

Copyright Notice

Staff and students of this University are reminded that copyright subsists in this extract and the work from which it was taken. This Digital Copy has been made under the terms of a CLA Licence which allows you to:

- Access and download a copy
- Print out a copy

This Digital Copy and any digital or printed copy supplied to or made by you under the terms of this Licence are for use in connection with this module or course of study. You may retain such copies after the end of the course, but strictly for your own personal use.

All copies (including electronic copies) shall include this Copyright Notice and shall be destroyed and/or deleted if and when required by the University.

Except as provided for by copyright law, no further copying, storage or distribution (including by e-mail) is permitted without the consent of the copyright holder.

The author (which term includes artists and other visual creators) has moral rights in the work and neither staff nor students may cause, or permit, the distortion, mutilation or other modification of the work, or any other derogatory treatment of it, which would be prejudicial to the honour or reputation of the author.

Title of extract: **Summary: The Two Concepts of Childhood**

Name of Author: **Aries, P.**

Title/Author of book/edition (if applicable): **Centuries of Childhood. Aries, P.**

Name of Visual Creator or other acknowledgement (if applicable):

Journal details –title/Vol/Year (if applicable):

Publisher: **Penguin**

Pages scanned: **125 - 130**

Course of Study (Module name and number): **Plentyndod Cynnar: Safbwyntiau Rhyngwladol /Early Childhood: International PerspectivesEAEC6012-C**

Name of Designated Person
authorising scanning:

E. L. Harris

Date authorised: 05.04.17.

Moodle/Powerpoint

Summary

The Two Concepts of Childhood

In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children: it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society, this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society. That adult society now strikes us as rather puerile: no doubt this is largely a matter of its mental age, but it is also due to its physical age, because it was partly made up of children and youths. Language did not give the word 'child' the restricted meaning we give it today: people said 'child' much as we say 'lad' in everyday speech. The absence of definition extended to every sort of social activity: games, crafts, arms. There is not a single collective picture of the times in which children are not to be found, nestling singly or in pairs in the *trousse* hung round women's necks (see Père Michault, 1931, p. 119); or urinating in a corner, or playing their part in a traditional festival, or as apprentices in a workshop, or as pages serving a knight, etc.

The infant who was too fragile as yet to take part in the life of adults simply 'did not count': this is the expression used by Molière, who bears witness to the survival in the seventeenth century of a very old attitude of mind. Argan in *Le Malade Imaginaire* has two daughters, one of marriageable age and little Louison who is just beginning to talk and walk. It is generally known that he is threatening to put his elder daughter in a convent to stop her philandering. His brother asks him: 'How is it, Brother, that rich as you are and having only one daughter, for I don't count the little one, you can talk of putting her in a convent?' The little one did not count because she could disappear.

The quotation from Molière shows the continuance of the archaic attitude to childhood. But this survival, for all that it was stubborn, was precarious. From the fourteenth century on, there had been a tendency to express in art, iconography and religion (in the cult of the dead) the personality which children were seen to possess, and the poetic, familiar

significance attributed to their special nature. We have followed the evolution of the *putto* and the child portrait. And we have seen that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the child or infant – at least in the upper classes of society – was given a special costume which marked him out from the adults. This specialization of the dress of children and especially of little boys, in a society in which clothes and outward appearances had considerable importance, bears witness to the change which had taken place in the general attitude towards children: they counted much more than Argan's brother imagined. In fact, *Le malade imaginaire*, which seems as hard on little children as do certain remarks by La Fontaine, contains a whole conversation between Argan and little Louison: 'Look at me, will you?' 'What is it, papa?' 'Here!' 'What?' 'Haven't you anything to tell me?' 'If you wish, I can tell you, to amuse you, the story of the Ass's Skin, or else the fable of the Fox and the Crow which I was taught not so long ago.' A new concept of childhood had appeared, in which the child, on account of his sweetness, simplicity and drollery, became a source of amusement and relaxation for the adult.

