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CHILDHOOD IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN TIMES

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The history of European childhood as a field of study has virtually exploded since its inception in 1962 with the publication of Philippe Ariès’s pioneering *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. The first to draw attention to the importance of this life stage as an area of scholarly inquiry, Ariès’s work has been one of the primary influences prompting historians over the following half century to arrive at a better understanding of what childhood and parenting were like during the medieval (AD 500–1500) and early modern (AD 1500–1800) periods. His work emerged during a pivotal time for historical studies, when scholars were forging new paths of exploration. While the annals of war and treaties remained classical subjects, professional historians, particularly from the Annales School in France and the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure in the United Kingdom, turned their attention to social history. Borrowing methods from psychology, biology, sociology, and demography they formulated new questions and crafted new narratives. Childhood as an area of historical study was a product of this moment, which was also a time of strong interest in Freudian psychoanalysis and Jean Piaget’s studies of child development, areas that explored human ambivalence toward the early stages of the lifecycle. The 1960s and 1970s also gave rise to the study of the so-called “forgotten people,” which included the subaltern classes, women, and children. The rise of informatics and historical research based on archival and parish collections enabled scholars to reconstruct demographic patterns for nameless people by using records of birth, baptism, marriage, and death as well as tax data and notarial documents. Further, the burgeoning fields of cultural studies and art history made literary texts, diaries, poetry, ages-of-man literature, and illustrations with distinct life-cycle stages, advice books, family letters, humanist writings, catechisms, hagiography, and iconography popular sources for the exploration of social life. The confluence of all of these developments advanced childhood studies, an interdisciplinary field that would expand over the late twentieth century in multiple directions.

Economy and demography

It became apparent at the outset that there was not just one model of childhood. Several factors shaped human experience, among them broader economic and demographic cycles. The first five centuries of medieval life were ridden with invasions, famine, poverty, and high mortality, conditions that encouraged most people to organize under religious houses or warrior hierarchies supported by a mass of indentured...
rural laborers. Europe was a thinly populated rural sea, its peoples vulnerable to the cyclical pressures resulting from inclement weather and poor harvests. Infant mortality was high, and it was common for children to lose one or both parents. In this context, young people who survived adversity often lived with fictive kin, either under the tutelage of a secular lord; a bishop, abbot, or abess; or a group of serfs.

After AD 1000 Europe’s demographic and economic landscape changed dramatically. The invasions ceased, the birth rate steadily rose, and improved agricultural methods yielded a more plentiful and nutritious diet. Population growth in the rural sector helped break up serfdom and permitted newly freed laborers to become wage earners, thus the European economy diversified, shifting from an exclusively agrarian society to that of a rural sea now populated with significant urban nuclei. Cities and towns absorbed rural workers into guilds, and handicrafts spilled into the countryside in dispersed cottage industries. On a global level, maritime power in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean expanded, resulting in new colonies and markets in the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and West Asia. In northern Italy, the commercial revolution produced an international banking network, monetary exchange, maritime trade insurance, and double-entry bookkeeping. Society reorganized, with the middle ranks in urban areas growing rapidly in prosperity. The period between AD 1000 and 1300 was marked, thus, by economic expansion, a phenomenon that permitted the formation of nuclear households. Nonetheless, infant and child mortality remained high, especially among ordinary people, with as much as a quarter of all infants born failing to complete their first year of life and another quarter expiring before reaching their teens.

By AD 1300 Europe entered another cyclical downturn. The pronounced population growth of the previous three centuries stretched the limits of agrarian technology, setting off a series of famines that produced widespread malnutrition. Then the Bubonic Plague swept over Europe, decimating between a third and a half of the population between AD 1348 and 1350 and bringing the cycle of expansion to an abrupt halt. Once again the children that survived adversity had their lives disrupted, often finding themselves in truncated households.

The impact of this boom and bust activity on household structure was dramatic. In periods of slow population growth, or following catastrophic levels of mortality, there was more pressure to marry, and to marry during adolescent rather than adult years, in order to maximize the period of human reproduction and replenish the labor force. There were also generally more landed resources available as well, increasing the possibility of raising children at home. When, however, the population rose to the level where food resources and land became scarce, the situation in AD 1300, more people postponed marriage to their late twenties, producing fewer children, or did not marry at all. Poverty and malnutrition became dominant concerns, with fewer households able to support children and parents resorting to abandoning infants to foundling homes or orphanages or farming them out as domestic laborers. After the Black Death of AD 1348 trends shifted once again. Land once again became plentiful, wages rose, and couples were encouraged to wed young to compensate for demographic losses.

