

In our Time Programme 51
Childhood

Melvyn Bragg : Hello, St Paul wrote of the Corinthians, "When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things". But is it really as simple as that, and can one always make such a clear distinction between childhood and being an adult, and is such a division even desirable? For most of this century, in the Western world, childhood has been another country, with different laws and separate truths. It's something we feel either that we've missed or somewhere to which we long to return. Has it always been such a cherished state and do our endless machinations to keep childhood special actually help the individual?

With me to discuss the enigma of childhood is social historian Christina Hardiment, author of "The Future, The Family" and Dr Theodore Zeldin senior fellow at St Anthony's College, Oxford and author of "An Intimate History of Humanity".

Christina Hardiment, Rousseau's manual of childhood, "Emile", which was published towards the end of the 18th century was massively influential at the time, what new idea of childhood did that introduce?

Christina Hardiment : He introduced ideas that we would take for granted today. He came in very strongly saying children should be free, should be allowed to discover for themselves, in a quite adventurous way. We'd be pretty scared by the fact that he thought that children should get as cold as possible, and as hungry as possible, to teach them the value of these things. But he was reacting against a very strict and authoritarian way of bringing up children, in the same way that we're reacting against one.

Melvyn Bragg : He had the idea of a "natural" child, what did he mean by natural, at that time, a couple of hundred years ago?

Christina Hardiment : He said don't put children in swaddling bands, dig them a little shallow place in the earth, so they couldn't climb out of it and let them be free to play in the dust and eat mud and experiment, and so on. He felt that they should really just be allowed to rampage around. Charles Fox the English politician, he was a great follower of Rousseau, had a little baby boy, he absolutely adored, and at grand political dinners, this child would be brought in and would rampage round, sitting in bowls of custard, and so on to great sort of plaudits from everybody and claps. It was freedom, a complete reaction.

Melvyn Bragg : You say that "Emile" had a massive influence at the time, you mean massive influence in a rather closed section of society?

Christina Hardiment : I think most writers are influential only in literate sectors of society, until you get to a society where everybody can read, and freedom for children is very much one side of prosperity.

Melvyn Bragg : Was it regarded as something absurd at the time, his ideas? Or something that people welcomed, it was an idea that was ready for its time?

Christina Hardiment : It was the age of the French Revolution and overturning a great many authorities, and so it suited people's ideas of freedom that children should be free and indeed they themselves.

Melvyn Bragg : Rousseau borrowed from Locke and ultimately from the Spartans, the idea that children should be hardened, and you realise at the time of Rousseau, half the children born, died before they were eight years old, what did hardening mean, in practice, at that time?

Christina Hardiment : Well the idea was that if you looked at Nature, you saw that she was prodigal, enormous numbers of animals and children and plants died, for one reason or another, they weren't perfect, they collapsed, and so it was as you say, Spartan, they did want to strengthen them and really it was "survival of the fittest".

Melvyn Bragg : Theodore Zeldin, what do you think of this "Spartan" idea and the "natural" idea going hand in hand as they seem to go there?

Theodore Zeldin : Well I think Rousseau was a rebel, and he thought the world was terrible, and he had a lot of trouble with it and he was a typical sort of delinquent, mad, maverick sort of person, and so he said "Let us try and stop this influence coming on to our children, and therefore let us go to Nature, where institutions cannot influence them, keep them separate. Treat children as children," which means take them out of the world, protect them and er.... I think what's happened with children is that in the....for most of history, children have been exploited, forced to be obedient, "Do what your told" , and then with Rousseau, you get the idea that children need to be protected from this awful world, and now we are moving into a different age, and we're saying, "Let us listen to children, and let us discover that they each have something interesting to say", and the originality of the next century may be, that we have introduced into the world a voice which has never been heard before, as in the 19th century we introduced the voice of the working class, the 20th century we introduced the voice of women, and now we're going to introduce the voice of children, and you must know that in this year, for the first time there's been the World Parliament of Children, with which to express themselves and we now treat them as equals.

Melvyn Bragg : Well, let's try to plot this path through. At the end of the 18th century, after Rousseau, we have the two great monuments of human rights, the Bill of Rights in America and the Declaration of the Rights of Man in France. How did those two bills have anything...any bearing on the way children were regarded.

