

Childhood During the Middle Ages: An Enlightened View

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Grade 6

SRA Corrective Reading Series

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There have been myriad misconceptions about the life of children during the Middle Ages in Europe. Recently, historians and scholars have begun exploring the misconceptions to see if they are correct, and to find out where such mistaken ideas originated. Ultimately, most historians now agree that medieval childhood was not as terrible an experience as once thought. Even so, you would probably not be willing to give up your iPod and your computer to go live in twelfth-century England!

Some of the common misconceptions about childhood during the Middle Ages had to do with the idea of the “dark ages.” Previously, life in the Middle Ages was considered so unenlightened and backward that all aspects of it were looked down upon by cultural historians. The fact that few children were represented in art work of the time period led many people to believe that children were not held in high esteem by adults. Also, when children were pictured in paintings of the time, they were often shown dressed in adult garb. This caused historians to conclude that children were treated like adults, and that childhood was not considered a separate category of development. Finally, since the infant and child mortality rate was high during the Middle Ages, many children did not live to adulthood. Scholars concluded that adults of the medieval time would not allow themselves to become emotionally attached to children, since they were likely to lose them.

The idea that children were unimportant to medieval culture has waned due to some compelling evidence to the contrary. For instance, one of the dominant aspects of medieval culture was its agrarian nature. Farming was one of the most important activities for a majority of people during the Middle Ages. For farmers, the family unit was of utmost importance. A farming family needed many children, and hoped for several sons, to help work the land. For that reason, historians consider that families were one cornerstone of medieval life, as are children and fertility. Scholars also cite laws protecting the rights of orphans as evidence that children were valued during that time.

Some quantities of childhood in the Middle Ages might be familiar to you. For instance, babies were swaddled by their mothers and caretakers because they believed that doing so would make the child’s limbs grow straight and strong. Mothers still use this practice, but do it to make the baby feel secure. In poorer families, mothers breast-fed their babies, while wealthier families hired wet nurses.

As children grew, they were expected to do light, easy chores such as sweeping and helping tend the garden. They played with timeless toys that you probably played with as a young child: rag dolls, balls, hoops, and marbles. They could be seen climbing trees and wrestling. Just as all children do, they imitated the activities of their parents and pretended to hold jousting tournaments and hunting competitions. Medieval children

were expected to wash each day, clean their teeth, comb their hair, and make their beds, unless they had servants to do chores for them.

Education was a very different matter for medieval children, however. The level and amount of education depended on the status of parents and the gender of the child. Many children never became educated, since knowing how to read and do mathematics was not necessary for the majority of the peasant children who would be working the soil for their lifetimes. More affluent families schooled their children at home with tutors. Sometimes, children of the noble class were sent away to monasteries and nunneries to learn from the clergy. Girls learned needlework and weaving—skills that would benefit them once married—while boys learned to read, write, and do mathematics so that they could account for family money or keep village records. The sons of knights left home to live with the liege-lord at a young age so that they could learn to become knights themselves.

One other educational path to adulthood existed in the form of apprenticeships. Young teens were apprenticed to craftsmen to learn a trade. Apprenticeships lasted from seven to ten years. These arrangements were usually made by parents for their children based on connections the family had, but without regard to the wishes of the children. An apprentice and master relationship was as intimate as the parent and child relationship is today, since apprentices lived with their masters for the length of the apprenticeship. The master clothed his charge and allowed him to dine with the family. As a result, strong emotional bonds were often established between the master and the apprentice. Apprentices were often remembered in the will of their masters.

Comprehension

- 1 Which one of the following dates would be considered part of the Middle Ages?
 - a July 4, 1776
 - b October 10, 1987
 - c January 13, 1066
- 2 One of the reasons that people had mistaken ideas about childhood during the Middle Ages was—
 - a that children represented in paintings during the time were dressed in adult clothing.
 - b children left diaries that discussed their miserable existence.
 - c photographs of the time showed children in poor situations.
- 3 During the Middle Ages, the childhood mortality rate—
 - a was about the same as it is now.
 - b was extremely high.
 - c was unrecorded.

- 4 One of the most important activities during the Middle Ages was—
a playing with marbles.
b swaddling infants.
c farming.
- 5 Wealthy families during the Middle Ages—
a hired wet nurses for their infants.
b did their own farming.
c expected their children to do light chores.
- 6 One reason that historians now think that children were more valued during the Middle Ages than previously thought—
a is the existence of more artwork depicting children as children.
b is that they found out about laws that protected the rights of orphans.
c is that they realized that medieval mothers swaddled their infants.
- 7 One way medieval children are similar to modern-day children—
a they played with balls and marbles.
b they listened to their iPods.
c they went to school at age five.
- 8 If a young person became an apprentice during the Middle Ages—
a he lived with the master's family for seven to ten years.
b he learned to read and write.
c he could always decide what trade he wanted to learn.
- 9 During the Middle Ages, girls—
a generally did not learn to read.
b had the same opportunities for education as boys.
c could learn to become a knight.
- 10 The strong emotional bond created between master and apprentice—
a often caused the master to cry when the apprentice finished the apprenticeship.
b was due to the apprentice living in the home with the master, eating at the master's table, and wearing clothes provided by the master.
c happened because of family connections.

Learn about Words

- A Vocabulary
- 1 Myriad is—
a a mirror.
b a large number.
c few.

2 Misconceptions are—
a things we take for granted.
b wrong ideas.
c thinking of something clearly.

3 Agrarian means—
a farming culture.
b an annoying person.
c a person that lives in Agraria.

4 Compelling—
a means plowing a field.
b is to drive.
c is allowing things to happen.

5 Waned—
a means to grow smaller.
b is to gain power.
c means to begin.

6 Monasteries—
a are where masons live.
b are where monks live.
c are where nuns live.

7 Liege—
a is a feudal lord.
b is another word for line.
c means a collection of people.

8 Apprentice—
a means a master of something.
b is in charge.
c is a beginner.

9 Affluent—
a means wealthy.
b is a person who has the flu.
c cleans out the chimney.

10 Noble—
a is notorious.
b means aristocratic.
c means none.

B Synonyms are words that have the same or nearly the same meaning.

For each word in Column I, find a synonym in Column II and write it.

	Column I	Column II
11	common	eyes
12	interesting	culture
13	unique	juncture
14	enclose	song
15	heritage	engaging
15	scholar	surround
16	connection	solitary
17	competition	operate
18	lyric	everyday
19	ocular	thinker
20	function	contest

C Homonyms are words that sound alike but have entirely different meanings.

Match each of these five words with its definition.

21 pedal
a foot powered
b sell

22 peeled
a rang
b ready to eat

23 ore
a minerals
b paddle

24 mission
a project
b hymn book

25 medal
a an award
b interfere

D Place the following vocabulary words in alphabetical order:

- 26 qualities
- 27 competitions
- 28 medieval
- 29 emotionally
- 30 historians
- 31 scholars
- 32 timeless
- 33 unique
- 34 sweeping
- 35 utmost

not for distribution