While Europe slowly recovered from its catastrophic losses of the fourteenth century, it witnessed yet another period of pronounced change in the balance of demographic and economic power during the sixteenth century. Once again the population
reached levels that a constrained agrarian technology could not accommodate. The sixteenth century thus mirrored the period between AD 1300 and 1348, but it also witnessed high inflation, thus the problem of poverty became critical to both ecclesiastical and lay institutions. Foundling homes and orphanages multiplied, replacing family households, but there were also increasing droves of uprooted children. Poverty swept over most of the peasantry, with significant differences between Western and Eastern Europe. While the West imposed heavy taxation, it still afforded rural laborers wages and contracts or leases, however exploitative. The East, on the other hand, fell into serfdom, hardly different than slavery. In this context it is not possible to envision productive, nuclear households with fathers and mothers parenting their offspring. Rather, such adversity produced truncated households that cast children, at best, under the tutelage of institutions. In this context childhood was usually brief and most certainly a luxury reserved for the prosperous.

The eighteenth century brought new changes to the system of production that impinged on the built-in demographic structures discussed above. The guild system in urban centers was compelled to share manufacturing terrain with rural households, where all family members took part. International merchants, circulating in a global economy that reached from Europe to the Americas, Africa, and Asia, purchased both raw materials and handicrafts from these households to export to external markets. In this setting the work of both women and children was critical. Rural industrialization permitted married people to stay together and work out of the home and afforded children greater opportunity to remain with them and participate in household production.

**Class and gender**

Like demographic and economic trends, social class and gender were important variables that affected childhood experience. Medieval and early modern European society was distinctly hierarchical. Status was defined both by bloodline and in law, and was visually represented in dress, manners, and lifestyle. Moreover, culturally constructed rules about the norms of masculinity and femininity clearly determined peoples’ roles in life. Thus children in elite households were tracked for different destinies than those of the laboring classes. The progeny of royals and nobles, or others with power and great wealth, were situated on a life-cycle trajectory that greatly depended on local inheritance practices. Roman law on the Continent and common law in England followed the principle of primogeniture, whereby one heir carried on the family name, inheriting the preponderance of the family patrimony. Likewise, one daughter was destined to marry, thus limiting the family dynasty’s financial liability in expending resources for dowries. This behavioral strategy, called restricted marriage, meant that Europe’s upper classes produced a significant number of unmarried and displaced men and women. Disinherited sons of feudal knights, for example, joined Crusades to foreign territories in order to net land and primary resources and to enjoy the feudal privileges they were deprived of at home. Others were constrained to join mercenary companies or to take religious vows, often against their will. Daughters of the nobility not tracked for marriage had even fewer options. They filled Catholic Europe’s aristocratic convents, and, like monks, were constrained to take vows of celibacy. Similarly, non-noble elites intent on preserving the wealth of the family
dynasty over time, also practiced restricted marriage. This was common practice in the oligarchic circles ruling European cities, and among the judicial and notarial elites that dominated legal life and bureaucracy. For the offspring of the wealthy and powerful, childhood under parental supervision was but a transitory moment, probably for not more than a decade, before, as adolescents, the young were placed under the supervision of surrogate adults, be it in military companies for males or in religious institutions for either sex. It is important to note that the disinherited did not necessarily remain celibate. Many produced illegitimate children who experienced stigma and marginalization.

Children from elite circles tracked for marriage remained closer to the hearth and were trained early on to be family patriarchs, astute estate managers, and military and political leaders in the case of males, or household managers and mothers in the case of females. They received home tutorial or some other form of schooling. Parents consulted late medieval advice manuals on how to care for infants and toddlers and raise and educate the young, with gender-specific instructions. Mothers in households with the financial means to betroth daughters, for example, were given books such as *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* to prepare them for married life. Children were also given toys and games to develop their skills. Boys undertook athletic and military training that fostered teamwork and built moral character. They also studied geography, Latin grammar, and history to prepare for their political responsibilities. Those dislodged from the natal household were also schooled in primary education and trained to serve in capacities that enhanced the status of the family dynasty, whether in military, bureaucratic, or religious service. Adolescent males were prepared for law, medicine, or government, females for domestic responsibilities. Some males boarded out, their teachers becoming their parents, while females remained at home or were enrolled in convents by age nine.

