

“We invented a new game”: British Children’s Responses to the French Revolution

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This paper explores play as a medium for tracing the responses of British children to the French Revolution. Drawing upon letters, diaries, and autobiographies it considers the ways in which children processed their understanding of the revolution and the subsequent war through fantasy, mimesis, and imagination. It considers how various forms of reported play may be used by historians to chart how the family operated as a medium for the reception and diffusion of political ideas and events. It suggests that juvenile identities can be carefully teased out through close reading of children’s extant diaries and other writing—material which is highly suggestive of the extent to which current affairs and ideological debates impinged upon the consciousness of even the very young. In exploring this activity, the paper draws upon recent literatures concerning the political socialisation of children. In place of older models in which children were often viewed as the passive recipients of educational processes, it draws on those theorists who point to the active role of individuals within socialization. McDevitt and Chaffee for example, formulate a revisionist model of “trickle up influence.”¹

Here, rather than conceptualising politicization as an inert model of downwards transmission, children are perceived as acting agents in their own right, whose views and actions are capable of significantly affecting the outlook of their parents and other adults around them. Through the appropriation of fiction, family discussions, and community loyalist involvement, children frequently constructed a distinctive juvenile culture which was both steeped within, yet also parallel to the worlds of the adults around them. The paper considers the various forms of play in which children engaged (socio-dramatic play, fantasy play, and so on) and which became woven into people’s memories of these turbulent years. Juvenile behavior reaffirmed contemporary perception of the enormity of the crisis facing Britain and was often read as symptomatic of the widespread effects of the revolution and war upon the British nation.

¹ Michael McDevitt and Steven Chaffee, “From Top-Down to Trickle-up Influence: Revisiting Assumptions About the Family in Political Socialization,” *Political Communication* 19:3 (2002), 281-301.