Theodore Zeldin : The Declaration of the Rights of Man is very important, because it said parents need no longer be obeyed. The paternal authority was destroyed and somebody said, "when they cut off the head of Louis the 18th er.... Louis the 16th, they cut off the head of every father who had tried to be the king in his family", and this idea of paternal authority which goes back to the Chinese and so on, who thought the most important thing for a father, was to create a family, which was his army, and er...now we're saying, "No, children have rights of their own".

Melvyn Bragg : How was this received again, the idea ofthe idea of the...the head of the house, the head of the army, being no longer the head of the army, at the time? I'm just trying to sort of set the end of the 18th century, before we move on. Was this...was this just among a few intellectuals, and thought an interesting notion?

Theodore Zeldin : No, it was very important because the...it meant that the younger son, was the equal of the elder son, the father couldn't decide which of his children would have what, and I suppose the final result is that children began to be protected. There was a war, you see, between children oppressed by their parents. In the French Revolution, the children rebelled against their parents and get the right not to have to obey them. But the children don't win, in the end, because the parents power is moved on to teachers, social workers, doctors, and the children go into the control of institutions and so it's in a way the state which takes over.

Melvyn Bragg : That..that's....that's one part of it, another part of it is that the mothers take over don't they? This is very....this is generalisation time...

Christina Hardiment : Yes, yes I don't...

Melvyn Bragg :but Napoleon said that "The future of France is that the mothers of France would improve their moral values", and Napoleon had a big influence, we're told, a huge influence in the 19th century, but his statement about the mother being the moral force, the educative force and so on, can you just.....?

Christina Hardiment : Yes, I don't really agree with what Theodore is saying, I think he's....he's...I think that it was much more a temporary thing, and the reaction, if anything, of the French Revolutionary ideas and the Bills of Rights, was to clamp down even more. I think the shift in authority from father to mother was a middle-class led development, because you suddenly got a growing middle-class, where the father earned money by leaving the house and the mother had enough money not to need to leave it. So, whereas when both parents worked, children had to, mainly in the home, you know, then the children helped, when you've got factories and so on, children are often neglected and so on. In upper-class families, then the parents were busy doing their own things and nurse maids were employed, but the development of the...the role of the mother in bringing up children was very much a mid 19th century institution, and mothers were very proud of it, and they put a great deal of religious and spiritual efforts into saving the souls of these children and thinking about their welfare and so on, and I think that was quite a marked new development that affluence was produced.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you see the role of mother as strongly as Christina, Theodore?

Theodore Zeldin : Well errr...this movement she describes is contemporaneous with the development of compulsory education. So the mother had to abandon control to the teacher.

Christina Hardiment : Not in the early 19th century.

Theodore Zeldin : Yes but that is the result and so are you saying for a number of years the mother was in charge and then ceased to be?

Christina Hardiment : Yes, very much so. I completely agree when you start looking at the 20th century, that the role of the school and children in the family is something that hasn't been examined nearly enough, and is enormously important.

Theodore Zeldin : Your saying the 18th

Christina Hardiment : But in the 19th century....

Theodore Zeldin : ...the 19th century, is the age of the mother?

Christina Hardiment : ...very much so. Because children didn't have to go to school, because it wasn't compulsory schooling of such an age. I mean they might only go to school for a few years of their childhood, or be tutored at home. There wasn't anything like the institution of compulsory schooling that has bounced through the 20th century, moving from, sort of, having to stay at school when you were 10 or 11 at the beginning of this century, to having to be there till 16.

Theodore Zeldin : No then I won't agree though, because I'd say that in the 19th century most children worked.

Christina Hardiment : Yes.

Theodore Zeldin : The purpose of having a child until very recently, was to get someone to help you, make more money and to survive.

Christina Hardiment : I don't think that was the purpose of having a child. I think children did help you make money and help the family survive.

Theodore Zeldin : Well the more children you had....yes, alright, the more children.....

Christina Hardiment : But I don't think that was the purpose .

Theodore Zeldin : Errrrm...well..... alright. But in any case children worked and the mother also worked, and the originality of that was when mothers ceased to work, er sorry, when mothers began working in place of their children, which is what the 20th century has done. Children now no longer work and instead it's the mothers who work.

