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The Child in Society

This chapter explores:

> how society's understanding of what is meant by the term 'child' has changed over time;
> what we mean by the notion of 'childhood';
> how different agencies working to support children and their families use different models of the child;
> how the Every Child Matters agenda requires tensions between agencies to be resolved; and
> how the Every Child Matters agenda requires the voice of the child to be at the centre of the agenda.

While education is concerned with learning and academic achievement, it is also very concerned with enabling children to explore and develop social, performance and physical skills. Early Years settings and schools have also increasingly realized that developing these skills and helping children to learn needs to be done in partnership with the child's home and family. Since, when a child comes to the Early Years setting or into school, the family come too, the beliefs and values held by the family come with the child; they are not left at the door. However, under the ECM agenda, settings and schools are now required to be even more proactive in listening to and working with children and their families to develop provision and to work closely with other agencies also working to support children and their families. For both these aspects of the ECM agenda to be successful, it is helpful for settings and schools to reflect on what model of the child they consciously – or subconsciously – use as they go about their day-to-day business, and how that model helps – or hinders – their relationship with the child's parents and with other agencies. This chapter seeks to explore how dominant discourses with regard to what society

views children as being have changed over time, what current models of the child are prevalent in different sectors in society and how these impact on the child's experience of 'being a child' and childhood.

How society's understanding of what is meant by the term 'child' has changed over time

If we look at a brief history of childhood and attitudes to childhood in Western Europe, beginning in the *Middle Ages* (*c*.1000–1453 CE) it is possible to find evidence that children were treated as being 'miniature adults'. They wore the same clothes, ate and drank the same things as adults, were expected to work and were regarded as having the same cognitive abilities as adults. However, this is not to suggest that children at this time were not still as cherished, wanted and loved as at any time in history. What is being explored here is that as society has changed, so too has its concept of the child and childhood.

The notion that children inhabit a special time – that is, childhood, which is somehow different and distinct from adulthood – began to emerge in the fifteenth century, and with it the idea that children may have different needs to adults. It has also been the case that at different times throughout history as different religious notions dominated society's views, these too have impacted on how children and childhood have been viewed. At times children have been seen as naturally wicked and in need of redemption, but by the *nineteenth century* children had come to be seen as being more naughty than wicked (Foley et al., 2001; Luke, 1989; Mills, 1999).

In terms of contemporary views of childhood, in *twenty-first century* Britain there are a range of concepts relating to what we mean by children and childhood. To some extent we are still operating with a romanticized view of childhood, which began to emerge in the *eighteenth century*, which saw children and childhood as a charmed time of purity and innocence (Foley et al., 2001). We still tend to see children and childhood like this, seeking to protect children from the loss of innocence that comes with being an adult. However, this model of the child brings with it its own tensions, since most children want to explore the world, experiment and 'find things out for themselves', while the adults around them manage and limit their experiences and development towards adolescence and young adulthood.

The child in contemporary British society

To a greater extent all the models of children and childhood briefly explored above are as seen from an adult point of view. We examined in the previous chapter the notion of how dominant groups can oppress and control those

more subordinate to themselves, not necessarily to intentionally cause harm or suffering, but because they believe they know what is best for in any given situation. In terms of the adult–child relationship, adults are undeniably in control. This is in part because children are in the process of developing physically, emotionally and cognitively and, obviously, while still very young need a lot of attention, care and support to enable them to simply survive. For these reasons children are also very vulnerable and dependent on those around them who do have the capacity to provide for their needs, and it is in trying to define what the features of this relationship, between the developing and mature human being, should be that the different models of the child and childhood proliferate and who holds the power to make their writ run is decided. It is possible to consider the child as being different from adults in that as *biological* entities they are different from adults. However, adults have invented and reinvented the idea of child and childhood as a social construct, to suit our own purposes and depending on the dominant discourse of the time (Cannella, 2002; Robinson, 2005).

We can discuss children as being distinct from adults in biological terms, since children are developing to a physical, emotional and cognitive maturity and because of that are vulnerable in ways adults are not, but we have translated this initial dependence into the industry of childhood, where, in the most extreme cases, children are kept infantilized and not required to have a view, an opinion or a direct input into what might be happening around them and to them, since 'in an important sense the child is an adult in waiting and therefore not part of the social world that counts' (Wyness, 1999: 24).

