

Changing Attitudes toward Children
In Perspective
1982

In ancient civilizations children were the property of their parents. Very few Greek families raised a deformed child or more than one girl. Unwanted children were left to die on hillsides or abandoned in temples where childless couples might find and adopt them. The Roman father had absolute power over his children, including the right to inflict capital punishment. Under biblical law, the ancient Jews were commanded to take a rebellious and disobedient child to the gates of the city where the city elders were to stone him to death.

During most of medieval and modern western history the child was viewed as a miniature adult, if he was lucky enough to survive past infancy. American frontier families didn't bother to name their children until they were at least three months old, because of the high rate of infant mortality.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, dubbed "The Century of the Child," over two million children under the age of fifteen were full-time laborers, and four- and five-year old children worked sixteen-hour days. By the sixties and seventies, children's needs and interests determined the curricula of our schools, and 1979 was declared "The International Year of the Child." Today the mass media pander to children's tastes, while radical religious groups seek the passage of legislation that would give legal personhood to fertilized ova. Governments protect the welfare of children through a wide array of programs ranging from laws preventing child abuse and the exploitation of child labor to school lunch programs and financial aid to the mothers of dependent children. Attitudes toward children have, perhaps, changed more rapidly and more drastically than have attitudes toward any other minority in recent memory.