To begin with, the attitude was held by women, women whose task it was to look after children – mothers and nannies. In the sixteenth-century edition of *Le Grand propriétaire de toutes choses* (1556) we are told about the nanny: 'She rejoices when the child is happy, and feels sorry for the child when he is ill; she picks him up when he falls, she binds him when he tosses about, and she washes and cleans him when he is dirty.' She brings the child up and teaches him to talk: 'She pronounces the words as if she had a stammer, to teach him to talk better and more rapidly ... she carries him in her hands, then on her shoulder, then on her lap, to play with him when he cries; she chews the child's meat for him when he has no teeth so that he can swallow profitably and without danger; she plays with the child to make him sleep and she binds his limbs to keep them straight so that he has no stiffness in his body, and she bathes and anoints him to nourish his flesh ...' Thomas More dwells on the subject of the schoolboy being sent to school by his mother: 'When the little boy will not rise in time for her, but lies still abed and sluggish, and when he is up, weepeth because he hath lien so long, fearing to be beaten at school for his late coming thither, she telleth him then that it is but early days, and he shall come time enough, and biddeth him: "Go, good son, I warrant thee, I have sent to thy master myself, take thy bread and butter with thee, thou shalt not be beaten at all."' Thus she sends him off sufficiently reassured not to burst into tears at the idea of leaving her at home, but she does not get to the bottom of the trouble and the late arrival will be well and truly beaten when he gets to school. (Quoted by Jarman, 1951.)

Children's little antics must always have seemed touching to mothers, nannies and cradle-rockers, but their reactions formed part of the huge domain of unexpressed feelings. Henceforth people would no longer hesitate to recognize the pleasure they got from watching children's antics and 'coddling' them. We find Mme de Sévigné admitting, not without a certain affection, how much time she spends playing with her granddaughter: 'I am reading the story of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the Indies, which is entertaining me greatly; but your daughter entertains me even more. I do so love her ... she strokes your portrait and caresses it in such an amusing way that I have to kiss her straight away.' 'I have been playing with your daughter for an hour now; she is delightful.' And, as if she were afraid of some infection, she adds, with a levity which surprises us, for the death of a child is something serious for us and nothing to joke about: 'I do not want her to die.' For, as we have seen from Molière, this first appreciation of childhood went with a certain indifference, or rather with the indifference that was traditional.

The 'coddling' attitude towards children is even better known to us by the critical reactions it provoked at the end of the sixteenth century and particularly in the seventeenth century. Peevish persons found insufferable the attention paid to children. Montaigne bristles: 'I cannot abide that passion for caressing new-born children, which have neither mental activities nor recognizable bodily shape by which to make themselves lovable, and I have never willingly suffered them to be fed in my presence.' He cannot accept the idea of loving children 'for our amusement, like monkeys', or taking pleasure in their 'frolicking, games and infantile nonsense'.

Another example of this state of mind, a century later, is to be seen in Coulanges, Mme de Sévigné's cousin. He was obviously exasperated by the way his friends and relatives fussed over their children, for he composed a song dedicated to 'fathers of families', urging them not to spoil their offspring or allow them to eat with adults.

It is important to note that this feeling of exasperation was as novel as 'coddling', and even more foreign than 'coddling' to the indifferent attitude of people in the Middle Ages. It was precisely to the presence of children that Montaigne and Coulanges, like Mme de Sévigné, were hypersensitive; it should be pointed out that Montaigne and Coulanges were more modern than Mme de Sévigné in so far as they considered it necessary to keep children apart from adults. They held that it was no longer desirable that children should mingle with adults, especially at table; no doubt because if they did they were 'spoiled' and became ill-mannered.

The seventeenth-century moralists and pedagogues shared the dislike felt by Montaigne and Coulanges for 'coddling'. Thus the austere Fleury, in his treatise on studies, speaks very much like Montaigne: 'When little children are caught in a trap, when they say something foolish, drawing a correct inference from an irrelevant principle which has been given to them, people burst out laughing, rejoice at having tricked them, or kiss and caress them as if they had worked out the correct answer. It is as if the poor children had been made only to amuse the adults, like little dogs or little monkeys.'

The author of *Galatée*, the manual of etiquette commonly used in the best colleges, those of the Jesuits, speaks like Coulanges: 'Those persons are greatly at fault who never talk of anything but their wives, their little children and their nannies. "My little son made me laugh so much! Just listen to this ..."'

