

THEME 02

Childhood is a-changin'

CONSUMER
PRACTICES

DEMOGRAPHICS

MODERNITY

Structural demographic and socio-economic developments are having an impact on our conception and experience of childhood, both for parents and children. As childhood becomes more serious and longer at the same time, this changes how children are raised and prepared for their role and life in society. As children have the future, understanding this changing childhood provides insights into the socio-cultural changes of our society.

Our observations

- Two-thirds of [Hong Kong women](#) do not want a child or any more children, although they already have very low total fertility rates (TFRs, the average number of children a woman would be predicted to have if she lived from birth to at least the end of her childbearing years, which was [1.19](#) for Hong Kong women in 2017). The main reason is that the financial burden of raising and educating a child has become so intense that many are simply opting out of parenthood altogether. Besides Hong Kong, TFRs are lowest in urban areas in East Asia (e.g. in [South Korea](#), [Japan](#), [Singapore](#), [Taiwan](#), [Chinese cities](#)).
- During the 20th century, the nuclear family (two parents with one or two children) became the norm for most households in developed countries. However, that is [changing](#), as the number of divorces has gone up and the number of marriages went down, and as a result, the number of [one-person households](#) and households that are patchworks of [stepsiblings and -parents](#) have increased significantly over the past three decades.
- According to philosopher Luc Ferry, having children has been considered one answer in [Greek mythology](#) to the question of how to gain immortality. This idea is still reflected in our saying that parents can “live on” in their children.
- In their book [The Fourth Turning](#), sociologists Neil Howe and William Strauss write about generational dynamics within societies. They define generations as demographic cohorts over a span of about twenty years (the length of one life phase) that are shaped by key historical events and social trends (i.e. formative experiences) during their childhood, from which a shared set of values and attitudes is derived. Each generation then passes through the four stages of life, in which they have a different relation to these values and hold different attitudes: acquiring values from older generations (childhood), developing and articulating one’s own values (young adulthood), applying and realizing values in the world (midlife), and remembering and transferring values to new generations (elderhood).
- We have written before that investments in the earliest stage of childhood render the [largest benefits](#), as our brains then have the highest degree of plasticity and make many vital neural connections. There is a strong body of literature that shows that proper early-childhood care and education brings significant benefits to the person later on in life.
- The Aristotelian view of childhood, as explained in his [Ethica Nicomachea](#), which was dominant before, states that children are immature creatures that have not yet become fully developed, mature human beings. For Aristotle, parents should therefore be strict with their children by treating them as imperfect beings and educating them on how to realize their human potential. In his work [Centuries of Childhood](#) (1960), historian Philippe Ariès argues that our ideas of childhood have changed over time and across cultures. He shows that there was no conception of “childhood” as such during the Middle Ages, and children were seen as intrinsically evil. This is also illustrated by [medieval paintings](#), in which children are depicted as small and imperfect adults.



Connecting the dots

During the second half of the 20th century, TFRs collapsed across the world: from around 5 children in the 1960s to 2.5 in 2017. Looking at [World Bank data](#), we find that there are strong regional and geographic differences, which are strongly correlated with income, as women in richer countries tend to have fewer children than women in developing countries: 1.68 for women in high-income countries versus 4.63 in low-income countries. Besides income, we find that TFRs are significantly negatively correlated to [urbanization](#), [female participation rates](#) and [industrialization](#). That is because in traditional, rural societies, men do the labor while women are supposed to have children, which are valuable, productive assets for household and agricultural tasks, as well as a hedge against old-age poverty. But in industrial, modern cities and societies, the economic value of children diminishes rapidly, as they are not allowed to work and have to attend school. As such, they consume household wealth instead of producing it, making having many children an economic disaster instead of a blessing. Having children in urban, post-industrial and high-income societies is even less attractive from an economic perspective, as the opportunity cost for having children is then even higher (e.g. higher housing costs, fewer green spaces to play, more traffic and living amidst strangers as well as less free time for parents to pursue their own interests). This is changing the conception and experience of childhood, both for parents and children.

