



## Key Course Themes



### chapter themes

- This chapter is designed to help you to make the move to the university-level study of childhood as smoothly and swiftly as possible.

### Knowing what to expect

CS/ECS courses usually attract people with a wide range of prior experiences, and so students are likely to have an equally wide spectrum of feelings about studying childhood at degree level. Some may lack confidence because it seems that many of their peers have previously taken child-focused courses, while they have not. Others may initially feel that they're being asked to cover old ground and that they know the subject well already.

This chapter shows that no matter what you have done before coming to university, *everyone* has something new to learn, adjustments to make and study skills to develop. No matter how much, or how little, prior experience of studying childhood or working with children you have, you will usually need to adjust your thinking, and your approaches to study so that you can contribute and draw from the new learning opportunities university study affords. Indeed, you may well hear lecturers say that they are still learning about childhood themselves, because the sort of learning you do at university is never 'done' – there are always new insights to be gained and connections to be made.

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It's worth remembering, too, that *everyone* has valuable experiences to offer. We hope by the end of this chapter you will see how much you have to gain from developing good working relationships with your fellow students, as well as your lecturers.

## **How can you tell what your course's approach is?**

### **Where is it located?**

The first thing to do is to identify where your course is taught within the structure of academic disciplines of your university. Broadly speaking, CS/ECS is usually taught under the umbrella of Social Sciences and Humanities, but you can learn a lot by getting a closer focus on it than this.

One way of sorting this out in your own mind is by looking at which School, Department or Faculty your course sits in. For example, is it in Education, Health, Cultural Studies or Social Studies? Is it offered in just one department, or a few? Getting answers to all these questions can tell you a lot about the sort of emphasis it is likely to have.

### **Who teaches on the course and what are their particular research interests?**

What a lecturer's discipline and research interests are is not always apparent to a student, but it is important because each discipline has its own academic outlooks and perspectives, and this has an impact on what is taught and so on what you need to know to do well. So, for instance, the people who teach you may view themselves as primarily a historian, an anthropologist, a psychologist and so on and that will influence the course. On the other hand, your course may be taught mainly by professionals that are trained to work with children and families (such as qualified teachers, health visitors, playworkers, social workers) who will base their teaching on those professional perspectives. Finally, the course might quite consciously set out to offer you a mix of professional and academic perspectives on the child. We will help you identify your lecturers' perspectives by looking carefully at the words they use to describe the study of childhood and finding out what terms they find problematic or even offensive. You can start, though, by looking up their publications, either through an online bookshop, or, even more usefully, by looking at the university website, which should offer both biographies and bibliographies of the staff teaching on your course. What they write and what their professional background is should help you to find out whether their

CS/ECS teaching is the main aspect of their job, or if they teach on other courses too.

### **What approach does your course take as a whole?**

Many of the people who work on CS/ECS courses would class their work as interdisciplinary. However, they don't all mean the same thing by 'interdisciplinarity'. Sometimes they mean you get to study childhood from different academic disciplinary perspectives, sometimes they try to meld this into a holistic approach. Some courses concentrate on the many diverse ways childhood is viewed with regard to time, place, age, ethnicity and other variables. CS/ECS can also be informed by a critique of the ways in which children's lives are governed and regulated, dominated by adults. Courses may also be underpinned by an emphasis on children as participants in society and decision-makers – and consequently have a child-centred approach or children's rights as a dominant theme. Asking yourself, 'where does my lecturer stand in relation to this?' or, 'do all my lecturers agree, or do they have quite different viewpoints?' will help you to sort this out. In asking these questions you will start to develop a reflective approach to your course.

### **You and course themes**

Generally speaking, the new student of childhood must learn to take a *thematic* approach to study. Childhood is the theme at the core of your study, but there are lots of different ways of approaching that theme. Students on CS/ECS courses are encouraged to engage simultaneously with a range of interlinked disciplinary perspectives, which means they might be expected to draw on recent research and theories including sociology, psychology, cultural studies, social history, philosophy, social policy and children's rights. This means that students have to 'know their way around' a whole host of disciplines and the different ways they talk about childhood, and be able to use the different patterns and ways of constructing and talking about knowledge that they contain. As you read across a number of disciplines you will discover an extensive lexicon of terminology, approaches and conventions, in what can be described as a 'joined up' approach to study.

In very practical terms, the thematic approach means you have to learn to navigate round a large number of areas of the library, as texts on childhood will appear in all of them, rather than being located together. Chapter 2, 'Reading into Writing', guides you through the tricky process of managing the different languages used by different academic cultures, which you need to learn to use in your writing if you wish to do well.

