1 Understanding childhood: an introduction to some key themes and issues

Mary Jane Kehily

Recent developments in education and the social sciences have seen the growth of childhood studies as an academic field of enquiry. Over the last decade or so childhood studies has become a recognized area of research and analysis, reflected in the success of publications such as James and Prout (1997) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* and Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) *Stories of Childhood: Shifting Agendas of Child Concern*. A growing body of literature points to the importance of childhood as a conceptual category and as a social position for the study of a previously overlooked or marginalized group – children. Childhood studies as a field of academic endeavour offers the potential for interdisciplinary research that can contribute to an emergent paradigm wherein new ways of looking at children can be researched and theorized. This book aims to bring together key themes and issues in the area of childhood studies in ways that will provide an introduction to students and practitioners working in this field.

In this chapter I aim to introduce and comment upon some of the key themes and issues that will be revisited throughout the book. I want to begin by asking the question, ‘What is childhood studies anyway?’ Is it a collation of already existing knowledges about children and childhood or does the term constitute a new academic field? An obvious point to acknowledge is that the study of children and childhood has been part of a diverse range of academic disciplines for a very long time. Different disciplines have developed different ways of approaching the study of children, using different research methods driven by a far from coherent set of research questions. For some disciplines (such as sociology and cultural studies) childhood as a concept is specifically addressed, while for other disciplines (such as psychology and education) the focus has been upon the child or children. In order to develop an insight into the diversity of childhood studies as a field of inquiry, the book is divided into three parts: historical approaches to childhood, sociocultural approaches and policy perspectives. These offer a different and sometimes distinct way of looking at children and childhood, providing the reader with a conceptual
framework for understanding the field. Each part is considered in more detail below.

**Historical approaches to childhood**

Historical studies provide a rich source of knowledge about children and childhood in the past and the present. Many of the issues that concern contemporary studies of childhood have a historical trajectory that elucidates and informs the present in powerful ways. Issues of concern for contemporary scholars of childhood such as child labour, the gulf between the experience of childhood in the West and the non-western world, and western anxieties about children in the new media age can be usefully explored by recourse to history. Historical approaches suggest that childhood was reconceptualized in the UK between the late nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I (Steedman 1990; Gittins 1998). These studies demonstrate that concerns with child poverty and ill health produced a significant shift in the economic and sentimental value of children. Over a fairly short historical period the position of working-class children changed from one of supplementing the family income to that of a relatively inactive member of the household in economic terms, to be protected from the adult world of work and hardship (Cunningham 1991). A contemporary US-based study elaborates upon this theme by indicating that children’s contribution to the family in western contexts is economically worthless but emotionally ‘priceless’ (Zelitzer 1985). Zelitzer’s study suggests that children’s ‘value’ lies in their ability to give meaning and fulfilment to their parents lives. Further historical research suggests that childhood provides a site for thinking about the self and locating selfhood; a way of mapping and developing human interiority (Steedman 1995). Seen from this perspective, the child represents an extension of the adult self, a symbolic link with one’s own childhood invoking a psychic dynamic between the past and the present.

Some of these themes can be seen in the work of Henry Mayhew, a nineteenth-century social commentator who observed and documented the lives of working-class people in London. His detailed descriptions in *London Labour and the London Poor* (first published 1861), provide us with a rich social history of life and conditions in nineteenth-century England. Mayhew’s encounter with an 8-year-old street vendor, the Watercress Girl, documents his feelings of surprise at meeting a child who, to his mind, is not a child. Mayhew’s sense of surprise rests upon his observation that a child of 8 has ‘lost all childish ways’. Mayhew begins by positioning her as a child and speaking to her about ‘childish subjects’ such as playing with toys, playing with friends and going to the park. The Watercress Girl, however, is not familiar with this aspect of child-
hood and has no experience of playing for pleasure. Her experiences are centred round a few streets in London where she lives and works. Mayhew draws our attention to the material circumstances of the girl’s existence: she is pale, thin and unused to eating regular hot meals; she is unkempt and inadequately clothed; she no longer attends school; and she has become accustomed to a life of hardship that includes occasional bouts of physical abuse. Mayhew is moved by the child’s description of her life to the point where he finds her account ‘cruelly pathetic’. From his description we can deduce something of what Mayhew’s expectations of childhood may be. It would be reasonable to suggest that Mayhew views childhood as a period of life where play and carefree pleasure should be indulged, where the child is protected from the adult world of work and is cared for, kept warm and well fed. The encounter between Henry Mayhew and the Watercress Girl can be seen in a couple of interrelated ways. First, it is possible to understand Mayhew’s surprise as a moment where the imagination is held in check by the reality of experience. The Watercress Girl challenges Mayhew’s concept of childhood and disturbs his notion of what a child is and how a child behaves. Hence his difficulty seeing someone so young, talking to her as a child, while simultaneously recognizing that she is not childlike and in fact is ‘in thoughts and manner, a woman’. Second, the account can be seen and understood in terms of social class. As a middle-class man, Mayhew is confronted with a working-class childhood which he does not recognize and has not experienced. Mayhew’s description of the Watercress Girl may indicate that, from his perspective, the girl has been deprived of her childhood. The theme of lost or stolen childhood is one that remains part of popular contemporary discourses of childhood.