The concept of childhood

It is when we begin to consider these beliefs about the charmed, pure and innocent nature of the child and how they impact on what we believe children should and should not be exposed to, or encouraged to engage with at any one time, that we begin to shape our ideas about childhood. Wyness (1999) in discussing the work of Aries states how 'Aries was concerned with the historical shift in sentiments which shaped a set of ideas and values that gradually crystallized into the idea of the modern child' (Wyness, 1999: 22), and childhood as the space that the child is allowed to be a child in. There can be a tendency to believe that childhood is a given and that childhood is experienced in a similar way by all young human beings and happens for all children in a similar way. Different families and societies, depending on tradition and cultural practices and, to a very great extent, the economic situation of any given family, will treat childhood in very different ways and have very different expectations for that child.

As we have seen, because childhood is to a great extent, particularly in industrialized Western nations, a social construct (Barber, 2007: 82; Cannella, 2002) it can and is defined in different ways by different societies, and for this reason

Activity

What, for you, are the defining features of childhood – how is childhood different and 'special' as compared to adulthood? What happens in childhood that is special to that time and ceases to happen as we become adults?
Now separate your ideas into the following categories:

> what children, as young human beings, actually need to thrive and grow into healthy adults;
> what society also encourages us to provide for children, believing that these are also necessary to enable children to thrive; and
> what society suggests children should not be exposed to as this will harm their development in some way.

Reflecting on this activity, what does this tell you about your model of the child and childhood?
Where did you get these concepts from?
Is there anything you would change in your thinking?

childhood is not experienced in a universal way, across the world. Any one child's experience of childhood will be determined by the society it grows up in and, in the same way, the society will determine how it views the child and what it will seek to provide for the child and expect from it. We have already seen how the notion of what a child is and what childhood might be is determined by prevailing cultural notions. However, one of the problems that this social construction of the notion of children and of childhood leads to is that we lose any sense of benchmarks that might guide us in knowing what it is best to do for children and what children themselves need from their childhoods.

In British society it is generally the norm that children are dealt with differently from adults and often in a more marginal way. It is the adults who have a voice – they make decisions, they control the real power, in terms of money, the media and politics. This is not to say that children are not central to the economic and cultural identity of the adults around them; we can see this in the industry of childcare, education, toy-making and media provision that has developed, dependent entirely on 'children'. Whether it meets the needs of the child we can debate, but what theses industries do achieve is the generation of adult employment and considerable economic wealth. For these reasons, there is a very strong economic argument for the version of childhood currently predominant in society to be perpetuated. However, the downside of this situation is that, again, it is the adults making decisions about what they believe children want from these industries. Even where there are claims that children are consulted with regard to developing toys and media products, these industries are still financed and run by adults (Cannella, 2002). This is not to separate out caring for and wanting to provide for a loved one, because we want to be part of

these people's lives and we are concerned for their well-being. Rather, what we are considering is what the actual needs of young human beings are against what we have come to believe they are, and the tensions between these two notions.

The voice of the child

In exploring the concept of child and childhood we have been doing so very much from the stance of being adults, deciding what ought to be the case for children. What we have been denying is that children are beings of themselves and for this reason have what Wyness (1999) describes as an 'ontology'. That is, because something 'is', it commands an authority to be considered and listen to, for its concerns to be canvassed and for its interests and needs – as it considers them to be – to be met. This notion of the ontology of children is what we might now call their 'rights'. Namely the very fact that human beings, and in this instance children, 'are' affords them the expectation of certain responses from those around them.

It is important to consider here the ontology of the child as it impacts on our model of the child and childhood, since a child is not a possession or an object; it is a human being of itself and therefore needs to be accepted on these terms and its wants, needs and desires considered – as are those of adults. This is an important concept to think through. Very often parents will use phrases such as 'this is my child and I decide what is best for it', which seems in the way it is expressed to be to do with ownership of a sort of material good. It often follows from this that parents will then go on to say that because the child is 'theirs' they can, therefore, 'bring it up' and treat them as they see fit. While parents, for many excellent reasons, are often the most-well placed people to bring up their own children, not least because most parents will do so selflessly, providing the best care, love and consideration for the child that they can, the child, from even before it is born, is a member of the wider community and the wider community has a role in bringing up the child. Children are part present as beings in society, yet because they lack power (they do not have voting rights, for example) and they have no direct economic earning power (although through their parents they do have buying power) they are generally ignored in the wider social context. To a greater extent children are treated as being invisible – and they remain so, as beings, until the family has undertaken its role to socialize the child into adulthood. Only then will the person have an ontology and become a person with a voice that will be listened too.

