“Childhood”: Changing and Dissonant Meanings

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Introduction

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “childhood,” meaning “the state or period of being a child,” dates to the 10th century. The term is thoroughly entangled with the stem “child,” but the suffix “hood”—also found in words like “sainthood” or “bachelorhood”—shifts the meaning from a type of person to a somewhat bounded state or condition (the hood of a garment is a suggestive image). In the English-speaking world, childhood has come to be framed as a thing or a possession that may be given, lost, stolen, or even disappear. As this essay will elaborate, the reification of childhood as a relatively stable “thing” fuels dichotomous thinking and glosses ambiguity, ideological struggle, cultural variation, and historical transformation.

In 1900, Ellen Key, a Swedish pedagogue, feminist, and writer, published a best-selling book translated as *The Century of the Child* ([1900] 1909), in which she argued for the need to change the status of children in Western societies in the upcoming century. As I will briefly detail, during the 20th century dramatic changes indeed came to pass through struggles around children’s participation in labor and schooling. As we move into the 21st century, the media, consumption, and issues related to learning have become key sites of controversy about the meanings and future of childhood. In the course of these changes, the desirability of moving beyond stark dichotomies (“child”/“adult”; “passive”/“agentic”; “learner”/“teacher”) and unitary images of childhood has become ever more apparent.

The Shifting and Ambiguous Terrain of Age Categories

At first glance, “child” may seem like a natural and embodied category, referring to the early years of

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physical maturation before the changes of puberty. It is part of a cluster of age categories—infant, child, adolescent, adult—arrayed in a line of cumulative growth and aging. In European history the image of a linear life course divided into age chunks goes back at least to the Middle Ages, but there was minimal age consciousness—no obsession with reckoning the specific age of each person, no celebration of birthdays, little preoccupation with separate stages of life—until the emergence of modernity in the 17th century (Hendrick in press). In a highly influential work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), the historian Philippe Ariès observed that in medieval Europe there was "no awareness of the particular nature of childhood." Children had a different legal and social status than adults, but from the age of about seven they participated in work and were integrated into household and village life. Age divisions were not marked by extreme spatial separation or by specialized activities, clothing, objects, or knowledge.

According to Ariès, the view of childhood as a separate, highlighted, and protected condition emerged along with the creation of age-segregated schools. Schools as separate institutions for the transmission of knowledge were initially established to train clergy, but with the development of industrial capitalism and the centralization of states, the demand for formal literacy expanded. Participation in organized schools became an age-linked activity initially limited to aristocratic boys—the first group, according to Ariès, to experience childhood as a set-apart, specialized stage of life.

Ariès called attention not only to the emergence of the school as an age-graded institution, but also to the separation of the privatized family from broader kinship and communal relations—another dimension of the move to locate (in Ariès's view, to confine) both girls and boys within particular spaces and activities. By the 19th century class-privileged children were set apart spatially and institutionally, through age-marked clothing and objects and by being protected from labor and from particular types of knowledge, for example, about sexuality, that became defined as only for adults.

During the early 20th century in Europe and the United States, the conception of childhood as a somewhat separate and protected space extended to the less affluent. The initially contested passage of laws against child labor and making school attendance compulsory had the effect of muting class divisions in the daily activities of children. Institutionally, childhoods take shape at the nexus of states, markets, and families, and, in the United States during the Progressive Era (1890–1910), relationships among these domains were dramatically reconfigured. Viviana Zelizer (1985) has described this transformation as a movement from "the economically useful child" contributing labor and wages to the household, to the "economically useless, but emotionally priceless child," sacralized and removed from paid labor into the more protected worlds of families and schools. Other institutional changes, such as the creation of juvenile courts and the age-specialized expert knowledge of pediatrics and developmental psychology, also elaborated upon childhood as a particular state of being.

As this brief history suggests, childhood is constituted as both a set of institutional arrangements and a powerful and emotionally charged set of ideas. In the 1930s, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1938, p. 162) observed that U.S. culture went to "great extremes" to emphasize contrasts between the child and the adult. The child, Benedict noted, "must be protected from the ugly facts of life," including sexuality (notions of innocence infuse the modern idea of "the child"), while the adult must encounter these facts "without psychic catastrophe"; "the child must obey, the adult must command this obedience"; the child is framed as irresponsible, the adult defined by responsibility. Benedict contrasted this disjuncture with the beliefs and practices of Native American cultures that assumed more continuity in the positioning of the young and the older.

