A Right to Childhood?
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Prof. Cunningham provided an overview of theories of childhood in the West over the past 500 years. Images referred to are in his presentation: Hugh Cunningham: presentation.

1. **Romanticism**

The key moment in the last 500 years in the history of childhood is the Romantic Movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Romantics broke with the Biblical tradition that children were scarred at birth by original sin and with the more recent view, popularised by John Locke, that they were blank slates. For the Romantics, children were born innocent, or more than innocent, 'trailing clouds of glory' from Heaven in Wordsworth's vision. They were depicted in new ways, Joshua Reynolds's 'The Age of Innocence' becoming the template for pictures of children right up to the present.

2. **The right to childhood**

The Romantic Movement gave children something never previously articulated, a right to childhood, a phrase we still often invoke. What exactly constitutes this 'childhood' is rarely spelt out, but it undoubtedly includes a right to have their innocence protected and prolonged. Childhood came to be thought of as properly spent in a garden (Illustration to Hark, Hark the Dogs do Bark), fenced off from adulthood. It meant that children should not work, should not know anything about sex, and should be brought up in close contact with nature – something hard to achieve in increasingly urban Britain (Illustration of girl in field). Perhaps above all it meant that childhood should be happy, the happiest time of life – it came to be thought downhill from then onwards.

3. **A story is born**

The late Victorians constructed a narrative to normalise the innocent child. Before the Romantic Movement, it was said, children were treated as 'little adults'. This was a sin against the nature of childhood, though it might be unjust to blame pre-eighteenth-century parents who knew no better. The worst time for children was contemporaneous with Romanticism, the early industrial revolution, with children working in mines and factories. From this fate they were rescued by people like Lord Ashley, and then from another fate, as street children, by the NSPCC in the 1880s. So successful were these rescues that by 1930 in *Important People* children could be presented as 'happy and healthy', the girls 'fairy-kissed' (illustration). In 1942 it was confidently asserted that 'The story of English children at the present hour is a story that moves towards a happy ending'.

4. **Unpicking the story**

The story began to lose its resonance in the 1970s. Historians questioned the 'little adult' interpretation, producing much evidence that adults in the middle ages and early modern period had a clear sense of how children differed from adults (think of Jaques with his outline of the stages of life in *As You Like It,* stages which were frequently pictured). Children, research shows, had protection in law long before the NSPCC claimed the contrary. What was different about those centuries was that they were not, for better or worse, 'child-centred' societies.

5. **The unhappy present**

No one now thinks the story of English childhood is moving towards a happy ending. The news about childhood is almost uniformly pessimistic – it's 'toxic' in Sue Palmer's influential interpretation, many children 'feral'. It's proved impossible to defend the barriers that in the romantic view should separate out childhood from adulthood. Perhaps the problem lies not with childhood but with the adulthood that we try to keep children out of.

6. **A Scandinavian future?**

The Romantic view of childhood has outlived its usefulness. We would do better to downgrade our expectations of what childhood and children should be. Trying to protect children, we prolong their childhoods, giving them no easy way to grow up. A better way ahead would be the Scandinavian one in which the default position is that a child has a competence to do something rather than being thought of as deficient in skills and therefore in need of protection. Constantly proclaiming that children have 'a right to childhood' may be a mixed blessing for children. We might do better to focus on a right to grow up.

Further reading:

Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (2005)
Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (2006)