The demonization of the child

Adults' attitudes to children are further complicated by the tension between conflicting views held about children, depending on the age of the child. While it is simply easier to romanticize the view of the young child being innocent and charming, even when they might also be actively rejecting this view of themselves by 'being naughty', it is much harder to continue to view children in this way as they become older, more independent and start to want

to be young adults. Society has invested hugely in the charming, pure and innocent model of the child. We know that children do grow up and, indeed, must because we need them to take on the role of adult and eventually take over the adult world from us, but we are very unsure of how to actually support the child through the process of becoming an adult. Many of us further exacerbate this tension by giving children mixed messages about what we expect from them. We want children to be charming, pure and innocent, but there is a dominant discourse that also encourages us to think it is amusing to dress children as mini-adults and see them ape the behaviour of adults, although only when we allow it. Children who take licence to 'ape' adult behaviour and actually begin to behave like adults, in earnest, we are very uncertain about dealing with; indeed such children are reported by the media as being 'demon' children.

The dominant discourse of the demon child is one that began to gain its current momentum in the media in the early 1990s, although the notion that children, particularly those on the verge of adulthood, are particularly susceptible to behaving in demonic ways is an idea that has been prevalent since the 1840s, when the term 'juvenile delinquent' was first coined. There is also evidence of concern about adolescents, particularly young men, behaving delinquently, or demonically in reports about wild behaviour of gangs of apprentices, dating from the 1500s (Muncie, 2004). However, it was the terrible and highly atypical murder of the toddler James Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys that set the scene for the current concern with the demon child (Muncie, 2004: 3). Muncie states: 'The death of James Bulger triggered widespread moral outrage' (ibid.)' the ongoing consequences of which Muncie suggests are threefold:

> First, it initiated a reconsideration of the social construction of 10 year olds as 'demons' rather than as 'innocents'. Second, it coalesced with, and helped to mobilize, adult fear and moral panic about youth in general. Third, it legit-imized a series of tough law and order responses to young offenders which came to characterize the following decade. (Muncie, 2004: 3)

Barber (2007) suggests this tension arises because, while we encourage children to pretend to the clothes, behaviours and attitudes of adults, we are aware that they have less 'worldly' experience and, to adult eyes, children seem not always to understand the consequences of certain behaviours in particular contexts. We can provide them with the 'tools' of being an adult and encourage them to try them out at home, but we find it hard to accept the consequences of the children and young people then trying out these ideas in the 'real' world. 'Since young adults are knowledgeable and informed without necessarily being wise' (Barber, 2007: 85). Sometimes we 'have propelled children into places and positions before they are ready' (Wyness, 1999: 24). Rogers suggests that these tensions are compounded by adults' attitude to childhood having distilled into two distinct ideologies, or discourses, these being: 'the discourse of welfare and the discourse of control' (Foley et al., 2001: 30).

Further to this, the relativist nature of local practices in bringing up children

can cause concern, particularly where not all families keep their children invisible. The following two extracts from media articles are presented as case studies that seek to present the truth behind what has come to be widely accepted as young people 'out of control'. However, in reality, crimes committed by children fell between 2002 and 2006, but that the 'numbers of children criminalised had gone up by just over a quarter' (BBC, 2008) in Britain a child can be charged with some crimes at the age of 10, which is also in sharp contrast to other European countries that have a higher age of criminal responsibility and lock up far fewer of their children. Indeed, children in Britain are far more likely to be the victims of crime than to perpetrate them (Narey, 2007). What we do know from research is that where children live in poverty – with its attendant risk factors, of 'poor housing, poor health, educational underachievement, truancy and exclusion' – children and young people in these situations are also at more risk of becoming involved in crime (Narey, 2007). And as Martin Narey, Barnado's chief executive says:

> We can either support [these children] to grow into responsible citizens and valued members of the community or we can reinforce their disadvantage by ridiculing them in the media, expelling them from school and locking them up – pushing them further to the margins, when they most need our help. (Narey, 2007)

Activity

We have seen how the media is very powerful in supporting and possibly even in establishing dominant discourses. Over the course of a day, note how different media report on the behaviours and actions of older children or adolescents.

