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Introduction: Setting the Context

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┌──────────┐ **Learning outcomes** ┌──────────

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Identify the ways in which society has changed how it views children and their place in society
- Critically appraise the new sociology of childhood
- Reflect on the role of children in research

Key words: childhood, children's rights, children's welfare, society, sociology

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Introduction

The term childhood is non-specific and relates to a varying range of years in human development in different contexts. Developmentally, it refers to the period between infancy and adulthood, but it has been argued that it is a sociological concept rather than a natural phenomenon and thus accordingly has changed over time as views of children have changed.

In this chapter, we provide a very brief history of children and childhood to explore their place in society to set the context for the book. First, we describe the theory of childhood and signpost you to a range of sources that provide a comprehensive discussion of the theories and views. We present a timeline to highlight changes in the concept of childhood over the centuries and illustrate how this has affected the development of legislation around children's rights. Second, we explain how the concept of childhood has moved from a position where children were perceived as vulnerable, incompetent and passive recipients of adult care, to competent social actors shaping their place and role in society; and we outline the interactions with legislation, which is mainly approached from a generational order (when members of a group are categorised by age and legal rights). Finally, we discuss how the process of researching children has evolved in parallel to the changing social, political and legal views about children.

The sociology of childhood

As our understanding of children and childhood is historically, culturally and politically influenced, it is useful to consider the concept of childhood as a dynamic process. That is to say that the concept of childhood changes in response to societal changes and also that the perspectives of society change in response to new ideas or findings. The perspectives and views of children

held within any given culture are important as they influence whether and how children are understood and prioritised by politicians, health providers, lawyers, social workers, educationalists, families and other parties, including researchers.

Concepts of developmental age as opposed to chronological age and the meanings given to these age-related groupings are neither fixed nor universal. Childhood as a definition and its components is subject to the changing values, definitions and expectations within any society. Over time our understanding of children and childhood has changed quite considerably and these changes are briefly outlined in Figure 1.1.

During the last century there has been a growth in interest in treating children as a distinct **population** that warrants inquiry in its own right. Initially there was a surge of looking at children's development and their abilities, which was later criticised for treating children as objects. However, historically, society's interest in children's roles began well before this time.

If you are interested in this topic then we recommend you source one or more of the following textbooks which provide a good comprehensive discussion of the debates, issues, theories and developments in this field.

- Corsaro, W. (2011) *The Sociology of Childhood* (3rd edn). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- James, A. and Prout, A. (eds) (1997) *Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Studies of Childhood.* London: Falmer Press.
- Jenks, C. (2005) *Childhood.* London: Routledge.
- Woodhead, M. and Montgomery, H. (2003) *Understanding Childhood: An Interdisciplinary Approach.* Milton Keynes: Open University.
- Wyness, M. (2011) *Childhood and Society* (2nd edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Please note that this is not an extensive list and there are lots of other good textbooks on this issue, but this should help you to get started.

Activity 1.1

There is a long history to the concept of childhood and how it is encapsulated. What are your views on children? Are they mini adults or are they not? Write down a few of your preconceptions about childhood and children. Think about how your own perception of childhood and your own experiences as a child might influence how you undertake your research with them.

