
UNIT 1 CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

As ‘Concept of Childhood and Adolescence’ is the first Unit of the Course: “Childhood and Growing Up”, it is apt to know the different meanings of childhood and adolescence in different cultures and societies. We all think that we are aware of childhood and adolescence as we experience these stages or we have children of these stages. Though we have passed through the stages of childhood and adolescence, yet we have to address some issues such as-‘Do children across different cultures experience childhood and adolescence similarly? How do urbanization and economic change impact the construction of childhood and adolescence?’

This Unit will help you understand how a child is different from an adult. After going through this Unit, you will understand the various perspectives of childhood and adolescence in different cultures. By understanding the concept of childhood and adolescence in various cultures you may arrive at the conclusion that childhood and adolescence is basically constructed based on the socio-political realities of diverse contexts. As teachers or prospective teachers this unit will help you understand children in your classroom coming from diverse contexts.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- discriminate between childhood and adolescence;
- develop understanding of the term ‘social construction of childhood’;
- identify the various perspectives of childhood;

- explain the concept of adolescence;
- analyze and reflect on how different cultures experience childhood and adolescence; and
- differentiate among a child, an adolescent and an adult.

1.3 CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD

Children and childhood are familiar terms to us. We all have been through the age when we were called ‘**children**’ and have experienced the phase called ‘**childhood**’. Not only childhood but also we have passed through the stages of adolescence with varied experiences. The word childhood means the state of being a child. Till the end of the twentieth century the idea of childhood as a separate social category had been paid very little attention. According to cultural norms and expectations, the definition of childhood also varies.

As adults, we see children in the same manner and not as unique individuals who have varied experiences, interests, styles of learning, and knowledge. We often force them to be the way we want them to be, which deeply influences children’s development. As teachers or prospective teachers, we need to develop a familiarity with experiences of children, so that we can question our own perceptions about ‘the children we teach’. In this Unit, an attempt has been made to become aware of limitations of our own understandings about children. In order to understand the different experiences, it is fair to consider the variety of perspectives of childhood. Let us first examine the anthropological perspective of childhood.

1.3.1 Anthropological Perspective of Childhood

While examining the anthropological viewpoint, you could see that there are no chronological limits of childhood or biological boundaries. From anthropological viewpoint, childhood can be perceived from five angles. Firstly, children are socialized to learn and perpetuate a set of norms and customs. According to this view, we may treat children as **small adults in the making**, moulded by parents and adults in a community to sustain the culture of a society. Secondly, children’s personalities are understood as natural reactions of the anxieties and cultural aspects in which they grow up with. The emphasis is on how the cultural patterns are internalized and in turn are reproduced in society. Thirdly, childhood socialization is a process by which norms, attitudes, ways of thinking and values of society are acquired by children to enter the next stage of development. This view suggests that child rearing practices are influenced by the geography, history and ecology of a community, which, in turn, shape the personality of a child. Fourthly, childhood is viewed in terms of ‘developmental niche’. The ‘developmental niche’ stands for the framework for examining the cultural structuring of the micro-environment of the child. It also tries to explain the environment in terms of child’s viewpoint and to understand the process of development and acquisition of culture. The child is seen as bringing its own temperament, as well as species-specific potentials, to the developmental niche provided by its culture. The developmental niche is divided into three components as given below:

- i) the physical and social settings in which the child lives (for example, type of house or living space the child has)
- ii) the customs of child care and child rearing (for example, scheduling of activities such as sending children to play schools or showing them TV programmes)

- iii) the psychology of the caretakers (for example, do the care takers believe that a regular sleep schedule is necessary for healthy development).

