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Understanding children and childhood

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Understanding Children and Childhood

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For further details and a list of Virginia’s publications, visit [http://www.ioe.ac.uk/staff/ECPE/ECPE_56.html](http://www.ioe.ac.uk/staff/ECPE/ECPE_56.html)

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Inviting your Critical Engagement

Photos used throughout this publication are sourced from Shutterstock (http://www.shutterstock.com). They have been selected to highlight the diversity of ways in which children and childhood can be represented.

We encourage you to engage critically with these images as you reflect on the idea that 'childhood' is socially constructed. Ask yourself, ‘What message about children or childhood is being conveyed through this image?’ ‘How do these images challenge my understandings of children and childhood’?
Introduction

Children and young people have become the focus of much attention in recent years. A number of developments have contributed to this increased focus, one of the most important being the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We will read a little more about UNCRC later in this paper.

The past two decades have seen an increasing recognition of the importance of childhood as a stage in the life course that affects later adulthood. There have also been waves of concern expressed in Western countries about the effects of rapid social change and new technologies on children’s lives. On the one hand, childhood might be viewed as lasting longer and longer as children are expected to stay on in education for increasing periods - into their 20s. On the other hand, some commentators talk of childhood ‘disappearing’ (Postman, 1982).

Discussions about children and childhood are often emotive and raise difficult questions and challenges. We all think we know about childhood, whether we are parents of children or whether we remember our own childhood experiences. In this sense we all have our own theories and constructions of children and childhood.

A range of academic disciplines have also had plenty to say about children and childhood, including psychology, anthropology, history, sociology, and social geography. Each of these disciplines presents differing, sometimes even conflicting, perspectives.

I, for instance, am writing this Background Briefing from the point of view of a sociologist.

My PhD research was about English secondary school children’s work, broadly defined (their part-time jobs, marginal economic activities, working in family businesses and domestic chores at home). At the time I started, 20 years ago, there was very little sociological research that took children’s activities seriously in the here-and-now and as economically significant, (as opposed to exploring the possible effects that working had on children’s socialisation), so I began to try to 'think sociologically' about children’s roles in society, and to engage with the differing ways in which childhood is conceptualised and understood.

How do we make sense of these differing approaches and claims about childhood, particularly when these change and shift over time?

This Background Briefing paper will introduce you to some of these ideas, explore why they matter and how they are relevant to our personal and professional interactions with children and young people.

It will help you understand the interdisciplinary approach to the study of children and young people which has come to be known as ‘Childhood Studies’ (or perhaps more accurately ‘Childhood and Youth Studies’). Childhood Studies, in our context, embraces children and young people aged 0-18 (and sometimes into their early 20s).
What is childhood?

How we think about and understand children and childhood matters enormously because our views, theories and ideas affect how societies treat and engage with children in everyday life and practice.

Yet, what is childhood?

The language we use is important here. A dictionary definition of ‘child’ is illuminating. If we take (for example) Chambers Concise 20th Century Dictionary, the definition begins with an explanation of ‘child’ as ‘a very young person (up to the age of 16 for the purposes of some acts of parliament, under 14 in criminal law...)’. This implies that the term ‘child’ carries specific legal implications.

The dictionary definition continues by elaborating that a child is ‘a son or daughter: one standing in a relationship of adoption or origin (to a person, place, etc)’. So the key point here is that childhood is relational – about relationships, and how people, both adults and children, are connected to each other through family ties.

Further definitions include: disciple, offspring, descendants, inhabitants. Childhood is the ‘state of being a child: the time of being a child’. ‘Childish’ is of, or like a child: ‘silly; trifling’. Being childlike is defined as ‘docile’ and ‘innocent’.

We sometimes call children ‘kids’, but in the UK at any rate, many children dislike this term and its use is discouraged - after all, it means ‘young goats’! However some young people may also dislike being called ‘children’ or ‘youth’ too.

For most of the 19th and first half of the 20th century, being a child in Australia and the UK was defined in relation to the age at which children left school. This meant that the notion of ‘child’ was flexible as the school leaving age gradually increased over time.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) defines ‘child’ as all those under the age of 18 years, but people often overlook the latter part of UNCRC’s Article 1 - ‘a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier’. This means that in countries where marriage implies the age of majority (adulthood), childhood technically ends when a person marries. In some countries boys and girls can marry at different ages; for example, in Vietnam the age for girls is 18 (although for boys it is 20), while in South Africa and Chile girls can marry at 12 and boys at 14 (Melchiorre, 2004).
Acknowledging diverse childhoods

How childhood is lived and experienced will obviously differ from place to place. Perhaps the starkest contrast might be the supposedly comfortable consumption-rich childhoods of developed Western countries with the (at times) poverty-stricken childhoods experienced in many developing countries.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this dichotomy is immensely simplistic and problematic. There are many marginalised and poor children in rich countries, and while poverty-stricken children may appear to lack a great deal, they may have attributes and resources (such as spirituality and close family ties) that may not be acknowledged in traditional objective measurements.

Research into child poverty, for example, provides an interesting example of how our understandings are changing as we begin to listen more to the views of children and young people. Traditionally, much of the research we have conducted and consumed as a society has been quantitative (that based on analysis of statistics). For example, we have been concerned about the number of children living below established ‘poverty lines’, or the number of children ‘participating’ in school (generally measured by the number enrolled rather than those consistently attending or completing).

This type of research, while very important, has only provided us with part of the ‘picture’ of the experience of poverty.

Qualitative research, and more importantly, research that is conducted with children and young people, can provide quite a different perspective. Research on children’s perspectives of economic adversity (in both developed and developing countries), highlights that children are not so concerned about their lack of resources, per se, but exclusion from activities that other children take for granted, together with embarrassment and shame about not being able to participate on equal terms with other children (Wordsworth, McPeak, & Feeny, 2005; Redmond, 2008).

Illustrating the potential value of such research, one study (Wordsworth, McPeak, & Feeny, 2005), which involved extensive consultation with children, has led to the development of alternative approaches to program design and evaluation in the community development sector and the approach is now used in a number of child-focused non-government organisations (NGOs). This research identified that children experience poverty in three interrelated domains (or DEV dimensions): Deprivation (lack of essential material conditions and services); Exclusion (on the basis of age, gender, class, caste etc); and Vulnerability (with regard the changing array of threats in their environments).