## Problematizing childhood

Making the move to studying childhood at university, however, basically involves seeing childhood in new, increasingly complicated ways. Most courses will encourage you to identify and take stock of what you already know about children and childhood, whether that is theoretical knowledge, the practical work of bringing up children, professional practice, or your own experience of being a child. Your lecturers, though, are likely to move you gradually away from personal to more theorized views of children and their lives, encouraging you to see childhood as a complex, problematic concept, rather than a straightforward, natural phase that we all go through. This chapter highlights some of the ways they might encourage you to see childhood afresh, waking up to 'taken-for-granted' notions about children and childhood.

In short, your lecturers are looking for far more than commonsense ideas, or a set of facts about children's development: they eventually want you to be able to analyse children's lives and environments; the products and policies that are made for them; their experiences and the views of professionals who work with and for them. In a nutshell, they will want you to be able to analyse ideas and meanings associated with 'the child' and 'childhood' and see that talking about childhood is actually a very demanding thing to do. They hope that during your time at university you will get deeply involved in exploring, discussing and debating a range of varying ideas and perspectives on the meanings of childhood.



### key point

The words lecturers might use to describe this process include:

As an idea childhood is	Discussing it is
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contested</li> <li>• Problematical</li> <li>• Complex</li> <li>• Debatable</li> <li>• Challenging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intricate</li> <li>• Complicated</li> <li>• Involved</li> <li>• Discursive</li> <li>• About perceiving key questions, rather than seeking answers or final solutions to problems</li> </ul>

## The implications: there's no 'correct' answer

From your viewpoint as a student, it's crucially important that you grasp this, because it means there is rarely a single correct answer to the assignments

that are set. Put bluntly, it means that no one can tell you what you should put in an assignment. Studying childhood at university, therefore, is not a case of simply knowing and remembering facts, but being able to show that you genuinely understand complexity, can question everything and shift between diverse viewpoints.

However, although there may be no right or wrong answers, from an examiner's point of view, there are certainly better and worse ways of producing good assignments about childhood. The rest of this chapter is geared to help you get off to a flying start, by helping you use the teaching sessions, your experiences, your peers, your lecturers and all the activities offered on your course productively.

## What will the teaching of childhood be like?

When people first come to university they typically anticipate more structure. They expect to sit in huge tiered lecture halls, simply writing down whatever pearls of wisdom the lecturer utters. Studying CS/ECS is rarely like that. Besides, this is a very passive learning strategy which won't help much. Instead, you are expected to play a highly active role within and beyond the classroom. Whilst you may find you have relatively little scheduled class time, compared to students on other degrees, you are expected to do a lot of independent or directed study. Becoming an active learner is the key to success.



### key point

#### What is an active learner?

Active learning is an approach or a learning strategy. It means becoming:

- **Personally involved** – for example, by trying to understand a range of viewpoints, recognizing debates, doing things which help you to make sense of your learning about childhood, discussing ideas, linking information/concepts and looking for patterns of ideas, linking your learning to what you know.
- **Critical and analytical** – for example, by not taking things at face value, always asking 'why?', examining beliefs about childhood from many angles, comparing the same issue from different theorists' points of view, being attuned to hidden agendas, weighing up the arguments for and against something, looking for contradictions.

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- **Creative** – for example, by applying your imagination, searching for connections and patterns, asking questions, being curious, thinking laterally, weighing up how others see things, thinking critically and analytically.
- **Reflective** – for example, by analysing and evaluating your own experience and performance, being able to draw lessons from it.
- **Self-regulating** – for example, by effectively managing your own time, priorities and resources, evaluating your work and monitoring your own learning.

All these aspects interrelate, and will, importantly, help you develop personally to meet the challenges of graduate employment.

As a result, then, expect to change. Even if you already have lots of practical experience, you should soon begin to see things very differently as an active learner, questioning your practices and beliefs about children and childhood as you think more deeply about the issues and the possible implications of different theories or ideas.

You are likely to find a mixture of teaching methods used in scheduled class time. These are outlined in Table 1.1, together with some tips for how (and how not) to approach each one.