Contrastive opposition between "child" and "adult" continues to run deep in the cultures of contemporary global North countries. Note that "adulthood" is often contrasted with "childhood," while we do not refer to "adolescenthood," "teenhood," or "youthhood." The words "adolescent" (framed in the early 20th century as a separate period of life), "teen" (a variant in the register of popular culture), "tween" (a term introduced by marketers), and "youth" (a word with a long history) have a more liminal feel, sliding in and out of "child" and "adult." All age-chunk categories are intrinsically temporal, with individuals and cohorts maturing and eventually moving through them. But the words "childhood" and "adulthood" tend to be deployed in fixed and bounded ways that gloss a great deal of internal variation and obscure the complex and multistranded temporalities of age.

Chronological age may seem helpfully “etic” in precision, like the use of color spectography to fix phenomena “out there” so that anthropologists can trace “emic” variation in the color terms used across cultures. But the “emics” of age spill beyond the seemingly “etic” counting of years, since not all cultures keep track of the years individuals have been alive. Even where chronological age is culturally paramount, the description of someone as 10 years old is, at best, a proxy for enormous physical, developmental, and social variation. This variation may include circumstances that press individuals to act and feel “older” or “younger” when judged by various systems of understanding, a process Anne Solberg (1990) calls “social age.”

Who “counts” as a “child” in various contexts is a matter fraught with inconsistency. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, passed in 1989 and by far the most influential global document defining this terrain, specifies that a child is anyone from birth to age 18. In the domain of politics, the U.S. pro-life movement pushes the initial boundary by deploying “child” (as in “unborn child”) from the moment of conception, a rhetorical use countered by the pro-choice preference for “fetus” or “fertilized egg.”

To explore the uses of age categories in another semantic domain, academic writing, I reviewed past issues of the journal *Childhood* and found that most authors used “child” for those from birth to 14 years old (although the journal includes very little about infants). For subjects 16 years and older, authors often added the terms “young people” or “youth,” with “children and young people” or “children and youth” used as generics for the full continuum of birth to age 18. At the early end of the age continuum, authors also felt a need for more specification, typically referring to subjects between two and five years old either as “young children” or “preschool-aged.”

In yet another domain—the law—divisions between childhood and adulthood are notoriously inconsistent. In the United States one may enlist in the military at age 17, while not having a legal right to drink, and a 13-year-old may be tried as an adult in court, but is not able to sign a legal contract. Finally, in this brief but hopefully indicative review of varied contexts of word use, what do “children” call themselves? During stints of fieldwork in U.S. public elementary schools over the last three decades, I’ve found that fourth, fifth, and sixth graders prefer to be called “kids” (Thorne 1993, 2008); they experience “child” as top down and condescending. But, according to a sociologist colleague in the United Kingdom, some British children object to being called “kids.”

Learning, Media, and the Contested Meanings of “Childhood”

Both keywords in the title of this journal—“learning” and “media”—evoke images of contemporary childhoods. The images, however, tend to veer in dissonant directions, although there is also movement (as in this journal) to examine young people’s learning in the context of new media. As noted earlier, since emerging in 17th-century Europe and consolidating in the late 19th century, the material and imagined realm of “childhood” became centrally defined by two institutions: families and schools. Childhood became framed as a period of preparation and learning guided not only by parents, but also by experts like teachers, pediatricians, and specialists in child development. Patterns of academic knowledge also reflected the equation of children with development and with school-based learning (Thorne 1987). Until the 1980s, when academic approaches to childhood, and to learning, began to broaden, the study of children was limited to a few fields: education, child psychology, the sociology of families, and anthropological research on childrearing. Within the social sciences children came into view primarily as learners, but also when they were seen as threatening, like juvenile delinquents, or as threatened, for example, as victims of abuse (Thorne 1987). Adult interests and perspectives infused all of this work, reflecting deep relationships between power and knowledge.

The equation of children with school-based and adult-taught learning resonates with the adult-child dualisms Ruth Benedict described in 1938. This dualistic view assumes that children are innocent, malleable, vulnerable, dependent, incomplete, and in need of guidance and protection. In relational contrast, this perspective frames adults as knowledgeable, autonomous, and responsible; adulthood is the completed “endpoint” (to use a term from developmental psychology) that children move toward. Like many dualisms, this one is also asymmetric: adults are more powerful, children are subordinate. Adults may use their greater power with caring efficacy, seeking to guide and protect children (“needy” versus “caring for needs” might be added to the cluster of dualisms). But relations of protection tend to slide into justifications for control. On the underside of the coupled image of "child-as-learner" and "adult-as-guide-and-teacher" lie the harsh practices of discipline and punishment that have attended the history of schools and families. Past and present adult practices toward children embed both care and domination.

