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Childhood and family life

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In this essay I will be defining childhood and family life and comparing the difference and changes from the past and present. I will analyse the development of current policies and regulations which are there to protect children and draw a comparison to historical policies. I will then compare the impacts of the policies and will finally draw a conclusion including my recommendations for improvements to the system currently in place.

The concept of childhood is referred to as the stage of development from birth to adulthood. The concept of childhood wasn't acknowledged until the 16th Century. After researching through medieval literature and art Aries discovered that childhood wasn't recognised in that era. In medieval society as soon as a child was able to live without its caregiver (parent or nanny) they were sent to work and therefore treated like an adult and seen as such. Aries (1982) recognised that the idea of childhood is being aware of the difference of the nature of childhood and being able to differentiate between the child and the adult. Most definitions of childhood are based on the development of growth meaning that they are not fully complete. Childhood is defined by each society at a particular time and place so varies significantly (Wagg 1992).

The social construction of childhood meant recognising that it is defined differently in many different societies depending on the cultural beliefs. Even in the same society childhood can be seen differently depending on social factors including the gender and the social class to which they belonged. The concept of childhood is not seen as universal or even natural in certain societies. The idea of childhood in society can come from the ideas and beliefs and cultural changes over time (Aries, 1982; Jenks, 2004).

With the emergence of modern schooling and the bourgeoisie (middle class) nuclear family brought about the contemporary understanding about childhood and the roles for children (Mouritsen, 2002). It was the understanding that the 'Marksist concept of class' was the reason why the modern concept of childhood was introduced as there was a need for a well-educated and useful workforce especially after the industrial

revolution had calmed. After industrialisation the emphasis was on education and learning the necessary skills making children useful adults (Mouritsen 2002). This was viewed as making children financially dependent on parents during this period of childhood which is recognised worldwide in most societies.

A Family is seen as the unit that provides care to a child (Wright 2015). The aim of any family is to provide all members emotional and social security. The family structure differs and is compared to a form of communal living in all societies (Mcdowall Clark 2013).

The family structure has changed over time mirroring changes in society. In the beginning of the 21st century 61% of children lived in a nuclear family with married parents. The nuclear family unit is most recognised and used as the basis when politicians create social policies (Mcdowall Clark, 2013).

The position of children in the family dynamic shows that their needs are only met through adult interpretation which can mean that their needs can remain hidden. There has been significant tension acknowledging the rights and needs of children and the rights and needs of the caregivers and how the state (government) addresses/interprets these rights. Social policies can have a huge effect on children's lives depending on what services have been accessed especially direct interventions aimed at the caregivers. Modern childhood is constantly undergoing economic and social changes with the children living in varying family dynamics/settings. Policies are aimed and evolving with these changes with policy makers recognising that future investment is necessary as children are to become the future workforce so by strengthening their childhood and upbringing will make them better citizens.

In the past women stayed at home to look after the children and men went to work. As the role of women has changed in society with women gaining more rights and are making the decisions to aspire in education and employment, they are deciding not to have children until later in life which is impacting on the size of the family. Also, with women being able to leave dysfunctional marriages easier has changed the dynamics of the family structure with more single parent families and more blended families with children growing up with half siblings (Mcdowall Clark 2013).

There have been many developments of policies and regulations which have helped influence the social construction of childhood.

International legal recognition of childhood was introduced by Eglantyne Jebb in 1919 after all that she witnessed during the post war misery then she moved to Geneva to help form the save the children International union. From this point the ball was set in motion and in 1924 the league of nations created the declaration of the Rights of the Child. Which continued to evolve over the next 60 years and on 1979 The UN declared the year of the child which was a significant milestone where they drafted a legally binding convention. In 1990 world leaders signed a declaration on the survival, protection and development of children. In 1999 Immediate action for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour is adopted. By 2002 world leaders endorse the need for a 'world fit for children'. They insist the family has the main responsibility of protecting the child and therefore should receive support and protection.

Every Child Matters is a UK based initiative introduced in 2003 which made a significant impact on policy change in regard to the welfare of children which helped introduce the Childrens Act 2004. This legislation highlights the importance of child welfare and protection as every child has the right to Be healthy, stay safe, enjoy, achieving, make a positive contribution and have the ability to achieve economic well-being. This legislation/policy has helped in the recognition of the rights of children, young people and their families

These social policies are very important maintaining the welfare of children and families. Social policies are very important as children's lives can be hugely impacted depending on the quality of the social care provisions in place especially education, social services and welfare provisions.

Current approaches and interventions are all carried out via the local authority in which you live. Ultimately the responsibility is placed on the parents/primary carers however the local authority and other collective agencies and organisations work in partnership to provide a unified service to safeguard vulnerable young people, children and families.