The vast majority of children were not, however, from elite circles, thus their experiences varied, largely dependent on the nature of the family household. Historical demographers have concluded that the dominant family form in Western Europe was nuclear. In only a few areas, such as southern France, rural Tuscany, or among the ruling class of Venice, was the family extended. Children could only remain at home and be raised by their natal parents if the household could sustain itself economically. The financial strength of the household depended on the physical environment, the productivity of the land, and the strength of the labor market, variables that fluctuated over time. These factors helped to determine whether children attended school or worked, whether they lived with their parents at home or were farmed out to more prosperous households, whether they married young, old, or not at all. Some youngsters were apprenticed early on for rural labor, the handicrafts, or trade, depending on the opportunities their families could give them. Those in less fortunate circumstances were sent into domestic service, or deprived of any training if they came from destitute households. Many children lost one or both parents; the more fortunate among them received vocational training from an orphanage. In most of these circumstances, children were supervised by other adults, who may or may not have acted as surrogate parents. But even within the nuclear family, supervision shifted if either spouse was widowed and remarried, a common occurrence in a society ridden with war, epidemic disease, and famine. A remarried father was more likely to keep his children at home than a remarried mother.
In general, childhood was much briefer in poor or modest agrarian societies than in wealthy, urban environments. From an early age boys and girls were given tasks to assist with sustaining the family unit. Children as young as four or five might tend their infant siblings. By ages six to eight they were assigned small chores such as collecting firewood or worms on vines, herding livestock, weeding, sweeping, cleaning, carrying water, preparing food, and doing small errands. Both boys and girls might work in fields or tend farm animals. Girls also provided domestic service, helping with spinning, sewing, and lace making. Responsibilities grew exponentially between the ages of seven and twelve. By age fourteen, members of both sexes were doing the work of adult men and women, respectively. It is important to note that in medieval and early modern society the household was a center of production as well as reproduction; a place where all family members participated in some form of labor. Their activities revolved around ensuring at least subsistence level, making clothing, and constructing housing. In that context, everyone worked the land, watched the livestock, and produced the basic items critical for the survival of the household unit. Everyone engaged in the planting and harvesting of crops both for subsistence and to furnish the raw materials for manufactured products, such as flax, hemp, silk, and plants for dyes.

Some children in artisan households had the opportunity to learn the trades of their parents. This depended on the degree to which the economic activity could sustain the household. Therefore it was possible that only one or two sons became cobblers or smiths, while the others, like rural children, were forced to leave the household and seek other means to make a living. Commercialization in the cities of northern Italy, Flanders, and Germany offered greater opportunities to some than other places in Europe. Sons followed their fathers into international trade, banking, or manufacture. Moreover, where business and industry thrived there was great demand for professionals skilled in medicine, the notarial arts, and law, prosperous positions regulated by guild membership and often passed down from father to son. Often these professionals dominated civic councils, whose memberships were also hereditary.

Stages of childhood development: infancy

Within the general parameters outlined previously, historians continue to explore the specific experiences of medieval and early modern European children. Evidence for the earliest stage of the lifecycle, infancy, comes from a variety of sources, including manuals on midwifery and obstetrics, medical texts, judicial records, registers of baptisms and deaths, folk literature, the iconography of manuscript illuminations, church carvings, paintings, stained glass, printed books, and artifacts ranging from clay feeding bottles to toys. The subject is also approached indirectly through studies of motherhood, unwed mothers, and infanticide. Each of these sources is open to interpretation, thus accounting for many of the controversies about childhood history. The most debated questions include whether parents were attached to their infants; whether they treated infant boys differently than girls; and whether such practices as swaddling were cruel and detached or compassionate forms of protection.