**Table 1.1** Common teaching methods and how to approach them

<i>Type of session</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Do</i>	<i>Don't</i>
Lectures	Usually for large numbers of students. Will cover core ideas that everyone needs to get their heads round. May be interactive – breaking up for small-group discussion, question-and-answer sessions or debates. N.B. 'Lectures' are often used as a general term for any teaching session.	Prepare in advance. If the lecturer has set reading, get hold of it and make notes on anything you don't understand. Pick up clues about the key aims of the session. Make notes on the main points, issues, controversies and ideas and afterwards discuss with other students over coffee. Date and sort these afterwards into files for each module. Join in with discussion activities. If there is a Powerpoint on the E-Learning portal, download it before the lecture and take it along. You can then simply add your own notes to it.	Simply copy down whatever the lecturer says or puts on overheads. Just turn up and hope that'll be enough.

**Table 1.1** (Continued)

Seminars	Tend to ask you to work on pre-prepared material. Might ask you to present your ideas, sometimes in groups.	Do your homework and go to the session prepared, even if it's not 'marked' – joining in will really help you develop your understanding before it 'counts' in assessed work. Make notes on the feedback you get, from peers as well as tutors.	Let yourself and your fellow students down by being ill prepared and not contributing to discussions.
Tutorials	Tend to be your chance to set the agenda and talk about your problems, gain feedback on your ideas when preparing an assignment or discuss your progress and devise action plans.	Prepare notes beforehand of things you want feedback on (e.g. an essay plan, uncertainties you have about core concepts or reading for a module) List questions you want to ask about to help you better understand the topic (e.g. getting clarification on a theory).	Ask procedural questions that can be answered elsewhere (e.g. word limits, deadline dates, where to hand in assignments – your course administrator or handbooks can tell you). Expect your lecturer to cover material from a lecture that you missed.
Directed study	This is like 'homework', which you do out of class contact time, although it's rarely taken in or marked. Expect to spend a lot of time on this and on more general reading round (usually called 'independent study'), as it helps you make sense of sessions and is crucial to producing good assignments.	Make sure you do it, as it will help you make the most of teaching sessions. Talk about it with other students. (See Chapter 2, 'Reading Into Writing', for guidance.)	Put it off or rely solely on formal contact time if you want to do well in your assignments.

These methods may seem less directive than those you experienced at school and college – and it can be hard not having anyone nagging you to turn up, but it's hugely important to realize that;

- the lectures are important in enabling you to perform well
- tutors expect you to do much more than simply turn up to sessions.

We'll now turn to why this is the case, and how you can make the most of what is on offer.

## Why go to lectures?

On any course students need to become alert to the ways in which things are done in their particular subject area. In CS/ECS courses you will need to get yourself clued in to the following ways of knowing about childhood:

- Knowing yourself
- Knowing your lecturer
- Knowing the subject/content

In the rest of this chapter we'll explain what we mean, and how you can use lectures to best effect to help you build up these ways of knowing.

## Knowing yourself: personal views of childhood

It's useful to think of learning to study childhood at university as a sort of journey. Achieving the complexity, subtlety and questioning approach to CS/ECS that we outlined at the beginning of this chapter usually means starting initially with what we know and experience at an individual, personal level. Most CS/ECS courses will, therefore, begin the course, and probably most modules, by first identifying and then questioning or challenging your own relevant personal experience in particular contexts. The following examples are designed to give you a flavour of the sorts of activities lecturers may use to help you take this initial step on the road to theorizing childhood.

### Identifying personal views of the child

You will probably undertake introductory tasks and class activities that help you to identify your own opinions and views of the child-related topics lecturers are teaching. Firstly, lecturers usually want to show you that when we look at a child we may think that we all see the same thing. We don't. What we see depends on what we bring to the situation – our personal 'baggage'.

We all have values and beliefs about what is proper, right and good for children, values that usually relate to our own experiences. Often we haven't really thought about them, assuming instead that they are 'just the way things are'. Lecturers typically want you to start to see these views and opinions as 'loaded' and problematic. For this reason, it's important when studying childhood to identify and know about your own views.





### to think about

#### **Identifying your personal views and values by talking with fellow students**

Here, for example, is a student talking about the age at which, in her opinion, children should start school:

*We send children to school properly at five. They need to learn to read and write, and the earlier they start the better, because otherwise they'll fall behind. And no one can get by these days without being able to read and write properly.*

This student was taken aback to find that another student in her discussion group was outraged at the prospect of sending children into formal education so young:

*In Norway we don't force children to read and write until they're ready. They need to play and enjoy life and find out who they are and how to get along with other people first. They learn to read and write when they're about seven.*

Neither student really noticed what they took for granted about children's needs, until they discussed it. This is why your peers are so important: you can all help each other begin to register the complexity of studying childhood.