These three components function together in shaping the developmental experience of a child within the larger culture. Finally, some anthropologists view childhood itself as a cultural construction shaped by forces within as well as outside a single cultural community. Children experience culture within a family through their daily routine of life. Here daily routine consists of going to school, religious practices, play, mealtimes and family visits. Generally, culture enters into the mind of a child through various growing up experiences. The experiences children had in childhood might have impacted their adult life. Here we have to remember that child rearing practices vary from culture to culture and represent an adaptation to different environments. You will study in detail about the growing up experiences of children in various contexts such as in different types of family structures, growing up in discomfort zones and growing up as a girl in Unit 2 titled ‘Socialization and Growing Up in Diverse Contexts’ of this Block. The ways in which children assign meaning to their everyday environments, be they city, rural, suburban or discomfort zones and how they involve in these environments play a major part in shaping children’s lives. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will be referring to the **sociological perspective** of childhood.

1.3.2 Sociological Perspective of Childhood

We understand that there exist variety and diversity in experiences of children across times and societies. Further, there are different conceptions about child and childhood across time, societies and contexts. These are so different that it is difficult to have one idea for child or childhood. Yet, in general as adults, we envision childhood as one category. Such a vision is more of a creation or construction, which is not based on an *empathetic* understanding of experiences of children. It is shaped by a uniform and narrow vision of society, which may have a deep implication on lives of children. This way of looking at children seems to be adults’ **construction of childhood**. We may agree with Mayall’s (1991) argument that ‘children’s lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adults’ understanding of childhood and what children are and should be’.

Childhood as a Social Construction

A social construction can be defined as ‘a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which “reality” is negotiated in everyday life through people’s interactions and through sets of discourses’ (James & James, 2008, p.122). It focuses on culture and context in understanding what happens in society and in constructing knowledge based on those understandings. When we examine the idea of social construction, we have to highlight the following points:

- All ways of understanding are culturally and historically relative;
- Our knowledge about the world is constructed through our daily interactions; and
- There are many possible constructions of the world.

You may notice that when developmental psychologists differentiate children from adults on the basis of ability in a range of domains, social constructionists argue that childhood has more to do with how people define it; thus making childhood a social construction. Our attitude towards childhood is influenced by the dominant belief systems of the society in which we live, and so it may vary across time and culture. We can only begin to understand our views of childhood if we take account of our

own position in a particular social, political and cultural context. The constructed nature of childhood becomes more apparent when we contrast the concepts of childhood that prevailed at different **historical periods** or in different **cultures**. Let us discuss the historical perspective of childhood.

1.3.3 Historical Perspective of Childhood

When we try to know the meaning of child in different societies, it is better to overview the history of the idea of childhood. If one analyses history, one will realize that meaning and description of children varies across time periods in history. A French historian named Philippe Aries, analyzed how children were depicted in history. Using works of art, letters, and many other sources he explored how the meaning of childhood evolved from medieval times onwards to the present. Read the following box.

Philippe Aries wrote that childhood is a very new concept. It did not exist at all in the medieval period. He found that there were no children depicted in paintings of that era. There were only young babies or adults. All those who were not babies were painted in adult dresses, with adult body language, and adult-like expressions. Most young people were apprenticed, became workers in the fields and entered the adult roles at a very early age. Even 'people' around seven years of age were seen as little adults, and not as children.

The medieval cultures lacked the concept of childhood. Childhood is a later historical creation. It came into existence among the rich people (upper class) in the 16th and 17th centuries. It further developed in the 18th century among the upper class. And it finally emerged on the scene in the 20th century in both the upper and lower classes. Once the institution of childhood began to emerge, the situation of the young person began to change in society. First they were named children. A theory of innocence of the child emerged. Children were to be protected from adult reality. The facts of birth, death, sex, tragedy and adult world events were hidden from the child. Children were increasingly segregated by age.

-Philippe Aries (1962), Centuries of Childhood

Another thinker, John Holt, wrote about young people and their place, or lack of place, in modern society. He talked about the institution of modern childhood, the attitude, customs and laws that defined and located children in modern life and determined, to a large degree, what their lives were like, and how we, their elders treated them. He further talked about many ways in which modern childhood seemed to him be bad for most of those who lived within it and how it should and might have changed.

