Course Overview

The interdisciplinary study of childhood has emerged over the past three decades, primarily as a reaction to the past failure of the social sciences to take seriously the study of children and childhood and leaving the study of children and youth largely to the field of psychology. Some also say that the impetus for what is sometimes called the “new sociology/anthropology of childhood” can be traced to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been adopted by all countries except the United States: ‘The interlocking Articles of the Convention offer children an internationally recognized set of rights that they can hold in independence of the interests and activities of the adults that directly surround them’ (Lee 2001, 92). But whatever the combination of forces was for the burgeoning of this interdisciplinary activity, it has become an important complement to the field of psychology. It often called “critical” childhood study because of a felt need to distance itself from the taken-for-granted, universalizing, views of childhood that have been dominant in the past, through a perspective of critique.

The seminar begins with an introduction to the social construction of childhood and to changing concepts of childhood and adolescence from a variety of historical periods, asking what we mean by “childhood” or “youth” and what is at stake in these definitions? We examine various historical models of childhood and how they survive in different degrees and combinations today, including the romantic child, the sinful child, the sacred child, the child as miniature adult and the developing child. As we do so, we will examine how our shifting—and often contradictory—conceptions of childhood both align and clash with the way children actually live.

We will also look at the ways in which age intersects with other dimensions of social experience: sex/gender, race, class, nation, and religion. In addition, we consider what young people do, how they live their lives and imagine their futures. In doing so we will discuss alternative theories to what has been called the “socialization” of children in order to recognize that children participate actively in society, not only constrained by the existing social structures and processes whereby society is reproduced but also contributing to it and
changing it.

Finally, we will look at some childhood experiences that challenge the historically recent notion of a “protected” and “innocent” childhood, including child labor, child sex, and child criminals. We will examine how different institutions, discourses and systems shape how childhood is experienced: including family, school, media and consumer culture. While attending to the force of structural inequalities in cultural and economic arrangements, we will give equal attention to the methodological strategies used by various researchers and practitioners for working with rather than on or about children.

Learning Goals: Students will learn the following key concepts that undergird critical childhood and youth studies:

1) understanding the construct of childhood, recognizing that across and within societies there is no universal agreement on what constitutes childhood or when it ends.
2) understanding processes of socialization and child development – rather than characterizing children as “incomplete” en route to becoming adults and as objects rather than subjects of adult socialization, critical childhood studies focuses on children as active agents who contribute to and are shaped by social institutions.
3) understanding child-adult relationships as existing within power relations, as one of interdependency and oppression rather than deficiency.
4) Recognizing how important children's rights to have a voice has been for their protection, acknowledging the dangers associated with essentializing and romanticizing children's voice(s).
5) Familiarity with new methods that enable children to inform adults about their lives and that minimize adult “voicing over” children's experiences and perspectives.

Course Requirements

1. Readings: The class schedule lists when each reading is due. All papers and chapters listed in the syllabus are available on the CUNY Commons website. The books are available from the Reference desk of the Graduate Center Library

2. Assignments:

   -- Facilitating a Class Discussion: The course will be run as a seminar with everyone required to periodically structure or co-structure discussions of the week's readings. This involves: locating yourself as a reader of the text(s) and generating questions to promote discussion in the seminar. These should be posted on the course blog at least two days before the class meets.

   -- Final Project: The final project may take the form of a written document or a digital/multi-media format. There will also be small products required along the way to help scaffold your project. The final project can take the form of a paper that involves
original research, it can be a review essay discussing and analyzing literature (over time) on a particular topic (this would be good practice for writing an engaging literature review), or it could, for example, be a critical review of media dialogs regarding an issue of current debate regarding children or childhood. If you have easy access to children, you might even want to use the seminar to keep a log of your observations (and perhaps copies of materials produced by the children) related to a theme of your interest. Collaborative work is encouraged. In addition to the topic itself, your project should include a discussion of the particular social construction of childhood adopted by those who have studied your chosen topic. Two assignments will build towards your final project:

1. Short statement of purpose: This includes a statement of your topic, its significance, your goals; intended audience; and what form your project will take: e.g. a website, video, literature review, original research paper. Due on September 25.