Contemporary images of children in advertisements, television and film also comment on the concept of childhood in ways that bespeak a particular relationship with the past. Barnardo’s is a leading children’s charity based in the UK. About 20 years after Henry Mayhew’s encounter with the Watercress Girl, Dr Thomas John Barnardo became so concerned about the plight of street children in the East End of London that he opened an orphanage. This children’s home became a model for the setting up of others throughout the UK and Barnardo’s name has since been associated with the institutional care of children and young people. Barnardo’s no longer run children’s homes but they continue to be involved in many charitable projects to support children and young people. Barnardo’s describe their approach to caring for children in the twenty-first century in the following way:

Children have only one chance of a childhood. They deserve to be protected from harm, to enjoy good emotional, mental and physical health, and to feel that they belong in their home, at school and in their local community.
Barnardo’s believes that it is never too early or too late to offer a helping hand – and to give the most disadvantaged youngsters the chance of a better childhood and a brighter future.

(Barnardo’s 1999)

Like other charities Barnardo’s rely upon donations from the public and are constantly engaged in fundraising ventures to support their work and promote the public profile of the organization. In October 1999, Barnardo’s launched an advertising campaign in newspapers and magazines to raise awareness of their work with children. The series of advertisements portrayed children in a variety of ‘adult’ situations: homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, prostitution, suicide and prison. The image of a baby injecting drugs, aroused a great deal of controversy. The Advertising Standards Authority received 28 complaints from individuals and organizations that considered the advertisement to be shocking and offensive. In the face of public protest, Barnardo’s replaced the image with one of a happier baby without the syringe and tourniquet. But why is the image such a shocking one? It could be argued that the power of the image lies in the fact that it deliberately and self-consciously transgresses boundaries. While it is generally accepted that adults have knowledge of the world of drug use, it is usually assumed that children should be protected from such knowledge. To see a baby who is not only exposed to the reality of drug use but actually participating in it can be seen as a violation of generally held sensibilities about appropriate knowledge and behaviour. Yet all drug users were, of course, once babies. And this is the point that the Barnardo’s advertisement makes very forcefully. Childhood leads inevitably to adulthood and furthermore the child’s environment and experiences can have a bearing on adult life. In the advertisement the image and the text work together to create this message. The text reads:

John Donaldson. Age 23. Battered as a child, it was always possible that John would turn to drugs. With Barnardo’s help, child abuse need not lead to an empty future. Although we no longer run orphanages, we continue to help thousands of children and their families, at home, school and in the local community.

(Barnardo’s 1999)

The visual and textual juxtaposition of John Donaldson, baby, and John Donaldson age 23 makes a direct link between a battered childhood and drug abuse in adulthood. In this sense the image is stark and uncompromising. From the perspective of the charity, the link between abused childhood and troubled adulthood calls for intervention and change encapsulated in the Barnardo’s logo, ‘Giving children back their future’. Henry Mayhew and Dr Barnardo both view working-class children as poor and impoverished in many
ways; their sense of lack is material, emotional and experiential. The Barnardo’s advertisements suggest that children deserve to have a future and that they represent the future. As such, Mayhew and Barnardo both contribute to a view of childhood defined by its social status as a subordinate group in need of protection in order to be prepared for adulthood. Of course, it is adults who are claiming a future for children rather than children themselves, and this brings us to another point. Mayhew and Barnardo both position children as essentially passive – things happen to them that they do not choose and cannot control. Issues of agency and powerlessness remain central to contemporary discussions of childhood, emerging across several chapters in this volume.

The idea that childhood innocence should be preserved is a pervasive one and can be seen to operate on many different levels. Henry Mayhew’s account implies that children should be protected from the harsh realities of life. The advertisements featured in the Barnardo’s campaign may be aligned with this sentiment but go further to indicate that the child is an adult-in-the-making and therefore requires quality care and attention. The idea of childhood that can be discerned in Mayhew’s account and Barnardo’s advertising reflect two discourses that underpin contemporary understandings of childhood – the Romantic discourse and the discourse of *tabula rasa* (blank slate). Drawing upon the work of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), the Romantic discourse claimed that children embody a state of innocence, purity and natural goodness that is only contaminated on contact with the corrupt outside world. The Romantic vision of the child ascribed children a spirituality that placed them close to God, nature and all things good. Children’s purity should be respected and protected in order for them to express themselves freely and creatively. These ideas about children were taken up in England by William Wordsworth who famously claimed that ‘The Child is father of the Man’ (‘My Heart Leaps Up’, 1802). The *tabula rasa* discourse draws upon the philosophy of John Locke who developed the idea that children come into the world as blank slates who could, with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings. Within this discourse the child is always in the process of becoming, an adult-in-the-making with specific educational needs that adults should take seriously. It is the responsibility of adults to provide the appropriate education and control to enable children to develop into mature and responsible citizens (for a further discussion of discourse informing childhood see Montgomery 2003). The Romantic and *tabula rasa* discourses along with a third discourse – the Puritan – postulating that children are potentially wicked or evil, underpin many contemporary discussions of childhood and are elaborated upon further in many chapters of this book.

The theme of representations is taken up in Chapter 2 to illustrate the ways in which the concept of childhood has been constructed over time. Using a range of historical examples, Diana Gittins points out that childhood
is an adult construction that changes over time and place. Moreover, she suggests that the concept of childhood serves to disguise differences between children, especially in relation to social categories such as gender, ethnicity and social class. The chapter provides a clear and insightful discussion of the Ariès thesis, an influential historical study that analysed paintings to argue that childhood is a modern invention that emerged from the beginning of the sixteenth century. Gittins points out that the development of childhood as a concept was class-specific, reflecting the values and practices of a rising European middle class that increasingly differentiated adults and children, girls and boys.