Getting involved in class discussions about people's views and beliefs helps us to see how variable these are. You are on the right lines if you start to question what you previously 'knew' – or failed even to register – beforehand. Students often say studying childhood is like suddenly waking up, and hence is very different from previous study.

It makes you think a lot more, think in different ways. There are things you accept before you come here that you don't happen to think about, unless you study this course. Things occur to me now, that I wouldn't have thought about before – in everyday life. Like, you're watching children in society, all the time. How they're treated.



## case study

### Thinking about the words we use

You might get asked to identify your personal opinions, values and attitudes by noting your personal feelings and reactions to, say, a video clip of children, or some images.

In this example, for instance, a lecturer shows her class a video of a child with her mother, shopping in a supermarket. The child can be seen running up and down the aisles of busy shoppers, gathering armfuls of goods from the shelves and pushing the trolley in all directions.

Students write down what they see, and then compare and contrast their notes. Usually, their views vary. Some see the girl as 'naughty' and feel sorry for the mother, who they see as not being able to control her daughter, or as being subject to other shoppers' views of her 'poor' parenting skills.

*A naughty little girl is banging her trolley into other people's trolleys. The poor mother is embarrassed, because everyone is staring, especially when the little girl has a tantrum.*

*The girl is behaving like she's spoiled: the mum should stop her. She's being a real nuisance.*

Others' sympathies lie with the child.

*I remember the boredom of going shopping as a child – at least this little girl is managing to liven things up! She's just having fun!*

The point is that different students bring different things to analyse exactly the same incident. The difference lies in their *values, attitudes and assumptions* about what makes a 'good' mother, about how children should behave, about what children are like and how they should be treated.

Note how the words they use reveal this: 'poor mother'; 'naughty girl', 'just having fun'. These words show their views of the child are far from neutral. It is, therefore, invariably a useful exercise to think carefully and critically about the words people use to describe children and childhood.

Tuning in to these words helps you to see where people might be coming from when they talk, and later write, about CS/ECS topics.

When you come to write your assignments, lecturers will expect you to 'define your terms' – to show that you know that there are many different ways

of viewing a phenomenon, and can spell out clearly the ways in which your essay uses a word or term. We will talk more about this in later chapters, but it's important that you realize that many of the informal in-class exercises that are set encourage you to practise thinking about the ways in which words and images used to discuss and describe children and childhood are deeply loaded with significance.

### Making the familiar strange

Lecturers will often get you to jot down notes about your prior knowledge of the child and childhood. You might be asked, for instance, to write down, as quickly as possible and in no particular order, all the words that spring to mind in response to the question, 'What is a child?'



#### case study

#### 'What is a child?'

Here's what some students wrote:

Innocent	Cute	Enthusiastic
Curious	Friendly	Loveable
Playful	Happiness	Dependent
Vulnerable	Carefree	Small
	Fun	Always learning

The lecturers then prompted students to think about how these words, on the whole, combined to create a hugely idealized image of the child. To show how 'loaded' the words are, they asked students to think about the implications for real children.

In fact, the first set of words mostly construct the child as perpetually happy, leaving no space for children to be sad (what if their pet has just died?); bored (what if they have to sit through a dull set of wedding speeches?); or knowing (what if they've been involved in bullying at school?). Among other things, this can exert a potentially huge pressure upon real children.

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Students realized the extent to which the words and ideas that spring to mind to describe the notional child are often very biased, and, when taken altogether in this sort of exercise, reveal common generalizations about children. The artificiality of the exercise, which doesn't ask students to relate to 'real' children, heightens this, but it usefully shows how far adults have *abstract ideas about the meanings of childhood* that result in stereotypes about children. Often, as in this case, these ideas reflect dominant beliefs: commonly held values, attitudes and assumptions. This exercise, then, moves students' knowing from the tacit (taken for granted) to the explicit, making them question, once more, what they already think they know.

### Life maps and timelines

**A personal timeline** Another common exercise to get you thinking about your personal views of childhood is to get you to draw a line like the one below, asking you to mark key milestones on the line, as you moved from childhood to adulthood.

Myself as Child -----Myself as Adult

Don't enter any information you would rather not share in these sorts of exercises: lecturers are not asking you to dig up unhappy memories. People usually put things like 'started school', 'moved house', 'best friend moved', 'passed driving test', 'pet died', 'parents divorced', 'rented own flat' and so on.

When these are compared and contrasted you'll probably notice some broad similarities in childhood experience (especially if people have fairly similar backgrounds and cultures), but large discrepancies on a personal level. This helps you see the point that childhood is a relative, variable entity, dependent on an individual's personal experience. Put simply, no two childhoods are actually the same.