2. A draft of your method, process or research design for gathering source material, and how you will work with this material. Due Oct. 16

4. The final project must be handed in on December 18

3. Learning Goals:

Students will have gained familiarity with the basic tenets of a critical childhood studies approach as evidenced in their analysis of course texts; and as evidenced by their awareness of, support for and engagement in efforts to ensure children's rights.

4. Assessment of learning:

Students will demonstrate their grasp of five basic tenets of critical childhood and youth studies identified above through the following:

A. Seminar discussion and weekly comments and questions, written in brief, related to your readings on the seminar blog of CUNY Commons
B. Blog posts regarding your structuring of seminar discussions related to the weekly readings.
C. A final project that successfully applies elements of a critical childhood perspective, and a short presentation of this in one of the closing two sessions of the seminar.
Course Schedule

Useful Background Readings:


James, A. And James, A. (2012). Key Concepts in Childhood Studies


August 26  Introductions

- Round-table brief introductions
- What happened to childhood in 2020 in the USA?

September 2  The Social Construction of Childhood
Introduction to the history of the study of children and youth and childhood and the emergence of interdisciplinary child and youth studies.

**Background Reading:**


**Required reading, for open discussion:**


**Student-led discussions:**


**September 9th**

The movement for children’s rights

*A short statement of purpose of your project is due*

**Background reading:**

*The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

http://www.unicef.org/crc/


**Student-led discussion:**


**September 16th**

**The Challenges of Researching Children's Perspectives**

**Background reading:**


**Student-led discussion:**

Lico & Luttrell, *An Important Part of Me: A Dialogue about Difference*


### September 23rd

**Ethnography and the Study of Peer Culture**

**Background reading:**

Mandell, “The Least-Adult Role in Studying Children

Corsaro, W. (2104) Children’s Peer Cultures and Interpretive Reproduction. Ch. 6 of *The Sociology of Childhood*, 4th edition:


**Student-led discussion:**


### September 30th

**Childhoods through the lens of literature**

Due today: A draft of your method, process or research design for gathering source material, and how you will work with this material

**Background reading:**

Flynn, R. The Intersection of Children’s Literature and Childhood
Studies. *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly,* Volume 22, Number 3, Fall 1997, pp. 143-145


**Student-led discussion:**


**October 7th**

**Unequal Childhod in the USA**

**Background reading:**

Bernstein, R. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (Intro chapter and Chapter 2 On “Scripting Things” is on the Commons site and the full book is on reserve in the Grad Center library.

**Student-led discussion:**


Pugh, A.J. (2011). Distinction, boundaries or bridges?: Children, inequality and the uses of consumer culture
October 14th

Parenting and Caregiving

*Background reading:*


*Student-led discussion:*


Wrigley, Julia Do Young Children Need Intellectual Stimulation? Experts' Advice to Parents, 1900-1985

Source: *History of Education Quarterly,* Vol. 29, No. 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 41-75 Published by: *History of Education Society*


October 21st

Play


*NPR podcast_ Kids-these-days-growing-up-too-fast-or-never-at-all?* Atlantic magazine:

[http://www.npr.org/2014/03/20/31922339/kids-these-days-growing-up-too-fast-or-never-at-all](http://www.npr.org/2014/03/20/31922339/kids-these-days-growing-up-too-fast-or-never-at-all)
If you have the time, you can also look at this book in our Reference Selection of the Library:

October 28th

**Work**

*Background Reading:*

Liebel (2004) Introduction and Chapter One of *A will of their own: Cross-cultural perspectives on working children*

*Student-led discussion:*


Liebel (2004). The Working Child has a Will of its Own: Subject-Oriented and Participative Research on Children’s Work in Latin America. In *November 11th*

November 4th

**Violence towards children**

*Background Reading:*

Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children
*http://www.end-violence.org/*

*Student Lead Discussion:*


**November 11th**  
**Children and New Technology**


**November 25th**  
**No class**

**December 2nd**  
**Discussion of personal projects**

**December 9th**  
**Discussion of personal projects**

**December 16th**  
**Discussion of personal projects**

**Final Projects Due: Dec 18**

**Final Grade Submission: December 30th**