If traditional conceptions of "learning" fit tidily with the idealized childhood of the 20th century, what about the word "media"? Here the connotations are more jarring and transgressive, with relations between children and the media a recurring site of public alarm and debate. In the 1980s popular books began to appear with almost interchangeable titles: *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1982), *The Erosion of Childhood* (Suransky 1982), *Children without Childhood* (Winn 1983), *Our Endangered Children* (Packard 1983). The authors all uphold the ideal of "childhood" as a nurturing and protected sphere—a concept they distinguish from "children," who may grow up in non-nurtured, non-protected circumstances, and thus, by this definition, be without a childhood. The authors argue that protected and nurtured childhoods are being eroded by trends (the points vary from book to book) such as changes in family life (high rates of divorce, the entry of more mothers into the labor force, the shortage of alternative sources of nurturance), and increasingly competitive and bureaucratic pressures on children, in and outside of schools.

The authors also indict the mass media for giving children access to adult knowledge, especially about sex, violence, and drugs. Neil Postman (1982) argues that childhood as a protected condition emerged along with the printing press, which gave adults control over information. In his view, the spread of more easily accessible electronic media, like television, exposed children to "adult" knowledge at earlier ages, leading to the disappearance of childhood. In short, while a school- and family-based concept of "learning" resonates positively with the unitary, 20th-century, global North ideal of childhood, that sort of childhood and the "mass media" are often seen as deeply at odds.

Adult concern about children being corrupted by mass media has a long history (Starker 1989; Buckingham 2000). In the 19th century adults worried about the effects of dime novels on young readers; waves of panic attended the introduction of comics and movies in the early part of the 20th century and the spread of television in the 1960s. These earlier periods of alarm reverberate with more recent anxiety about children's engagement with video games, cell phones, and the Internet (Starker 1989; Buckingham 2000; Drotner in press).

Why do some adults regard the mass media as sources of danger to children's welfare and to the future of childhood? Because these critics observe that children and youth seem to have a special affinity for movies, comics, television, video games, and the Internet; they worry that the media deliver content and facilitate social contacts beyond the control of parents and teachers, thus unsettling the boundaries of protected childhood. As evidence, these critics cite statistics about young people's uses of time. According to one often repeated fact, by the 1950s in industrial countries the average 18-year-old had spent more time engaged with various media than in school. More recently, a time-use survey of 10- to 19-year-olds in the United States found that 80 percent of boys and 20 percent of girls played video games, and that gamers spent 30 percent less time reading and 34 percent less time doing homework than non-gamers (Cummings and Vandewater 2007). Studies of this kind suggest that engagement with media undermines valued forms of learning.

Some observers believe that children are "by nature" attracted to and adept at the use of technologies that require special skills, such as sharing music on iPods, playing complex video games, using interactive sites on the Internet, and instant messaging on cell phones (here I'll grant a bit of biology; arthritis hampers manual dexterity). John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, the authors of *Born Digital* (2008), describe children raised in a digital world as Digital Natives, as contrasted with Digital Immigrants, that is, older people who learned the technologies as adults. The language of "born" and "native" naturalizes the connection of children and young people with digital technologies. But not everyone, young or old, is equally facile with or involved in these technologies, and, for economic reasons, large segments of the global population have little or minimal access to computers. Popular mappings of generational change tend to be drawn with the class-privileged at the center.

Children aren't born as savvy users of digital technologies. The skills are learned, interest and access are unevenly distributed, and young people may take to the media in part because designers and marketers spend a great deal of effort and money trying to lure them in that direction. The history of mass media is entangled with commerce and consumption, and corporations have long sought to cultivate children's engagement with marketable popular culture (Cook 2004; Schor 2004). As earlier discussed, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ideal of childhood as a sacralized space, outside of the market, was promoted by campaigns to remove children from paid labor and put them in schools. But over the course of the 20th century, this separation has been undermined, not by a resurgence of children participating in production in industrialized countries, but by the expansion of markets selling goods and services to and for children. The commodification of U.S. childhoods picked up steam in the 1930s (Cook 2004), and by the late 1990s corporations were spending over $15 billion a year on marketing and advertising to children (Schor 2004). Corporations with a large stake in reaching children channel much of their persuasive effort through the media, which promotes the image, laced with fantasy, of the child as an autonomous consumer.