Childhood Studies, which we will learn more about in this Background Briefing, would suggest that we need to respect the dignity and self-worth of all children, and try to understand their lives from their own viewpoints, without judgement. Childhood Studies reminds us that childhood is not the same for all children and ‘idealised’ notions of childhood may be inappropriate and/or unrealistic. So, it makes sense to speak of a diversity of children’s experiences rather than a single universal phenomenon of ‘childhood’.
Changing ideas about children and childhood

How were children understood in the past? How has childhood changed?

The French social historian, Phillipe Ariès (1979, p.128), made the famous (and controversial) claim that ‘in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist: this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised’. Note his emphasis on ‘the idea’ of childhood.

What Ariès meant here is that childhood is socially constructed, in that childhood has different meanings, and children have different roles and undertake different activities in different historical periods and in different cultures.

Ariès argued that children existed alongside adults, and once they were past infancy, they participated in the life of the communities around them, working (and playing) with adults, with no distinctive practices (or clothes) focused on them as children.

Gradually, bourgeois (middle-class) boys were singled out for special treatment in the form of education, and this was eventually, over the course of two or three centuries, extended to middle-class girls, then to working class children.

So, for example, during certain periods of history, children were expected to work, firstly with their families, and then as wage labourers, in order that they and their families could survive. This is still, of course, the case in many developing nations.

What is a ‘social construction’?

Throughout this document we will be referring to the idea of ‘constructions’ or ‘social constructions’.

A social construction might be defined as ‘a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which “reality” is negotiated in everyday life through people’s interactions and through sets of discourses’ (James & James, 2008, p.122). In other words, it relates to the idea that different ‘realities’ arise from the interactions people have with each other and their environment (James & James, 2008). In this sense, sociological theory argues that ‘reality’ is socially constructed.

The idea that individuals are involved in ongoing ‘making’ of everyday life and meanings through their actions is the core idea underpinning a school of thought referred to as ‘symbolic-interactionism’.

A range of other ideas that we, perhaps, take for granted can also be seen as social constructions – ideas such as ‘adolescent’ or ‘generation’, which we explore later in this document.

In thinking about the ways in which childhood is socially constructed, as well as culturally and historically situated, look again at the various photo images we are using in this Background Briefing paper. In what ways do such images reflect a particular construction of childhood? How do these images influence your constructions of childhood? In what ways are children’s lives being portrayed here? What other images of childhood might subtly influence interactions with children and young people in your particular profession?
The classic work of Viviana Zelizer (1985) explored the shifting meaning of childhood in the USA, showing how children gradually became ‘economically useless’ as they no longer undertook wage labour, instead they became ‘emotionally priceless’, giving meaning to their parents’ lives.

Nowadays, however, industrialised Western societies demand schoolwork from children in order to prepare them as future members of the labour force, and this is increasingly the case globally. Children’s daily lives have become structured around school and formal learning, and while a large proportion of older children may have part-time jobs, their main activity is to attend school and be educated.

In many Western countries, children and young people’s competence (their capacity to do something) is very often 'measured' by their educational attainment. Furthermore, ideas of ‘competence’ are generally based on adult criteria and thus children are often understood as being non-competent (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998).

Thus, to a large extent, Western society, and in particular its social policies, tends to focus on what children will become, rather than children’s being – in other words, the focus is on what they will become in the future rather than the here-and-now of childhood, and their everyday lives as children.

In many majority world (developing) countries, however, children’s roles are very different. Because of the more crucial importance of children’s labour to many household economies, children are involved in various forms of production. Girls often play a central role in domestic labour and sibling care-taking. Children take on considerable responsibilities, and see this as part of their obligations to their families.

Hence, in some countries, child labour is prevalent and, for many children, education has to fit around work commitments. This contrasts with the developed West, where children’s work has to fit around their education commitments. The priorities for children are different, and thus their ‘childhoods’ are different.

The age at which societies consider it ‘acceptable’ for females to enter motherhood provides another example of how constructions of childhood change over time and between different cultural contexts. In the 19th century, it was not only normal but also expected for women to marry and have their babies young. For example, my great, great grandmother was 15 when she had her first child. She was working as a domestic servant in India where she had migrated from Ireland.

Now, in Western developed countries (and increasingly globally) teenage parents are dominantly viewed as a ‘social problem’ whose sexuality needs to be controlled. Again, such an example illustrates the powerful norms (i.e. shared ideas and values) that society exerts on childhood, and how these change over time.

Experiences of childhood also, of course, differ according to class, gender, ethnicity, religious and cultural background. Social structures such as these don’t necessarily determine individual children’s experiences, but they clearly influence them by setting the boundaries of what is possible,
appropriate and expected. Children, as active individuals, are thus constrained by the various institutions, structures and cultures in which they find themselves – whether schools, families, or physical geographies. These in turn shape their experiences of childhood.

So, what happens when two (or more) cultures with differing views and values regarding children and childhood collide? If we take Australia, as an example, its history and present (and arguably its future) has been deeply influenced by tensions around social constructions of childhood.

Australia’s historical treatment of Indigenous Australian children is a case in point. The Australian sociologist, Robert van Krieken (1999), has written extensively about the Australian government’s policy of assimilation; removing Indigenous children from their families. Some have referred to this as a ‘cultural genocide’, since dominant European ideas about childhood were forcibly imposed upon Aboriginal people in what now, with the benefit of hindsight, seems to be an appalling history, and for which the Australian Government has now apologised.

Similarly, the British and Australian governments recently apologised for their tragic policies related to child migrants. These children were exported from orphanages and children’s homes in the UK to Australia and Canada in the period from the 1920s to 1967. The exact number of child migrants is not known, but estimates suggest that between 7000 and 10 000 children were sent to Australia between 1947-1967 alone (Dow & Phillips, 2009). Often these children faced difficult conditions. In 1998 Great Britain’s House of Commons Health Committee concluded that:

children were placed in large, often isolated, institutions and were often subjected to harsh, sometimes intentionally brutal, regimes of work and discipline, unmodified by any real nurturing or encouragement. The institutions were inadequately supervised, monitored and inspected (cited in Dow & Phillips, 2009).

