

CHILDREN'S LIVES AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The dawn of the twentieth century was a time of great change in the United States, and many of those changes can be seen in the lives of the nation's children—how they worked, played, learned, and made sense of the world.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1900, the U.S. was a diverse nation, and its children lived in a wide range of circumstances—different geographic settings, economic backgrounds, and family structures. The country was experiencing tremendous growth, and more and more families were living in cities, although a majority of Americans lived in the country until 1920. Many children lived in terrible poverty, while others were part of a growing middle class. At the same time, a great increase in immigration brought children from all over the globe, but especially from southern and eastern Europe, into the American experience.

Chores and Work

Rural children often worked on their family's farms, helping with the endless tasks that were completed using human and animal power. Many children in cities and towns also worked—in mines, in factories, and on the streets (selling newspapers and food, shining shoes). Concerns over child labor found



At the Seashore
<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a10744>

support among the Progressives—the growing number of people who believed government should take an active role in solving social and economic problems of society.

In 1904 the National Child Labor Committee was formed to advocate for children in the work force. In the next few years, the federal government passed several laws to try to regulate child labor, but the Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional. Not until 1938 did the federal government successfully regulate the minimum age of employment and hours of work for children.

School

The turn of the twentieth century also saw great changes in the education available to children around the nation. In the late 1800s, public schools were becoming more numerous, and states were beginning to require school attendance. By 1920, all the states required students aged 8 to 14 to attend

school for part of the year; in rural areas, the school year was somewhat shorter because young people were still needed to work on the farm. Rural areas made the one-room schoolhouse famous—all the grades studied together in a single room, and were taught by one teacher. In urban areas, of course, schools were larger and students worked in separate classrooms according to their grade level.



School house in Kirkland, Georgia
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004000346/PP/>

Students today would be surprised at the sparseness of the classrooms 100 years ago—there were many fewer books and what we today consider “school supplies.” Rather than markers, scissors, glue sticks, paper, computers, and more, students in the early twentieth century probably had only a slate and chalk. Discipline could be rather strict, and learning was frequently by rote memorization. There was no school lunch program; instead, students carried their lunch to school, often in a metal pail.

Fun

Children at the turn of the twentieth century loved to play as much as children today do, and many



City children
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003656220/>

of the favorite games of a hundred years ago are still popular today. However, the places in which children played and the toys they had at their disposal changed greatly.

Parks and playgrounds were built in unprecedented numbers around the turn of the century,

partly as a result of the Progressive and conservation movements. New organizations such as the YMCA and the Boy Scouts sprang up, aiming to provide urban youth with exercise and character-building experience.

Factory-made toys were uncommon in the nineteenth century—most toys were either home-made or fairly simple. Early in the twentieth century, though, as the nation became more industrialized, toys began to be manufactured on a large scale. The first two decades of the century saw the introduction of many classic toys, including the Lionel Train (1901), Crayola Crayons (1903), and Lincoln Logs (1916). New design improvements in the 1880s and 1890s



Messenger boy and bike
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002699100/>

made bicycles safer, and bikes and tricycles came into children’s hands in much greater numbers, providing countless children with the tools to explore the changing world around them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Work with students to look for details in the photos that give insight into life 100 years ago. Have students look at a photograph for 30 seconds and memorize any details they see. After students share what they noticed in the photograph, have the students take a second look. Focus their attention on a particular feature, such as the physical surroundings, the clothes people are wearing, or objects in the picture. Help students identify objects that aren't familiar to them.



New York City school children
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2006675675/>

Study several pictures and help students organize observations into different categories (clothing, objects, etc.).

Help students reflect on their observations by asking: How are the children in the pictures similar to and different from you and your friends? What do we know about children 100 years ago based on this picture? Students may use their observations about life 100 years ago to draw pictures that compare the photographed events to how a picture of children doing a similar activity today might look.

Have students choose an activity they do regularly, and, based on their observations, have students think about how the activity would have been different 100 years ago. Have students work in groups to write a skit showing this activity being performed 100 years ago. Students may design props and act out the skits for their classmates. Do their classmates agree with how the activity would have changed?

Observe selections from the Children's Object Book and pictures of children's homes. Discuss what students notice about the homes of children 100 years ago. Compare and contrast the objects in the book to the common features found in modern homes. What is the same? What has changed? What is missing? (You may conduct a similar analysis using the photographs of classrooms.) Encourage students to create shoe-box dioramas that depict homes or schools of 100 years ago.