We provide some discussion of this issue for you to refer to when you have completed the activity at the back of the book. You might want to compare your ideas with these.
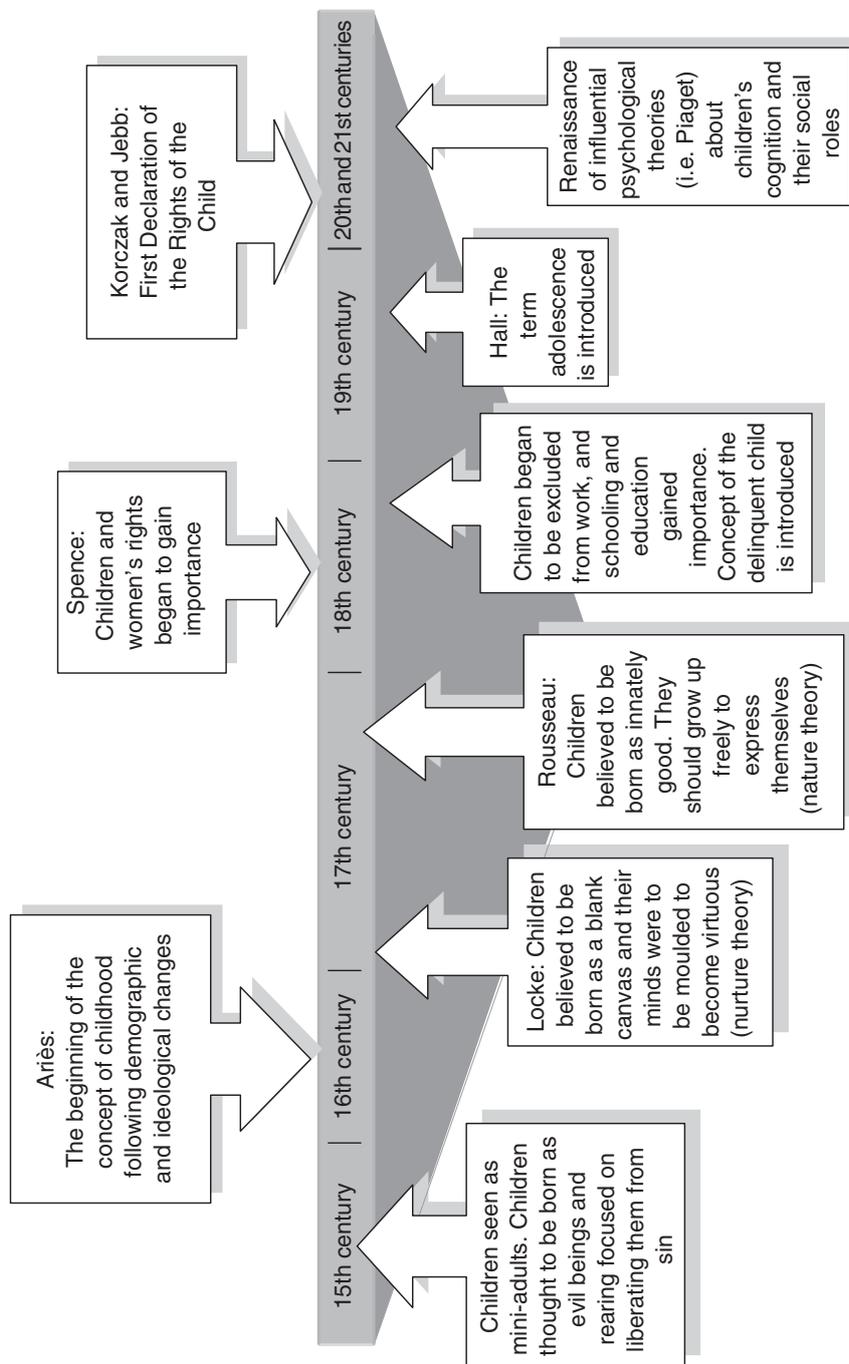
Figure 1.1   A timeline in the history of childhood

The timeline shows centuries from 15th century to 20th and 21st centuries with the following events:

15th century: Children seen as mini-adults. Children thought to be born as evil beings and rearing focused on liberating them from sin

16th century — Ariès: The beginning of the concept of childhood following demographic and ideological changes

17th century — Locke: Children believed to be born as a blank canvas and their minds were to be moulded to become virtuous (nurture theory)

17th century — Rousseau: Children believed to be born as innately good. They should grow up freely to express themselves (nature theory)

18th century — Spence: Children and women's rights began to gain importance

18th century: Children began to be excluded from work, and schooling and education gained importance. Concept of the delinquent child is introduced

19th century — Hall: The term adolescence is introduced

20th and 21st centuries — Korczak and Jebb: First Declaration of the Rights of the Child

20th and 21st centuries: Renaissance of influential psychological theories (i.e. Piaget) about children's cognition and their social roles

Children's rights

The contemporary sociology of childhood is organised around two central discussions, namely the child as a social actor and the generational view. We do not go into detail here as this is beyond the scope of this book, but rather provide a brief introduction to the issue.

The social actor approach: The concept of childhood has evolved from children being a uniform group perceived as vulnerable and irrational, to the view that children actively operate in their environments and are able to make sound decisions on a daily basis, as competent social actors that define their sense of self through interactions with others. In other words, this social actor approach focuses on children's everyday life and the ways they orientate themselves in society, engaging with the cultural performances and the social worlds they construct and take part in.