Creating children as a special category of people also creates the need for cultural products and practices that set children apart from adults. Toys, books and artefacts made specifically for use by children are often referred to as the material culture of childhood. In Chapter 3, Peter Hunt explores this aspect of children’s culture and discusses the historical relationship between children’s books and the concept of childhood. He points out that children’s literature is an unreliable resource for understanding childhood. Children’s literature creates or constructs a version of childhood that is then addressed in children’s books. Important power struggles can be played out within children’s literature as it is of course adults who write and children who read the books. Viewed across time, the literature can be seen as a site where competing versions of childhood can be defined and struggled over. The earliest books for children were produced for the middle classes and had a strong didactic purpose, providing children with moral and religious education. In recent times, children’s writers appear to be on the child’s side, creating an alliance with other children against adults. The potency of children’s literature lies in the residual image of childhood it leaves behind – the safe, decent world of the Famous Five or the wonderful fantasy world of action heroes. Hunt suggests that a significant change in children’s literature occurred during the 1970s. This period was marked by the introduction of neo-realist themes – dark tales portraying a nightmarish world, usually outside the bounds of children’s fiction. In contemporary children’s literature, children are positioned as perceptive and reflexive subjects, more knowing than the adults around them. Finally, Hunt suggests that children’s books reflect the aspirations of adults for children – aspirations that can be variously identified as: the child as last refuge of a collapsing society; child as consumer; and child as rebellious individual.

In Chapter 3 of the section on historical approaches to childhood, Mary Jane Kehily and Heather Montgomery consider childhood in relation to issues of sexuality. Contemporary discourses, drawing heavily on Romantic themes, position children as sexually innocent. Exploring ideas of innocence and sexual knowledge historically through anthropology, it is apparent that childhood sexuality is a highly contested domain contingent upon time and place. Through discussion of a range of examples from different times and
geographical locations, the chapter points out that the meanings ascribed to sexuality and sexual practice are a matter of interpretation for both adults and children. The chapter suggests that the idea of childhood innocence in the West retains its strength as an adult *ideal*, something which adults would *like* children to be. In many western contexts adults appear keen to maintain symbolic boundaries that play out the powerful social taboo commented upon by Stevi Jackson (1982), that children and sex should be kept apart. However, a Foucaultian perspective indicates that the presence of boundaries also creates the conditions for multiple acts of trangression. The eroticization of children in the West, particularly girls, can be seen in this light. The chapter points to the potential of literature and popular culture to illustrate and illuminate these themes in films such as *The Wizard of Oz* and novels such as *Lolita*. The chapter concludes with the thought that the construction of childhood innocence reveals much more about adults than children.

**Sociocultural approaches to childhood**

Part 2 considers the ways in which the study of childhood has been approached within the social sciences and cultural studies. Here the focus is largely upon the contemporary period of the late twentieth century to the present day. The late twentieth century was marked by an interest in forms of reflexivity. Academics working within the confines of disciplinary boundaries posed questions concerning the nature and status of academic inquiry such as ‘How do we know what we know?’ and ‘How far does research bring into being the subject it purports to study?’ The argument could be made that, in conducting research on children, researchers also produce a version of ‘the child’ and indeed a version of childhood. The recognition that there may be different ways of being a child and different kinds of childhood is important to the development of contemporary approaches to childhood. Central to contemporary approaches is the understanding that childhood is not universal; rather, it is a product of culture and as such will vary across time and place.

The disciplines of psychology and sociology have made a significant contribution to contemporary understandings of childhood. In general, psychological research has focused upon the individual child, while sociological research has been interested in children as a social group. In the early twentieth century, developmental psychology became established as the dominant paradigm for studying children (Woodhead 2003). Developmental psychology documented the stages and transitions of western childhood. Within this framework, childhood is seen as an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be charted though stages relating to age, physical development and cognitive ability. The progression from child to adult involves children in a developmental process wherein they embark upon a path to rational subjectivity.
Sociological approaches by contrast have been concerned with issues of socialization; ways of exploring how children learn to become members of the society in which they live. The differences between the two approaches are outlined and discussed in an academic intervention that sets out the parameters for a ‘new sociology of childhood’ (James and Prout 1997). James and Prout propose that ‘the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which it is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture’ (p. 7). They suggest that there is a growing body of research that identifies an emergent paradigm for the study of childhood. Key features of the paradigm, as outlined by James and Prout, are:

- childhood is understood as a social construction;
- childhood is a variable of social analysis;
- children’s relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right;
- children should be seen as active social agents;
- ethnography is a useful method for the study of childhood;
- studying childhood involves an engagement with the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