Compare the reports in national newspapers and on national news channels with those on local news programmes and in local papers. Often local reporting conveys a better balance between the problems caused by a minority of adolescents and celebrating the achievements and successes of local young people.

The child's experience

While the 'demon' child is a current dominant discourse, and one that does not stand up to rigorous scrutiny, what we do know about children is that, particularly in educational terms, they 'are achieving better than ever before – gaining good exam results, continuing to university, driving growth in high skills sectors of the economy' (Narey, 2007).

Let us explore further behind the media spin and examine what children's actual experiences of childhood are. A further dominant discourse with regard to childhood is that children are 'better off' in material terms than they were a few generations ago (Foley et al., 2001: 18). While for many families levels

of economic wealth have improved over the past 20 years, there is also evidence that there has been an increase in child poverty. This is further explored in Chapter 8. Although there has been material change, it has been different for different social groups (ibid.). However, all children come under the same pressure to have the same, possibly higher than previously, material expectations and 'change of this nature has led to a stereotyped picture of modern children as spoilt and over-materialistic' (Canella, 2002; Foley et al., 2001: 19). But, again, in this area of their lives, children can be seen to be modelling adult behaviour, since adults too use material goods to 'define their sense of identity', therefore 'we can hardly blame children for doing the same' (Foley et al., 2001: 19). We have allowed the advertising and media industry to pressure us as adults to 'buy' not only for ourselves, but also for children too.

Another common assumption about the change in childhood experience is that children today are healthier than children in the past, and although infant mortality rates fell by 65 per cent between 1963 and 1993, these improvements have only been for certain sectors of society. There is also evidence that suggests the rates of childhood asthma have increased, and that there has been a general deterioration in health and diet (Foley et al., 2001: 20). 'Children in the UK spend most of their waking hours in formal education ... compulsory education is the defining characteristic of modern childhood' (ibid.) and while there is evidence to show that children are attaining higher standards in the subjects they study at school, there is also evidence to show that the improvement in standards have reduced the opportunity for children's personal, social and creative abilities, plus their access to 'free-time' and the chance for unsupervised 'play'. Although there is evidence that children are attaining higher levels in English, mathematics and science at school, this rise in achievement is not true for all groups of children; boys may be becoming increasingly alienated from formal education and 'there is evidence of persistent underachievement by children from some minority ethnic groups, gypsy and traveller children and children who are in care' (DfES 2003a; Foley et al., 2001: 21).

Research has also shown that parents are anxious about allowing children to freely roam without adult supervision and that there is concern about a rise in violent crimes against children, although it is less clear if these incidents have risen or it is the fear of them that has led to a change in parenting behaviour (Foley et al., 2001: 22). Compounding the concerns about children being 'out' without adult supervision is the rise in the home as a place of leisure and entertainment, where most households have at least one television, video player and DVD player. Many households have computers and access to the Internet. Not only do children have access to these forms of entertainment, but much of it is aimed directly at them, and while there is also concern that too much access to television and games consoles exacerbates anti-social behaviour, research shows that children are also quite able to reject media messages they do not like and are not 'at the mercy' of the media, passively soaking up everything they watch, as is sometimes suggested (ibid.).

Children's lives and experiences need to placed in the wider social context in which we all live. Children and adults face, and deal with, a wide diversity of experiences. What must be considered is the control children have over their own lives and experiences.

Case study

James, known as Jimmy, was a 12-year-old boy in a Year 6 class in a North-West London primary school. He was an Irish, gypsy traveller whose family had recently moved from their trailer on the local authority travellers' site into settled accommodation.

Jimmy was the eldest of seven children, having five brothers and a very recent baby sister. Four of the boys were at school and the entire family was delighted the new baby was a girl, which was evident from the stories the boys told about their baby sister and how they would also write about her and want to take things home from school to show her.

Jimmy's dad, also called James, had recently, through the death of his own father, become the 'head' of the entire extended family in the local area. By default Jimmy then became 'head' of the family at school being responsible not only for his brothers, but a number of cousins too.

This was Jimmy's second year at school. At the beginning of the year he could not read or write and the decision had been made to place him in a school year lower than his chronological age. He was physically bigger than the other children in his class and emotionally much more mature; he was well liked by the other children but received a mixed response from teachers. He was very good at attending, rarely wore uniform to school, was hardly ever badly behaved, was very funny and quick witted and, it also transpired, could drive.