The generational view: The second approach that has shaped the sociology of childhood is called the generational view. This centres on socio-structural and socio-theoretical questions concerning social equality and social order, which categorises their members by age and segregates them in many respects (rights, deeds, economical participation, ascribed needs and so forth). This generational view of social groups underpins the traditional way in which the law understands children.

History is not always coherent or neatly organised and frequently the social actor and generational views of children clash. Those who contributed to shape the modern concept of childhood have postulated the idea that children should be entitled to socio-cultural rights and moral rights. In other words, the fact that children belong to an identifiable group allows them to be considered by society as a group with particular rights and worthy of moral consideration (Paul, 2007). However, having a moral right does not necessarily mean that one is entitled to legal rights and although attempts are made to incorporate moral and socio-cultural rights into the law, this is not always possible and significant differences between the rights of adults and children, which can be thought as unfair, become evident.

For instance, children have specific moral rights (such as enjoying the right to be safeguarded) precisely because they constitute a distinct vulnerable group. This contrasts with the legal age of criminal responsibility, which in some countries, such as India, starts at 7 years old. On the other hand, children and adults share the same status of personhood, as they have civil, political, social and economic rights, which in theory enable them to practise their citizenships. Yet, legally, children are not considered citizens in so far as they do not have the right to vote and their rights are limited by age.

Activity 1.2

Do you think children should have rights? What would be the justification for your perspective? Note down some of the reasons why you think children should or should not have rights. What do you think are the pros and cons of these rights in today's society?

   We provide some discussion of this at the back of the book to help you balance your perspective.

Research

The views of children and childhood, children's rights and children's abilities inevitably have an influence on the way **research** is conducted. The way in which children are positioned in society will affect the way researchers carry out their projects and therefore it is important that we consider how this is influenced in practice.

Research 'on' children

It is tempting, but unfair, to judge how unfavourably children have been perceived in the past compared with how they are viewed today, given the vast amount of literature that is currently available to us. However, it is important to remember that what is known about children and young people today is because they have been made participants of a systematic process of observation and interpretation.

   Over the past two centuries, the view of children has changed dramatically. It is now widely accepted that childhood is a special, eventful and unique period through which skills are acquired to achieve full potential by adulthood. It is now clear that there is a division between childhood and adulthood in terms of roles and expectations. While this is the majority view, there are those who would argue that children should be treated as adults. This position has been reached because of research that has been previously undertaken.

Activity 1.3

Make a list of all the reasons you can think of why it might be important to consider how children feel about being studied. We provide some additional information at the back of the book to help you develop your list.
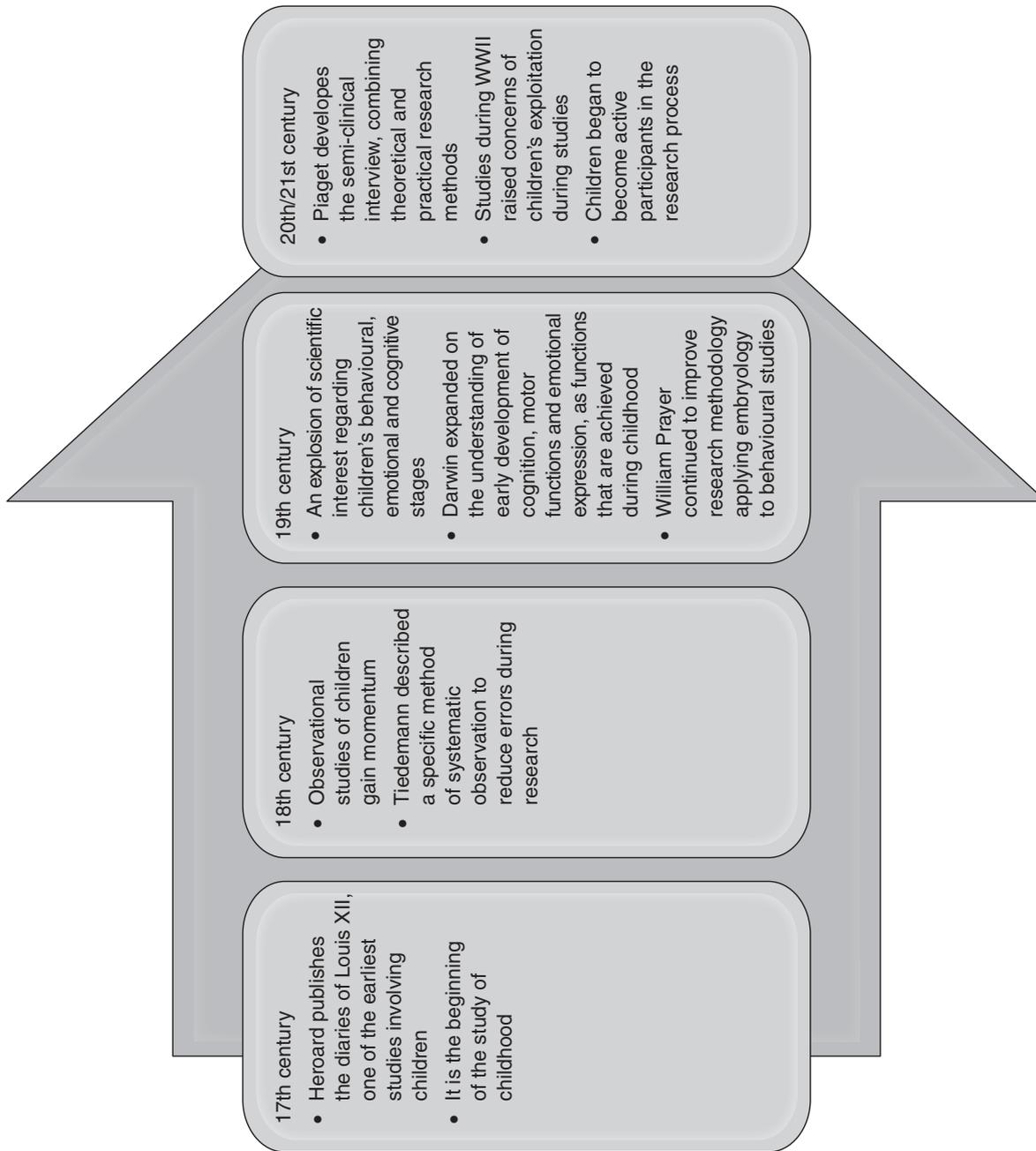