Christina Hardiment : I think we're...we're, sort of vaulting slightly here, but I think the change is that when children went to school, for the very good reason, to give them a better future, and fathers were outside the household as well, earning money, and you had domestic appliances and electricity and things which meant that actually maintaining the home wasn't something you needed huge staff and children and so on to help, and you didn't have to have children in charge of the poultry yard or whatever, then the mother is at home and under occupied and lonely, and that's what drives her out of the house.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I just come back a little? How did the sciences in the 19th century affect the view of children...where the pseudo sciences like phrenology or the idea as science as applied to everything in life, including family life?

Christina Hardiment : I think it completely shifted thinking from, where you're talking about Nature, you know, prodigal and children dying and you can't do anything about it, to saying, well with phrenology, you have different faculties of the brain, which, it was thought, could be encouraged to be developed, and so the mother had a very important role, because she could actually nurture that bump of benevolence, and discourage that one of cruelty, by careful bringing up, and all the metaphors of child care at that time, are out of the garden, really, out of the potting shed. It's "pruning up " the twig, that as the twig is bent, so the child is inclined and this sort of thing.

Theodore Zeldin : I'd qualify this. When Christina says, "they went..... children were sent to school to give them a better life", I don't think that was quite what happened. they went to school in order to prevent them doing things which adults did not want.....(Christina laughs)..and errrr.....

Christina Hardiment : That gets a bit conspiratorial! (Mel laughs)

Theodore Zeldin : Well, if you read the, you know, some of the theorists, they were very concerned that they wanted to moralise children.

Christina Hardiment : Oh yes! Oh yes!

Theodore Zeldin : And Rousseau says , "You've got to treat children as children, you've got to make them happy and not think about their future".

Christina Hardiment : Yes.

Theodore Zeldin : In other words get away from what they will do....the world is terrible, so at least them have a few years of happiness..... that's very difficult.

Christina Hardiment : It's interesting, there have been, and they almost are at exactly the same points in the centuries, the late 18th century, the late 19th century, and the late 20th century, there always seems to be a decade or two of people really falling in love with children and giving them complete freedom, and then there's always a reaction, and I....there is this sort of pattern, that seems to occur.

Melvyn Bragg : In your book Theodore, your book "An Intimate History of Humanity", you say, I'm quoting, "There have always been outsiders trying to interfere between parents and children", you give one of the examples of Christianity, could you develop that? It's an interesting thought.

Theodore Zeldin : Yes, because have always said to parents, "Children don't really belong to you, they belong to society, or they belong to God, and in any case you don't know how to teach them to do what is right", and most people used to be illiterate and therefore there was some attempt by those who could read, to change the behaviour of people. People always thought that most humans were sinful or bad or stupid and had to be improved, and parents were not doing it, because parents were concerned with their own economic interests.

They wanted either, to make the child produce as much money as possible or to marry their daughters to get advance in the world, and I think if we're talking about Rousseau as being the great innovator, one should remember that Rousseau said that, "Girls are by nature, destined to obey men, and so you must encourage nature to develop their submissive faculties", and I think we have to, in any discussion of childhood, mention that boys and girls were treated very differently, and in many civilisations, to have a daughter was a mistake, and this is one of the great originalities of our time, that we are trying to treat them equally, and that girls are now....girl children..... children....female children are developing attitudes which are going to be quite influential.

Melvyn Bragg : The interesting thing..... one of the interesting things in that out of that statement, is that when you say "interfere", you talk about Christianity doing it quite deeply. Your father is replaced by a God father.

Theodore Zeldin : That's right.

Melvyn Bragg : Your....

Theodore Zeldin : The spiritual father is more important than the physical father.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, and your...what you learn at home is not as important as what you learn in church. These takeovers..... do see these as takeover bids, Christina Hardiment, how do you.....?

Christina Hardiment : I feel that's an exaggeration, really, and I do think it depends who you listen to. If you actually listen to the way parents write very thoughtfully about their children, and the way people who want to dictate policy write, you get a complete difference, and I think...I felt very strongly, and the reason I wrote a book examining the history of baby care theories, was that, in a way what we're doing now you could say was less kind, than what parents were doing in the 19th century with their children, and that in fact the core of concern, perhaps it is oppressive at times, might have been easier for children to grow up with than a sense of being very peripheral to life, which is often what children experience now.

And I think your feeling, only I'm feeling that you, Theodore, feel that people are trying to bounce....pound down children, when in fact it's a caringness, and I think there is a qualitative difference.

Theodore Zeldin : Well, yes, errr....people try to change children for their own good, and they call that "care". It's very difficult to distinguish.