-John Holt (1974), Escape from Childhood

Now you know that there have been different ways in which childhood has been perceived in different times in the history of civilization. For example, children in non-industrial society are treated differently from children in industrial societies which will be discussed in detail in the section 1.5 'Concept of Adolescence'. Therefore, childhood is not a given concept; it is a concept which develops through adults' lenses, and their ways of perceiving children in the society.

1.3.4 Cultural Perspective of Childhood

Variations in our images of childhood can be found not only by going back over time

but also by travelling through the different cultures in the world. In different cultures there is a variation in children's social position and roles. These variations are seen between *rural* and *urban* areas, among *different communities*, and among *different countries*. Let us look at some examples of how children are reared in various cultures.

Observe an **Indian mother** with her baby on her lap. The mother does her best to foster emotional tie by cuddling, smiling, singing and talking, and thus ensure that she is very much the focus of the baby's attention. While looking at **Kaluli mothers** and their babies, we will get a different picture. The Kaluli people are a small society living in the tropical rainforests of Papua New Guinea (close to Australia), and there mother-baby interaction takes a very different form. Mothers hold their babies outwards so that they can see others who are part of their social group. Mothers rarely talk directly to their babies; instead, other people talk to the baby. Why is it so?

As Kaluli people are living in one large long house with no internal walls, the mother-child bond is less significant and children are prepared to be aware of the social community as a whole. Hence they adopted the practice of facing the child outward and not towards the mother.

(Source: Schaffer, H. Rudolph. (2004). *Introducing Child Psychology*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.)

An example of mother-child play session in two societies is given below:

In the course of childhood, a mother in western society tries to develop independent nature among children by providing situations to explore on their own. On the contrary, a Japanese mother socializes the child to become dependent on other members of the group. For example, during play sessions while confronted by a car, a western mother might say: 'This is a car. It has nice wheels. You can play with it.'

A Japanese mother would say: 'Hello chan, It's a vroom vroom. I give it to you. Now give it to me. Yes. Thank you.'

What difference do you observe between these two mother-child play sessions?

The mother in western society gives much importance to teach the child the name of the object and its properties whereas in the second case, the mother wants to teach the child the cultural norms for polite speech and to focus on interpersonal aspects. Another point you can observe is that in western society, mothers join their children in play to foster their cognitive and educational skills whereas in Japanese society, play is merely a means of involving a child in social rituals that will develop mother-child relationship.

(Source: Schaffer, H. Rudolph. (2004). *Introducing Child Psychology*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.)

From the above examples, you might have inferred that child rearing practices are important in shaping the personality of children. Even today there are variations in our images of childhood when we compare different parts of the world with different cultural traditions. What is normal in one society may not be acceptable in another. These differences are due to the rearing practices as how children are talked to, held or played with. Thus we may say that each society sets out to produce children with personality characteristics that fit in with its own values. The social and cultural contexts in which children grow up exert influences in making sense of the social

world of the child. Thus, you may say that there is no single universal definition of childhood. Childhood differs across time, place and culture. In the next section we will discuss the meaning of the concept ‘Child.’

Check Your Progress 1

Notes: (a) Write your answers in the space given below.
 (b) Compare your answers with the one given at the end of the unit.

i) “Childhood is a social construction”. Do you agree with this statement? Why?

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1.4 DEFINITION OF CHILD IN DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Teachers in schools deal with children belonging to various backgrounds. Some teachers shout at children, some try to talk to them to resolve the matter and some become ignorant. However, to handle children with diverse background is not that simple. This exposes us to the reality that we, as adults or as teachers are not well equipped to understand the classroom contexts. This results in our lack of engagement with children in diverse contexts. Do you think these situations have something to do with how children are placed in the society? Apparently, it may not appear so. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will begin to explore this question.

