

Early childhood care in Europe (nineteenth-twentieth century)

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ABSTRACT

The lowering infant mortality, the increasing value ascribed to education, and the perception of children as individuals that need to be socialized combined in the second half of the nineteenth century to make early childhood a new age in life. Women's role as mothers, workers, and educators was redefined as a result. Early childhood became an object of scientific study through an abundance of medical, psychological, and pedagogical discourses, and often provided women with their first legitimate field as scientists. It also became a policy issue, and was considered as a national treasure deserving protection, either by focusing on the family and the mother's role within it or by establishing collective childcare. The latter would prove decisive in the rise of women's paid work, and to this day represents a distinctive feature of Europe. Despite a diverse range of national situations and trajectories, representations of early childhood evolved in remarkably similar fashion across Europe.



Photograph taken in an Amsterdam nursery in 1942: children are distinguished based on their age group and supposed needs; the clothing of the childcare worker and the children reflects the nursery's continuity with the hospital environment. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Konrad Grob, *Pestalozzi in Stans* (1879): the teacher who exerted considerable influence throughout the nineteenth century is depicted here as “the father of orphans.” Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Early childhood emerged as a new age in life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was defined in connection with compulsory schooling for children (between the ages of 5 and 7 depending on the society and the period), which was becoming widespread at the time. In fact, it was referred to as the “preschool age.” These new ways of perceiving, studying, and treating children between birth and school age brought into play actors from fields as diverse as health, education, and social issues, in addition to families themselves. They involved women as caregivers, childminders, educators, and scientists—and more generally as mothers and workers—with early childhood being seen at the time as a domain reserved for women.

The first childcare initiatives

Infant mortality remained high in all European countries throughout the nineteenth century. The affection felt for young children, which can be observed within the nuclear family, coexisted with disinterest and economic considerations. The abandonment of infants and the massive placement of children with wet-nurses reached their peak at the time. This was particularly true in cities, with half of Parisian children in 1860 being placed with wet-nurses.

By considering young children as beings to be educated, the Enlightenment did change representations of early childhood, which led to a series of famous experiments—the institute of Johann-Friedrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) in Yverdon, the infant schools of Owen (1771-1858) in New Lanark, the Kindergarten of Fröbel (1782-1852) in Keilhau—that offered women from the bourgeoisie a space for affirmation and even professionalization. However, given the social effects of industrialization, priority for childcare was first given to children whose mothers had to work. Created initially by churches or rich philanthropists, *salles d’asile* (infant schools) and *crèches* (nurseries) in France, *Bewahranstalten* in Germany, and *presepi* in Italy focused on the child’s survival and exerted a form of class-based control over mothers. Such childcare was seen at the time as a kind of emergency assistance, and was not intended to be made universal. There were contrasts between countries like Germany, where it was limited and spread across a large number of private actors, and other countries (France, Spain, Italy) where public authorities, in competition with the Catholic Church, gradually took over the *salles d’asile*. In France they were already being attended by 644,000 children upon their transformation into *classes maternelles* (preschools) in 1881.

Thanks to the understanding of the origin of microbes, the “pasteurization” process, and the first vaccines, the 1890s Pasteurian revolution allowed a sharp and definitive drop in infant mortality, ushering in a new age for early

childhood. It was accompanied by a series of new initiatives: the Gouttes de Lait organization (which provided mothers with sterilized milk), dispensaries, associations promoting breastfeeding, and nurseries developed within a transnational European space, as demonstrated by the practice of holding international congresses, such as those organized by Gouttes de Lait in Paris in 1905, Brussels in 1907, and Berlin in 1911. While nationalism rose, dropping birth rates fueled fears of demographic decline, and reinforced maternalist representations justifying the creation of child benefits, the first maternity leaves, and the promotion of breastfeeding across all European countries regardless of their liberal, fascist, or communist ideological orientation.

Young children, an object of scientific study

As this hygiene revolution took place, young children became objects of scientific study. The American scientist Stanley Hall (1844-1924) coined the term “pedology,” defined as the science of the psychological and cognitive development of children. The notion of “development” and its “stages” generated an abundance of scientific discourses, that followed two major orientations: a psychoanalytical one launched by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and pursued in a critical manner by Melanie Klein (1882-1960), John Bowlby (1907-1990), and René Spitz (1887-1994); and a cognitive one launched by Jean Piaget (1896-1980), in relation to which Henri Wallon (1879-1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) positioned themselves. While there were very few of them, it was through pediatrics that women entered medicine and psychology, as did Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) of Hungary, who invented “free motricity,” Marie-Elise Kayser (1885-1950) of Germany, who founded public lactariums (milk banks) in Germany, and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) of Italy, who created the pedagogy that bears her name.

The changing perception and the scientific approach of children revived the Enlightenment’s educational project. The movement of *Kindergarten* in Germany, the *Case dei bambini* in Italy, *l’école maternelle* in France, and the institutions created in the USSR—inspired by Vygotsky in keeping with Hall’s pedagogy—all demonstrated this confidence in pedagogy, even though their conceptions differed and even opposed one another. They often provided women with their first careers in pedagogical research, as was the case with Maria Montessori in Italy, and even in high-level administration, as with Pauline Kergomard (1838-1925) in France.

Women’s work and childcare

The second half of the twentieth century was marked in Europe by the massive expansion of national health and social policies. Systematic vaccination against measles, poliomyelitis, and rubella decreased infant mortality even further, particularly in Central European countries where communist regimes created the first national public health systems. The appearance of artificial plastics, milk, and foods, in addition to industrially produced toys, changed the everyday lives of children and parents in middle-class and bourgeois households.

While the unequal division of domestic labor was rarely called into question, the legitimization of women’s paid work henceforth raised the question of the social rights associated with childcare. Two models emerged: an educational model built on school institutions and distinct from nurseries, which spread in France, England, and Belgium, and later in Italy and Spain; and a model of childcare and services for mothers, covering all ages of early childhood, which spread *ex nihilo* in Scandinavian and communist countries from the 1960s onward, and gradually assumed educational duties. Collective childcare also fueled female employment in a sector that fulfilled a socialized maternal function of sorts.

Early childhood education, which was henceforth based on consensus, rested upon the conviction that young children were individuals in the process of socialization. These representations were driven by the rise and popularization of psychology, with periodicals for parents, and reference works such as the world-renowned *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946) by Benjamin Spock. This conception of education fostered a certain return of men, who were quite present in the field of early childhood, for example in the French *salles d’asile* during the nineteenth century, but had been gradually marginalized except as doctors and scientists. Their

return was reflected in the growing role attributed to the father. The importance ascribed to child psychology went hand in hand with strengthened gender socialization. While, until the early twentieth century, young children were often dressed in a gender-neutral manner, there was a shift toward early socialization as little boys or girls in the mid-twentieth century. Despite diverging views, diverse national paths, and ideological divisions, this tendency to see young children as social beings was present in all countries, and contributed to a shared European representation of early childhood.

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