Both of these examples reflect the power of ideas about children, and the conflict between what may be considered to be in the ‘best interests’ of children, and the ‘best interests’ of societies and States. These examples also illustrate how concepts, values and attitudes about children change over time.
Constructions of childhood in social policy

Ideas about children and childhood are also quite likely to differ between different segments within society, different professional groups and even between various government departments. These ideas become manifest in social policy.

So in educational policies, children are mainly understood as learners and citizens in the making - adults in preparation. The focus is, in the main, on their educational outcomes. Vast sums of money are invested in working out how to improve their qualifications and attainments to ensure they are well positioned to take their place in a competitive labour market/economy.

The school leaving age has crept upwards in many countries, and is reflective of societal perceptions of young people’s transition to adulthood. For example, in the UK in the first half of the 20th century, children could leave school a year early on the grounds that they were entering ‘beneficial employment’, however by 1944 the school leaving age was fixed at age 15.

In Australia, the school leaving age varies in different states, and there have been a number of recent rises. In NSW, for example, it was raised to 17 in 2009, while Victoria changed their school leaving age from 15 to 16 in 2006.

In social welfare policies, children are frequently seen as being at risk of abuse including neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and indeed, physical punishment. The dominant idea is that children are vulnerable which may lead to an overemphasis on ‘rescuing’ children, and a lack of emphasis on enabling them to ‘participate’ – that is - to express their views when matters are being decided about their futures, an issue which is particularly topical in the area of family law.

News media and popular culture, particularly in Western countries, often portray stories about children in emotive ways (Holland, 2004). A dominant image presented is of young children as being ‘cute’ or ‘at risk’. However, young people, especially young men, are often presented wearing ‘hoodies’, and are depicted as out-of-control and dangerous.

Older (and sometimes even young) girls are often presented in sexualised ways. Popular media often also focuses on the ‘problem’ of teenage motherhood, an issue we examined earlier in its historical context.

In Australia, as well as elsewhere, quite controversial images have been created and presented by both politicians and the media in relation to children who are refugees and/or seeking asylum. Images of ‘damaged’ children or children in difficult circumstances are often used in charity campaigns. Positive images and stories are few and far between, particularly in state and national media, although perhaps less so at the local level.

What do these ‘constructions’ do to adults’ perceptions of children?

Pat Holland suggests that it leaves us feeling in control, and children as unable to answer back.

Of all social groups, children have been the least able to explore their view of themselves in the public domain. They have found themselves trapped by received definitions, which are underpinned by powerful adult emotions (Holland, 2004 p.205).

Yet social policies in all these realms of society are (or should be) changing, as governments begin to implement the various requirements of the UNCRC.
The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

One of the key instruments that is influencing how the international community conceives of, and deals with, children is the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). This convention has been ratified by every country in the world, except the USA and Somalia.

As Dershowitz (2004, p.20) suggests, ‘most people see rights as something special, to be respected and not to be treated lightly’. Affording children rights through the convention does not imply that children have a special status, nor does it assume that the interests and views of children are the same as adults. Rather the Convention implies that children, like adults, are citizens and entitled to participate in social, cultural and political life.

Nelson Mandela’s (2000) words about the purpose of UNCRC are authoritative:

*The Convention on the Rights of the Child is that luminous living document that enshrines the rights of every child without exception to a life of dignity and self-fulfilment.*

The formally agreed standards of UNCRC include provision rights (to necessary goods, services and resources); protection rights (from neglect, abuse, exploitation and discrimination); and participation rights (whereby children are respected as active members of their family, community and society) (Alderson, 2000).

Whilst all three of the UNCRC ‘P’s are important, the one that is having a significant influence on conceptions of children’s role in social and political life, relates to participation. Article 12 of the UNCRC deals specifically with children’s participation rights:

*State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*

What are rights?

Human ‘rights’ refer to the basic standards people require to live with dignity. A human rights advocate is a person who demands that the human dignity of all people be respected.

In 1973, Hillary Clinton quite pointedly suggested children’s rights were a ‘slogan in need of a definition’ (Rodham, 1973).

Children’s rights are now articulated in numerous ways, including through a range of civil, cultural, economic, social and political rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) is the first binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights for children.

However, several other articles give expression to children’s participation rights, including the right to get and share information and freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of association (Article 15), rights to access information (Article 17) and freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14). Article 4 states that governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children’s rights are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Taken together, these articles reflect ‘a new global consensus that, as soon as children are able to express a preference about a matter affecting them, they have the right to form an opinion, make it known to others and have it considered’ (Melton, 2006, p. 7). Indeed, Hogan (2005, p.35) suggests there is considerable consensus that the UNCRC reflects ‘an unprecedented value for the subjective worlds of children and for their right to be consulted and taken seriously’.
So, for example, through the implementation of participation rights we might expect to see children and young people having a greater say in how their schools are run and governed, involved in a range of activities within their neighbourhoods and communities.

Participation also poses new challenges for adults/professionals in a whole range of settings and circumstances as they learn how they can best facilitate children and young people’s participation.

It is a useful exercise to try to identify instances where children have had their views taken into account and/or have been involved successfully in policy shifts or changes in practice.

One example from the UK was where children and young people campaigned successfully for a change to mental health policies in relation to hospitalisation. Until then, young people were often treated on adult psychiatric wards. However, in response to consultations with young mental health service users, regulations have now changed and under 16 year olds may no longer be accommodated on adult wards.

In Australia, there are a range of examples of studies where children have been consulted on issues of importance. However it is difficult to find examples of direct impact on public policy or legislation.