A Pupil in Pleasant Green School,
West Virginia
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004005117/PP/>

The set includes photographs of children at work. Help students think about their own work experiences by asking how many of them have paying jobs and how many do chores at home. Show the pictures of children at work and ask them what clues the pictures offer to help them decide whether these children were doing paying jobs or chores at home. As a class, discuss why children might have worked 100 years ago.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/touring/index.html>



Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862-1912

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html>



Photographs from the Chicago Daily News, 1902-1933

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpcoop/ichihtml/cdnhome.html>



The South Texas Border, 1900-1920

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/runyon/index.html>



The Emergence of Advertising in America: 1850-1920

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/advertising/>

PRIMARY SOURCES WITH CITATIONS



"At the Seashore." Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Company, between 1900 and 1906. From Library of Congress: *Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920*.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a10744>



"Girls' Playground, Harriet Island, St. Paul, Minn." Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c1905. From Library of Congress: *Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920*.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a12326>



"Just Kids." Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., c1904. From Library of Congress: *Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920.*

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a05674>



Singer, Jasper H., copyright claimant. *The road to Washington*. Print. c1884. From Library of Congress: *Popular Graphic Arts.*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009633815/>



Abadie, A.C., photographer. *Annual Baby Parade, 1904, Asbury Park, N.J.* United States: Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1904. From Library of Congress: *America at Work, America at Leisure: Motion Pictures from 1894-1915.*

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mbrsmi/awal.4183>



The Children's Object Book. Book. London and New York: Frederick Warne & Co., 188?. From Library of Congress: *Rare Book and Special Collections Division.*

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/juv.48867>



Butcher, Solomon D., photographer. "[Sylvester Rawding family in front of sod house, north of Sargent, Custer County, Nebraska]." Photograph. Sargent, NE: 1886. From Library of Congress: *Prints and Photographs Division.*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005693378/>



Hine, Lewis Wickes, photographer. "[Tenement house with children in front. Possibly 36 Laight St.]" Photograph. New York, NY: 1910. From Library of Congress: *National Child Labor Committee Collection.*

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004001940/PP/>



Johnston, Frances Benjamin, photographer. "Elementary School Children Standing and Watching Teacher Write at Blackboard, Washington, D.C." Photograph. Washington, D.C.: Frances Benjamin Johnston School Survey, 1899. From Library of Congress: *Francis Benjamin Johnston Collection.*

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b36952>



Johnston, Frances Benjamin, photographer. "[Washington, D.C. Public Schools - classroom scenes and school activities]." Photograph. Washington, D.C.: Frances Benjamin Johnston School Survey, 1899. From Library of Congress: *Francis Benjamin Johnston Collection*.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2001703644/>



Berliner, Emile, author. *Muddy Jim and Other Rhymes: 12 Illustrated Health Jingles for Children*. Picture book. Washington, D.C.: Jim Publication Company, 1919. From Library of Congress: *Emile Berliner and the Birth of the Recording Industry*.

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/berl:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(berl+04010600\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/berl:@field(NUMBER+@band(berl+04010600)))



"[Children posed with bicycle and tricycles]." Photograph. Detroit Publishing Co., 1919. From Library of Congress: *Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection*.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/det/item/det1994022193/PP/>



Hine, Lewis W., photographer. "[Series showing the day's work of Estelle and Felix Humphrey. See card reports of same. L.W. Hine] Location:[Elizabethtown vicinity, Kentucky]."

Photograph. May 1916. From Library of Congress: *Prints and Photographs Online Catalog*.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004004322/PP/>



Hine, Lewis Wickes, photographer. "High up on the top floor of a rickety tenement..." Photograph. New York, NY: 1912. From Library of Congress: *National Child Labor Committee Collection*.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004003079/PP/>



"Breaker Boys, Woodward Coal Mines, Kingston, Pa." Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Publishing Co., ca. 1900. From Library of Congress: *Touring Turn-of-the-Century America: Photographs from the Detroit Publishing Company, 1880-1920*.

<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/det.4a07285>



Hines, Lewis Wickes, photographer. "Salvin Nocito, 5 years old, carries 2 pecks of cranberries for long distance to the 'bushel-man.'" Photograph. Browns Mills, NJ: 1910. From Library of Congress: *National Child Labor Committee Collection*.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ncl2004000511/PP/>