As adults we feel that we fairly understand childhood and children’s experiences. Let us ask some questions to ourselves. Can we ‘define’ childhood? We all have experienced childhood; would it be possible for us to ‘define’ a child? If you ask these questions to people, most may use some of the following adjectives to describe children:

Children are:
 innocent, God’s gift, pure and truthful, sweet, cute,
 playful, childish, funny, idiot, naughty,
 fragile, protected, soft like potter’s clay, fearful

These are some general perceptions that most of us have about children. If we closely examine these perceptions, we will realize that these do not explain children’s experiences. Some children come from a deprived context, and therefore appear to be having different experiences. Do you think all children, including those coming from better-off families, have same experiences? We may say that it is less likely to be so, but we cannot say anything for sure. This is because every child has different conditions to live in. Since experiences of children are different, it would be incorrect to think of children as one category, and attribute one single ‘definition’ of childhood. It might sound a little unusual to some of us, but there are different and even conflicting perspectives about the meaning of child.

The English word ‘child’ comes from the Teutonic root and from the Gothic word for womb. The English word ‘baby’ is originated from the first sounds made by an infant which sound like “be-be” or “ba-ba”. In English a baby is also referred to as an ‘infant’, which has its roots in defining a person who cannot speak (in = not, fans = speaking).

In Japanese the newborn baby is called 'aka-chan' (aka = red, and chan = title given to children). This is simply because the skin of the baby appears reddish in colour. In the next paragraph, we will discuss how a child is defined on the basis of age criterion, legal point of view, as a labour, and social policy.

- i. **The age criterion:*** Most commonly 'age' is a criterion to define child. Generally, child is defined on the basis of age. A human being is considered to be a child from birth till the onset of puberty, that is, the age span from birth to 13 years, in the average child. Childhood in this age span ranges from birth to puberty.

There is a debate around this demarcation of age. Some argue that child comes into existence and the childhood starts, even before the child is born. That is, in the fetal stage itself. Furthermore, some argue that childhood extends till a period one gains all legal rights as 'adults'. That is, unless one is legally an adult, one is a child. In India, this would mean that till 18 years of age one is a child.

- ii. **Legal view:*** **The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** defines a child as a human being below the age of 18 years. **The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)** considers a child as a person who is in between the age group 0-18 years. While **the Juvenile Justice Act** in India considers persons below 14 years of age to be children, **the Right of Education Act 2009** narrows the definition down to persons between 6 to 14 years. The different articles of Indian Constitution and Acts put various age limits for a child. **Article 21 A** of the Constitution of India says that the State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children within the ages of 6 and 14. **Article 45** of the Constitution specifies that the State shall endeavor to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of 6. Under **the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act, 1986** a child is a person who has not completed 14 years of age. **The Indian Mines Act** defines children as those below 18 years. While perusing all these acts or articles a uniform age range cannot be seen.

It will be interesting to note that all over the world the age for legal adulthood differs. In India it is 18 years, in Iran it is 15 years, in Scotland it is 16 years, in Japan it is 20 years, and in Egypt it is 21 years. What do you think are the implications of legal age on life? Till one attains legal adulthood, one is a protected citizen. Therefore, children, adolescents or minors, are the responsibility of their guardians and the government. Their food and health, clothing, shelter, education and good life, are responsibilities of the guardians and the government. After attaining the age of adult, one is legally responsible for oneself. One can enter an employment, vote, contest election, marry, file a case, buy property, drive, and the like. However, there are many contradictions within this legal criterion. For example, the legal age of entering into work in India is 14 years. The 'child' lacks right to vote at this age and other adult rights. A person, who has not attained rights as adult, would be more vulnerable in employment. Do you think it is healthy physically and mentally for 14 years old to engage in labour?

- iii. **Child as a labour:*** Despite the fact that child labour is illegal, large number of children work in factories (carpet weaving, bidi making, bangle making, cracker factories etc.) at small shops, does domestic chores (cleaning, cooking, taking care of sibling, etc). Many are in situations where they have to engage themselves in begging. Childhood in poverty, and experiences of children in

impoverished contexts, are very different than that in better off situations. Children in such cases are perceived as helping hands in family’s subsistence. Mostly, children in such situations do not live more different than adults.