One example might relate to whether smoking should be prohibited in motor vehicles. All six Australian states have now legislated or committed to legislation, except the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Northern Territory. In January 2009 the ACT Government released a consultation paper seeking views from the public. The ACT’s Children & Young People Commissioner conducted a survey on children and young people’s views on this issue. From a sample of 150 responses, 76% indicated they would not be happy to sit in a car with someone who was smoking; 67% of children and young people think that adults should be banned from smoking in a car when there is a young person with them; and 56% of children and young people think that people should be banned from smoking in a car at any time. At the time of writing (October 2010) no legislation has been introduced in the ACT to address this issue.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has undoubtedly raised the visibility of children in the eyes of states and governments. However, the focus on 'participation', that is, eliciting children's views on matters that are important to them, can be a distraction from more urgent structural and political factors that affect children in their everyday lives.
**Participation**

Although there has, in recent years, been increasing interest in children’s participation, and an accompanying growth in literature, research and practice, defining children’s participation is not straightforward. Children’s participation is deliberated at every level including its meaning, its importance and benefits, its political and social application, and its implications for children (Fitzgerald, 2009). It is a highly contextualised concept, in that it is practised in diverse ways in differing places and spaces, and its meaning and interpretation vary according to its contexts (Lister, 2008).

At its broadest and most general, participation means involvement in activities, but there are many levels of participation, which are influenced considerably by roles, expectations and relationships within society at particular times. It may, for instance, refer to children taking part in decision making either collectively (for example, voting, participating in youth parliaments, schools, local councils etc.) or personally (for example, having a say in family law and care and protection matters or family relations) (Davis & Hill, 2006).

Much of the literature distinguishes between different dimensions of participation including its level, focus, content, nature, frequency and duration. Some writers, for instance distinguish between seeking children’s views (which some people prefer to call ‘consultation’) and directly involving them in decision making.

According to Lansdown (2006), a number of indicators might be seen as facilitating effective and meaningful participation. These include: children understanding what the project or the process is about; what it is for and their role in it; transparent power relations and decision-making structures; early involvement of children; equal respect for all children regardless of their age, situation, ethnicity, abilities or other factors; the establishment of ground rules with all children at the beginning; and voluntary participation.

A number of models have been developed in recent years that seek to conceptualise different levels of engagement for young people in participatory processes. One of the very well known of these is Hart’s (1997) ladder, with its eight rungs stepping up from manipulation, decoration and tokenism to young people initiating, directing and sharing decisions with adults at the top. However, this is only one of the many models which all receive critique and debate in terms of their usefulness.
Agency

The idea that children are social actors in their own right underpins the notion of children’s agency.

‘Agency’ is a concept that is understood differently by different disciplines, and indeed by different theorists within the same discipline. The relationship between ‘structure’ (institutions and practices that organise and constrain social life) and ‘agency’ is arguably not one that is resolvable in any straightforward way, regardless of the age of the actors.

Within sociology, agency tends to be taken to mean ‘the capacity to act’. Giddens, one of the leading social theorists of the late 20th century, for example, suggests that ‘agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). He attempts to locate the ‘logical connection between action and power’ by suggesting that

...to be an agent is to be able to deploy... a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to “make a difference” to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events (Giddens, 1984, p. 14).

While Giddens, in common with most mainstream social theorists of this time, would (presumably) not have considered children to have agency (see Ennew, 2000), there is no reason why we shouldn’t use Giddens’ notion to impute agency to children.

It is not difficult to see that at the (micro) level, particularly within family relationships, children have agency, or the ‘capability’ to make a difference. This begins from the moment of conception and at birth a baby’s cries influence parents’ behaviour. Market researchers often claim that children have the power to influence parents’ shopping habits – they call this ‘pester power’ (see for example, McDermott et al., 2006).

Neither of these observations would surprise developmental psychologists, but mainstream sociology had not, until recently, paid children’s agency much attention. Furthermore, from a sociological perspective, children lack the power of authority, the power that is derived from adult status, and thus it can be said that they occupy a powerless position in society.

Many researchers in the area of Childhood Studies are interested in the interaction between structure and agency, and how this plays out in the context of relationships between parents and children. They focus on how these relationships are constrained, or affected, by broader social factors, such as those embodied by institutions, or affected by social policies, political processes, or economic and environmental considerations. The sociology of childhood thus accounts for children as both constrained by structures and as agents acting in and upon structure (Prout & James, 1990). It acknowledges that children do not exist in a vacuum, or merely within families, but in social worlds that are affected by broader social processes (see James, Jenks & Prout 1998).
Disciplinary perspectives on children and childhood

So far we have explored how our constructions of children and childhood have changed, and continue to change, over time. Let’s now look a little more closely at how theoretical ideas have influenced the study of childhood.

We’ll begin by charting a short history of developments in theory, particularly over the last 15 years or so. We will particularly explore how different disciplines, namely psychology, anthropology, sociology and geography have influenced understandings of children and childhood.

Developmental psychology

Developmental psychology attempts to devise theories and explanations for how children develop certain competencies. It aims to predict how children will behave or react in specific circumstances, and involves testing these predictions. It is the scientific study of children’s development.

The ‘founding father’ of developmental psychology is Jean Piaget. Based on Piaget’s work, developmental psychology separates different stages of childhood, and the implication is that children have to pass successfully through these stages in order to reach ‘adulthood’.

Developmental psychologists have, for example, explored the importance of child-mother relationships and emphasise the quality of relationship between mother and baby in terms of attachment theory.

Developmental psychology has also led to the creation of terms that we now take for granted such as ‘adolescence’. Prior to the ‘invention’ of this term, children went from childhood to the adult world of work, with no separate period in between. The term ‘adolescent’ was invented by G. Stanley Hall in the USA in 1904. It literally means ‘becoming adult’. The English social anthropologist, Ronnie Frankenburg has somewhat humorously pointed out that this implies that adults should be described as ‘mortescent’, i.e. becoming dead.

Indeed one could add a whole list of psychological terms and concepts like peer groups, peer pressure, self-esteem and body image, which have entered everyday speech from developmental psychology.

Piaget’s ideas about children’s cognitive and moral development – the idea that children pass through a specific sequence of stages as they progress towards adulthood and acquire adult ‘competence’ - have had a significant influence on professional and public perceptions of childhood. Piaget’s ideas are incorporated in the training of many...
professionals (such as teachers, social workers, health care professionals) and are, indeed, often reflected in parenting courses and handbooks.

It is important to recognise that because developmental psychology has traditionally been the main discipline or ‘lens’ through which children are understood within many professions, it has assumed a dominant voice when claims are made about children and childhood and has heavily influenced social constructions.