Parents are generally in the stage of their lives that they want to realize and pass on their world view and values (midlife). They do so by means of work and other activities, but also through their children, who are supposed to be a “mirror of themselves”. Children, on the other hand, are in their dependent stage of life, in which they acquire and internalize ideas and concepts about the world, primarily from those who raise them (i.e. their parents). Only when they reach young adulthood do they adopt a more reflexive and often critical stance on their upbringing, and develop personhood on their own. This dynamic establishes the hierarchical and often conflict-prone relationship between parents and children. But with fewer children, parents increasingly focus their attention and care on the offspring they do have, burdening children with their emotional projection and ambitions. And this provides tangible benefits for their offspring, as differences in parenting have been proven to cause wide social divisions among children (e.g. [school results](#), [future income](#), [socio-emotional functioning](#)). As children have become

a(n) (emotional) luxury instead of a(n) (economic) necessity, children now have a more serious childhood, in which they feel an increased pressure to achieve success and act as their parents prefer.

At the same time, children are also experiencing a lengthening of their childhood. Throughout most of Western history, the concept of a separate childhood as a stage of life was relatively absent, and children were mostly treated as imperfect adults and immature beings. Only during the influence of the Romanticism in the 18th and 19th century, childhood began to be regarded as a separate stage of life, in which children were seen as innocent beings who needed to be protected from the corruptive forces of life and a hazardous world. This coincided with the process of modernization in the West, and the rise of the dirty and hard factory life in the urban jungle. But the [traditional rhythms](#) of our daily life are seeing radical change in our post-industrial, developed economies. One consequence of this is that children increasingly refuse to take up their responsibility and move into adulthood, reflected in the fact that children [live at home longer](#) with their parents, with whom they have a more [equal relationship as friends](#), eventually have fewer children, don't marry, don't take up a mortgage and buy their own house and are less interested in pursuing a [traditional career path](#). Some have argued that because of this, their childhood is ever-expanding as they are unwilling to grow up by taking responsibility and venturing into the world (akin to the 1904 novel [Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up](#), the protagonist of which has endless adventures in his imagined Neverland).

That brings us to our changing childhood: childhood is becoming more serious as parents increasingly focus on helping their children reach adulthood and develop their personhood, while childhood is also extended over a longer time. That has several implications. First, childhood care is increasingly being taken out of the household and into official institutions in most developed economies, a process known as [“defamilization”](#). As such, childhood is increasingly “rationalized”, with upbringing techniques derived from scientific insights and professional childhood care institutes. Technology also comes into play, with an increasing number of devices tracking and monitoring the upbringing of the child. As such, [baby](#) and child technology (i.e. [pedagogical toys](#)) is becoming an increasingly important part of the “life cycle technologies” that help us navigate through life.

Implications

- New insights from neuroscience show that our [brain](#) undergoes a “rewiring” process that is not complete until approximately our 25th year, when our prefrontal cortex (responsible for planning complex cognitive behavior, personality expression, decision-making and social behavior) is fully developed. As such, a lengthened childhood provides young people with more time to develop their cognitive capabilities and personhood, instead of entering the labor market before their brain has fully developed (i.e. in their early 20s).
- Just as the demographic process of ageing creates problems for our [pension systems](#), the demographic transition of fewer children and changing household compositions create new problems for children who suffer from poor parenting methods. To some extent, this has always been the case, as there has been persistent income inequality in which rich children stay rich and poor children stay poor.
- There is also the struggle for “positional goods” (i.e. goods that are limited in supply and that money cannot buy) among the global middle classes, such as enrolling children in the best schools, or even before that, selecting a spouse that will produce the best offspring in terms of socio-economic success. This will happen especially in countries where competition to outperform is fierce, and life in urban environments and labor markets is considered to be tough, most notably in East Asian countries.