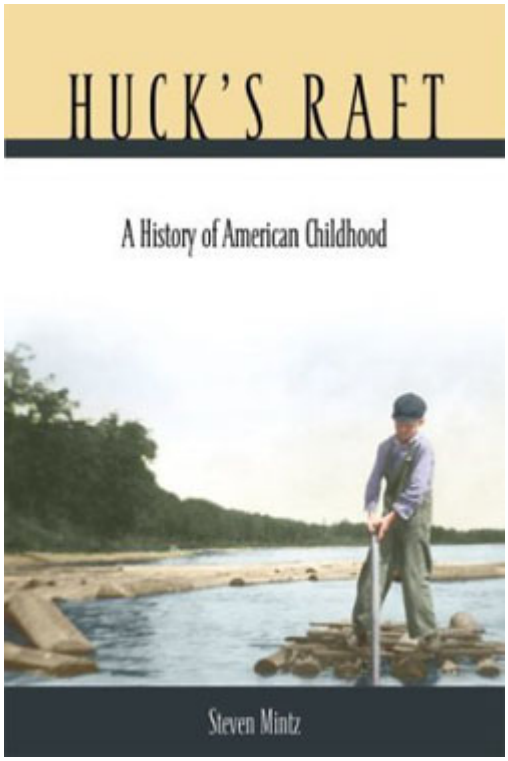
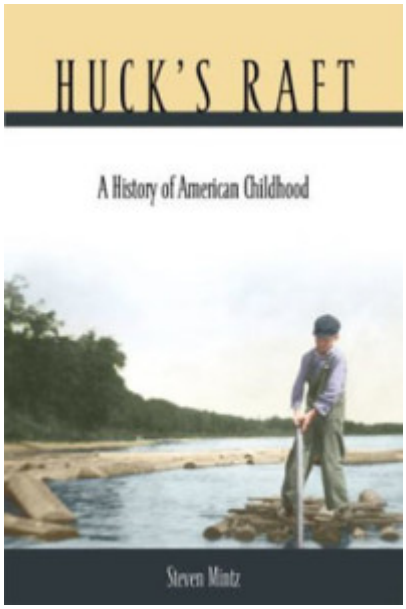
Childhood Then and Now



What is the meaning of childhood, who is a child, and who decides? Does childhood have a history? And, if so, what does that history have to tell us? These are a few of the questions that drive the comprehensive and skillfully written *Huck's Raft*, a new synthesis of the history of American childhood from the colonial era to the twenty-first century by one of the premier historians in the fields of children's and family history. Steven Mintz has managed a very difficult task with grace and aplomb. *Huck's Raft* is a book for many occasions, one that deserves a wide readership among students, history scholars, and child advocates.



Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood

The title sets the tone for this book. Mark Twain's rambunctious lad symbolizes for many the innocence of past childhoods. This nostalgic belief that American youngsters once upon a time had a carefree life is, Mintz argues, one of the myths Americans hold about the history of childhood. A better metaphor for the history of children and youth is the perilousness of Huck's journey on the raft. Or, as Mintz puts it, "There has never been a time when the overwhelming majority of American children were well cared for and their experiences idyllic. Nor has childhood ever been an age of innocence, at least not for most children" (vii).

Mintz deftly tells the stories of both groups of children, those well cared for as well as the majority who were not. Indeed, the stories reveal that there were many different childhoods in the past, and they draw attention to the familiar inequities of race and gender, as well as ethnic and regional divisions. In *Huck's Raft,* childhood is "not an unchanging biological stage of life but is, rather, a social and cultural construct that has changed radically over time" (viii). The biological facts of child development provide continuity to the history of childhood, but in every era, as Mintz shows by marshalling the works of myriad historians, biology has been "modified by history and mediated by culture" (4). Children, like their parents, lived lives constrained by the social, political, and economic context.

Of all the perils children have encountered on the metaphorical raft, however, Mintz believes that class differences have had the greatest impact on the meanings and the experiences of childhood. Different socioeconomic settings led parents to different views on the nature of childhood and the place of children in the family. By determining a child's educational opportunities, playtime activities, and participation in the work force, class differences shaped different paths to adulthood.