The differences between psychological and sociological approaches to childhood are frequently emphasized and mobilized as part of a move to critique the universalism of child development (James and Prout 1997; Jenks, this volume). In Chapter 5, Chris Jenks discusses the different ways in which developmental psychologists and sociologists have approached childhood. His chapter points to the influence of Piaget and, by contrast, the conceptual grounds of sociological thought. Finally, Jenks’ chapter offers a series of models of the child that provide an overview of sociological approaches to childhood. While it is instructive to think about the differences between developmental psychology and sociology, it is also helpful to hold onto the commonalities and points of continuity between the two approaches. Socialization also calls into being an adult-in-the-making, a child that is in the process of becoming a responsible citizen, albeit a more socially orientated one. The histories of developmental psychology and sociology can be seen as engagements with the project of liberalism – the production and regulation of rational and civilized adult citizens (see Walkerdine, this volume). There is a further methodological point to be made in support of developmentalism. As Martin Woodhead (2003) notes, many of the critiques of Piagetian approaches overlook the research goals and practices that informed the investigation of children’s thinking and learning. Woodhead points out that Piaget’s approach was child-centred: to encourage greater respect for children’s thinking and behaviour; to attempt to understand children’s perspectives on their own terms.
Valerie Walkerdine’s chapter aims to think about the place of psychology in the understanding of childhood. She notes that developmental psychology has played a central role in the scientific study of children since the end of the nineteenth century. The sociological critique of this body of literature has had the effect of purging psychology from childhood studies only to replace it with forms of neuroscience. Walkerdine suggests that psychology can contribute to our understanding of childhood and can be understood within the context of a historically specific political moment of western democratic societies. Walkerdine explores the experience of schooling in nineteenth-century England as a process designed to address national problems of crime and pauperism. Education would teach moral values and good habits. This investment in pedagogy produced a new way to understand the nature of children. From this perspective, developmental psychology provides valuable insights into childhood as a process of adaptation marked by the staged progression towards adulthood. Walkerdine points out that childhood is always produced as an object in relation to power. Moreover, the modern western conceptualization of the child exists in circuits of exchange between the western and the non-western world. Walkerdine suggests that it is important to move beyond dualisms to understand how people become subjects within specific local practices and, further, to understand how subject positions and practices operate within complex circuits of exchange. In conclusion, Walkerdine outlines three approaches to rethinking the place of psychology in childhood: situated learning and apprenticeship; Actor Network theory; and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of assemblages.

The final chapter of Part 2 shifts the focus to a consideration of children’s culture. Approaching childhood from a cultural perspective draws upon the work of Raymond Williams (1961, 1989) who famously claimed that ‘culture is ordinary’. Williams referred to culture as a ‘way of life’ that makes sense to individuals in a particular community. This perspective also sees culture as a form of action – it is not just something that people have, it is also what they do (Kehily and Swann 2003). David Buckingham’s chapter considers the relationship between new media technologies and childhood, and particularly the ways in which children’s lives have been shaped and changed in the new media age. Buckingham observes that technology, like the idea of childhood itself, is often invested with our most intense fears and fantasies. These fears and fantasies usually fall into two camps: technology as dangerous and threatening or technology as a form of liberation and empowerment. In the age of the internet, the computer becomes a convenient place to dump worries and frustrations. Countering this view is the Romantic-inspired idea that children are naturally creative and can use new technologies in positive and empowering ways. Buckingham suggests that both these perspectives are symptomatic of the sentimental ways in which children are viewed in western societies. He points to the technological determinism that underpins much
discussion of new media, a way of looking that assumes technology will bring change in and of itself. New media technologies, however, rely upon many of the forms and conventions of old technologies. While much research refutes the idea that computer games, for example, are antisocial, very little is known about how children perceive, interpret and use new media. Finally, Buckingham calls for the need to connect macro and micro perspectives, to situate children’s relationships with media within the texture of their daily lives while also taking account of the economic and political forces at stake.

In thinking about children’s cultural worlds it is important to acknowledge the rich vein of school-based studies that have contributed to an understanding of childhood from the perspective of children themselves. This body of literature explores the many ways in which children make sense of the world around them and take their place in that world through everyday cultural practices. Many of the studies adopting this approach capture something of the experience of being a child. In an influential early study based in the UK, Charlotte Hardman (1973) sought to discover whether there is in childhood a self-regulating autonomous world that does not necessarily reflect early development of adult culture. Inspired by the Opie’s (Opie and Opie 1969) *Children’s Games in Street and Playground*, Hardman suggested that children should be studied in their own right and should be treated as agentic social actors. She developed an analysis of children’s culture based upon participant observation of children in a primary school. She suggested that culture could be represented diagrammatically as interlocking circles in which children constituted one segment of a society’s set of beliefs, values and social interactions. Hardman’s generative approach called for the ‘muted voices’ of children to be heard. This call was taken up by Bill Corsaro (1985) in his study of children at a nursery school in the USA. Like Hardman, Corsaro’s ethnographic observations of children at play offer a compelling and richly detailed analysis of children as active meaning-makers.

Berry Mayall (1994, 2002) has further explored childhood from the perspective of children themselves. Mayall’s study argues that children constitute a part of the social order that can be seen in terms of generation. Mayall suggests that children’s contribution to the social order should be recognized. Specifically, she points to the significant role that children play in relationship work: providing support, making and maintaining relationships in families and taking on care activities.

Other studies of children’s cultural worlds have drawn attention to childhood as a gendered experience. Barrie Thorne’s (1993) US-based study of children, gender and play uses ethnographic methods to study the social worlds of boys and girls (aged 9–10) in a public elementary school. Her study captures the energetic and highly-charged nature of children’s cultural worlds where friendship involves engagement in imaginative forms of physicality, talk and action. To the adult researcher the rapid movements of children
at play appeared haphazard and chaotic. However, after several months of observation Thorne began to make sense of children’s play from the perspective of children themselves. Thorne’s analysis suggests that children’s friendships have a structure and an internal logic that makes sense to the children involved. Through patterns of friendship and rituals of play, children create meanings for themselves and others. An example of this cited by Thorne is the way in which children use everyday objects such as pencils, crayons, erasers, toy cars, magnets and lip gloss. Thorne suggests that these objects acquire symbolic significance among friends. In the school context, where children have little power, these objects become significant as tokens of friendship that can be bartered and exchanged. Thorne observed that the objects constituted a flourishing ‘underground economy’ and indicated that among the children she studied, they acquired use-value in contexts where patterns of trade marked circles of friendship in the following ways: ‘as a focus of provocation and dispute, as a medium through which alliances could be launched and disrupted, as sacraments of social inclusion and painful symbols of exclusion, and as markers of hierarchy’ (Thorne 1993: 21).