More recently, however, Piaget’s ideas have been held up to some critique – particularly with regards the universal applicability of this theorising, the emphasis on children’s lack of competencies, skills, and knowledge and their ‘faulty reasoning’. Such an emphasis, it can be argued, can inhibit people’s ability to see the opposite, that is, children’s capacities, their understanding and their moral/empathetic behaviour.

Psychology has also, arguably, been utilised to explore (individual) children’s problems, develop interventions and bring children back to ‘normality’ (whatever that may be). The emphasis on ‘the normal child’ is value-laden, and can lead to the stereotyping of children. As an example, an emphasis on the nuclear family as ‘norm’ leads to conceptions of other family forms (single-parents, same-sex parenting, broken homes etc) as ‘abnormal’, with arguably detrimental consequences for the children concerned, who are seen as deficient in some way.

Most research informing developmental psychology has been based on research conducted in western, privileged cultures. This is increasingly acknowledged as having created many limitations to theory.

There is, for example, some fascinating work by Robert Serpell, a developmental psychologist, who has looked at Zambian children’s competencies in (for example) creating three-dimensional wire models of cars that they use as toys (Serpell, 1979). He contrasted their skills with those of English children, who simply cannot work to the same level.

The point being made by Serpell is that children’s development, and their capacities and skills, are hugely influenced by their experiences. Their competencies develop in relation to activities and practices in everyday life, in particular contexts. Zambian children may, however, be assessed using Western developmental measures and be found to be ‘less able’ than their English counterparts.
Psychology has, of course, continued to develop as a discipline since the days of Piaget and other early developmental psychologists. Since the 1980s, developmental psychologists have increasingly viewed babies and children as social actors although they tend not to try to understand or explore the relationship between childhood and the specific social, political or economic contexts children find themselves in.

Social anthropology

Social anthropology has also been crucial in advancing our thinking about children and childhood, reinforcing the idea that childhood differs across time and place.

Margaret Mead’s seminal work on young people in Samoa (first published in 1928) is such an example. After studying 68 young women between the ages of 9 and 20 Mead concluded that the passage from childhood to adulthood (‘adolescence’) in Samoa was a smooth transition and not marked by the emotional or psychological distress, anxiety, or confusion seen in many other countries such as the USA. Mead concluded that this was because Samoan girls belong to a stable, monocultural society, surrounded by role models, where nothing concerning the basic human facts of copulation, birth, bodily functions, or death, was hidden and where Samoan girls were not pressured to choose from among a variety of conflicting values.

British social anthropology has tended to differ somewhat in emphasis from that in the US. In the UK an emphasis has been placed on recording children’s activities and stories through ethnographies, particularly their roles in family life, kinship and political systems (Montgomery, 2009).

Two key publications have been important in the field of social anthropology. The first is a paper published by Charlotte Hardman in 1973. In it she suggested that children are as worthy of study as any other section of society and that a focus on children could reveal aspects of social life not found in (then) conventional ethnographies. Hardman (1973, p. 87) proposed an approach that:

...regards children as people to be studied in their own right... If we conceive of society as a group of intertwining, overlapping circles, which as a whole, form a stock of beliefs, values, social interaction, then children... may be said to constitute one conceptual area, one segment of this stock. The children will move in and out of this segment and into another, but others take their place. The segment still remains. The segment may overlap with others, may reflect on others, but there is a basic order of beliefs, values and ideas of one group which bounds them off from any other group. Thus I propose that instead of just looking at one or two segments, usually men and sometimes women, we can add other dimensions, children or the aged for example...

Another noteworthy paper is by the American social anthropologist, Enid Schildkrout. Published in 1978, this work examined children’s roles and activities in the town of Kano, northern Nigeria; the differing activities undertaken by boys and girls and their involvement in a ‘children’s economy’:

Children have their own money, from school allowances given to them daily for the purchase of snacks, from gifts, from work they have done for strangers, and from their own investments. Most children regard the economic activity they do for profit... as work done for themselves, even though they may hand over the money to adults...
for safe keeping. Besides doing chores for adults, boys make toys for sale, and they rent out valued property (such as slide viewers or bicycles). By the age of ten many girls begin to practice cooking. They do not help very much in the preparation of family food, for this is strictly the wife’s responsibility, but they do sift flour, wash dishes and help with other tasks. By age twelve many girls help their mothers in all stages of preparing food for sale. By ten, many girls cook food for sale on their own... and prepare various snack foods. These are then sold in very small quantities to other children... (Schildkrout, 1978, p. 360).

These two papers are important because they establish childhood as a valid field of research. They emphasise the interconnections between childhood and adulthood and show how childhood is differentiated by age and gender. Subsequently, there has been an increase in what might be termed ‘ethnographies of childhood’, focusing on children’s experiences, and working with children as informants and as reliable sources of information.

US-based Sharon Stephens (1995) for example, has pushed disciplinary boundaries, encouraging the development of a comprehensive agenda for children and childhood that encompassed environmental and political issues. Stephens saw the study of children as essentially multi-disciplinary, and challenged both physical and social scientists to consider what impact their work might have on children’s worlds and, conversely, what children’s rights might mean for their work.

Sociology

Up until the mid 1980s, sociologists rarely thought about childhood apart from as a phase of the life course that simply involved socialisation; that is, the process whereby children became civilised, functioning adults. The study of children was essentially left to psychologists - sociologists focused instead on families.

From its earliest roots, sociology had relied upon a particular view of children and childhood. Emile Durkheim, the French thinker and (with Marx and Weber) one of the founders of sociology, suggested that childhood is a period:

...in which the individual, in both the physical and moral sense, does not yet exist, the period in which he [sic] is made, developed and is formed ... the educationist is presented with a becoming, an incipient being, a person in the process of formation (Durkheim, 1979, p150).

It was this powerful idea, that a child was not really a person, but a ‘blank slate’ (tabula rasa) upon which culture could be ‘written’, that dominated sociological and social thought. To argue that children could be viewed as fully social beings capable of acting in the social world, was quite radical (Waksler, 1991).

However, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologists increasingly acknowledged that research specifically related to children and childhood was underdeveloped (Qvortrup, 1987; Prout & James, 1990)\(^1\).

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\(^1\) It might be noted that similar points were made by feminists about ‘malestream’ sociology (which had focused on men’s lives and formal institutions, and had ignored the everyday, mundane lives of women) until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s brought attention to the structural position of women (for example, Oakley, 1974).
The Danish sociologist, Jens Qvortrup, was the first to break from the emphasis on the sociology of the family in the mid 1980s (Qvortrup 1985). He noted that family sociology tended to be about parents, or at best parent- (usually mother-) child relationships, and not about children as a separate social group. There were plenty of 'sociologically relevant' discussions of children's problems and problem children, but few studies that were grounded in children’s experiences of their daily lives (Qvortrup, 1987, p. 3).

In the UK, the work of two sociologists, Allison James and Alan Prout, initiated a wave of research that acknowledged children’s agency, and saw children as social actors in their own right. James and Prout’s text, Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood (first published in 1990), proposed a framework that saw childhood as, to a significant extent, socially constructed, in that children’s roles and activities are differentiated according to historical period and cultural context.

From this perspective, children are seen as active social agents, who shape the structures and processes around them (at least at the micro-level), and their ‘social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults’ (James & Prout, 1997, p.8) – a claim discussed in more detail below.

The English sociologist, Berry Mayall (1994) argues that this new field of sociology emphasises:

...how far we adults fall short of implementing children’s rights, what children’s own experiences and discourses tell us about their understandings of the rights and wrongs of their daily lives and what resistances children make to the childhoods proposed for them’ (Mayall, 1994, p. 2).

Essentially, the ‘sociology of childhood’ involves moving beyond understandings of childhood as a period of socialisation (the study of what children are becoming) to a sociology that is interested in how children experience their lives in the here-and-now. The key point claimed for this new field is an understanding of the child as being:

...the child is conceived of as a person, a status, a course of action, a set of needs, rights or differences – in sum as a social actor... this new phenomenon, the ‘being’ child, can be understood in its own right. It does not have to be approached from an assumed shortfall of competence, reason or significance’ (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 207).

This interest in childhood ‘as a social phenomenon’ was also growing in other European countries throughout the 80s and 90s. Jens Qvortrup, mentioned previously, continued to be a key player. From a macro-sociological perspective he argued that the ‘professionalisation’ of childhood (the ways in which children have become the focus of specific professions, and how an expertise has been generated about childhood through, for example, psychological, psychiatric and pedagogic institutions) ought to be the subject of sociological enquiry:
The postulate that childhood (as a structural element and a status position) changes in time and space in accordance with the dominant adult society’s needs and interests seems so evident, indeed almost trivial, that we may be surprised that it is almost impossible to find this perspective represented among sociologists (Qvortrup, 1987, p. 6).

Qvortrup led an important comparative study of childhood as a social phenomenon across 16 different countries (between 1987-1992), under the auspices of the European Centre for Social Welfare (Qvortrup et al. 1994).

Research about children was not, of course, limited to Europe. In the USA, for example, Barrie Thorne (1987) was also pointing to the neglect of children within sociology, and observed that research ‘has either ignored children, seen them as objects of adults (primarily women’s) labour, or confined them to questions of socialisation and development’ (Thorne, 1990 p.101). Thorne’s book Gender Play (1993) demonstrates how young children’s interactions with their peers regulate behaviour in gender-specific ways.

Thus it can be seen that over the past 20 to 30 years there has been a flourishing of sociological research on childhood. This relatively small but significant amount of activity has developed into a discrete sub-discipline within sociology; the ‘Sociology of Childhood’.

In many respects, development has been most strong in the UK where the Economic and Social Research Council has supported a program of research focusing specifically on children and young people. This has resulted in an increasing range of UK-based books, articles and courses dealing with current development in childhood studies. However the trend toward increased sociological focus on children and young people has occurred worldwide.

The growth in interest in children and childhood from researchers, theorists and practitioners from a variety of disciplines and locations was reflected in the establishment, in 1993, of the journal Childhood: A journal of global child research, which provides a forum for a broad range of papers relating to childhood. Only most recently, however, has the ‘Sociology of Childhood’ begun to have a major impact on research and practice in Australia.

Geography

Another discipline that has been, and continues to be, influential in relation to Childhood Studies is the field of Human Geography.

As with the sociology of childhood, geographers’ interest in childhood only really gained momentum in the 1990s, although there were some notable studies in the area before then. Likewise, this interest emerged from the realisation that human geography had, until that point, largely ignored the everyday lives of children.

Two terms are used to refer to geography’s interest in children and young people. What has come to be referred to as ‘children’s geographies’ is an offshoot of human geography and deals with the study of places and spaces of children’s everyday lives. ‘Geographies of childhood’, in contrast, has an interest in how (adult) society conceives of the very idea of childhood and how this impinges on children’s lives in many ways.
Geographers are interested in both the social aspects of geography (how the workings of society touch on children’s lives) and the imaginative aspects (the lived experiences, feelings, stories, hopes and fears of children themselves) (Philo, 2000).

Like sociologists, geographers are interested in diverse childhoods, and the different possibilities that arise from engagement with diverse spaces, places, environments and landscapes. Philo (2000) interestingly classifies this work into three broad themes: homely geographies (the indoor geographies of home and hearth), streetwise geographies (wider spaces of playgrounds, roads, paths, fields, woods and hillsides) and institutional geographies (such as those of school or religious institutions).

There are a whole range of focii within children’s geographies. Examples include children’s lives in cities and rural areas, children and technology, children and the environment and children and globalisation. Geographers also have a keen interest in unique methodologies of researching children’s worlds and the ethics of doing so.

A body of very interesting research is focused on children’s concepts of their own places. Kim Rasmussen from Denmark, for example has examined how spaces such as homes, schools and recreational institutions have been created by adults and designated by them as ‘places for children’. Her research (Rasmussen, 2004) involved providing children with cameras to take photographs of the spaces which are most meaningful to them. It demonstrates that children relate not only to official places provided by adults, but also to informal places, often unnoticed by adults. The analysis sheds light on differences between ‘places for children’ and ‘children’s places’.