The starting point for all of these debates was the precariousness of infancy. Poor hygiene, filth, contaminated water, harmful bacteria, and limited medical expertise made infants highly vulnerable to disease. Many suffered from worms, diarrhea, and smallpox. The poor were also victims of malnutrition, which brought on a variety of
deficiency diseases. As a result, infant mortality was very high, ranging between 30 and 50 percent. One in two children of the lower classes was likely to die before the age of one year. One in two of these reached their teens.

Survival depended to a large degree on how and what infants were fed. Both medieval and early modern people were aware that nursing, or wetnursing, gave a baby better odds of survival than feeding through a tube or clay bottle. Today scientific studies have concluded that breast milk furnishes protection against allergy, disease, and infection because it is rich in antibodies, nutrient proteins, lipids, vitamins, and minerals. Unfortunately, some mothers of the past, especially the poor and malnourished, did not have enough milk. Others died in childbirth. Still others, in more fortunate circumstances, were accustomed to engaging wetnurses. As a result, infants were deprived of their own mothers’ precious breast milk and were thus more prone to serious ailments and death.

The quantitative studies of David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber for medieval Tuscany show that the infants of the rich were more likely to survive than those of the poor. Moreover, Klapisch-Zuber’s analysis of the breast milk business, based on Florentine ricordanze, or family diaries, demonstrates that male and female babies were nurtured differently, with boys given preferential treatment. They were nursed for longer periods and were better supervised than girls, who were often given over to wetnurses. There was not only an overall awareness that breast feeding was superior to tube feeding, but it was also believed that the character of the wetnurse would be transmitted to the child through her milk, thus fathers were careful about whom they chose to nurse their infants, particularly their male babies. Klapisch-Zuber concludes that they opted to have wetnurses for infant boys in their homes where they could be supervised. On the other hand, female babies were more likely to be given to country women, where there was greater risk of starvation if the unsupervised nurturant ran out of milk but pretended to feed the infant to prevent a loss of income. Ironically, Klapisch-Zuber also found that it was women from the wealthier classes that, with the support of their husbands, were more inclined to give their babies over to wetnurses. This stands to reason since only they could afford them. Moreover, some were under greater pressure to conceive in order to ensure the elite family dynasty, and many realized that breast feeding inhibited fertility. Philip Gavitt’s study of the Florentine Ospedale degli Innocenti (foundling home) suggests that male babies may have received better treatment than female ones, for female infant mortality was higher than that of males. Gavitt also reveals that the Florentine countryside was a center of wetnursing, catering to a broad clientele. There are fewer records shedding light on wetnursing in medieval London, but Barbara Hanawalt finds that male infants had a better chance of survival.

Most historians studying childbirth and the nourishment of infants generally conclude that parents were attached to their babies, irrespective of the high death rates. Regarding Renaissance Italy, Jacqueline Musacchio’s work on descibi da parto, or birth trays, and other ceramics that were presented as gifts to a newborn’s parents, shows their enthusiasm: they were interested in illustrating heroic themes that would influence the child’s upbringing. Moreover, all authorities recommended breast feeding for the health of the child. The fifteenth-century Venetian humanist writer Francesco Barbaro, for example, insisted that mothers nurse their own babies. Finally, the presence of foundling homes indicates that it was important to protect and care for infants.
and children. In his *Kindness of Strangers* John Boswell explains this in terms of children's value to the labor force, but we can also interpret it as a sign of fundamental respect for human life. In Renaissance Italy the family was the fundamental unit of social organization, and children were critical to its survival over the long term. There is a variety of visual evidence that suggests that parents treasured their offspring, dressing them in fine linens, silks, and brocades. This is particularly evident in the official family portraits of Italy's great dynasties, such as the Gonzaga of Mantua and the Pesaro of Venice, where children garbed in fine splendor were proudly displayed on canvas.

A few historians, on the other hand, have characterized specific parenting practices as evidence of cruelty. Swaddling, for example, is one of the areas where there is little agreement. Barbara Hanawalt explains that the divergence is largely due both to historians' selection of sources as well as the different ways they interpret them. Mary Martin McLaughlin, in *Survivors and Surrogates*, for example, argues that swaddling was a practice that reflected concern to provide infants with good care. She draws this conclusion from her readings of Guibert of Nogent's memoirs and the encyclopedia of Bartholomew of England. Bartholomew explained that swaddling kept the infant warm and prevented the formation of deformities. Lloyd deMause's readings, on the other hand, led him to characterize swaddling as cruel because it deprived the child of using his or her limbs. Other historians have pointed out that the practice was not sanitary, with infants remaining in soiled cloth for long hours.