Thorne identified a further example of children creating meanings through friendship in playground chasing games. Here Thorne describes and comments upon the widespread invocation of ‘cooties’ or rituals of pollution in which individuals or groups are treated as carriers of contagious ‘germs’. Thorne documented the experiences of some unfortunate children whose undesirability was captured and pronounced by the tag ‘cootie queen’ or ‘cootie king’. Thorne suggests that, in general, girls are seen as a source of contamination, referred to by boys in one school as ‘girl stain’. This involved boys treating girls and objects associated with girls as polluting while the reverse did not readily occur. Thorne’s analysis of these games points to the relationship between children’s cultural worlds and the broader context of power relations in which they exist:

When pollution rituals appear, even in play, they enact larger patterns of inequality, by gender, by social class and race, and by bodily characteristics like weight and motor coordination . . . In contemporary US culture even young girls are treated as symbolically contaminating in a way that boys are not. This may be because in our culture even at a young age girls are sexualized more than boys, and female sexuality, especially when ‘out of place’ or actively associated with children, connotes danger and endangerment.

(Thorne 1993: 75–6)

Thorne points to the further significance of gender in children’s cultural worlds through her conceptualization of ‘borderwork’, a term used to characterize the ways in which children tend to form single-sex friendship groups
that serve to create and strengthen gender boundaries. Thorne suggests that children’s friendship patterns create a spatial separation between boys and girls that they work to maintain through play and social interactions more generally. Drawing up boundaries, however, also creates opportunities for transgression, crossing the line to disrupt gender-appropriate behaviour or ‘border crossing’ as Thorne terms it. While most children adhered to gender-defined boundaries, Thorne did notice that border crossing appeared to be acceptable among girls or boys who had achieved a position of high status within their peer group.

Valerie Hey’s (1997) study of girls’ friendships in the UK points to some under-acknowledged features of same-sex friendship groups. Hey’s ethnographic study of girls (aged 11–18) in two secondary schools challenges many assumptions relating to girls’ friendship with each other. Hey suggests that feminist researchers have a tendency to romanticize girls’ friendships, to view them through the celebratory lens of girls’ capacity for sharing, caring and mutual support. By way of contrast, Hey documents and discusses the frequent interactions between girls that centre upon the less than supportive practices of bitching, falling-out and rituals of exclusion. In Hey’s account girls can be seen to be engaged in patterns and practices of friendship that are fuelled by tensions and conflict as much as support and care.

Frosh et al.’s (2002) study of boys and masculinity illustrates some striking features of boys’ friendships. Their interview-based study of boys (aged 11–14) in the UK suggests that boys’ relationships with each other are structured around the contradictions of masculine identities. Many of the boys they spoke with saw masculinity and toughness as inextricably linked, thus making it difficult for them to discuss feelings of emotional closeness and intimacy within male friendship groups. In individual interviews with Rob Pattman, however, many boys did discuss feelings of intimacy and vulnerability at school and within the family. Frosh et al. particularly comment upon the ways in which conforming to masculine norms may constrain boys and leave them with few opportunities for expressing their feelings. The studies of Thorne, Hey and Frosh et al. contribute to an understanding of childhood by problematizing the notion of gender as a ‘natural’ self-evident feature of children’s lives in western societies.

**Policy perspectives on childhood**

Part 3 is concerned with issues of policy and the ways in which policies relating to children may produce moments of conflict and contradiction when they collide with the realities of children’s lives. In Chapter 8, Wendy Stainton Rogers points out that social policy is motivated by a concern for children. Issues of deprivation and disadvantage, and ways to alleviate them, become
central to social policy perspectives on children. Earlier in this chapter, we discussed the work of Barnardo, whose concern for children in poverty provided the impetus for the institutional care of children in the UK. This identification of a ‘need’ followed by social action has been a feature of policy-based approaches. Generally speaking, social policies attempt to make positive interventions in people’s lives. In the context of contemporary western childhoods, Kellmer Pringle (1974) outlined the four basic needs of children as:

- the need for love and security;
- new experiences;
- praise and recognition;
- responsibility.

The discussion of children’s needs, however, is commonly based upon assumptions and value-laden judgements about children. Martin Woodhead (1997) notes that the focus on children’s needs remains a powerful rhetorical device for constructing versions of childhood – prescribing care and education and evaluating the quality of adult-child relations. In a move to deconstruct western notions of childhood, the universalism of the ‘needs’ discourse has been critiqued and replaced by a discourse of children’s ‘rights’. The shift in orientation from needs to rights reflects an endeavour to understand and take into account the child’s point of view. Chapter 8 discusses these themes in more detail.

In the UK, social policy is premised upon taking decisions and courses of action that are in ‘the best interests of the child’. This aim resonates with global legislation on children, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). The UNCRC suggests that adult intervention on behalf of children should be guided by actions that promote the ‘best interests’ of the child or group of children. The UNCRC places children’s rights in the context of human rights and stresses the importance of rights for all children. The rights of children are outlined as a set of legally binding principles designed to protect and promote children’s welfare in areas such as health, education and the family. The UNCRC acknowledges the vulnerability of children and discusses their rights in relation to the ‘four Ps’: protection, provision, prevention and participation (for a further discussion of children’s rights and the UNCRC see Lansdown 2001; Burr and Montgomery 2003; Burr, this volume).

Issues of policy and legislation commonly rely upon top-down initiatives whereby adults attempt to ‘do the right thing’ by children. Some studies, however, have developed a child-centred approach to issues of rights. Priscilla Alderson (1993, 2000) takes an innovative approach to children’s rights in research that explores children’s ability to understand and make decisions on their own behalf. In studies of, for example, children’s ability to consent to
surgery and share in the organization and management of schools, Alderson tackles the issue of children’s rights from the perspective of children themselves. Her studies document and portray a richly-textured world in which children are indeed capable of exercising rights and making decisions concerning their welfare by themselves and for themselves.