Jimmy had a number of cousins at the school, two of whom caused the staff a lot of problems, their behaviour was very disruptive, sometimes violent, and the eldest boy's attendance was erratic since he often went to work with his father. This frustrated and pleased his teacher, since she was pleased he was absent and she did not have to deal with his behaviour, but it also interrupted the progress he was making. It further frustrated some staff that the cousin would do what Jimmy said, but would not obey them. Sometimes, they felt their authority and values particularly challenged when they were forced to seek Jimmy's help to manage his cousin. From Jimmy's point of view, this was a normal way to do things and he was often very embarrassed and apologetic that he could not control his cousin better and that the cousin was letting the family down so badly.

Jimmy's Year 6 teacher was very committed to working with traveller families in a supportive and proactive way, and in working with the Traveller Support Service from the local authority. To the teacher it was clear that in many many ways Jimmy had 'out-grown' primary school, the very real responsibilities he was used to dealing with and the authority he was used to commanding with adults outside school caused tensions in the school. However, it was usually Jimmy who realized that power was organized differently in the school and generally he was

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prepared to defer to the teachers. He was also bright enough to see the irony in that at one moment he was being treated like a child and in the next his help was wanted to deal with his cousin and he even managed his aunt and uncle when they were aggressive towards the school.

Over the course of Year 6 Jimmy learnt to read and write. His parents were very pleased – for a number of reasons. His mother had come from a settled background and felt school to be important; for his father it was both expedient (particularly when having to deal with the settled community) and added to the respect he and Jimmy had in their own community. That Jimmy took his reading book home was an opportunity not lost on the teachers' of his brothers and cousins. If Jimmy took his book home – didn't they think they should too? However, Jimmy's mum often said having to listen to four boys reading was a mixed blessing.

Jimmy himself had put a lot of effort into this task, partly because being able to master these skills added to his authority and standing in the family, but also because he knew that it meant he would probably be allowed, by his parents, not to have to go to secondary school. Again Jimmy was quite astute enough to know the uneasy alliance he had struck with the authorities in his primary school he was unlikely to achieve at secondary. He also knew, from older members of his own family, that he would get a far rougher ride from the older children at secondary school. By the end of Year 6 Jimmy felt school had done as much for him as it could and that he too had done his bit for the school. However he had also come to the considered opinion that now it time to go and take up his place as a man in his community and help his dad in the more important tasks of managing and looking after everyone.

Listening to children

Two of the most influential changes in terms of consulting with children and listening to their voice are:

> the United Kingdom's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991; and
> the Children's Act 2004.

In ratifying the UNCRC the British government has agreed to honour the rights set out in the convention, 'except in those areas where the government has entered a specific reservation' (Directgov, 2008). Since the treaty came into force in 1992, children in Britain have been entitled to over 40 specific rights, including having the 'right to have their views respected, and to have their best interests considered at all times' (Directgov, 2008). However, a convention is not the same as *law*, and the British government is not legally bound to adhere to the convention. In the same way, children can 'not bring a case to court if they believe that one or more of their Convention rights are being infringed'

(NSPCC, 2008a). Indeed the British government has been criticized by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, to whom it reports every year, for its failure to make progress in securing some of the articles it ratified. However, through the Children's Act 2004 the government has responded to some of the criticisms of the Committee and has also enshrined in British law the requirement that in separation or divorce proceedings that come before a court, the wishes of any children affected must be 'the court's paramount consideration in any decision relating to his or her upbringing' (DCSF, 2007c: 42). It is also from the Children's Act 2004 that we have the five outcomes of the ECM agenda, and the requirement for all agencies who work to support children and their families to work together and to work with children and families, listening to their voices in determining how provision should be 'rolled-out'.

One of the most important messages that the ratification of the UNCRC and the subsequent legislation that has been briefly outlined above signals, is that, by acknowledging children have rights, it gives them an ontology – it acknowledges, partly in law, that they are beings 'of themselves' and therefore can speak directly for themselves and are not at risk of having their wishes reinterpreted or misinterpreted through the channel of the adults around them. The notion of the child's voice is further discussed in Chapter 7.