Despite the fundamental role he attributes to broad social and economic forces,

Mintz also wants us to recognize that children have helped to make our history. Historians are not accustomed to thinking of children as historical actors, yet this perspective has been one of the principal contributions to the discipline from those who study past childhoods. By mining the existing literature, Mintz is able to mark the times when the beliefs and actions of young people helped to make history.

In *Huck's Raft,* the history of childhood is periodized as three broad and overlapping chronological eras. The eras of premodern, modern, and postmodern childhood correspond loosely to the colonial years, the mid-eighteenth century through most of twentieth, and the 1980s to the present. As the author says, each period is "characterized by strikingly different and diverse childhoods" (3). Within each era, however, Mintz takes middle-class childhood as a norm against which other (read: poor, dependent, or racial) childhoods are measured and evaluated.

Readers of *Common-place* will be most interested, perhaps, in Mintz's account of colonial, or premodern childhood, in part because Mintz believes the relationships between colonial youths and their elders have much to tell us about the problems facing young people today. Colonial historians have determined that Puritan colonists conceptualized their children as adults in training, with deficiencies of skill and character that proper child rearing would overcome. Adults assumed they had much to teach young people and they hurried the integration of children into adult society through formal apprenticeship and domestic chores. For all the attention to the young, Puritans did not sentimentalize childhood. Rather, the religious sect believed that children were "riddled with corruption" (11), that it was the duty of adults to reform the child, and that the moral development of children was a responsibility of the entire community, not just the parents (a belief that led to support, in theory if not always in fact, for public education).

In discussing the premodern era, Mintz shows how gender, race, and regional differences resulted in different childhood experiences for colonial youths. Boys and girls were trained for the separate duties and tasks required in the gendered world of their day. White children found that childhood among the Indians was often much freer and less filled with drudgery (attested to by the stories of captured children who refused to return to their parents). English children in the Chesapeake colonies grew to adulthood (if they did not die young) along a different path than the one followed in Puritan communities. In part, the disparity emerged because the Chesapeake was a less religious culture (leading parents in this region to place less emphasis on shaping a child's conscience). Perhaps a more significant contrast was the frequency with which children became orphans in the southern colonies, because these areas experienced a much higher overall death rate than New England.

Regional dissimilarities point to the importance of demography and the role of birthrates, disease, and death in the history of children and youth, issues Mintz returns to and develops in his discussions of other groups and other

historical eras. Throughout the book, Mintz underscores the difficulty historians have reconstructing the past of a seemingly voiceless and powerless group, and he makes note of the creative sources used by the historians of childhood. Accounts of antebellum slave childhood, for example, rely on evidence of physical health to gauge the horrors of slavery for the young. Here, as Mintz reports, historians have made use of mortality tables, nutrition studies, and evidence collected from graveyard remains to document the poor physical condition of slave children.

Historians of antebellum middle-class childhood, in contrast, are more likely to examine their subject using psychological determinants. Mintz does not neglect the devastating effects of disease on infant and child mortality rates among all groups throughout the nineteenth century. However, he is more interested in the new emotionality characteristic of the early-nineteenth-century middle-class family. These families, Mintz explains, “invented” modern childhood as one that was sentimentalized and sheltered (76).

The antebellum creators of modern childhood drew on the antiauthoritarian ideals of the American Revolution that encouraged youthful autonomy, on Enlightenment ideas about the malleability of the child’s character, and on Romantic and religious notions of childhood innocence. It was, however, the falling birth rate and the economic comfort of the middle class that in the end allowed for the emergence of the emotionally intense family in which mothers assumed responsibility for child rearing. In this environment, childhood was supposed to be a period of freedom from labor and a time of extended formal education.