Surely for Europe's elite, childbirth was an important event. It represented the future of the family, the survival of a dynasty. There was indeed great ceremony surrounding childbirth, which was largely a female event up until the eighteenth century. The role of the midwife was critical, and the memoirs of these health care givers show extensive knowledge and concern for the health and welfare of infants. Midwives held important places in society, often supervised by the state and church, and were called upon to testify in judicial matters related to female sexuality, childbirth, and infant death. Likewise, godparents held a special place in the lives of Catholic children because they were pledged to care for their godchildren should the parents become ill disposed, and provided a larger network of support for the young. The birth of the child was also a fruitful occasion to renew, expand, and solidify important social and political ties through the selection of godparents.

Not all pregnancies, however, led to childbirth, but infants that were conceived in marriage had a better chance of survival than illegitimate ones. Further, the insidious presence of poverty meant that not all pregnancies were welcome. Jean-Louis Flandrin's study of sexual behavior in early modern France concludes that parents attempted to limit birth. My own work for early modern Italy also reveals such practices. Although the evidence is scant, priests and laymen alike in the Republic of Venice visited apothecaries and mixed the abortion potions they urged their women to drink. Birth control, abortion, miscarriage, and infanticide, however, all elude the historical record, for they usually occur in secret, thus the historical evidence is descriptive rather than quantitative.

In early modern Italy women who were single and pregnant furtively left their rural villages or tiny hamlets, at times in the company of secret partners, to give birth in the anonymity of the city, where they could avail themselves of foundling homes after their 40 days of “lying in,” the term for post-natal care. They were often cared for by
other women who let rooms and offered an unofficial midwifery service. In addition to providing post-natal care, these women sometimes called in priests to counsel single mothers on how to dispose of the infant in a foundling home. Such homes, first established in the thirteenth century, swelled with abandoned newborns in Italy’s cities during the early modern era. Abandoned infants were in part the victims of population growth and poverty, especially during the sixteenth-century cycle of inflation when many people could not marry because of the high cost of living and the dearth of landed resources. It was not that parents did not care for their children but rather that they could not afford them. Many attached poignant notes to their infants describing how financial hardship had constrained them to relinquish their loved ones. But poverty alone does not explain infant abandonment; it was also a consequence of harsh laws regulating unmarried expectant mothers. While in Protestant territories magistrates obliged unmarried sexual partners to assume responsibility for their offspring, Catholic territories discouraged single mothers from keeping their babies. The new mother or father, or someone acting for them, felt constrained by social stigma and notions of honor to deposit the infant in a rotating cradle that pivoted between the outside and inside of a foundling home, giving over care of the infant to the nuns. Many were involved in living arrangements that, if discovered, would dishonor both them and their families. Some impoverished women, for example, had agreed to set up housekeeping with priests who reneged on their vows of celibacy or with men of high social station whose families had not tracked them for marriage. It is difficult to know how they or their partners felt about abandoning their offspring, but what is clear is that the conventions of society forbade them to raise children.

The foundling home solution in fact encouraged infant abandonment, however painful, even among legitimate parents who could not afford to feed an additional child, and the numbers of parentless babies grew exponentially through the early modern period. In fifteenth-century Florence, the Hospital of the Innocenti, a haven for the illegitimate offspring of nobles, housed about 6 percent of all baptized children, a figure that rose to 38 percent by the turn of the nineteenth century. Milan’s foundling home also expanded during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, taking in between 30 and 40 percent of all baptized children.\(^{18}\)

