

CHILDREN

Three topics are particularly important to the study of Victorian children: their numbers, their legal status, and the role of family in their lives. Children "were everywhere" and yet they were indistinguishable from adults in the criminal courts. On the other hand, hundreds of extant photographs proclaim the pride parents had in their progeny. For many children life was harsh, but, in general terms, its quality improved over the course of the century.

Between 1841 and 1911 the British population more than doubled (from 15,914,000 to 36,070,000) and children formed a significant proportion of the total. In 1841, 36 percent of the population was under fourteen years of age; in 1900 the figure was 32 percent. Infant and child mortality remained high throughout the century and in some areas markedly increased. In Glasgow in 1821 one child in 75 died, rising to one in 48 by 1861. Infant mortality in 1850 was still high (although far below most other European countries), particularly in the poorer classes. In Liverpool, the 1899 figures show 136 children per thousand born in the better suburbs died in their first year, while in the city's poorest quarters the figure was 509 per thousand. Illegitimate babies had half the survival rate of legitimate infants and many deaths went unrecorded, as it was common practice not to baptize infants who died within a month of birth.

Infants were subject to hazards from disease, dirt, neglect, and misguided treatment. Opiates such as Godfrey's Cordial were used to quiet fretful babies; little was known about the sanitary precautions needed when infants were given food from any source other than the breast. Infections spread easily in poor neighborhoods, where (even late in the century) toilet facilities were primitive, water difficult to obtain, and beds might be shared by several children and adults.

Disease, however, knew no social distinction. Inoculation almost eradicated

there was one epidemic late in the century but whooping cough accounted for two-thirds of all deaths under five years of age. From five to eight, scarlet fever was the leading cause of child mortality. Measles regularly killed 7,000 people a year; tuberculosis was common; and in the 1860s and 1870s diphtheria became a major killer of children under sixteen.

As adult mortality rates decreased so that fewer marriages were terminated by death, the middle-class family became increasingly long-lasting and intimate. Few children were apprenticed or sent to boarding school as the century progressed. Schooling for girls had relatively low priority, although the lower middle classes began to see education for a profession such as teaching or nursing as one way of reducing the burden on paternal resources as a girl got older. The central aspects of life were focused within the boundary of the nuclear family, generating a mixture of affection and of intense concern for emotional, moral, and religious welfare.

By late in the century many among the working classes sought to emulate the middle-class lifestyle. For the first two-thirds of the century, however, evidence suggests that for the poor the family unit provided little moral and emotional support, as well as offering a poor physical environment. In contrast to the pattern in the middle classes, lower-class boys were apt to stay at home while the girls were sent away, often entering domestic service at as young as nine or ten years of age.

Children's status before the law became defined over the course of the century. As late as 1814 execution for petty crimes was a possibility. Imprisonment, flogging, and transportation to the colonies remained acceptable punishments for children as well as adults. In 1838 Parkhurst Prison became the first separate correction center for juveniles. Reform schools were established from midcentury, but not until the Children's Act (1908) were offenders under fourteen kept from prison. Flogging declined in the family as a chastisement, but remained a legal and educational corrective.

Legislation to improve the social and welfare conditions of children blossomed in the second half of the century from the seed of

voluntary work sown in the first half. Such improvement as did occur was far-reaching, although it is symptomatic of British priorities that the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824 and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children did not appear until sixty years later.

Specialized pediatric medicine may be said to begin with the opening of London's Great Ormond Street Hospital (1852). Health visitor schemes (dating from 1862 in Manchester and Salford) combined with the increased training of midwives to improve the chances of childhood survival. Other significant dates in childhood welfare provisions include: the compulsory registration of births in 1837; the 1846 act making it illegal to insure the lives of children under six (in the belief that insurance benefits encouraged neglect, which led to early death); a series of employment acts beginning in 1847 that addressed child labor; and the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act (1889), which gave authorities the right to remove a child from its home if cruelty were suspected.

With the Education Act of 1870 and the subsequent refinements that made at least a few years of education both free and compulsory, children were for some part of every day removed from the family and working world into a separate culture. Toys and games were plentiful, literature for children flourished, and fashion catalogues displayed styles designed specifically for the young. If childhood is accepted as approximating the age range from birth to fourteen years, then by the end of Victoria's reign children had become a focal point of social interest.

W. JOHN SMITH

Bibliography

- Behlmer, G. K. *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England, 1870-1908*. 1982.
- Burnett, John, ed. *Destiny Obscure: Autobiographies of Childhood, Education and Family from the 1820s to the 1920s*. 1982.
- . "The History of Childhood." *History Today*, vol. 33, pp. 30-31.
- Coveney, Peter. *The Image of Childhood*. 1967.

Ewing, Elizabeth. *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations, 1770-Present*. 1974.

Maill, Antony and Peter Maill. *The Victorian Nursery Book*. 1980.

Springhall, John. *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883-1940*. 1977.

Walvin, James. *A Child's World: A Social History of English Childhood, 1800-1914*. 1982.

Wohl, Anthony S. *The Victorian Family*. 1978.