimental, attachments between parents and children.

# The New England Primer (1687)

*The New England Primer introduced colonial children to their ABC's by means of pictures and rhymes such as these.*



In Adam's fall  
We sinned all.



Thy life to mend,  
This Book attend.



The Cat doth play,  
And after slay.



A Dog will bite  
A thief at night.



An Eagle's flight  
Is out of sight.



The idle Fool  
Is whipt at school.



As runs the Glass,  
Man's life doth pass.



My Book and Heart  
Shall never part.



Job feels the rod,  
And blesses God.



Proud Korah's troops  
Were swallowed up.



The Lion bold  
The lamb doth hold.



The Moon shines bright  
In time of night.

*David, Joanna, and Abigail Mason (1670)*  
The Freake-Gibbs Painter



# *The Age of Innocence* (1785)

Sir Joshua Reynolds



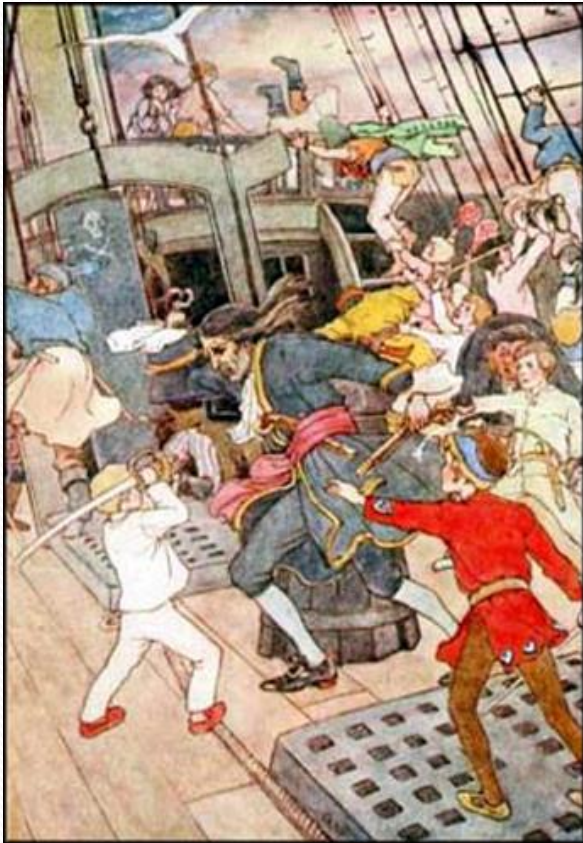


# Images of Victorian child mortality





# *Peter Pan* (1911): The Eternal Child



# The difference between middle-class and working class childhoods



# The difference between rural and (sub)urban childhoods





# 21<sup>st</sup> century global childhood: Who gets to have a happy childhood?





... and who doesn't?



# Thank you!

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