Wendy Stainton Rogers’ chapter focuses on practical ways in which childhood can be promoted or made better by adults working within the state policy of England and Wales. Stainton Rogers offers a critical commentary on the notion of the child’s ‘best interests’ by providing us with illustrative examples that unsettle established notions of childhood and welfare – for example, 14-year-old Zadie raises issues that address the tension between children’s autonomy and their need for protection. Stainton Rogers points to the limitations of the needs discourse and the rights discourse when it comes to acting in Zadie’s best interests. She suggests that a quality of life discourse offers more scope for developing sensitive approaches to children and families. Moreover, a consideration of quality of life has the potential to recognize the strengths of individuals and families in ways that move beyond forms of individualizing and pathology.

Chapter 9 further explores the theme of children’s rights by looking at the UNCRC in relation to the experiences of street children in Vietnam. Rachel Burr introduces the reader to the UNCRC and provides useful background information regarding its almost worldwide ratification. Here the impact of the UNCRC is examined in the light of sociocultural influences upon childhood experiences in South-East Asia. Burr argues that the UNCRC represents a particular model of childhood informed by western thinking that has implications for children in non-western contexts. Burr’s empirical evidence from Vietnam suggests that, as presently constituted, this child-focused international human rights law is fundamentally grounded in individual rights and therefore remains unable to accommodate societies in which communal rights are the norm. In a critique of the UNCRC Burr draws upon her ethnographic study to show that because the self as ‘I’ is not universally recognized the UNCRC itself holds little meaning for many societies where communal values take precedence over individual rights. Burr points to the clear tensions between the aims of the UNCRC and local practices in Vietnam. She points out that despite the almost universal ratification of the UNCRC, children’s rights are not universal; they are played out differently in different cultural contexts with inevitable points of dissonance and conflict. Seen from the perspective of children themselves in Vietnam, Burr’s study illustrates that top-down attempts to give children autonomy are not necessarily having their intended impact.

In Chapter 10, Daniel Monk explores the ways in which childhood is shaped by the law. Perceptions of law and the legal profession frequently paint a picture of law as complex, rather dry and, depending on the circumstances,
a burden or a source of protection. The aim of this chapter is to dispel these commonplace assumptions. Monk demonstrates that the law relating to children is not simply a code of behaviour or a rule-book that tells us what children can do or how adults (parents and authorities) should behave towards them. Rather, it can be seen as an increasingly significant site for the construction and legitimization of contemporary knowledge about childhood. In other words, law is not simply functional but productive. This approach requires that we think of law and read law as a contingent cultural and social text. This chapter introduces the reader to some of the key works and underlying principles of critical, feminist and socio-legal perspectives on childhood. It does not deal with these approaches in an abstract or purely theoretical fashion but applies them through an examination of three distinct and currently controversial areas of law:

- Child sexuality;
- Domestic violence and contact disputes in family law proceedings;
- Juvenile justice and the criminal child.

A common question and theme underlying all three areas is the extent to which the law listens to the voice of the children concerned and acknowledges their individual subjectivities. Monk highlights this point and explores the extent to which children can be understood to be 'rights holders' and the degree to which the increased focus and acceptance of a 'children's rights' discourse has and is able to challenge the objectification of children by law. The three areas have been selected to reflect a wide range of legal categories (public, private family, criminal, education and health law) and a variety of legal sources (statute, case law and codes of practice). Monk does not attempt to provide a comprehensive coverage of child law; rather, he demonstrates that there is not one uniform coherent image of the child in law but, rather, that law engages in dialogue with a range of other discourses and tells many different stories of childhood.

The struggle for childhood

Chapter 10 is underpinned by the twin images of children as either innocent angels or evil devils. The Romantic-inspired child of innocence also calls into being its opposite – the demonic child. This duality is often used in the media and can be seen in contemporary views and images of childhood generally. Childhood figures in the contemporary British and North American imagination exist in an idealized state, but children who break out of this state, especially through crime, are increasingly penalized and demonized. Childhood innocence is celebrated and protected, while individual children
who transgress are vilified. Their behaviour places them beyond the realm of ‘proper’ children and normal childhood. As Scraton (1997: 167) observes: ‘The conceptualisation of “evil” within the aberrant child has long traditions with religious, academic and child-care institutions. It resides permanently beneath the surface which presents a veneer of tolerance and understanding in direct contrast to the forces released once children and young people step out of line’.

The cases below detail two murders committed by children in Britain and Norway. A comparison of these two cases illustrates the point that childhood innocence is an adult construct rather than an intrinsic and natural part of childhood. The cases also illustrate that there is no appropriate age or developmental stage where children can be said to understand moral reasoning. Children’s capacity to understand the consequences of their actions is dependent upon sociocultural context. Chapter 10 suggests that the ways in which children’s capacities are enshrined in law and social policy are far from coherent.

**Liverpool, UK: the Bulger case**

The murder of James Bulger was a key event in Britain in the 1990s and the repercussions continue in contemporary Britain. This event acts as a symbol for much of what is deemed to be wrong with British children and led to many newspaper editorials and commentaries on the nature of childhood, even though the case itself was remarkable for its very rarity. The number of children killed by other children over the last 150 years has remained extremely low and totally constant (Smith 1994). In 1993, James Bulger, a 2-year-old boy, was shopping with his mother in Liverpool and wandered off. He was found and led away by two 10-year-old boys, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, who subsequently assaulted and killed him and left his body on a railway line. The case appalled people in Britain for many reasons: the age of the murderers; the fact that they were caught on a closed-circuit television camera and images of them abducting James were broadcast on national television; and the indifference of passers-by, who seeing James in distress being led away by his killers did nothing to help. The case opened up an enormous public debate over the nature of children and childhood and the contrasting representations of children, with children such as James representing pure innocence and his killers pure evil.