Different agencies – different models of the child

Since the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, philosophers and those interested in exploring what it is to be a child and that childhood might be different from adulthood and how childhood, and childhood might determine the adult the child will become, have tended to pursue the argument through two approaches. The first of these theoretical approaches stresses the role of a child's innate nature in determining the person they will be, including the part developmental psychology has to play in the nature of the child. The second approach stresses the role of the environment in which the child grows up in as the determining factor – that is, how they are nurtured.

Nature

In terms of the 'nature' side of the debate, some of the most influential work has been that of Jean Piaget, who formulated his theory of cognitive, or 'thinking abilities' development in the 1950s. Piaget is known as a cognitive developmental theorist and viewed biology – the genetic make-up of the child – as being the most important distinguishing effect on how a child will develop. Through working with children and observing how they solved problems he set them, Piaget theorized that children' thinking and thought processes are very different to those of an adult. He proposed that the combination of the environment a child grows up in and the experiences that the environment provides a child, coupled with the natural stages of cognitive development a child passes through to adult-

hood, will impact on the cognitive development of the child. His theory develops the notion that children learn by exploring their environment and essentially 'testing how things work'. Through these experiences they build up schemas of understanding about the world which, as they learn new things, they adapt to assimilate the new information. His work has been very influential in establishing the notion that children are 'different' from adults, not just biologically, but that they think in different ways too and need an environment that allows them to play, test and explore the world around them.

Piaget's four main stages of cognitive development are summarized below.

Stage 1 Sensorimotor thought (birth to 2 years)

In this stage thinking is in terms of responding to and possibly interpreting inputs from the senses. In this stage children cannot think in an abstract way, that is, hypothesize, or think about things that do not have a direct bearing on their senses at that point. If their primary care provider is absent and they want contact with them, they will respond to that desire, rather than be able to reason that he or she is elsewhere and will come back soon. By about 15 months children begin to become more exploratory and to make causal links between events and their actions. For example, a random action that results in an event that interests and pleases the child will be made deliberately and intentionally in the future. Pressing a button on a washing machine or toy will cause something to happen.

Stage 2 Pre-operational thought (2–7 years)

Children begin to acquire language and develop the capacity to hold mental images and remember things, although they cannot think logically and deal with more than one idea at a time. For example, a child who is in the pre-operational stage will not be able to answer a question like: 'I have a handful of sweets, 2 sweets are red and 3 sweets are green. What do I have more of, the number of sweets altogether or green sweets?

Stage 3 Concrete operational thought (7–11 years)

This is a significant stage of development for children as it is at this point that they begin to be able to see the world, ideas and actions from the point of view of others. This is know as being able to decentre.

Stage 4 Formal operational thought (age 11 to adulthood)

It is in this stage that children become able to think hypothetically and outside their direct experience, for example, to imagine worlds, as in fantasy stories which do not exist in real experience; similarly, they are able to engage in abstract thinking such as is needed in mathematics.

One of the most significant things about this notion of child development is that the child must pass through each stage, and in the order as described by Piaget. It is important – and a developmental necessity in terms of the overall cognitive maturation of the child – that they 'complete' each aspect of cogni-

tive development and understanding before they can move on to the next stage (Bentham, 2004). While it is unarguably the case that children change physically in their development from babies to adulthood, Piaget's notion of cognitive stages raises as many issues as it seems to explain. Other child development theorists have significantly challenged the work of Piaget, for example, the child psychologist Margaret Donaldson (Donaldson, 1984). While Piaget's work is useful in that it provides a framework, an overview, of how children's cognitive abilities might develop, it is criticized as being too rigid in tying development stages to chronological age and adhering to the notion that each stage has to be passed through before the child is able to master the cognitive challenges of the next stage.

Other theories that have impacted on and influenced our knowledge, understanding and beliefs about child development, and therefore our models of the child, are theories with regard to learning development. One of the most influential theorists in this area is B.F. Skinner (1905–90). Skinner was a leading 'behaviourist', behaviourism being a theory that focuses on behaviour as the objective of all human functioning. Human beings are motivated to behave in certain ways depending on the sense of innate or extrinsic reward they feel as a result of that action. These ideas are the basis of many reward/sanction-based discipline systems used with children in formal education settings. Children are rewarded, through praise or in other ways, to encourage them to behave in ways that are wanted. Conversely, sanctions are applied when children exhibit unwanted behaviours, to discourage such behaviour. However, critics of this method of managing children see this approach as being akin to coercion, or brainwashing, or that children only learn to do things if there is a reward attached and they will not learn to manage their own behaviour in the absence of an incentive.