**Timelines from childhood to adulthood** This is a similar exercise, but more general, noting the milestones many children can be expected to pass and dividing the timeline up into stages. Students put things like 'weaned', 'started walking', 'learned to read', 'went to school', 'take SATs', 'move from primary to high school', 'first date', 'able to drink alcohol', 'learned to drive', 'allowed to have sex', 'start periods', 'leave school', 'can get married', 'allowed to vote', 'first job', 'go to college' and so on.

Discussion usually focuses on a wide range of different conceptual categories that can be used to define childhood. These might include:

- Biological and developmental definitions – for example, weaned, started walking, puberty, physiological changes. These often lead to stage definitions – babyhood, toddler, middle childhood, adolescence, young adulthood.
- Institutional/educational definitions – for example, pre-school, nursery-aged child, primary-school pupil, high-school pupil, school-leaver, college student.
- Age definitions – 0–3, under 5s, 7–11, pre-teens, teenagers, young adults.
- Legal definitions – age at which allowed to have sex, drink, smoke, drive, etc.
- Gender definitions – girlhood might be qualitatively different to boyhood.

Reflecting on personal experience usually prompts debate about the extent to which ‘real’ children actually conform to these definitions and norms. In particular issues around:

- Social values, attitudes and beliefs about children (especially their status, how far they are seen as dependent and incompetent, or capable and independent).
- Personal beliefs about how far children ‘need’ to conform to these milestones.
- What happens to children who don’t, or cannot, conform (e.g. how disabled children are seen when they don’t meet developmental ‘norms’).

You need to learn to tune into the nature of these debates in each module, because they furnish you with essential information about your tutor – what they see as important, what issues they want you to understand and be able to discuss and so on.

### **Knowing your lecturer and knowing the subject/content**

These two things are often intertwined, as we’ll show you. Lecturers will encourage you to question and interrogate taken-for-granted meanings around childhood through exploring personal values, as we have shown. Don’t assume, though, that because lecturers ask for your personal experience, they want you to express unconsidered opinions in your assignments. What they want you to do is to learn to *theorize* what you say. To do well in their assignments you must get to know their expectations about theorizing material. In this sense, knowing your lecturer is not about knowing them as a person or buttering them up so they’ll give you better marks, but making sure you fully understand their expectations about subject, content and how it is discussed.

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This is more complicated than it sounds because every lecturer will have their own disciplinary and/or professional approach to talking academically about childhood and children. You need to clue yourself in to the ways in which they theorize the subject area. These can vary dramatically from tutor to tutor and from course to course, so it's important for you to remain sensitive to the concepts, terminology and issues they wish you to discuss in the assignments they set. You will need to use these to show that you have moved beyond personal opinion when you come to tackle your assignments, because you will be marked down if you offer an untheorized opinion.

### But how do you know what each lecturer wants?

Going to lectures is the key to finding out each lecturer's theoretical approach to the subject: what counts as theory, for them, and how they define the nature of the subject or field of enquiry. You can fathom this out by thinking about the following things:

**Identifying your lecturers' key course themes and issues** The first step is to make sure you grasp the *issues* each lecturer wants their students to explore. Your assignment should relate to these. Specific issues reflect the focus of the subject area of the degree, or even lecturers' individual research interests, hence they can vary immensely. Certain ones crop up in different guises, though, as common course themes, threads and key issues.



#### to think about

Some examples of common course themes might be:

- power, control and decision-making on behalf of children
- status
- children's perspectives and viewpoints
- motivation
- ownership
- families
- inclusion and equal opportunities
- play
- citizenship and participation
- parenting

- gender
- learning (formal, informal and unintended, e.g. the hidden curriculum)
- growth and development
- autonomy
- children's rights and agency
- policy and practice
- leadership and management
- adults' roles (professional perspectives, parents' views, censorship)
- choice
- success and failure

James and James (2008) and Nutbrown (2005) offer useful further suggestions and starting points.

**Identifying your lecturers' theoretical stance to the subject area they teach** The reading list reveals any tutor's key concepts, viewpoints and approaches to studying childhood – and will equip you with the main 'tools' your tutors want you to use. We look at this in detail in the next chapter. The easiest way to begin, though, is to pay careful attention to what goes on in formal sessions. Here your lecturers will tend to introduce you to the perspectives and theories that interest them in more formal ways.