The secrecy surrounding infant abandonment makes it difficult to assign agency to women alone. Men also assisted their unwed partners in discarding their infants. There were also many deceased infants that never reached a foundling home; they were instead discovered in dung heaps, ditches, sewers, and rivers, their stories remaining buried in obscurity. Despite the participation of men in the crime of infanticide, throughout Europe the culturally constructed criminal was the single woman, who either miscarried, gave birth prematurely, had a stillbirth, or was desperate enough to strangle or smother her baby. Practicing midwives were also prime suspects. In northern Europe, unmarried pregnant women were obliged to register or face punishment for infanticide should they miscarry or experience stillbirth. There was no such law in Italy, but women convicted of infanticide were potentially subject to severe punishment. It appears, however, that the penalty of death was meant to serve more as a deterrent than as an actual punishment, for authorities rarely followed through.\(^{19}\) Frequently women fled before they were brought to trial and underwent a kind of self-imposed exile. Scholars disagree on what motivated judicial leniency. Some emphasize the importance of female honor, which was salvaged by discarding
the infant. Others underline early modern Europeans’ conception of the female sex as fragile and therefore the transgression of sexual chastity excusable. Still others hypothesize that mild discipline reflected discomfort with exempting seductive fathers from inquiry or punishment, a discomfort that may also shed light on judges’ reluctance to view infanticide as homicide. Elsewhere in Europe the eighteenth century witnessed greater sympathy for women accused of infanticide. Medical research emphasized the precarious psychological condition of expectant mothers. In Enlightenment England during the 1730s and 1740s, doctors such as William Hunter called for greater understanding of emotion, arguing that the pain of labor created temporary insanity. This became part of a larger debate in the 1770s in England. In Switzerland, Johann Pestalozzi, writing in 1783, characterized infanticide as the crime of women victimized by love. German romantic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also contained themes of sympathy for unwed mothers.

**Stages of childhood development: from infant to adolescent**

Once again social class, financial means, and gender played fundamental roles in determining young children’s experience during medieval and early modern times. Many lived with their parents at least until the age of seven, but thereafter their lives diverged. Less is known about the first seven years of life than about other phases of the human lifecycle, but advice manuals, pictorial evidence of swaddling and playing, and artifacts such as cradles, balls, and dolls indicate that it was a period when children, under their mothers’ supervision, were trained for survival but also given the leisure time to play with toys and to participate in games that shaped their fundamental socialization. Until age two they were generally swaddled to keep them secure; between two and five they freely engaged in playing; and from six or seven they were assigned some chores appropriate to their age and physical capability. Some of the evidence for this phase in the lifecycle comes from the study of accidents, others from the lives of saints. Barbara Hanawalt’s *The Ties That Bound*, a study that explores when and how children were injured, finds that the mishaps occurred when they were playing ball or tag, running races, attempting to be dare devils or doing chores like drawing water, helping their mothers to cook, or in the case of boys, taking horses to be watered or running errands for their fathers at work.20 She concludes that despite the substantial work expected, medieval people were aware of both the biological necessities and limits of the child and that they were emotionally committed. Saints’ lives, of course, present problems of interpretation because the writings aim explicitly to verify miraculous acts; however, in the course of describing the saint’s extraordinary feats, the authors reveal telling descriptions of ordinary children’s activities that reflect an awareness of age-specific stages of childhood development. The descriptions of miracles raising the dead, moreover, disclose parental emotions of attachment and grief as well as a firm commitment to ensure the survival of their offspring.21

The age of seven was in many ways a turning point in attitudes about childhood, especially with the onset of the religious reformations in the sixteenth century. In Protestant households seven was the age when fathers assumed greater responsibility for childrearing and building moral character. In Catholic communities seven was the age when children were old enough to account for committing mortal sin. Children
from the elite classes obtained some type of formal education beginning at age seven; others instead took on the tasks and trades associated with their future livelihoods.

There were many different kinds of educational opportunities open to the most fortunate among children. Prosperous parents of the aristocracy and the wealthy business and professional classes, for example, engaged tutors to live in or visit daily to teach their children as well as accompany them on travel. Another option was to enroll sons in boarding schools that housed and fed them in addition to providing a basic education. In this case the master became the boy’s surrogate father, also teaching manners and morals. Among the best examples of this are the famed Renaissance humanist schools in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century northern Italy at Ferrara and Verona, which were funded by families that wielded power and that sponsored the great innovations in art and architecture as well as urban planning. Endowed schools, that is, independent institutions run by a priest who taught Latin, were yet another option. Some towns sponsored such schools for the sons of the governing families. The boys were prepared for future lives in civic government. There were also church schools, attached to cathedrals, monasteries, and parish priests; and vernacular schools. The latter were especially popular in commercial areas. Teachers in vernacular schools offered instruction in reading and writing in the local language rather than Latin, but in addition taught commercial mathematics, elementary bookkeeping, and literature ranging from saints’ lives to chivalric poems. In the Germanic regions of Europe backstreet schools were established to teach some very basic literacy and elementary education to boys and girls. Because of the high costs, schooling was reserved for the wealthy. Ordinary people could not pay for tuition or upkeep, nor could they spare the assistance of their children at work. Generally there were more urban dwellers attending school than rural inhabitants, who could ill afford to leave the fields for classes and who often lived long distances from the centers of schooling.