An Australian example of research related to children’s geographies is that conducted by Geoffrey Woolcock from Griffith University. This research on child-friendly cities examines how children and young people's well-being is affected by different urban forms and by the social and ecological variations that occur throughout cities. Woolcock et al. (2010) focus on how adolescents and young adults need to be actively involved in urban design.

There is now a journal called *Children's Geographies*, marking the coming-of-age of this field of study. *Children, Youth and Environments* is another key interdisciplinary journal publishing papers in the area.
What is ‘Childhood Studies’?

Throughout this Background Briefing we have been considering how various disciplines and professions such as psychology, anthropology and sociology have influenced understandings of ‘childhood’ throughout history and into the present.

Understanding that different disciplines provide different perspectives on childhood is key to Childhood Studies. Sometimes these assumptions and ‘theories in use’ are explicit, but at other times they have to be deduced or inferred.

Childhood Studies provides an interdisciplinary approach to the study of children and childhood, meaning that it crosses traditional boundaries between disciplines, drawing together diverse theories and ideas to better understand the experience of childhood.

What might be able to be said about Childhood Studies, then, is that there are a number of key ‘principles’ which can be carried across to inform research and practice in a range of other disciplines.

For example, Childhood Studies challenges all of us, no matter what our disciplinary background to consider questions such as the following:

- How can we better respect children and their rights in our thinking, communication, research and practice - and ultimately in our social policies?
- How can we elevate the status of children and young people?
- How can we understand the complexities of children’s everyday lives while respecting their different circumstances? and finally...
- How can we draw on the diverse disciplinary perspectives and latest thinking about children and childhood to best progress their interests and wellbeing?

Earlier in this paper we read about the early ideas of Prout & James (1990, p.8), namely

- that childhood is a social construction;
- that childhood is a variable of social analysis;
- that children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspective and concerns of adults; and
- that children are and must be seen as citizens, active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them, and of the societies in which they live.
Citizenship

Recent theories of citizenship have drawn their inspiration from T.H. Marshall who defined citizenship as a status which is enjoyed by a person who is a full member of the community. James and James (2008, p. 31) for example, define citizenship as ‘a status that is given to members of a community who share those rights, responsibilities, duties and adopt those social practices that are intrinsic to belonging to and being a responsible member of that community and who, in return, share in the resources that are distributed within that community’. While offering this definition, James and James indicate that defining citizenship is far from easy and heavily contested. They emphasise that different social and political interests hold different perspectives on what constitutes a citizen and that this determines issues of inclusion and exclusion.

‘Embedded in most definitions of citizenship are notions of independence, maturity, competence and belonging’ – that citizens are expected to contribute fully to the life of that community (James & James, 2008).

The notion of children as citizens is still quite contested. Indeed, it wasn’t until the late 1990s that children began to be conceived of as citizens. Prior to this, children were seen as dependent on adults and thus having no political rights. For example, in Marshall’s (1950) seminal analysis of citizenship, children were considered as ‘citizens in waiting’.

In their 2009 research publication, Children as Citizens? International Voices Nicola Taylor and Anne Smith define citizenship as an ‘entitlement to recognition, respect and participation... it entails belonging to a society, meaningful interactions within it, being heard and taken notice of, engaging, and having obligations and rights’. Implicit in this definition of citizenship, they argue, is a sense of togetherness, connectedness and a sharing of common interests, but also of difference and uniqueness.

Notsurprisingly, then, Childhood Studies does construe children as citizens and quite a body of empirical and theoretical research in the field has focused on children as citizens; what this means and how children can be scaffolded as citizens, since they ‘require continuing care and nurturance and their citizenship emerges and develops within social contexts’, in interdependence between adults and children.

Building on these ideas, sociologists Berry Mayall and Leena Alanen argue that it is possible to identify three key insights about children that arise from the sociology of childhood and help us to think more critically about children and childhood.

The first such perspective understands children as agents and as active participants in constructing knowledge. From such a perspective, childhood studies is focused on:

...studying children in their own right and from their own perspectives, ... taking children as the units of research and focusing the study directly on children and their life conditions, activities, relationships, knowledge and experiences (Alanen, 2001, 12).

As we have seen, this approach emphasises ‘the present tense of childhood’ (Mayall, 2002) – being - rather than childhood as a state of future becomings.

More recently a number of writers (such as Flowerdew & Neale, 2003; Uprichard, 2008) have challenged us to think about children as ‘beings and becomings’.

The second approach is what Alanen refers to as the deconstructive sociology of childhood. This emphasises how childhood is socially constructed and that ideas about childhood change through time and space.
Earlier in this Background Briefing, for example, we explored how children’s roles and activities differ according to culture, history, class, dis/ability, gender, ethnicity and so on. Arising from this second approach, the analytic process of deconstruction is used to question taken-for-granted or commonplace assumptions about childhood.

The third insight is the structural sociology of childhood, in which childhood is understood to be a permanent social category in society. Its members change, but childhood, in its relations with the other major social group – adulthood – continues as an essential component of a social order where the general understanding is that childhood is a first and separate lifespan whose characteristics are different from the later ones (Mayall, 2002, p. 23).

The structural sociology of childhood is perhaps the least developed of the three approaches described here, not least because it can be difficult to trace the political and economic constraints and forces that operate to shape children’s everyday lives, if we focus entirely on what children have to say about their circumstances.

In summary, a range of social science disciplines have recently turned their attention to children and childhood as a field of study. Each discipline has slightly differing foci and methods. But what does all this mean for professionals and for practice?
Implications for professional practice

These theoretical ideas underpinning Childhood Studies have significant implications for how professionals approach, interact, communicate with, and involve children.

One example which illustrates how Childhood Studies is changing the ways professionals interact with young people is in relation to children’s competence to consent to surgery. Priscilla Alderson’s research has explored difficult questions about the age at which children are old enough to understand medical information, and when they are mature enough to make decisions in their best interests. Alderson’s work was based on in-depth interviews with children undergoing surgery, as well as their parents and many of the staff caring for them in hospital. This research challenged accepted ideas about children’s rights, interests and capacities, and indicated that what matters much more than age is children’s experiences of illness and disease and of previous medical interventions.