They'll tend to do this by presenting *conflicting perspectives*. On CS/ECS courses it's important to identify and talk about diverse perspectives, because this is the first stage of beginning to 'get into' any area being studied. In lectures, therefore, look out for the *key questions* each lecturer highlights or poses for you to discuss. This is where tutors really reveal the issues they want you to explore, and the concepts and terminology they want you to use. Time spent after sessions thinking carefully and making notes on the nature of these questions and debates – the big ideas – will be time well spent and improves your chances of doing well in assignments.

We'll now move on to think about how your lecturers might do this.

### **Introducing you to starkly different or contrasting views of the child**

Many courses will introduce students to the different models, concepts or images of the child that can best be seen by comparing differences between time, place, culture and so on. Historical approaches help us see how the child was/is seen as a special category of people, increasingly regarded as essentially different from adults, and viewed in relation to other social categories, such as gender (is girlhood different from boyhood?), class (is unemployed

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or working-class childhood different from middle- or upper-class childhood?), ethnicity (is childhood different according to your ethnic group?). It also helps us see how far, and in what ways, childhood is viewed as being different from (or similar to) adulthood in different contexts.

**to think about****Historical constructions of the child**

You may be asked to think about current ideas about childhood by reflecting on historical views of the child. This is because it is argued that social and historical factors have an important bearing on the experience of being a child. We can consider what meanings adults have associated with childhood as a state of being and begin to analyse the ways in which attitudes towards children have changed and developed by looking at representations of childhood across time.

For example, we can see that the state of being a child shifts if we think about differences in how long, say, childhood lasts. In Western countries nowadays we might expect children to start to play a formal economic role at the age of 15 or so, while in the past children as young as 6 went out to work.

Furthermore, at different times childhood could be seen, for example,

- as a time of Romantic innocence, during which children should learn naturally, protected from the polluting influences of adult institutions and ideas
- as innately evil, with Evangelical adults needing to be 'cruel to be kind' to ensure that children follow the path to righteousness and proper moral conduct
- as a time in which children are like blank slates ('Tabula Rasa') waiting for adults to give them knowledge and make them learn
- as under threat, with particular cases, such as Baby P or the Victoria Climbié inquiry, prompting massive public concern and policy developments around children's well-being and safeguarding

Always think carefully about the questions your lecturer highlights if they present you with starkly contrasting perspectives. Do they highlight questions relating to cultural determinants (e.g. gender, class)? Or do they highlight questions relating to children's agency (children's voices, power, status)? Do they highlight questions of policy, professional practice and change (what are the challenges of implementing the ECM agenda)?



Or do they focus on questions surrounding the representation of childhood (tensions between Romantic conceptions of the child as innocent and the child as knowing, debates about portrayals of the child in poetry, comics or other media)?

### **Recognizing the diversity of Childhood/Early Childhood Studies as a subject area**

Activities and reading that help students think about the variable ways in which childhood can be interpreted are important to CS/ECS as an emergent field. Lecturers often set such activities because they help students to perceive key questions about the meanings of childhood. Once more, seeing different points of view can help learners recognize, sharply and often with a shock or a jolt, how they think and feel about the ‘reality’ of childhood today. It makes us ask questions such as:

- What makes someone seem childish or childlike?
- What behaviour is regarded as ‘appropriate’ for children?
- What is a child’s nature really like? (Are children innately evil or inherently good?)
- Who ‘owns’ childhood and who governs it? How should children be treated?
- What is good for children?

All this draws attention to the crucial importance of *adults’* ideas about the meanings of childhood, which may not be what you expect to be studying. In fact, many of the questions on CS/ECS courses revolve around how adults see children: the meanings they ascribe to them and the ways in which they treat them.

It’s worth emphasizing, that, as a consequence, academic study of childhood often focuses on *representations*, stories and concepts – ideas – about the child (in line with disciplines such as sociology, English and cultural studies), as well as focusing (like disciplines such as education or psychology) on the child or children *per se*. You are looking for the hidden meanings, if you like, whether the focus of study is representational art about children, or products for children (paintings, fiction, magazines) or ‘real-life’ interview data (professionals, parents or children talking about childhood).

### **Perspectives on childhood**

Most courses nowadays will have a module that introduces varying views of the child, and highlights diverse perspectives on the meanings associated

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with childhood. Such modules aim to get you thinking about the hugely different ways in which childhood as an idea can be seen.

The words lecturers will probably use to highlight this common theme include:

perspectives	paradigms
views	conceptions
images	ideologies
models	ideas
theories	notions
versions	discourses
constructions	perceptions
concepts	interpretations ... of childhood.