Christina Hardiment : I don't think that was as manipulative as that, I mean an awful lot of the lessons children were learnt

Theodore Zeldin : "For your good".

Christina Hardiment : No, they weren't interfering that much, they were giving very strong moral lines, and children had to take the consequences of their actions. I think something rather different was going on.

Theodore Zeldin : Well most...most fathers ignored and neglected their children.

Christina Hardiment : No.

Theodore Zeldin : Errrrrm.....alright, err (laughter).

Melvyn Bragg : What a wonderful disagreement here!

Theodore Zeldin : There is....I..... I think.....there is....well..we're....I think one of the things...there's a danger in this conversation, is that we may be talking about English fathers, or European fathers...or..

Christina Hardiment : Yes.

Theodore Zeldin :and we have to think of the whole of the world, and today if we're discussing what has happened in this century, we have to realise that every kind of behaviour coexists today in different parts of the world. The whole of history is still present.

Christina Hardiment : So we're both right? (Mel sniggers)

Theodore Zeldin : We're both right and er.... um....in er....many civilisations, the child is cared for and loved very much in very early childhood, in infancy, when its fun, and then it's put to work, and things change.

Melvyn Bragg : There was a transformation, let's generalise the beginning of this century, in this....let's stick to this country or around about this country...

Theodore Zeldin : Okay.

Melvyn Bragg : ...in this education of children in the simple way that it was extended. Children left school at 11, then 12, then 14, then 16, and now an awful lot of them go onto 18. What was the philosophy underlying this

century's extension of education? Was it simply that we need brighter people and so on? Or was there more to it than that?

Christina Hardiment : Well it was very much I think, to give the child more opportunity, and what I think has been underestimated is the effect of that. We hear a lot now about how parents are failing their children and the family's falling apart, and so on, and you don't often say, "Well it's not really surprising, because children leave home at a quarter to eight in the morning or a quarter past eight, from the age of 5 or even 4 or even 3 now. They get maybe at four or five and they've got 2 or 3 hours homework. Now where is that parental influencing coming in? And if that's going to be thought a good thing for children, and the fact that we do it is presumably because we think it's good, then I do think we have to pile in a huge amount of resources and, sort of enterprise into exactly what's happening to those children during the day.

Melvyn Bragg : You clearly don't think it's such a good thing, I mean from your tone, am I misinterpreting?

Christina Hardiment : Erm, no, think that if you want to give every child the best opportunity then it ought to be freely available, but it's the quality of this thing we call "education" which I think has some quite profound question so to be asked about it.

Melvyn Bragg : Well, that's a slightly different debate, what we're talking about is that they go away at about quarter to eight in the morning and they come back at about four, four fifteen, generally speaking pretty tired I would have thought, and then on the whole, there's one...at least one, perhaps two out working or out. It's a very different sort of childhood until..... let's stick around this country....even a hundred and fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, where most things happened around the house, and as you say in your book, people turned up at the door to sharpen knives and this, that and the other. All that went on. It is a profound change which you referred to at the very top of the programme, Theodore.

Theodore Zeldin : Yeah, you asked an important question which is, "What's going on?" and I think it...this means first, that for the last century, the specialists have...the scientist if you like, have obtained dominance, and they've said "This is the way you've got to deal with children" and the result of their taking eight hours a day or whatever it is off children, is that the family is transformed into a leisure institution.

Christina Hardiment : Mmm.

Theodore Zeldin : And the development of the society..... the leisure society...erm, has been put intounder the control of parents....parents are in control of the leisure society, and children have been put to the centre of leisure society, more and more. So we've created on the one hand, the specialist society, which will make children the kind of people we want them to be, and we then compensate for all the pain by amusing them afterwards, and it doesn't really work. I think this is a mess we've got into. I think the leisure society is a mistake, because it has allowed us to excuse the disagreeable things we do to people when they're not in leisure, and work can continue to be disagreeable, because you say "Oh well afterwards you can go home and watch telly", and if we are to think of what we want in the future, I think we need to abolish the leisure society, and we have to say "Work itself should be more fulfilling and not just a grind".

Melvyn Bragg : That's fascinating.