- iv. **Child in social policy:** In educational policies children are pictured as learners and future citizens of a nation. The responsibility of providing education to children falls upon the adults. Parents spend vast amount of money for the education of children. **Right to Education Act, 2009** ensures that any cost on education, up to 8 years (Class I-VIII) of schooling will be borne by the State. In social welfare policies, children are considered as vulnerable group who are easily subjected to physical punishment, sexual abuse and emotional abuse. In media, children are depicted as sale promoters in advertisements.

In many societies, the term child is used to indicate a kin relationship but also to indicate a state of servitude. Biological determinants were not always taken into account while indicating childhood. In Medieval Europe, infancy was generally considered to occur at birth or at the end of breast-feeding which prolonged up to age of three. The stage of childhood was considered to end at around seven years when an individual attained the competency to perform certain domestic or industrial tasks. The eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau considered childhood occurring between birth and twelve years. Hence, there is no universal definition of child and childhood.

Check Your Progress 2

Notes: (a) Write your answer in the space given below.
 (b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of the unit.

i) Why is it not possible to give a universal definition of child?

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1.5 CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence, as we know today, has undergone major social and evolutionary transitions like childhood. You might know that ‘adolescence’ as a concept/term was introduced at the end of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century. Before this period, adolescence was not differentiated from childhood. In the introductory part of this Unit, you have read thus: How do urbanization and economic change impact the construction and experience of adolescence? The introduction of the concept/term adolescence is the result of the rapid changes brought about by industrial revolution in society. You could categorize these changes as industrialization, urbanization, institutionalization and immigration. Though we are not going into the details of each category, let us examine the changes brought about by industrialization and how this impact the concept what we call **adolescence**.

Before delving into the details of condition of children and adolescents in industrial societies, we have to address the captivating question- ‘How childhood and

Note: The portion under ‘Definition of Child in Different Perspectives’ is adapted from Unit 9: ‘Childhood’ of the Course BES-001: Understanding the Elementary School Child with minor changes.

adolescence are treated in non-industrial societies?’ In the subsequent paragraph, we ponder over this query. Ruth Benedict argues that in non-industrial societies, children are generally treated differently from that of industrial societies in the following ways:

- Children in non-industrial societies took responsibility at an early age;
- Those children who show obedience to adult authority were placed in less value; and
- The sexual behaviour of children is often viewed differently.

Before the industrial revolution, children and adolescents were considered to be merely miniature adults. They were expected to work within the family household such as in farm fields, carpentry or engaged in other trades at home. Children and adolescents were seen more of an economic liability and less of an asset. In rural areas, they helped in livestock and harvesting; but in the city, they often didn’t work. With the increased mechanization, the demand for skilled workers had increased and necessitated a specialized division of labour. This reduced the usefulness of both children and adolescents as workers. More than that, laws were passed restricting child labour and making schooling compulsory. What changes have happened in society to make childhood and adolescence as a distinct life-stage? You may say that schooling, laws restricting child labour and child protection Acts gave children the stages of childhood and adolescence. By the middle of the 20th century, adolescents were separated from adults and they spent most of their time with peers. After World War II, the enrolment of adolescents who attended schools increased and they delayed their entry into the adult world. Thus, you have understood how urbanization and economic change impact the construction and experience of adolescence.

When we look at the derivation of the term ‘adolescence’, we can see that the term comes from the Latin verb ‘adolescere’ which means ‘to grow up’ or ‘to grow to maturity’. In psychology, adolescence is treated as a stage between childhood and adulthood. In this stage, one has to adapt and adjust childhood behaviours to the adult standards that are recognized in one’s culture. Here, we may refer adolescence not only to biological growth, but also to social growth within a cultural framework. Some may consider puberty as the evidence of reaching adolescence stage. We use **puberty** to denote the time when a child attains physical and sexual maturity. The two-year period that precedes puberty is termed as **pubescence**. It is the period when physiological changes lead to the development of secondary sex characteristics. Adolescence being linked to puberty refers to the transitional period from childhood to adolescence and is different from culture to culture because of the influence of society. Generally, we may divide the stages of adolescence as follows:

Table 1.1: Stages of Adolescence

Three main **stages of adolescence** can be discerned:

Early adolescence (10-13 years) – In this stage, there is a spurt of growth and development of secondary sexual characteristics.