### Identifying the key issues within a module

Getting to know your lecturer also means tuning in to how far your lecturer is interested in studying children as ‘real’ embodied individuals, perhaps in particular professional contexts or settings, or how far they expect you to explore more general ideas about concepts of childhood in a more abstract sense. Again, thinking about the focus of their lectures and the key debates or questions they expect you to be able (eventually) to discuss and theorize in a scholarly, academic manner in your assignment will give you a good idea. They will usually start, however, by getting you to simply see that there is a debate to be had.

Often they refer to key debates, or even set up debates for you to hold among yourselves in class. Recognizing these is the key to success.



#### case study

### Identifying the key issues – Child Development

A lecturer teaching Child Development was keen to introduce her students to ‘great’ researchers: people like Piaget, who had conducted experimental research, observing children and drawing up theoretical viewpoints. She was concerned, however, that because a lot of her students would feel that they ‘already knew’ about these theories from previous courses, they would tend to

simply regurgitate the researchers' accounts of the 'ages and stages' in the assignment they produced. This was not at all what she wanted – instead she expected her students to *stand back and question* psychologists' interpretations of the factors that impact on children's development. This, for her, was theory.

To highlight this she based her lectures on key themes, such as the extent to which various theorists saw the role and relative importance of genetic or environmental factors in children's development. In sessions she encouraged students to compare and contrast different theorists' views of the ways in which children are understood to develop, change, grow and make sense of the world. The questions she raised in sessions surrounded:

- How do different researchers and theorists (Locke, Skinner, Bandura, Vygotsky, Freud, Piaget) believe that children learn?
- How does each explain children's emotional, social and intellectual growth?

The essay title she set was 'Piaget was a psychologist who explored factors that impact on children's development. Discuss his findings in the light of relevant literature'. Poor essays were those in which students simply gathered and copied down information about Piaget's stages. Essays that received good marks discussed Piaget's ideas by recognizing them as part of a *debate* about the relative importance of nature and nurture.



### case study

#### Identifying the key issues – Children's Rights

A lecturer teaching Childhood and Human Rights wanted to encourage students to think about the complexities involved in coming to decisions which could be deemed to be 'in the best interests of the child'. After outlining the series of markers laid down by the UN Convention, her sessions focused on how children are constructed in the minds of adults and the relationship between this and the implications for social policy and practice in the care, education and health of children within both the family and the wider community.

In sessions she got students to discuss and debate issues of power: who holds it, how it is accessed, what is the commitment to power sharing. One

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debate, for example, focused on the 'Gillick Case', which students were asked to read about before the session. The lecturer asked one group to make the case that girls under the age of 16 should have access to contraception without their parents' knowledge. She asked the other group to put the view that this would encourage promiscuity and the promotion of under-age sex to people who might not be emotionally ready.

In this way the lecturer encouraged students to think about who they thought should decide and why, as a first step to identifying the issue and perceiving the debate, which hinges essentially upon different views of the child. She was not looking, ultimately, for a gut-response or an opinion, but for a reasoned response, acknowledging different points of view. Other sessions were used to model similar debates, by presenting different perspectives on whether a disabled child's 'best interests' would be served by attending a special or a mainstream school, and on whether conjoined twins should be separated, if the operation risks the result of only one twin's survival.

The lecturer hoped that by setting up in-class debates students would be clear that she would give very low marks to an assignment that simply regurgitated the principles of the UN Convention, and expected essays to discuss and debate the complexities and problems involved in decision-making on children's behalf. The next two chapters will explain the ways in which she hoped students would move beyond the broad, rather emotive debates initiated in her teaching sessions, into theorizing different perspectives via reading, but for now it's important to recognize that the sessions act as important signals to cue-sensitive students about the nature of the issues this lecturer hoped to raise.

## Exploring policy issues

As we said earlier, CS/ECS courses are likely to require you to study *adults'* views and assumptions on childhood. Adults' beliefs, approaches and the views of policy-makers are common themes in CS/ECS, because children's worlds and environments are heavily shaped, and constrained, by what adults want, or the ways in which adults believe children and young people should be treated.

Child-centred consultation (seeking children's views and seeing them as people *now* rather than as just miniature adults-in-the-making) is another issue which will emerge in different areas within your course. The questions here might be:

## KEY COURSE THEMES

- How can you, in policy terms, balance the tensions between seeking to protect children while including them in decision-making?
- Who decides what is in the child's best interest, when parents, professionals and children cannot agree?

These two themes are academically significant, as they demand that the student engages deeply with key ideas and beliefs about childhood. It is also significant professionally in relation to policy developments.

