

Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Work

Sources for 17th-century England indicate that children entered the work force at a much earlier age than today's legal minimum of fourteen years. Children as young as five ran errands, fetched wood and water, herded geese and did various other tasks not demanding either great skill or strength. Slightly older children picked fruit, manured fields, pulled stones and weeds, and tied sheaves during harvest. There are many instances of boys helping with the plowing and even having charge of a team of oxen or horses at the age of twelve. In towns and cities, they also helped in the shops, taverns and worked alongside their fathers. Generally, girls stayed close to home and tended younger children, did housework, sewed and helped prepare meals. Even they, however, would go out and work in the fields during harvest.

Seventeenth-century families were economic units as well as social ones, and children were expected to contribute what they could. In England, a good part of what children did was dependent on where they lived. Out in the country, they would be helping with the crops or livestock. In the towns and cities, they might be working in whatever occupation their father or mother held. In both areas, they could help in small but important ways.

Both sexes while young helped around the house, although boys at the age of seven or so were more likely to be out with the men. Older children watched the younger ones and sometimes acted as nurses to the sick or elderly. They ran errands. Older girls would continue to work with their mothers or other women in the house, learning the skills they would need later in life.

Sometime in his early teens, usually between fourteen and seventeen, a boy might be apprenticed to a master to learn a trade. This almost always involved payment to the master by the parents, the higher status and more lucrative trades being more expensive to enter. Apprenticeships generally ran for seven years, during which time the child would live with his master and family. He would learn the trade, starting with the most menial tasks and gradually getting more instruction. At the end, he would be able to work and earn money for himself, and eventually become a master in his own right.



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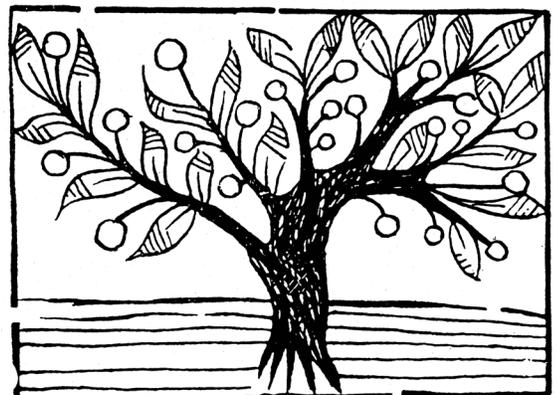
Work in Plymouth Colony

Even very small children could perform some work for the household. All Plymouth homes had gardens next to the house, which needed frequent tending most of the year. There was planting in the spring and thinning out to be done once the plants began to grow. The garden beds had to be weeded and perhaps watered as well. The colony had acres of Indian corn under cultivation and children could help there as well. The ground had been under cultivation by the Natives for years, and needed to be fertilized with fish prior to planting, and then five or six kernels of corn were planted above. The corn plants were weeded periodically over the growing season and the ears of corn harvested in early fall. The corn had to be dried before storage. The colonists also had goats, cattle, pigs and chickens which needed tending.

Opportunities for trade apprenticeships in New England were much more limited. Virtually all of the boys became farmers in early Plymouth Colony. There was not enough work for most craftsmen to support a family by following one craft year-round. For girls, it was expected, as in England, that they would marry and raise a family. Just as the boys

became farmers, so did the girls become farmers' wives. Clothing their families was more difficult than it would have been in England. In the first years, both finished garments and fabric had to be imported. Housewives did their own brewing and baking, salting fish, etc.; there were no shops, markets, peddlers or fairs in the early years. Girls were trained by the mothers in the domestic arts required to run a house. These included gardening, cooking and preserving foodstuffs, tending children, sewing and mending, etc. Women were also responsible for the medical care of their households, so making medicines and treating illness and injuries would also have to be learned.

Just as the girls worked alongside their mothers to learn the skills they would need as adults, boys accompanied their fathers or other men as they worked. Ready fields for planting, sowing seed, weeding, judging ripeness, harvesting and finally storing the year's crops were only part of their training. They also needed to know how to tend livestock, hunt, fish and do the woodworking necessary. More importantly, they had to be educated to fill the role of head of the household which they would someday occupy.



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