The most common subject taught in all of these schools was Latin, the legal language of the elite preparing for government, the professions, or the lifestyle of the great landed nobility. Only a small percentage of boys and girls attended such schools, and they generally did so between the ages of six and fifteen. The percentage of females probably reached no more than 1 percent of the population, for they were excluded from all of the professions. Girls were not entirely cut off from formal education, but they had no public outlet for what they learned. Convents taught basic reading and writing in addition to sewing and manners, but women could not teach nor enter government or the professions. Their basic options were marriage or religious life. When the Protestants closed the convents and monasteries in the sixteenth century this avenue of education was discontinued.

There was a qualitative leap in the school curriculum between the Middle Ages and the fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance, when both commercialization and urbanization required more education for children. While the earlier age offered instruction in Latin via religious texts, grammars, and glosses, mainly for future clerics or secretaries and notaries that would serve secular rulers, from the fifteenth century Renaissance teachers looked to antiquity for cultural and educational models, such as the writings of Virgil and Cicero. Renaissance humanism, an aspect of late medieval and early modern high culture that developed in Italy between AD 1300 and 1500 and spread to northern Europe between AD 1500 and 1650, was an educational program that trained the oligarchs and despots of the Italian cities.
and the chancery officials of Europe's growing bureaucracies in grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. The constitutional histories of ancient Greece and Rome were emphasized for their moral and historical examples; rhetoric and statecraft became new fields of study. Moreover, the humanist emphasis on critical observation as opposed to simply citing ancient authorities prepared boys for careers in law, medicine, and natural philosophy. In many ways this elite educational program in the classics perpetuated the class hierarchy and perceived gendered differences between boys and girls.

A number of important developments facilitated the education of children starting in the late fifteenth century. Among them was the invention of the printing press. Movable type made it possible to print reading primers, grammar manuals, and classical and humanist texts that could be disseminated broadly. In this context, books became very important. Another was the northern humanist movement, which spread from the Italian cities. Desiderius Erasmus (AD 1466–1536) and other northern humanists emphasized the secular program of the Italian schools but also prescribed religious training and more advanced courses in philosophy, Hebrew, mathematics, and theology. There was, for example, little agreement among theologians and laymen over whether children were inherently innocent or evil, but they concurred that childhood was the critical period when character was shaped and that education was imperative. Following northern humanism, the Protestant Reformation was a third important development influencing childhood education. Martin Luther (AD 1483–1546) advocated compulsory elementary school education for all, children were encouraged to read the Bible, and literacy levels rose. More specialized Catholic schools also arose during the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, founded by the Jesuits. They offered advanced Latin humanities, philosophy, mathematics, and physics to boys aged ten to sixteen. This was a great era for school foundation, and literacy levels among males grew significantly.

While the number of opportunities to attend schools increased during the early modern period, and civic groups, church, and state devoted greater emphasis to child rearing and education, there was also significant epistemological conflict. This was an era of religious fragmentation, with Protestants competing with Catholics to both define religious doctrine and to organize obedient, loyal followings. The issue was not simply religious difference; it was a broad conflict over how society should be organized. The Renaissance and Reformation era was also a period of growing secularism, when statecraft, beginning with the political writer Niccolò Machiavelli (AD 1469–1527), evolved into a rational science, liberated from the church and the divine, to be studied, understood, and improved. From the late sixteenth century, early modern rulers financed ever larger military and bureaucratic apparatuses and engaged scientists to improve technologies ranging from agricultural production and transoceanic navigation to the refinement of instruments of warfare and manufacture. Humanist methods of critical inquiry challenged the established reverence for the ancients advocated by more religiously inclined scholastic teachers, and the scientific debates advanced by physicians and natural philosophers fostered more skepticism. At the same time, however, the new views clashed sharply with both religious doctrine and folk wisdom and superstition. New scientific observations made the world larger, but disconcerted theologians by deposing it as the center of the universe, and ordinary
people still relied on magic and spells to negotiate life’s hardships and quell fears about the devil.