**Every Child Matters: New contexts, new professionals, new challenges**

It's a very exciting, interesting and challenging time for CS/ECS in the UK, as in recent years, public attention and national policy have focused on children and childhood at a range of levels and across a number of professions. As a consequence of this focus there is, and will continue to be, an impact:

- on the sorts of jobs that are available
- on the kinds of professionals who are needed
- on the sorts of courses universities make available

'Every Child Matters: change for children' is a core policy approach to the well-being of children from birth to the age of 19. The aim is that every child, whatever their background or circumstances, has the support they need to meet the Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes, which are to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being

This means that organizations providing services to children are being asked to work together in new ways, sharing information. The ECM agenda implies deep-seated structural and cultural change, so issues relating to the restructuring of the children's workforce, principles of leadership and management, health and welfare, and the implementation of integrated and multi-agency working will be a key focus of many courses.

An integral part of ECM is the Common Core Framework of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce. This aims to reflect a set of common values and define the knowledge and basic skills needed by those working with children and families. The Common Core sets out six areas of expertise which everyone working with children should have. They include:

## STUDYING CHILDHOOD AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

- effective communication and engagement
- child and young person development
- safeguarding and promoting the welfare of the child
- supporting transitions
- multi-agency working
- sharing information

These areas will appear as central and recurrent themes on your course and you are likely to be given lots of opportunity to reflect deeply on them and debate how they might be viewed and interpreted. It's important to engage actively and questioningly, however, rather than seeing your learning as a straightforward set of knowledge that you are given or acquire. The following chapters will help you develop effective strategies to accomplish this.

Further, ECS is a particularly rapid growth area. New legislation is affecting practitioners on a daily basis, and the sheer pace of change means they may well be struggling to keep abreast of developments, whilst you will have a chance to study and consider them in detail. The Foundation Stage of Education (3–5) now affords the early years of education a distinct identity and importance. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project, which demonstrated the effects of high-quality provision on children's development, has contributed to the belief that a graduate-led workforce will improve children's outcomes. As integrated and holistic services are being developed, and the profile of childcare is significantly raised, early years' practitioners' roles and responsibilities are changing apace as are the potential career pathways for those interested in working with and for children. For instance, Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) offers the potential to become a change agent who helps to raise quality of provision. All these changes require dedicated, creative, imaginative and reflective thinkers, who can understand, interpret and respond sensitively to complex situations.

It's worth remembering, then, that you, as a current student, will be one of the professionals meeting these challenges. As we will discuss in the final chapter, doing any degree enables you to develop a range of valuable graduate skills, but as ECS/CS students you have the chance to work and reflect on issues specifically relating to relevant policy, child development, the challenges of partnership working, professional and leadership roles. This will help you work towards becoming a critical practitioner who can make a difference in settings, but you need to be active, within and beyond the university classroom, rather than sitting back and passively waiting for learning to happen. Above all, you must make sure you become familiar with your courses' aims so that you make the most of what's on offer.

Learning to ask yourself questions about why things are as they are, why change is challenging, why people hold certain values, or how people construct and reveal views of children's needs is essential to studying CS/ECS. It means you're being analytical and critical. If you get into the habit of using sessions to tap in to the relevant issues, identifying the 'big questions' and rehearsing your responses to different ways of addressing them, you should be well placed to successfully tackle the reading and the assignment. This is because you will start to see what *you* need to know and be able to do on each module, which will enable you to take fruitful next steps.

### **Look for issues not answers: 'it depends'**

In short, your course is likely not to give you 'answers' but to *raise issues*. CS/ECS is, increasingly, all about problematizing what can be made to sound extremely easy: doing the right thing by our children, whether as carers, policy-makers, educators or parents. You will no doubt study provision, policy and legislation on your course, but you must learn to adopt a critical, academic eye when you look at these, too. Again and again, you should realize that whatever is done on behalf of children is far from simple: it all depends on how you see it.

It's therefore very important to perceive the steps that help you to become critical and analytical when studying children and childhood. 'Critical' in this context does not mean you have to disagree with everything, it means weighing up and thinking questioningly about other people's ideas, looking for the meanings beneath the surface, contrasting different interpretations and people's values, attitudes, principles and assumptions about children, childhood and children's worlds. It means tuning in to the ways in which people disagree, and, even more importantly, thinking about the *reasons* why they disagree. It means identifying complex and untidy issues, and logically following through and teasing out what different viewpoints might mean. It means always asking 'why?'

The next chapter helps you to see the role of further reading to extend this process of critical enquiry.