Mid adolescence (14-15 years) – This stage is characterized by forming new relationships with opposite sex and the peer groups and the development of a separate identity from parents.

Late adolescence (16-18 years) – At this stage, adolescents behave similar to adults, and has formed a distinct identity and has their own opinions and ideas.

From the above paragraphs, you might have thought that adolescence is related with physical changes only by considering maturity as the most obvious reason. Usually maturity refers to the age or stage of life when an individual attains physical, emotional, social and intellectual development fully. On the contrary, you may wonder why we have not taken an age-graded definition of adolescence. Several reasons are raised against age-graded definitions. First, there is variation in the age of onset of pubescence. Second, age cannot be treated as a psychological variable; it is only a rough index of the experiences one goes through the process of psychological development. Finally, we cannot limit adolescence to the teen-age years as many individuals in their early twenties are in adolescent roles. For example, some 18-year-olds are financially independent and staying separately from their parents (therefore considered as adults), while others may still depend upon parents financially and emotionally attached to parents (therefore considered as adolescents). However, there are other social and cultural determinants in describing adolescence. Like childhood, adolescence is also a **cultural construction** instead of a biological phenomenon or an age range. Let us discuss the concept of adolescence in different cultures.

1.5.1 Adolescence in different cultures

You might be thinking how adolescence can be culturally constructed? Adolescence is culturally constructed in the sense that how various cultures define adult status and on the terms of learning adult roles and responsibilities by the adolescents. Adolescence occurs within a cultural context. Moreover, it takes place within a specific time frame for each individual. Your adolescence, that of your parents and that of your children will share certain commonalities, such as biological growth, but will be unique in certain respects such as play and music preference. Now you may agree that adolescence is present in all cultures but the lived experiences vary greatly among cultures. Adolescence is considered in different ways in various cultures. Read the matter given in the following box:

In middle class America, adolescence is termed as ‘vestibule adolescence’ which describes the period between 18- 20 years of age. Arab adolescents are supposed to remain within the family system until marriage; this reveals the influence of family interests and opinions. In Mexican American culture, adolescents are discouraged from leaving home.

Do you know that in some cultures adolescence does not occur? For example, instead of considering adolescence as a stage, they would conduct a puberty rite ceremony or rite of passage. This marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Does your culture celebrate any ceremony to mark the entrance from childhood to adolescence? There are examples of **puberty rituals** that have developed in many cultures to mark the departure from childhood to adolescence. Puberty rituals are especially common in various societies and traditional cultures.

Read the following box:-

In Samoa, an island in the Pacific Ocean near New Zealand, both male and female participate in puberty rituals. The traditional rite of passage into adolescence contains an elaborate process of tattooing sometime between ages 14 and 16. For boys the process lasts for 2 to 3 months whereas for girls, it takes 5 to 6 days.

(Retrieved from https://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/hip/us/hip_us_pearsonhighered/sample_chapter/020559526X.pdf)

Among Navajo Americans (a Native American tribe), females have a ceremonial ritual related with the onset of menarche. This indicates the entrance of children to adolescence stage.

(Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/3011605/Adolescent_Identity_Formation_and_Rites_of_Passage_The_Navajo_Kinaalda_Ceremony_for_Girls)

In Judaism, boys are considered as a 'bar mitzvah' (means 'son of the commandment') at the age of thirteen and girls as a 'bat mitzvah' at the age of twelve. By these ceremonies, they are looked upon as adults and obliged to follow Jewish commandments and laws.