The commodification, and thus the altering, of childhoods includes not only consumer goods and popular culture, but also the expansion of markets into schooling, health care, and support services like tutoring. Since the 1960s, cutbacks in state provisioning, the expansion of markets, and widening gaps between rich and poor (children are the largest age group living in poverty in the United States) have amplified class divisions in the contexts in which children grow up (Thorne 2008; Pugh in press). Because commercialized children's culture, including access to mass media, is widely accessible, it tends to obscure widening and racialized gaps between the rich and poor. Fantasies of childhood, inscribed in many forms of popular culture, should not be equated with the sometimes harsh circumstances of actual children's lives (Gillis 2003).

Media Threats to the Boundaries of Childhood

Information-bearing media threaten the ideal of childhood as a schooled, domesticated, and set-apart condition, nested in social relations with family, neighbors, friends, and classmates. Children's access to horror comic books (which caused much alarm in the 1950s), televised and video game images of sex and violence, and Internet pornographic sites contaminate childhood innocence (Jenkins 1998). Parents understandably worry that "adult content" will damage their children. There is also widespread concern about the speeded-up pace of growing older, with "kids growing up too young" as a result of commercial and media pressures, reworked in local youth cultures. Marketers deliberately use a strategy they call "age compression," designing and marketing sexy or "cool" products to younger kids; thus, the "tween" phenomenon, a term, as one marketer described it, for "9 year-olds going on 16" (O'Donnell 2007). But marketing images do not reflect the variety of actual lives and practices; fourth-grade girls do not look like Bratz dolls. As Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) observe in a book about "the millennial generation," today's young people are much less violent and sexually charged than the teen culture that adults produce for them.

For decades television has brought the larger world—including "adult content"—into domestic space and thus threatened the set-apart and protected idea of childhood, a threat countered by many private and organized efforts at regulation. Interactive computer sites, like chat rooms, blogs, MySpace, and YouTube, compound the blurring of boundaries since they can be used not only to receive outside information, but also to initiate new social contacts. As others have commented, the expansion of children's social relations into virtual space has taken place during a period when the embodied spatial range of children has dramatically contracted. In the United Kingdom and the United States the decline in the number of households with a mother at home during the day, fear of urban spaces, and anxiety about child kidnapping have led many parents and guardians to rein in the spatial autonomy of their children (Valentine 2004). Reporting on her extensive research on the uses of MySpace, danah boyd (2007) has observed that while they are physically using the computer in the adult-controlled space of the home, young people create public Internet spaces in order to hang out, negotiate identities, and gain status and recognition with minimal surveillance from adults. Taking the perspective of young people, boyd highlights the opportunities to socialize, build cultural knowledge, and engage in creative self-expression that online participation may provide.

New forms of access entail potential dangers as well as opportunities, and fear of online predators has become widespread. I live near a billboard funded by the Advertising Council that asserts in stark black and red print: "Every 10 seconds a child is sexually solicited online." What ages, I wonder as I pedal by, does this use of "child" encompass? The ambiguity of age categories leaves ample room for rhetorical maneuvering. "Child" evokes images of the very young and vulnerable—the word cries out for help more urgently than "teen" or "youth." A recent *New York Times* editorial, headlined "A Victory for Exploited Children," lauds the signing of the Safe Harbor for Exploited Youth Act, which applies to those under age 18, in New York (the headline uses "child"; the editorial and the statute itself use "youth").

A see-saw of assessment of positive opportunities versus risks in young people's uses of media swings through public and academic debates. It's another example of polarizing dichotomies that derail more nuanced understanding. During the past five decades commercial culture, consumption, and mass media have become central sites of struggle over who children are and where, how, and with whom they should spend their days. Ideas of childhood include all of these themes, and are relationally constructed along with varying ideas about adulthood. Who should have a hand in shaping the experiences of children? Parents and other adult relatives, teachers, and experts in child development have long been approved; marketers and advertisers have high stakes in influencing childhoods, but cause anxiety. Other types of adults—employers who hire children under age 14 in industrial countries and sexual predators—operate outside the law.