Sections of the British public and media reacted to the two killers in an emotive way. As the boys were taken to court a mob gathered outside the courtroom screaming for them to be given the death penalty. The courts decided that although they were below the usual age of criminal responsibility they should be tried as adults, in an adult court with none of the privileges usually accorded to children in such circumstances. They were found guilty
and sentenced by the judge, Mr Justice Morland, to be detained ‘for very, very many years, until the Home Secretary is satisfied that you have matured’ (quoted in Morrison 1998). Mr Morland suggested that their minimum sentence should be eight years for ‘retribution and deterrence’, which two days later was increased by the Lord Chief Justice to ten years. After those ten years were up, the decision about their detention would be reviewed although they were given no maximum sentence. The reaction to the boys by sections of the press was dramatic and often they were portrayed as monsters. In the words of the judge, ‘The killing of James Bulger was an act of unparalleled evil and barbarity’, while one police officer was quoted as saying, ‘I truly believe they are just evil’. A colleague of his reinforced this with the words, ‘You should not compare these boys with other boys. They were evil’ (Morrison 1998). The newspapers weighed in. The Sun’s headline read, ‘The Devil Himself Couldn’t Have Made a Better Job of Two Fiends’; The Mirror called the boys ‘Freaks of Nature’, noting that although they had ‘the faces of normal boys . . . they had hearts of unparalleled evil’ and the Daily Star said simply, ‘How Do You Feel Now You Little Bastards?’ (Davis and Bourhill 1997: 47).

Eighteen months later, the issue was still bitterly contested with certain tabloid papers backing James Bulger’s parents’ campaign to have the murderers locked up indefinitely with no hope of release. Partly as a result of this public pressure, the then British Home Secretary, Michael Howard, increased the tariff to 15 years. The lawyers for Venables and Thompson appealed against this at the Commission on Human Rights in Strasbourg. They took the case to the European Court of Human Rights which ruled in 1999 that, although Venables and Thompson had not been subject to cruel, degrading or inhuman treatment, their trial had been unfair and violated their human rights because they had not been able to understand the proceedings. The laws of criminal responsibility in England and Wales and the role of the law in demonizing Venables and Thompson are considered in more detail in Chapter 10.

Blake Morrison attended the trial of Venables and Thompson as a reporter. He went on to write a best-selling book about the experience, As If, in which he argues that Venables and Thompson remain innocent despite their crime:

I have a four-year-old who believes the man in the moon is real – who believes that the moon is a man. Other four-year-olds have similar beliefs. They think the mannequins in shop windows are dead people. They think the sea’s there because someone left the tap running. They wonder who the sun belongs to, and whether heaven has a floor, and why people aren’t in two all the way up. I know seven-year-olds who believe in the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy. I know nine-year-olds who believe in Father Christmas. (I know forty-year-olds who think
God lives in the sky and wears a white gown.) Long may it last, this belief in magic . . . But don’t tell me four-year-olds know the difference between right and wrong.

And eight-year-olds, ten-year-olds? They understand the difference better, but can they act on that understanding? Did I? At ten I stole a Ferrari – a Dinky toy belonging to my cousin Richard . . . I knew what I was doing was wrong but desire – such a good feeling, which as a child I hadn’t learnt to distrust – made it feel right . . . I had a moral sense but not moral conviction. How could I have had conviction? I was a child.

Rousseau writes of a boy killing a bird without knowing what he does. The phrase is reminiscent of Christ’s: ‘Forgive them father, for they know not what they do.’ Special pleading from the cross; that people sometimes kill in ignorance, even innocence, and should not be eternally punished for their sin.

The basis of doli incapax is similar: that before the age of reason, children can’t be held responsible. When does the age of reason begin? Every country has its own answer, its own baseline; it’s eight in Scotland, ten in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, twelve in Canada, thirteen in Israel, fifteen in Norway, sixteen in Cuba – and in Romania eighteen. The mad arbitrariness. And see how low the British come. Low is the word. Maybe Rousseau was right, or no less wrong than we are, to measure reason in inches rather than years: ‘Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking and feeling which are proper to it’. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute our for theirs, and I would like as little to insist that a ten-year-old be five feet tall as that he possess judgement. Robert [Venables] is four foot six, Jon [Thompson] is four foot eight . . . If children of four know the difference between right and wrong, let them be jurors. Let ten-year-olds for sure. Wouldn’t it be more appropriate for T[hompson] & V[enables] to be tried by ten-year-olds, rather than adults, since this would mean, as juries are supposed to mean, judgement by one’s peers? I try this question out, saying it out aloud . . . but the answer comes back: of course not. Ten-year-olds as jurors? I wouldn’t trust their maturity, their judgement, intelligence, the qualities said to be present in T & V when they killed James . . .

