

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Joseph E. Illick. *American Childhoods*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. xi + 218 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-1807-7.

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## Changing Childhoods

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In this short, ambitious book, Joseph E. Illick tackles a broad topic: how children of both genders and various economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds have grown to maturity between the seventeenth-century and the present in the United States. Perhaps the greatest strength of this book is that Illick, both in the title and the organization of the book, makes clear that there have been many ways of growing up in American history, or there have been various childhoods.

The book is organized both topically and chronologically. Illick begins with an examination of "Early America," which includes chapters on American Indian, European-American, and African-American childhoods. In the second section of the book, "Industrial America," he switches to a geographical and class-based organization with chapters on urban middle-class and working-class childhoods. In the final section entitled "Modern America," Illick continues the focus of the second section with two chapters: one on suburban (i.e. middle-class) and the other on inner-city and rural (i.e. lower-class) childhoods.

Each chapter in the book begins with a short profile of a real youngster who typifies the experience of youngsters of his or her racial, ethnic, or class background and time period (only one of the seven examples is of a female child). These examples provide an engaging and interesting way to introduce each chapter. Interestingly, Illick uses himself as the example to introduce the chapter on post-World War II suburban childhood.

In the first chapter on American Indian childhood, Illick deals briefly with various tribes of Native Americans, their goals and methods of child rearing. He begins the chapter with the earliest European descriptions of Native American children, glosses over the nineteenth century and concludes with a one-page description of Na-

tive Americans from World War II to the present. There is only one brief mention of boarding schools for Native Americans, which is unusual given Illick's attention to education in other chapters and the current interest of historians on the topic.[1]

The second chapter on European Americans extends from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century. It includes discussion of child rearing practices in the early Chesapeake and in New England as well as on the western frontier. The final chapter in this first section of the book covers African-American children from slavery through the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In it, Illick includes a valuable discussion of how many whites both before and after the Civil War perceived all blacks as essentially child-like, and how African-American young people confounded that perception with their political actions that helped bring about both desegregation and voting rights in the 1960s.

In the second section of the book, on the industrial era, both chapters are longer and more detailed than any of the previous three, probably because there is more secondary material on middle-class and working-class childhoods in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these chapters, Illick discusses not only child rearing practices, but also toys, schooling, health and employment issues. In the chapter on working-class youngsters, he also pays attention to child rearing among various ethnic groups.

The final section of the book carries the story of American children to the present day. In the chapter on suburban or middle-class childhood, Illick discusses at some length changing child-rearing advice from John B. Watson through Benjamin Spock. He also emphasizes that economic prosperity after World War II allowed many children to have longer and more protected childhoods. Yet these same youngsters also spent more time in school where they experienced considerable peer pres-

sure and remained “financially dependent while becoming physiologically mature” (p. 130). Of course, not all children benefited from post-World War II prosperity. In the chapter entitled “Inner City and Rural Childhoods,” Illick makes a strong case for the continued importance (from World War II to the present) of social class in determining the experience of growing up in the United States. He discusses the economic deprivation and welfare practices that have contributed to the growth of female-headed households, the unfriendliness of schools to inner-city youngsters as well as the high incidence of corporal punishment, child abuse, and youthful gang violence among inner-city families.

In this book, Illick provides readers with a useful introduction to a wide range of topics in the history of American childhood. He seeks to explain how parents of various backgrounds in various time periods have tried to raise their children to become autonomous adults. In the process, he emphasizes both history and psychology. Readers should be cautioned, however, that the book is short in length and short on detail. The footnotes are excellent, and readers who want more specific information on American childhoods should pay close attention to them. Throughout, Illick’s evidence is largely of adult attitudes and behavior toward children. He argues that “children have left almost no records of their childhoods”

(p. xi), a statement that is open to question given the excellent work of historian Harvey Graff.[2] Illick’s book is a fine introduction to the changing childhoods of American youngsters, and it serves as a challenge to future historians to find more primary accounts of growing up by children themselves and utilize them to broaden and extend the history of children in the United States.

Notes:

[1]. David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Delores J. Huff, *To Live Heroically: Institutional Racism and American Indian Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997); James T. Carroll, *Seeds of Faith: Catholic Indian Boarding Schools* (New York: Garland Publishers, 2000); Brenda J. Childs, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Clyde Ellis, *To Change Them Forever: Indian Education at the Rainy Mountain Boarding School, 1893-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996); and, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

[2]. *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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