In many parts of Tamilnadu when a girl attains puberty, a grand feast is conducted. She is bathed in turmeric and dressed as a bride and declared to the larger community that she had now matured.

In Nair community (one of the Hindu castes in Kerala) when girls attain puberty, they celebrate 'thirandukalyanam' in a grand scale. Thirandumangalyam and thiruandukuli are the other terms that are used for this ceremony.

Chuktia Bhunjia, a primitive tribal group in Odisha perform two ceremonial rites for girls-i) pre-puberty rite and ii) puberty rite. In pre-puberty rite, the girl is married to an arrow (Kan) or a branch of Mahul tree as her token husband. If she attains puberty before this rite, she is treated as characterless (Abheda) and face social disapproval. This rite is similar with marriage ceremony. During puberty, the girl is kept apart from others for one month. She is forbidden to visit any male person and to enter kitchen. After one month, she is taken to a river stream by her maternal aunt for bathing with oil-mixed turmeric. After wearing new cloth, she is taken to her uncle's house where a brass pot filled with water is given to her to carry to her own house. Directly entering into the kitchen, she starts cooking in new utensil to reveal her purity.

(Source: Retrieved from www.Antrocom.net/upload/sub/antrocom/100114/11-Antrocom.pdf).

From the above details, you know about the various ceremonies related with the coming of age (puberty) of children. You have noted that some of them are connected with an age of religious responsibility and some with the age of sexual maturity. Adolescence is not fixed; it varies between time, place and culture. Some researchers say that in India, in rural areas there is less variation between children and adults, as compared to urbanizing spaces. It is said that 'adolescence' is not seen as a separate phase in childhood. As soon as a child becomes physically mature to take up adult roles, s/he starts assuming adult roles like, for example, getting engaged in earning income, doing all household work, wear adult-like clothes, and even gets married at an earlier age. It is argued that concept of adolescence (as a phase of transition from childhood to adulthood) has come in existence in India and in many other countries of late.

Now you know that defining the boundaries of adolescence is not an easy task. Generally, psychologists agree that adolescence starts with puberty. At the same time, it is difficult to mark the end of adolescence which we term as 'maturity'. Usually maturity refers to the age or stage of life when a person is considered to be fully developed physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually. The rate of attaining

maturity will differ from person to person. We usually assume that maturity is attained by an individual when s/he is engaging in the socially defined roles of adults in society such as economic independence, marrying, parenting and others. Therefore, we may consider adolescence as the period which lies between attaining puberty and assuming various adulthood roles. So far we have discussed the concept of childhood and adolescence. In the next section, we will find the differences among a child, an adolescent and an adult.

Activity 1

Interview two adolescents from different socio-economic backgrounds and prepare a report on their growing up experiences.

1.6 DIFFERENCES AMONG A CHILD, AN ADOLESCENT AND AN ADULT

Before demarcating a child from an adolescent and an adult, let us try to understand the meaning of each concept in terms of some criteria. In the earlier sections, we have explained who child and adolescent are. **An adult** is a human being or living organism that is of relatively mature age, typically associated with sexual maturity and the attainment of reproductive age. While considering the difference among a child, an adolescent and an adult, we may consider the following criteria:

- Age
- Differences in range of domains
 - Physical
 - Cognition
 - Social
 - Emotional
- Perception

Let us discuss each criterion in detail.

- **Age:** Most of us think that age is the main factor in deciding the difference among a child, an adolescent and an adult. We have already discussed the chronological age of a child under the title ‘age criterion’ in section 1.4 and of an adolescent in the table 1.1 given under the section 1.5. The legal definition of entering adulthood usually varies between ages 16-21, depending on the region or community or country in question. Why we have not taken an age approach has already been discussed under ‘the concept of adolescence’. Age-criterion on the basis of various developmental stages consists of the following features:
 - **Age of identity exploration:** Children and adolescents are struggling to find out who they are and what they want out of schooling. In the case of adults, they have attained self-identity in terms of their responsibility to family and society.
 - **Age of instability:** Children and adolescents feel instability about their social roles and responsibility. They are guided by the adults what to do and what not to do. On the contrary adults express stableness in their social roles.
 - **Age of self-focus:** Children and adolescents lack self-focus in their decisions. They search for adult guidance especially from parents and

teachers in childhood and adolescence stages. Adolescents even turn to their friends for support and self-clarification, including their peers' opinions in their emerging self-definitions. Adults are totally self-focused in their day-to-day activities.