It is ironic, as Mintz points out, that this sentimental view of a sheltered childhood that “freed middle-class children from work and allowed them to devote their childhood years to education also made the labor of poor children more essential to their family’s well-being than in the past, and greatly increased the exploitation these children suffered” (92). It took over a century, or until the 1950s, before most children in the United States could be considered living a modern childhood, and even then, when baby boomers remember their innocent and carefree childhoods, their nostalgia bears little resemblance to reality. As individual chapters in the book demonstrate, the lag was due to slavery and racism, to immigration, and to the exigencies of industrial capitalism.

Yet, the same ideas that made it difficult for many families to adopt the trappings of modern childhood also spurred reformers to try to “save” dependent, delinquent, and destitute youngsters. Mintz shows how the invention of the modern child generated an awareness of child abuse, a demand for compulsory education, an end to child labor, and the need for economic assistance for children living in poverty. Clearly the history of childhood has much to contribute to our understanding of the growth of institutional bureaucracy and the rise of the welfare state. The invention of the modern child also resulted in the development of the many child sciences, for the

clinical and experimental study and treatment of youth, and as a consequence, the relinquishing of a degree of parental authority to these experts.

Another irony of modern childhood is the youthful autonomy fostered by the intense adult interest in providing a sheltered childhood. Segregated in their own spaces,from special nurseries at home to age-graded classrooms at school,and provided with age-appropriate activities, young people developed their own culture, separate from that of adults and seemingly outside their control. The consumer economy of the twentieth century contributed to this autonomy. This, however, is a tale with more irony; the sellers who found a lucrative market among independent youths also provided a degree of informal regulation as their products constrained autonomous decisions and fueled conformity.

Mintz devotes most of the book's chapters to the history of the modern child. As he moves the discussion on to the postmodern child, past the "youthquake" of the 1960s, the children's rights revolution of the 1970s, and the moral panics of the 1980s and 1990s (over, for example, stranger abductions and abuse at day care centers), he shifts the focus from historical narrative to social commentary. Mintz wants to challenge today's adults to create a childhood that reflects the realities of our children's lives, and he draws his message directly from the history of children and youth. "Superficially," Mintz writes, "postmodern childhood resembles premodern childhood" (4). Today's children are in many ways "little adults." Physiologically mature at an earlier age and initiated earlier into consumer culture, sexual experimentation, and the "realities of the adult world" (4), today's children are forced to make adultlike decisions. Yet, thanks to the inventors of modern childhood, we postmodern adults continue to think of the young as fundamentally different from us, so we have not provided our young with the skills they need for the process. Instead, we have institutionalized childhood in schools, in after-school jobs, and in opportunities for recreation, and as a consequence, our children spend much more of their time with people of the same age. Ours is a society, Mintz explains, that isolates and juvenilizes young people more than ever before; they spend much less time with adults who can model and explain the "realities" to them. "Our challenge," he concludes, "is to reverse the process of age segmentation" (383). "Since we cannot insulate children from all malign influences, it is essential that we prepare them to deal responsibly with the pressures and choices they face," and that means they need knowledge, not sheltering (382). A post-postmodern childhood must address this need; the history of premodern childhood provides a guide. It shows us that when children face adultlike realities, child rearing must involve the community as a whole; it must not be left up to individual parents.

This is a big book, making it easy to quibble about what has been included and what has been slighted. Stanley Fish has just recently informed us that religion will be the next category of analysis to shape historical research, and it would be interesting to see a comprehensive history of childhood that stressed this difference along with class, race, and gender. Then too, in his

emphasis on the social construction of childhood, one wonders if, perhaps, Mintz has swung the pendulum too far, dismissed too often the biological continuities in the history of childhood as he highlights the significant differences grounded in time and place. However, these are minor quibbles when set against the powerful argument supported throughout the book. The message of *Huck's Raft* is one postmodern parents, child advocates, and historians would be wise to take under advisement.

Further Reading:

For Stanley Fish's argument about religion, see "One University, Under God?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51:18 (January 7, 2005), C1.

This article originally appeared in issue 5.3 (April, 2005).

Kathleen W. Jones is an associate professor of history at Virginia Tech and author of *Taming the Troublesome Child: American Families, Child Guidance, and the Limits of Psychiatric Authority* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).