John Bowlby (1969–80), is one of the most prominent theorists to begin to research social effects on development, in particular he is famous for his 'attachment theory' (Flanagan, 1999). When Bowlby first began discussing this theory his work centred on the importance, in developmental terms, of the attachment a child forms with its mother. However, the notion that a child can form the necessary nurturing attachment, needed for healthy social and psychological development, only with its mother has been developed by other theorists working in this area and the current accepted theory is that children can form a number of attachments; what is important is that children need caring and nurturing relationships in order to thrive, not simply that basic needs for food and shelter are met (Foley et al., 2001: 211). This theme is picked up in the next chapter, in examining what children need from families.

A further influential theorist is Erikson who in the 1960s, devised a model of human social development that focuses more on the impact of background and environment on development, rather than genetic determiners. This is known as a psychosocial model (Miller, 2003). The importance of this theory of development is that it seeks to explore how the beliefs, attitudes and values we grow

up to hold are shaped by our innate characteristics or predispositions towards stimuli and how the environment we grow up in acts on those. Therefore, Erikson maintains, we are distinctly shaped by our formative experiences. If this is so, then the experiences a child will have while in an Early Years setting or in school will have a considerable long-term impact on the adult that child becomes, including the attitudes, beliefs and values they will hold.

The models we have briefly looked at here are very much associated with educational model of the child. Those who are primarily concerned with a child in terms of their health may be focused on different signifiers of development. For example, there is already a range of ante-natal screening that takes place while the child is still in the womb, to determine if the child has any 'health problems' prior to birth. Parents, too, are given plenty of health advice about how to ensure the child is born into an healthy environment, that it is provided with the right nourishment and that its health and growth are monitored against 'normal' trajectories of healthy development. In part this is because we know that health during childhood will impact on the health of the adult and that a child that is healthy is more likely to thrive in all aspects of their life. This concern for monitoring children's healthy development is expressed by the Institute of Medicine Staff in the following way: 'the nation must have an improved understanding of the factors that affect health and effective strategies for measuring and using information on children's health' (Institute of Medicine Staff, 2004: 14). In exploring the notion of the model of the healthy child, Warsh writes of the growth of the 'health movement' that filled homes with 'the technology of personal hygiene (washbasins, toilets, toothbrushes, soap, and tissues) and then making sure that these products were used. It was the job for a new kind of expert: a professional health educator' (Warsh, 2005: 24). Warsh (2005) goes on to describe the three principles on which this movement was based: that no matter how meagre a families resources everyone could maintain their own good health thorough 'preventive health care based on good habits of eating, sleeping, and keeping clean' (Warsh, 2005: 25).

There is no doubt that monitoring children's health over the past few decades has greatly improved the overall health of children, and this has included 'reducing mortality and morbidity from many infectious diseases and accidental causes, increasing access to health care, and reducing environmental contaminants (Institute of Medicine Staff, 2004: 14). However, just as there are criticisms of the various cognitive developmental models educationalists use of children, so too the health sector has its critics of its models, the significant issue of working with a 'model' being that the model presupposes that anything that does not fit the model is 'deviant'. Again, the child, that is, the person – the ontology of the child – can get lost in trying to fix the child to meet the model or in discarding the child that cannot be fixed. We have seen this happening in the past where children with disabilities and learning difficulties that cannot be 'fixed' are placed out of the way of mainstream society and their families left unsupported and marginalized.

In a multi-agency approach to working with children, there is the potential to have a range of different agents' models of what constitutes a child – and therefore the best way of dealing with the child to cause tensions between professionals. So far we have only considered the models used by educationalist or health-care workers. There are also the social care model of the child and the youth criminal justice model to take into account – to a greater extent the social care model of the child is explored in the following chapter of this book. Or, as those who have central to their working lives the concern for the welfare of the whole child, there is the duty to resolve difference through, in part, by talking to each other but, most crucially, by talking to and listening to the child.

Activity

Your model of the child and childhood
Think through the experience you have in working with children. Which of the models briefly outlined above seem to agree most with your ideas and experience?
   What evidence do you have to defend your ideas? Can you talk about instances of working with children when they have behaved in the way described by your preferred theorist?
   How has the model presented by your chosen theorist helped you provide better for the needs of children?
   Of the other theories, what is it that you do not agree with? What evidence do you have to support your position?