Christina Hardiment : I think it's a mistake to make a contrast to hard between the child's day as work and something in the evening called "leisure". It seems to me that, really, what one would hope is happening to children is that their curiosity is being met by the world around it, that it's parents can provide it with information and love and guidance and then if it goes out among its peers, it can do so sort of strengthened by a sense of its own home base, and I think the trouble with this very long school day, is that there isn't enough time to get back and recoup.

Theodore Zeldin : Well there was just a report published about three days ago, by the Inspectors of the French Ministry of Education, who said that only 30% of children actually have much of a conversation in class during school hours.

Christina Hardiment : Yes.

Theodore Zeldin : And so most children are pretty well silent and passive observers, if you like, and the conclusion from that is, that after having removed illiteracy, we now have the problem of the silence of children who do not know how to talk properly, do not know how to converse, and that is an enormous weakness, because most of life now, is the art of having relationship with others, and it's not sure, not certain that schools teach that...can teach that, and what is worse is, I went to a congress of teachers of teachers, and they had a lot of trouble talking also (laughter), because although they knew how to give their lessons, they were a bit stuck afterwards.

Christina Hardiment : I don't think I'd be to doom-laden actually. I mean if we sort of, you know when you come out of a dark cinema, and you see the real world, if we now pretended we were in a primary school in sort of almost any village in England, it would be a happy sort of place, humming with activity and ideas....

Theodore Zeldin : I'm not doom-laden at all.

Christina Hardiment : ...and the children would run out to their mothers arms.

Theodore Zeldin : I feel that what's happening now is absolutely marvellous, because we are discovering how interesting children are.

Christina Hardiment : Yes.

Theodore Zeldin : And how they are asking questions which are fantastic, and are very difficult to answer.

Melvyn Bragg : Do you two think...we're coming to the end of this...but do you two think that given there was such a huge transformation at the beginning of this century, and intellectually a big transformation two centuries ago, do you think what we've got now is the solution , or do you see something equally dramatic happening in the way that children are treated and guided, if you want, or represented in our society?

Christina Hardiment : I've always felt that children, and indeed the whole of society, is very much driven by the inventions we produce, and it was sort of practical changes that made us...do...those things happen, and I think now we're on the brink of the most extraordinary change in the way that our children are living with the fact that they can (indistinct) roam on the internet and ring up their friends, they can drive in cars, they are incredibly mobile, and they are very good at being friends. It's as if they have created a new sort of family round themselves. I think there is a very exciting new shape to the world of the family and the child and we're very much experimenting, but the prospects I think are better than they ever have been.

Theodore Zeldin : Provided they can create their own agenda, I was invited to this Parliament of Children and I noted that they demanded the same sort of things that adults were demanding, and what really concerned them was, what kind of future is awaiting them, and if they can create that future themselves, and if their voice can not just be a request that adults should not just change the world, that they should do something themselves, and I tell them this, and they said "We sort of forgot to say this. But we want to do it ourselves", and the agenda for these parliaments is produced by adults, and much of what the ideas we put, we offer children, are then discussed by them. The next stage is...I hope that they will think for themselves, and we will listen and they will do things for themselves. Children are now almost adults, and we are no longer adults, because we are also children all the time, we never think of ourselves as being complete people.

Melvyn Bragg : So you two think that the old...the idea of the children, father, mother, that, because of the schooling taking so much of their time, as it were, are building up an alternative society through....I'm quite.... I just want you to develop the "friends" idea a bit more.

Christina Hardiment : I think that children do mature very early now, and they have been educated and been given a whole lot of ideas and access to a huge number of ideas, and so it's almost again as if we're returning to the world when there was no difference between the child and the adult, because as soon as a child could earn some money, it was out there being a little adult, and I think children enjoy that. They like work stations more than play stations.

Melvyn Bragg : So we're going back to that? You see us going back to it, rather than going forward to something?

Theodore Zeldin : It's very important...

Christina Hardiment : It's a different way.

Theodore Zeldin : ...that children should participate. They're being segregated..... they've been segregated by these experts, and now it is time that they became part of the world, equal. There are two billion children under 15, one third of the world, and they ought, now, to be considered as capable of having opinions, in the same way as women now have opinions, and everyone else has.

Christina Hardiment : How old d'you think is old enough?

Theodore Zeldin : (long pause) Ten.

Melvyn Bragg : Well people used to go to work before they were ten. So it's rather interesting joining the work force another way, that's a beguiling idea. We might come back to it. Thank you very much Theodore Zeldin, thank you Christina Hardiment, thank you for listening.