

Raising Children in the Early 17th century: Child Care

Infant

Infants immediately after birth were cleaned and swaddled. Swaddling was a process by which a child's arms and legs were straightened and then wrapped with cloth bands. This was done to ensure that the child would grow up straight and not deformed. Children were kept in swaddling bands for a least a few weeks and probably several months after birth. The babies were breast-fed by their mothers or sometimes by hired wet nurses. They were diapered with "tail-clouts" which would be changed periodically, although accounts differ as to how frequently. Once they were out of swaddling, both boys and girls were dressed in "long coats," gowns which went well below their feet. Their first foods were pap or panada, thin cereals made with water, milk or broth. They were weaned at approximately a year.

Baby

The first major changes in a baby's development were teething and speaking. With teeth, a baby was less dependent on the mother or nurse for food. A baby's first recognizable words, then as now, were an exciting milestone in the child's development. Concerned parents tried to ensure that the people around the child were all of good character and wouldn't pass on bad language, opinions or habits to the child. Crawling, putting the child on a level equal with animals, was not encouraged. Babies, now dressed in "short coats" which ended at the ankle, were placed in baby walkers, or supported by others to stand and walk. They often wore a padded roll called a "pudding" to protect their heads in case of falls. Many gowns also had leading strings which attached to the back at the shoulders and held by another, helped guide the child's steps.

Child (6/7 to 12/14)

Age was viewed as multiples of six in the case of girls, and seven for boys. While there was no definitive break in a girl's life at six, a boy was usually "breeched" about the age of seven. At this time he was no longer dressed in a child's gown or skirts, but given small versions of adult male clothing. He was also likely to spend much less time at home with his mother, and more out with the men working. If a child did not go to school, s/he usually entered the work force by ten to twelve, although poor children might be placed in service at a younger age.

A girl was legally at the age of discretion at the age of twelve, and a boy at fourteen. They could wed at these ages, although that was very rare. A boy could inherit a copyhold lease at fourteen, as well. Twelve or thirteen had been the common age of confirmation in the Church of England until 1604, when reformers pushed the age to sixteen.



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Youth (12/14 to 18/21)

Children in the early 17th century, if they weren't in school, had commonly joined the work force by now. Some boys and more frequently, girls, would remain at home and work alongside their parents. For a boy who was to learn a craft, this would be the period in which he started his apprenticeship. His father or guardian would have tried to determine a suitable occupation for him, based on his inclinations and abilities. Since an apprenticeship had to be paid for, there were also economic concerns. The higher status and more lucrative trades were harder to enter, and the apprenticeship would cost more or last longer than the usual seven years. A boy might try several masters and occupations "on liking" before he settled on one and was formally recorded at the guild hall where the master craftsmen conducted official business. Girls rarely became apprentices. If they did, the girls were generally apprenticed to learn the skills of housewifery, and would be apprenticed to a mistress until the age of eighteen, or until married.

For those not apprenticed, the majority would become servants. They would contract, usually for a year at a time, to live with and work for a family. This was seen as having several benefits. The child's parents would be relieved of the child's economic support. The child would be earning money towards setting up a home. S/he would be learning skills, and making contacts which would also be useful in the future. The employing family would have the benefit of a household member to help with the work. This "life-cycle" servitude would continue for years, often until the servant married.

Fifteen was the age to begin military service in England; sixteen in New England. Boys at this time would become members of the local militia and train with the other men. At eighteen, he could swear an oath of loyalty. Girls could inherit at eighteen. At twenty-one, they were legally adults.



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