M. d'Argonne, in his treatise on education, *L'Éducation de Monsieur de Moncade* (1690), likewise complains that people take an interest in very small children only for the sake of their 'caresses' and 'antics'; too many parents 'value their children only in so far as they derive pleasure and entertainment from them'.

It is important to remember that at the end of the seventeenth century this 'coddling' was not practised only by people of quality, who, in fact, were beginning to disdain it. Its presence in the lower classes was noted and denounced. J.-B. de la Salle in his *Conduite des écoles chrétiennes* (1720) states that the children of the poor are particularly ill-mannered because 'they do just as they please, their parents paying no attention to them, even treating them in an idolatrous manner: what the children want, they want too.'

In the moralists and pedagogues of the seventeenth century, we see that fondness for childhood and its special nature no longer found expression in amusement and 'coddling', but in psychological interest and moral solicitude. The child was no longer regarded as amusing or agreeable: 'Every man must be conscious of that insipidity of childhood which disgusts the sane mind; that coarseness of youth which finds pleasure in scarcely anything but material objects and which is only a very crude sketch of the man of thought.' Thus Balthazar Gratien in *El Discreto*, a treatise on education published in 1646 which was still being translated into French in 1723. 'Only time can cure a person of childhood and youth, which are truly ages of imperfection in every respect.' To be understood, these opinions need to be put back in their temporal context and compared with the other texts of the period. They have been interpreted by some historians as showing ignorance of childhood, but in fact they mark the

beginning of a serious and realistic concept of childhood. For they do not suggest that people should accept the levity of childhood: that was the old mistake. In order to correct the behaviour of children, people must first of all understand it, and the texts of the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century are full of comments on child psychology.¹ The authors show a great solicitude for children, who are seen as witnesses to baptismal innocence, comparable to the angels, and close to Christ who loved them. But this interest calls for the development in them of a faculty of reasoning which is still fragile, a determined attempt to turn them into thinking men and good Christians. The tone is sometimes grim, the emphasis being laid on strictness as opposed to the laxity and facility of contemporary manners; but this is not always the case. There is even humour in Jacqueline Pascal, and undisguised tenderness. In the texts published towards the end of the century, an attempt is made to reconcile sweetness and reason. Thus the Abbé Goussault, a counsellor at the High Court, writes (1693): 'Familiarizing oneself with one's children, getting them to talk about all manner of things, treating them as sensible people and winning them over with sweetness, is an infallible secret for doing what one wants with them. They are young plants which need tending and watering frequently: a few words of advice offered at the right moment, a few marks of friendship and affection given now and then, touch them and bind them. A few caresses, a few little presents, a few words of cordiality and trust make an impression on their minds, and they are few in number that resist these sweet and easy methods of making them persons of honour and probity.'

The first concept of childhood – characterized by 'coddling' – had made its appearance in the family circle, in the company of little children. The second, on the contrary, sprang from a source outside the family: churchmen or gentlemen of the robe, few in number before the sixteenth century, and a far greater number of moralists in the seventeenth century, eager to ensure disciplined, rational manners. They too had become alive to the formerly neglected phenomenon of childhood, but they were unwilling to regard children as charming toys, for they saw them as fragile creatures of God who needed to be both safeguarded and reformed. This concept in its turn passed into family life.

In the eighteenth century, we find those two elements in the family, together with a new element: concern about hygiene and physical health. Care of the body was not ignored by seventeenth-century moralists and

1. As can be seen in the 1568 *ratio* of the Jesuits and in Jacqueline Pascal's regulations for the little girls brought up at Port-Royal.

pedagogues. People nursed the sick devotedly (at the same time taking every precaution to unmask malingerers), but any interest shown in healthy bodies had a moral purpose behind it: a delicate body encouraged luxury, sloth, concupiscence – all the vices in fact!

General de Martange's correspondence with his wife gives us some idea of a family's private life and preoccupations about a century after Mme de Sévigné. Martange was born in 1722 and married in 1754. He shows great interest in everything concerning his children's life, from 'coddling' to education; he watches closely over their health and even their hygiene. Everything to do with children and family life has become a matter worthy of attention. Not only the child's future but his presence and his very existence are of concern: the child has taken a central place in the family.