

The new heads of the family?

International Children's Day is celebrated in many countries on the 1st June, particularly in parts of Europe and south-east Asia, although the size and nature of the celebration varies from place to place. Often there are special events, or perhaps free entry to zoos or museums in towns and cities.

The status of children in society has changed over the years. A century ago, many parents preferred their children to be seen-but-not-heard and in poorer families they also worked from a young age. Indeed, spring and summer holidays originated partly so that young children could help with the planting and picking of the harvest.

In contrast, recent research in Britain and the US suggests that parents are spending more 'quality-time' with their children. One study found that fathers in the UK spend about four times longer with their children than in the 1970s.

However, for many people the position children hold in our society today is *too* great. They believe that children are currently the focus of attention and in America this change in power from adults to children has been called a *kindergarchy*. A survey in the US recently suggested that two-thirds of parents actually thought their own children were 'spoilt'!

It seems that in some Western societies many parents over-protect their children from unpleasant or uninteresting things such as housework. Much time, energy and money is spent on entertaining youngsters in after-school activities, at weekends or in holiday time. A modern family home is often full of toys or games while walls and fridges are covered with children's work, photos and certificates.

In some families it appears to be the child who is boss, whether it is choosing what to eat, which film to watch, or where to go on holiday. One popular American writer, Joseph Epstein, has therefore likened some parents to 'servants'! He says that the modern child is over-protected, 'over-loved' and full of self-importance.

In the past (and still today in many cultures), children were expected to be more independent and also to fit in with their parents' needs. They generally received less time, money and fewer material things. Perhaps this attitude helped children to be stronger mentally, more creative, and to have a more realistic sense of who they were. Today's children are tomorrow's adults, so finding the best way to bring up children is an important, even an urgent matter.

1 Before you read the text try to match the two halves of the sentence.

1 International Children's Day is celebrated ...	a in some families nowadays.
2 In the past (and also today), children worked from an early age ...	b in after-school activities, at weekends and holiday time.
3 Research suggests that fathers spend much longer with their children nowadays than ...	c in the past.
4 Some think the position of children is too great ...	d in our society today.
5 A lot of time, energy and money is now spent on entertaining children ...	e in many countries on 1 st June.
6 The child seems to be the boss ...	f in poorer families.
7 Children were expected to be more independent ...	g in the 1970s.

- 2 Now read the text and find out if you were correct.
- 3 Circle the correct answer(a, b or c) according to the text:
- International Children's Day is celebrated in some places by:
 - giving free entry to museums
 - having street parties
 - having school sports days
 - A hundred years ago, children were often expected to:
 - be quiet/work
 - be quiet/study hard
 - study hard/work
 - The research talks about parents:
 - in European countries
 - in the UK and US
 - in south-east Asia
 - A survey in the US found that most parents thought their children were:
 - spoilt
 - unspoilt
 - great
 - Evidence of children is everywhere in:
 - a child's bedroom
 - a family home
 - holiday time
 - Who does Epstein compare to 'servants' in some homes?
 - children
 - bosses
 - parents
 - Which of these did a child have *less of* in the past, in comparison to today's children?
 - play
 - attention
 - love
 - Because of the way they were brought up, perhaps children in the past grew up to be:
 - more intelligent
 - happier
 - more self-reliant

4 Discussion. Think about the following points:

- In your own words, what do you think the last paragraph means?
- Do parents in your country give more 'quality time' to their children nowadays than in the past?
- Do parents in your country give more money and things to their children nowadays? Think for example of pocket money and presents.
- Some countries are said to be more 'childcentric' than others, for example Italy. What do you think this means? Is your country childcentric?
- If a child is spoilt, how might this affect them later in life?
- What advice would you give to a new parent about bringing up their children?

5 Cover the text, then complete the gap with the missing word:

- A modern family home is full _____ toys and games.
- Walls and fridges are covered _____ children's work.
- Children are expected to fit _____ with the family.
- Many parents over-protect their children _____ unpleasant things.
- Much time, energy and money is spent _____ entertaining youngsters.
- The size of the celebration varies _____ place _____ place.

Glossary

attitude (*noun*) - opinions or feelings that you show by your behaviour: *people's attitudes towards the younger workers need to change*

focus (*noun*) - the thing that people are concentrating on or paying particular attention to

harvest (*noun*) - the time when crops are collected: *the grape harvest, the potato harvest*

quality time (*noun*) - time that you spend with someone, usually your child, doing enjoyable things together so make your relationship a good one

self-importance (*noun*) - the belief that you are more important than everyone else

servant (*noun*) - someone whose job is to clean, cook, etc in someone else's home

spoilt (*adjective*) - a spoilt child always gets what they want and they behave badly if they do not get what they want

status (*noun*) - someone's position in a profession or society