Approaches to child rearing existed amidst these sixteenth and seventeenth century debates. First, the Protestant split with Catholicism inculcated a different set of values. Protestants, privileging marriage and the family, refuted a thousand years of Roman Catholic tradition, which upheld the celibate ideal and religious enclosure. Instead they encouraged companionate marriage and shared parenting and admitted the possibility of divorce. Catholics, on the other hand, remained under a restricted marital regime that emphasized virginity and enclosure for unmarried women with no possibility of divorce. Protestants were highly critical of the Catholic position, which sometimes led to secret unions and illegitimate offspring. Martin Luther emphasized that the purpose of sex was procreation and that sex was a marital duty; moreover, that it was better to wed than to sin by engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. Second, according to Steven Ozment, Protestants viewed childrearing as a “rational art” that involved care of the child’s physical and material needs as well as instilling virtues and values. Spoiling was to be avoided and self-sacrifice and deference to patriarchal authority cultivated. Moreover, evangelists and radicals emphasized greater spiritual education of the young, a new approach to child rearing that clashed with the emerging scientific model of empirical observation and deduction. This approach also generated conflict with secular authorities who viewed the spread of religious radicalism as subversive. There were also philosophical disagreements over the inherent nature of human beings, whether laden with original sin and naturally evil or born innocent, debates that inevitably affected ideas about child rearing in different ways. Such disagreements influenced the educated classes more than ordinary people, but ordinary people were subject to other splits as their folk wisdom came under the censorship of the Reformation churches. Religious reformers were intent on molding parent–child relationships, mandating the former to instill moral values, to invest heavily in education, and, in consequence, to separate children from adult living in order to cultivate this preparatory stage of life. For the prosperous, schooling would be extended, with an emphasis on religious orthodoxy. While the minimum canonical age permitting marriage was twelve for girls and fourteen for boys, extending teens’ period of study ultimately postponed marriage, a rite of passage to adulthood. Another way of viewing this is to see a prolonged adolescence associated less with street games, rites, and rituals and linked more to securing a profession, with at least secondary schooling if not university becoming mandatory. There were, of course, gendered differences: schooling for females prepared them for matrimony and domestic life rather than the professions or a trade. Both male and female youths, whose families were prosperous enough to offer them secondary education, enjoyed increasing leisure time, in contrast to working youngsters. Marriage ended childhood or adolescence for women, while emancipation or inheriting land and establishing an independent household ushered prosperous males into adulthood.

In conclusion, there were a variety of childhood experiences in medieval and early modern Europe, shaped foremost by class and gender but also by the cyclical structures of everyday life. In principle, the higher the social station and level of financial prosperity, the greater the chances of survival, the more opportunity for higher education, and the lengthier the childhood experience. Poor people were cast into the
work force early on, and their lives were soon filled with responsibility and hardship. It would be fruitful to learn more about how those hardships influenced children’s cognitive and psychological development. It is difficult, however, for historians to know what children felt, or how they fended for themselves in what were challenging circumstances, for they did not leave us written records. The archeology of toys, and cradles, along with songs, rhymes, and riddles offer clues of times past, but there is a lot we still do not know, especially about poor children and the desperate parents who were forced to relinquish them to the care of others or who saw them perish early.

Notes

14 Margaret King’s study of *The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994) vividly documents a Venetian father’s lifelong grief over the loss of his son.
16 Flandrin, *Families in Former Times*, 153, 212–42.
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Suggestions for further reading

Abandonment and infanticide; poverty and charity


MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN CHILDHOODS

Childbirth and infancy


Childhood, general histories and historiography


Childhood, the early modern period


Childhood, the medieval period


*Childhood, the Renaissance period*


*Domestic service*


*Economy and demography*


*Family and household*


**Schooling**