This chapter has been exploring the concept of the child, and what childhood might be, through notions, or dominant discourses, that currently have a strong influence on how these concepts are viewed in society. More significantly, it is not only how these discourses explain children and childhood that we need to consider, but the impact these ideas have on public policy. The prevailing concept of what it is a child might be influences all practice that relates to children, from the way children will be treated in their own homes, to what happens to them in the Early Years setting and at school. These notions affect how children will be treated by health-care workers, child protection workers and how they will be dealt with by the Youth Justice System and the media. It is a symbiotic relationship, the dominant discourses feed public opinion and policy and vice versa.

The individuals in any group in society are linked to one to another by the means through which they communicate. A universally predominant way of communicating is through spoken and, often, written language, that is, through discourse. The 'centrality of language in social life' (Matheson, 2005: 2) serves a range of purposes: not only can we pass on information to each other, but the very language – choice of words – we choose to use to pass on information will shape the attitudes beliefs and values of the group, that is we

'cannot separate out people's thoughts and actions from the communicative means that they use to perform them' (Matheson, 2005: 3), what we say and write is what we do (Mills, 1997: 5).

> Discourse must be understood in its widest sense: every utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer, and in the speaker, the intention of influencing the other in some way ... It is every variety of oral discourse of every nature from trivial conversation to the most elaborate oration ... .(Mills, 1997: 5)

As has been explored in Chapter 1, the language of those groups that have the power in any given situation can be used, overtly or in inadvertently, to disadvantage subordinate groups. In some instances the discourse of certain groups becomes a dominant discourse and is treated as if it is the belief of a wide audience, sometimes of a society itself, that is, 'certain representations of the social world' come to be predominant or accepted view of how things should be (Matheson, 2005: 1). In Britain, a society that has a well-established, very complex, media industry (ibid.), many ideas can be circulated in the public arena, and where certain notions are 'picked-up' by media that command a large audience, then the way in which they express ideas can establish what can go on to become a dominant discourse.

Some of the dominant discourses as they relate to children and childhood have been explored in some detail above, both those perpetuated by the media and those used by different professionals concerned with children's education, health or social care. We have also already touched on two further discourses, that of a discourse of welfare set against a discourse of control. These are important ideas to consider, particularly for those who work with children and write policy for children. That is, is social policy and legislation there to protect the welfare of children, or to control them? Under ECM, there may be further tensions here, where those agencies from a child protection and health background may have different notions of what is in the best interests of the child – the welfare of the child – while schools, education and the criminal justice system can be seen to derive from a tradition of the discourse of control. What agencies working in tandem under ECM will have to do is accept pluralisms.

It is not by accident that a central tenet of the ECM agenda is that of well-being. We know that many children, through poverty and other impoverishing experiences, do not experience well-being or have the means to achieving it in the future for themselves. Therefore, we need to be concerned, not only for the material aspect of children's lives, but also the wider aspects of how they experience their lives socially and emotionally. Traditional attitudes to children have not stopped abuse of adult power over children, whether intentional or unwitting; however, changing practice to ensure children's ideas and wishes are routinely considered is a model of working with children that will be very challenging for some practitioners, teachers and others.

One way of beginning to resolve these tensions is to ask children themselves, 'Since Children themselves might have something particular to say about their

own world and to contribute to decision-making in relation to this environment' (Foley et al., 2001: 82). The notion of children's voice is explored further in Chapter 7. But if we consider where the power has traditionally been when it comes to judgements about children, whether from a welfare or control perspective, it has not been with the child. This has changed somewhat with the Children's Act and the notion of Children's Voice: 'What do all these stories tell us? First, they regularly present children's vulnerability. Second, they confirm adults' assertion of fundamental rights over young bodies and minds. Third, they demonstrate the diversity of children and their varying susceptibility to the control of the powerful' (Warsh, 2005: 15).

Further reading

'Say it your own way': Children's participation in assessment (that is, in consulting children to help practitioners and others make assessment about children's needs): www.barnardos.org.uk/sayityourownway

The full list of articles that comprises the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child can be accessed at: www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/_files/589DD6D3A29C929ACB148DB3F13B01E7 .pdf

Useful websites

www.dcsf.gov.uk/

www.cyh.com

www.bbc.co.uk/children/

www.surestart.gov.uk/surestartservices/childcare/childrensinformationservice/

www.familyinformationservices.org.uk/