Reworking the Meanings of "Child" and "Childhoods"

In the 1980s a number of economic and cultural shifts converged in organized efforts to alter the connotations of the word "child" and, by extension, "childhoods." The child/adult dualism that Benedict described in the 1930s, emphasizing sharp and contrastive difference, became more muted and qualified, and perspectives stressing similarity (some call it age blurring) were articulated in arenas as diverse as the United Nations, corporate marketing practices, and segments of the social sciences, including the study of childhoods, learning, and media.

This article has focused on the changing meanings of "childhood" in highly industrialized, affluent countries—the arena where debates about learning and media tend to unfold. The majority of the world's children do not live in these contexts and certainly don't have access to Internet sites like Neopets or MySpace, although they may have some access to television (the globalization of mass media is a salient theme that I don't have space to address). Many of the world's children live in conditions of abject poverty, worsened by global economic restructuring, and many are involved in exploitative forms of paid and unpaid labor with minimal, if any, access to schooling. A relatively high percentage of children are refugees; some are pressed into fighting in wars.

Awareness of the varied circumstances in which children grow up undermines any singular image of "contemporary childhood," especially if one takes a global perspective. The 20th-century ideal that I have discussed revolves around the material conditions and beliefs of the somewhat class privileged, as the anthropologist Tobias Hecht (1998) has argued in a book on children growing up in Recife, Brazil. Hecht distinguishes two kinds of childhood in Brazil: "nurtured" (receiving schooling and the comforts of material security) and "nurturing" (children contributing to household economies in impoverished barrios). Hecht does not describe impoverished children as "without a childhood"; he rather frames their circumstances and practices as a different *kind* of childhood. Other scholars who have immersed themselves in the daily lives of poorer children in global South contexts also question the hegemony of childhood imagery generated in the global North (e.g., Stephens 1995; Nieuwenhuys 2003). Thus, one might refer to many "childhoods," as does Annette Lareau in contrasting the daily lives and upbringing of working-class and middle-class U.S. children in her book, *Unequal Childhoods* (2003).

Contemporary uses of the word "childhood" encompass a three-way tension between a single ideal; recognizing that varied ideals may be embedded in the contexts in which different children grow up; and acknowledging that realities range widely and are often not so ideal. These tensions entered into the years of debate and negotiation that led to the final version of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Adopted in 1989 (and eventually signed by every country except the United States and Somalia), the UNCRC states that all children should have the right to life, survival, and development—thus affirming a basic universal standard, while also recognizing cultural variation (Stephens 1995; Child Rights Information Network website). The 54 articles of the UNCRC specify rights related to *protection* from physical, sexual, and psychological exploitation, from the effects of war, and from exploitative work; *provision*, such as rights to food, clean water, health care, and education; and *participation*, based on an understanding of the child as an active and contributing participant in society, not merely as a passive recipient of good or bad treatment. Article 12 of the UNCRC specifies that children have a right to participate in all matters affecting them, and that their views should be given due weight "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." Thus, variation in the competence and capacities of children, framed by a discourse of human development, qualifies participation as a right.

The UNCRC attention to children as participants in society and actors in the present helped facilitate the "new social studies of childhood," a movement among sociologists, anthropologists, cultural geographers, historians, and other scholars, which emerged in the 1980s in Europe and the United States. Critical of the encapsulation of children within notions of "child development" and "socialization," these scholars argued that children should be studied in their own right, with efforts to document their perspectives and attend to their standpoints, for example, in research on the media, learning (in a broad sense), politics, economics, migration, and war, as well as families and schools (James and Prout 1990; Thorne 1987; Qvortrup 1994; Buckingham 2000). This movement emphasizes the competence rather than the vulnerability of children, thus seeking to alter, or at least to expand, the connotations of "child" and "childhood."

As earlier discussed, the image of the competent and agentic child has also been promoted by corporations that market products for and to children. As Ellen Seiter (1993) has detailed, the advent in the 20th century of advertising and selling goods to children began with appeals to parents. But over time, advertisers also began to pitch their appeals directly to children, thus recognizing them as somewhat autonomous from overseeing adults. Dan Cook (2008) has called attention to the resonance between the new paradigm of childhood studies, which emphasizes children's agency and voice, and the language used by marketers and advertisers who promote "child empowerment" through goods (also see Schor 2004). This has an uncomfortable resonance, at least to social scientists who are critical of corporations and who regard themselves as seeking truth rather than promoting the manipulative fiction basic to advertising. But the resonance does point to a confluence of efforts to highlight children's competence rather than equating "child" with vulnerability and passivity.