The children's Acts of 1989 and 2004 highlights the responsibility of the local authorities to be pro-active in their approach to following up on accusations of neglect and abuse and maintaining all safeguarding practises. The Social Work Act 2017 is an extension of the Children's Act 2004 which encourages the multi-agency approach (M.A.S.H) of safeguarding by highlighting the importance of the key

agencies like clinical commission groups and the police having to work together for the greater good.

There is great emphasis on early intervention as providing help as soon as a problem is detected is more effective compared to reacting to the problem at a later stage. Early intervention can be detected in schools from early years to teenage years. The success of early intervention lies in government agencies all communicating and working together.

The benefits of these early interventions mean that they work together to help the whole family signposting each individual member to the relevant services and can help with problems such as substance abuse, housing and rent issues, provide support on training, domestic violence support and provide support for mental health issues (C.A.H.M.S). Early intervention also improves the development of a child especially during the early years as this is a significant time period for a child's development which if neglected will have a detrimental effect on the future for that child. Early intervention also empowers families of children with disabilities by providing a valuable support network and being able to make referrals to relevant agencies. It also lays the foundation to improve and offer better opportunities in the future. All this helps reduce inequalities and helps the most vulnerable members of society.

In modern industrialised societies different laws were passed to acknowledge childhood. In particular when you look at 'child labour' there are certain laws in place to make sure that children are not allowed to work until they reach a certain age. These laws reinforced the idea that children should be protected and nurtured. However, in some societies' children are supposed to earn from an early age and seen as economically responsible. This all depends on the child's socio-economic status and thus makes it difficult to implement certain policies and laws across nations especially the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In these societies' childhood is interpreted differently.

Childhood is not seen as natural or universal it is however, interlinked to cultural and social processes. It may be seen as different in different context, but one thing remains the same as childhood is seen as different to adulthood this is a universal understanding. Which brings us to the notion that even with all the diversity, childhood has evolved over time and has altered significantly in all societies with

factors such as gender and race having huge implications. Brown (1999) understood that the thinking of a child depends on the influential relationships introduced between the child and the social environment which the child is surrounded by.

Poverty can also impact significantly on a child/childhood as it is the deprivation of basic human needs which include safe drinking water, food, shelter, education and information services. The lack of these necessities impacts on the quality of life, around 14.2 million people in the UK live in poverty which includes 4.5 million children. Poverty can be put into many categories as there are different levels with income poverty being the most significant as not having the means to afford even the basic necessities like food can have detrimental effects on the health, there is service poverty where the family have obstacles in accessing services easily. And participation poverty where you feel left out as you are not able to pay for social and leisure activities. All forms of poverty can affect long term quality of life and has psychological implications as children grow up experiencing poverty and expect their lives will be the same and will have reliance on benefits and social care with low aspirations of working and earning themselves. They are raised in a culture of worklessness and adopt this as a norm. This will impact health with a higher risk of death and illness. Poverty can affect educational outcomes as there is high exposure to adversity with lack of recourses and ambition.

In conclusion the topic of childhood and family life in comparison to social policies has been investigated throughout history. Children have been seen to be hidden members within a family and not recognised as individuals with their own rights. Since the 20th century there has been a shift in the way children have been recognised and understood within policy making. This development in a change of view has addressed and made significant improvement in the lives of children and their families. By taking into consideration the whole family and their rights will continue to improve childhood with the ever-growing social changes and shift in the family structure.

Just as there are positives there is a negative where It is getting harder to change and adopt policies taking into fact that the family structure is significantly different to the ‘Nuclear family’.

The notion that childhood is socially constructed is correct as it is not a natural process which occurs it is society itself that decides when a child is seen as a child and when they are an adult. Childhood is linked with other factors in society and shouldn’t be seen singularly. If you look at Norway, they bring up their children by introducing the outside freezing climate form an early age straight after childbirth as it is part of the culture of the country, “constructing a national childhood” (Nilsen 2008).

Even with all the advancements in society it is getting harder to protect children and families especially when you look at the “increasing control of childhood through policy and practice” (Prout 2000). It is obvious that even though children are seen as individuals. Policy and legislations are increasing in the control and monitoring of children ultimately seen as a form of controlling their future whereas In the family home they are hidden away and in society they are seen as the future so there’s an investment in the future work force.

My recommendation would be that more needs to be done to combat the issues around poverty by helping with better access to services, better opportunities for training and jobs and giving them respect and a voice. Childhood is so important in shaping an individual and truly affects whether or not they will assimilate within society or not. And the success of the family is significant in ensuring that the child is nurtured and looked after well in order to be ready to live a healthy andsuccessful life.

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