Alderson’s work has had a profound effect on the ways in which children are now dealt with in hospitals, and many doctors and other health care professionals now (hopefully) take time to explain to children what they are doing, and aim to obtain informed consent (Alderson, 1993).

Another example might come from social work research. For a long time this has been dominated and (arguably still is) by developmental approaches and powerful ideas based on attachment theory, mentioned earlier.

For a brief period, I was responsible for teaching ‘child observation’ to social work students. This involved students spending one hour a week for 10 weeks observing a child under the age of 5. Sometimes students observed babies, but more often than not, they sat in pre-school (reception) classes and observed a focus child. This is, of course, invaluable training for social work students who need to make assessments based on close observations of particular children and their environments.

However, I was surprised to learn that students were taught not to engage with the children they were observing, nor to explain to the children what they were doing. From the point of view of the Sociology of Childhood, this was very puzzling – surely, three or four year olds would be curious to know what a strange adult was doing, sitting watching them, or following them out into the playground? But no, I was told, students didn’t explain and didn’t ask for children’s consent either… and anyway, I was told, children are ‘used to’ being watched by adults. At no point, as far as I could tell, were social work students encouraged to talk with children, or to learn how to do so.

Numerous official reviews of cases of child deaths where children were known to social services have recommended that social workers talk with the children they are responsible for. Indeed, as Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, the Chair of one such inquiry (into a child abuse scandal in the 1980s) famously remarked, ‘the child is a person, not an object of concern’ (Butler-Sloss, 1988).

I would like to be able to report that this has changed, and that social workers now do talk with children they are responsible for. However successive reviews since those remarks have pointed out that, generally, they do not. On the other hand, it is refreshing to note that young people who have been looked after in the public care system are now employed on social work training courses in some universities, to help teach social workers how to communicate with children.
Future directions and opportunities for research

So what does all this mean for improving the future activities of researchers and practitioners?

Childhood Studies is having some notable effects on research across a range of disciplines and professions.

There is a growing trend, for example, toward interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary research whereby teams of researchers with diverse backgrounds and experiences approach issues and problems collaboratively, but all sharing a common commitment to improving the status of children and young people.

Exciting opportunities are also opening up as we involve children in research, exploring their views and experiences on a range of questions that have previously only been approached from adult perspectives. Increasingly researchers are moving away from ideas about research ‘on’ children and young people to research ‘with’ children and young people. Much is yet to be done to better understand how adults can work with children as researchers.

Most Childhood Studies scholars agree that nearly all of the scholarly theorising about childhood has been done in the developed West. There are some critical questions to ask about childhood in the majority world. How do the theories described here fit when applied in vastly differing settings, where children may have very different responsibilities and expectations?

Social policies in many countries continue to view children as ‘outcomes’ - as future beings - and the emphasis remains on individuals, rather than exploring collective responsibilities towards children and young people. There is thus a need, in research and practice, to shift the focus from ‘the child’ (since this implies a universal category), towards ‘children’ (plural). Not only does this avoid the awkwardness of writing he/she, but it also emphasises the idea of children as a social group. At the same time, it is important to remember that there are differing childhoods, structured (like adulthood) by social class, gender, ethnicity, dis/ability, and rural/urban location. A structural analysis would want to explore processes of social exclusion, social justice, and the politics and economics of why certain groups of children fare better or worse in societies.
Accompanying these developments is a growing interest and need to pay much greater attention to the ethics of research and practice with children (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Such work emphasises respect for children and young people’s dignity and competencies, acknowledging what they can do, not what they can’t do or need support to do.

Much work also needs to be done in the area of research methods and professional practice in terms of finding ways for children to express themselves, drawing on their competencies. In research, for example, there is a recognised shift from adult oriented methods such as one-to-one interviews, that can be intimidating for children not used to communicating in this way. Rather, a range of creative and innovative research methods are being documented ranging from photo-elicitation interviewing (asking children to take photos and talk about them) to children’s forums (where children workshop issues and, often, present these issues to politicians).

One role of future social research ought to be to try to illuminate the interconnectedness of the ‘micro-social’ with the broader socio-political contexts in which the everyday lives of children are played out.

Childhood Studies, as a field of inquiry, is still in its early stages and a good deal of work remains to be done by people from all kinds of backgrounds and all walks of life. So we end this Background Briefing paper with an invitation to you to contribute to this emerging and exciting field; to apply these ideas in new settings and to pursue new learning and understanding to progress the wellbeing and status of children and young people.

We look forward to reading the results of your work.
References


About the Centre for Children and Young People

The Centre for Children and Young People (CCYP) was established at Southern Cross University in 2004. The CCYP works collaboratively with organisations, particularly in regional and rural areas, to enhance policy and practice related to the well-being of children and young people.

The Centre has three priority areas: Research, Education, and Advocacy.

For more information about the CCYP, visit ccyp.scu.edu.au

About the Course

The Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master of Childhood and Youth Studies are awards which have been developed collaboratively by the Centre for Children and Young People and the School of Education at Southern Cross University, Australia. The awards meet a recognised need, expressed by a range of professionals, for contemporary knowledge and skills to assist them to work more effectively with children, young people and their families.

The course seeks to be an innovative, professionally relevant, practical and interdisciplinary qualification for people working, or intending to work, with children, young people and their families. Applicants can enrol in any one of the awards or complete individual units as professional development.

Units are delivered externally so that students can successfully study at a distance. Each unit has authentic and professionally relevant assessment and the five core units involve optional but highly recommended summer/winter intensive workshops of 2 days duration. Students who are unable to attend are able to engage with workshop content and processes live online or via recorded formats.

The course incorporates innovative and appropriate use of technology to support students’ learning, opportunities for regular engagement with tutors and fellow students and (where appropriate) multimedia elements.

The course is underpinned by a deep respect and regard for children and young people and for their views and perspectives. It also incorporates an understanding that children and young people can benefit immensely from positive relationships with adults – parents, teachers and the myriad professionals with whom they may engage over the course of their childhood. The course embraces multidisciplinary perspectives in the belief this can enhance service provision and lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

For more information about these awards, visit www.scu.edu.au/childhoodstudies
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