Rather than being understood in a nuanced and contextual way, dissonant strands of meaning are often pitted against each other, especially in discussions of consumption and the media. As Cook (2008) and Drotner (in press) have observed, assessments of relationships between children and consumer culture, including the media, tend to be split between those such as Schor (2004), who see children as manipulable and exploited, and others, like Buckingham (2000) and Ito et al. (2009), who are more agnostic, emphasizing children's critical capacities and varied ways of responding to the media and consumption.

Drawing upon the new paradigms of childhood studies and documenting the perspectives of children and youth on their experiences with digital and networked media, the Digital Youth ethnographic project is one of many current efforts to bring "media" and "learning" together. In *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out*, the book resulting from this collaborative work, Mizuko Ito et al. (2009) note that since the 1980s, paradigms of learning, like those of childhood studies, have taken a social and agentic turn. Rather than focusing on individual cognition and knowledge acquisition in formal educational settings (with the assumption that adults teach and children learn), situated theories of learning explore varied communities and sites of practice, attending to informal modes of learning (Lave and Wenger 1991). As the Digital Youth ethnographers have documented, in their everyday uses of the Internet, cell phones, and other new media, young people engage in peer-centered, collective forms of learning. Youth organize their practices through varied genres of participation, some driven by friendship and others by specialized interests; they engage new media with varied degrees of intensity and commitment.

This direction of research on children and media moves beyond the question of "effects," instead attending to active forms of participation. Recognizing that some young people have expert knowledge that most adults lack inverts age-defined notions of teacher and learner. Participation in new media may encourage more lateral and less hierarchical relations between adults and young people. Dilan Mahendran (research reported in Ito et al. 2009) found that some program leaders in an after-school youth media program positioned themselves not as authority figures, but as "co-conspirators," as do adult participants in online interest-driven groups.

Beyond Dichotomous Meanings

The word "child" is a large and ambiguous semantic canvas, encompassing the highly vulnerable and unformed condition of infants as well as the full physical maturation and extensive competence of many 17-year-olds. Thus, dichotomies like vulnerable versus competent are easy to draw. As I noted earlier, some uses of "child" refer to the very young (which is where the image of the vulnerable child sits most securely); some to those further along in the continuum (the competence view seems most apt starting at around age eight and certainly by 14).

Understandings of childhood, learning, and media become more productive when efforts are made to move beyond dichotomies like child versus adult, passive versus agentic, learner versus teacher, and subordinate versus powerful. More care in the use of age terms and the questioning of reified and unitary notions of childhood help in transcending the pitfalls of dualistic thinking. Thus, the contributions of theorists like Martha Minow (1986) and Jeremy Roche (1999) are especially welcome. They have critiqued dualisms—vulnerable versus competent, dependent versus autonomous, needs versus rights—bound up in the child/adult dichotomy. Minow calls for a more contextualized, "both/and" approach, understanding that a child may need protection in one context and rights of self-determination in another. Drawing upon feminist theories of care and relationality, both Minow and Roche emphasize human interdependence and the persistence of vulnerability and needs, as well as autonomy, through the life course. The term "childhood" should be deployed with careful reflection about its multiple and shifting valances of meaning.

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Dissonant definition: discordant ; cacophonous | Meaning, pronunciation, translations and examples.Â Synonyms of 'dissonant'. disagreeing, differing, at variance, dissentient. discordant, harsh, jarring, grating. More Synonyms of dissonant. Trends of. dissonant. dissonant definition: 1. (of sounds or musical notes) sounding strange or unpleasant: 2. not agreeing with or not theâ€¦. Learn more.Â Translations. Click on the arrows to change the translation direction. Bilingual Dictionaries. Englishâ€“French Frenchâ€“English. Englishâ€“German Germanâ€“English. Englishâ€“Indonesian Indonesianâ€“English. Englishâ€“Italian Italianâ€“English. Englishâ€“Japanese Japaneseâ€“English. Part of the Geographies of Children and Young People book series (GCYP, volume 5). Abstract. This chapter provides a critical overview of the debates on how new developments in the digital age, such as forms of social media, specifically social networking sites, are influencing the social, cultural, and geographical dimensions of young peopleâ€™s friendships.Â â€œChildhoodâ€: Changing and dissonant meanings. International Journal of Learning and Media, 1(1), 19.CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Turkle, S. (2011).