17th century
- Heroard publishes the diaries of Louis XII, one of the earliest studies involving children
- It is the beginning of the study of childhood

18th century
- Observational studies of children gain momentum
- Tiedemann described a specific method of systematic observation to reduce errors during research

19th century
- An explosion of scientific interest regarding children's behavioural, emotional and cognitive stages
- Darwin expanded on the understanding of early development of cognition, motor functions and emotional expression, as functions that are achieved during childhood
- William Prayer continued to improve research methodology applying embryology to behavioural studies

20th/21st century
- Piaget developes the semi-clinical interview, combining theoretical and practical research methods
- Studies during WWII raised concerns of children's exploitation during studies
- Children began to become active participants in the research process

Figure 1.2 The history of research with children

Research 'with' children

The transition between research 'on' children, as passive participants, to research 'with' children, where participants' rights are respected and taken into account, began towards the latter end of the twentieth century. Following the death of many involved in research, adults and children, as a result of Nazi **experiment**s conducted during World War II in concentration camps, the protection of research participants gained relevance.

As attitudes about childhood and children began to change, including the idea of children as research participants, it became more common to include them in the planning stages of research and to consult with them on core research issues. We consider this in more depth later in the book as we discuss the reasons why researchers do research with children in a range of different disciplines.

Useful resources

Avert (2011) *Worldwide Ages of Consent*. www.avert.org/age-of-consent.htm (accessed 21/12/2011).

Interagency Working Group on Children's Participation (2008) *Children as Active Citizens*. http://sca.savethechildren.se/upload/scs/SEAP/publication/publication%20 pdf/child%20rights%20programming/Children%20as%20Active%20Citizens%20 A4%20book.pdf (accessed 29/12/2011).

Further reading

Archard, D. (1993) *Children, Rights and Childhood* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.

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Grieshaber, S. J. (2007) 'The sociology of childhood', in R. New and M. Cochran (eds), *Early Childhood Education: An International Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, pp. 871–874.

Hart, R. (1997) *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*. London: Earthscan.

James, A. and Prout, A. (eds) (1997) *Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Studies of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press.

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Morrow, V. (2001) 'Using qualitative methods to elicit young people's perspectives on their environments: some ideas for community health initiatives', *Health Education Research: Theory and Practice*, 16 (3): 255–268.

Woodhead, M. and Montgomery, H. (2003) *Understanding Childhood: An Inter-disciplinary Approach*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

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