God knows, adults find it hard enough to act on their knowledge of right or wrong. Can children, whose sense of right and wrong is newer but dimmer, fresher but fuzzier, act with the same clear moral sense? Do they grasp that hurting someone is much more wrong than stealing and truanting (which T & V had got away with for months)? Do they have a sense of the awful irreversibility of battering a child to death with bricks? Can death have the same meaning for them as it
Morrison argues that, as children of 10, James Bulger’s killers could have had no real sense of the consequences of their actions and that therefore they cannot be seen as truly guilty or held responsible. He is arguing from a belief that all children are innocent because they do not know. Others, in the media and the justice system, saw the learning of knowledge, especially about right and wrong, as a continuum and that by 10, children should know not to kill and what the consequence of beating and abusing a smaller child will be. The nature of the debate crystallizes round the notion of innocence. Morrison raises the question of innocence and guilt while others, such as the newspaper editors quoted above, suggest James’ killers were innately evil and that normal children, the innocents, had to be protected from these aberrations.

Trondheim, Norway: the Raedergrd case

A year after James’ death, the small Norwegian town of Trondheim was hit by a similar tragedy. In 1993, 5-year-old Silje Marie Raedergrd was playing with two 6-year-old male friends when the game turned violent. They stripped her, beat her unconscious and then ran away, leaving her to freeze to death in the snow. The similarities with the Bulger case were striking; what is stunning is the differences in perception of children and the way the authorities and Silje’s mother reacted. Trondheim is a close-knit community and although many people in the town knew who the killers were, their names were never published and they were protected from the media. The boys lived on the same housing estate as Silje and her family and as soon as news of her murder was made public, the police and the local schoolmaster opened up the school that both the boys and Silje attended and talked to both children and parents, stressing how safe the children were and appealing for calm and no vengeance. Meanwhile the mother of one of the boys who had killed Silje said, ‘Please remember that we are dealing with small children here. I cannot continue living here if my son is to be called a killer for the rest of his life’ (Franklin and Petley 1996: 150). Two days later, the killers went back to this school, accompanied by psychologists. There were no protests and no parents withdrew their own children. The Guardian reported the local paper’s attitude: ‘the culprits were just six years old; how did they know what they were doing? In Norway, where the age of criminality is 15 – as opposed to 10 in Britain – they were treated as victims not killers’ (Hattenstone 2000).

Silje’s mother’s reaction also contrasts starkly with the UK case. The day after the murder she appealed that the boys should be left alone and not subject to a witch-hunt. She said: ‘I forgive those who killed my daughter. It is
not possible to hate small children. They do not understand the consequences of what they have done . . . I can sympathise with the boys’ parents. They must be going through a lot now. I do not know all of them yet, but they are welcome to contact me if they so wish’ (Franklin and Petley 1996: 150). Despite the fact that she still suffers from post-traumatic stress as a result of her daughter’s murder and rarely goes out, Silje’s mother maintains that the boys should not be imprisoned: ‘No they were punished enough by what they did. They have to live with that. I think everybody has got to be treated like a human being. The children have to be educated, have to learn how to treat other people so they could get back into society’ (Hattenstone 2000).

A comparison of these two cases reveals that once again, ideas about children’s innocence are tied to ideas about age, what children can be expected to know and how far and at what age they have developed a moral consciousness and ability to reason. If Thompson and Venables had been Norwegian, there would have been no question about whether or not they should stand trial – they simply could not, because the Norwegian legal system does not recognize that children under the age of 15 can know what they are doing. The biggest difference in the cases, however, was the discussion they provoked about the very nature of childhood. The children in Trondheim were seen as much as victims as Silje herself and were counselled and reintegrated into society as soon as possible. The crime, while shocking, occasioned no great debate about childhood. In Britain however, the murderers have become symbolic of evil children out of control. The killers of James Bulger are now 20. They are out of prison, have been given new names and identities and have moved away from Liverpool. Their case also prompted questions about the very nature of modern children. Were these killers straightforwardly evil as the police had believed? Were they an aberration or was there something pathological in the nature of childhood itself? The Sunday Times claimed that the case was symptomatic of the inherent evil in children: ‘We will never be able to look at our children in the same way again . . . parents everywhere are asking themselves and their friends if the Mark of the Beast might not also be imprinted on their offspring’ (28 November 1993).

Childhood was in itself a dangerous place that had to be controlled and regulated by parents and adults. In the concern (some would say moral panic) surrounding children at the time, children were no longer seen as inherently innocent until corrupted but possessing ‘the Mark of the Beast’ which could emerge at any time. Others have taken this further, arguing that:

Children everywhere were described in terms reserved for hated enemies, they were subject to a ‘relentless outpouring of rage and hatred’ (Davis and Bourhill 1997: 56); the air was saturated with what Scraton (1999 unpublished paper) has recently termed the ‘ideological whiff of child-hate’. The cumulative impact of child
contempt has reached its crescendo. The demonization of children was symbolically established.

(Goldson 2001: 39)

These two different cases show the two extreme views of childhood apparent in much of western thinking. In Trondheim, the children were seen as entirely innocent because they were children. In Liverpool, they were evil, their innocence corrupted, and were afforded none of the privileges and tolerance that their age would have usually brought. In the former case the children were innocent because they did not know; in the latter, they were evil precisely because they did. In so many western images and understandings of children, as this chapter has explored, this dualism is inherent in studies of children. Their childhood is based around their innocence, whether that is defined as sexual, emotional or physical. Once their innocence has gone, so has their childhood, and once that has disappeared they are subject to the same pressures and difficulties as adults, whatever their age and whatever their understanding. They are entitled to no protection, no sympathy and no special pleading. They are no longer children. As Marina Warner (1994: 43) observes:

We call children ‘little devil’, ‘little monsters’, ‘little beasts’ – with the full ambiguous force of their terms, all the complications of love, longing, repulsion and fear . . . But the child has never been seen as such a menacing enemy as today. Never before have children been so saturated with all the power of projected monstrousness to excite repulsion and even terror.