- **Age of feeling-in-between:** Unlike adolescents, children and adults lack the feeling-in-between childhood and adulthood. But adolescents consider themselves as emerging adults. They assume responsibility for themselves, but still do not completely feel like an adult.
- **Differences in range of domains:** Development is described in three domains- physical, cognitive and social/ emotional domains. Let us examine the differences among a child, an adolescent and an adult on the basis of three domains.
 - **Physical:** Physical growth during childhood continues at a steady pace. The transition from childhood to adolescence involves a number of biological changes such as growth spurt, hormonal changes and sexual maturation that come with puberty. During adulthood, physical growth reaches at its peak.
 - **Cognition:** Unlike adults, the cognition of a child is characterized by freshness in thought. A child always sees the world through new eyes and is interested in learning and exploring the world. Adolescents often view the world in terms of polarities- right /wrong, good/bad, whereas adults move away from this absolutist thinking as they become aware of multiple perspectives of others.
 - **Social:** Children and adolescents are in the path of social development by imbibing new ideas, values and learning new skills. The goal of them is to develop a positive sense of self. They receive these learning experiences from their caregivers and others in the microsystem. The social development of adults is linked with the social roles they have to perform in society. These roles are categorized into work, marriage and parenting. As suggested by Erikson's theory of adult development, work is related with having an identity, marriage in search of intimacy and parenting children in terms of generativity.
 - **Emotion:** Unlike adults, children and adolescents are in the process of developing their ability to manage emotions. Lack of this ability sometimes leads them to risk-taking behaviours. On the contrary, adults achieve the ability of self-regulation and self-management.
 - **Perception:** Children, adolescents and adults differ a lot in their perception of the world. For example, by asking a question such as 'What makes clouds move?' you will get a series of answers from children and adults. Look at the three responses:

Child 1: As I am walking, cloud is also walking.

Child 2: They move themselves because they are alive.

Adolescent: Because of earth's rotation, cloud moves.

Adult: Clouds move because of the wind.

From the above responses, you can find out the differences in the perception of individuals in understanding the causality of geographical phenomenon. Children mostly perceive in terms of external reality (see the responses of Child 1 & Child 2).

Unlike adults, children keep information from their senses aloof and may therefore perceive the visual world differently. Adolescents think phenomenon in abstract manner and adults perceive it on the basis of experiences.

Check Your Progress 3

Notes: (a) Write your answer in the space given below.

(b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of the unit.

i) On what basis do you differentiate a child from an adult?

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the concept of childhood and adolescence from various perspectives. While examining the anthropological viewpoint, you could see that there are no chronological limits of childhood or biological boundaries. According to sociological perspective, childhood is a social construction. From the viewpoint of cultural perspective, our attitude towards childhood is influenced by the dominant belief systems of the society in which we live, and so will vary across time and culture. Next we define the term ‘child’ in different perspectives. Though there is no uniformity in the age range of a child, normally we will consider a person who is under 18 years of age as a child.

We explained the concept of adolescence and discussed it in the context of different cultures. Adolescence is not fixed; it varies between time, place and culture. At the same time, it is difficult to mark the end of adolescence which we term as ‘maturity’. The Unit concludes by differentiating a child from an adolescent and an adult.

1.8 UNIT-END EXERCISES

1. Compare and contrast childhood in ancient and modern times on the basis of following criterion:
 - Responsibility
 - Competence
2. Select any one socio-cultural context in India and examine how childhood and adolescence are perceived in that society.
3. Do you agree with the statement that ‘adolescence is culturally constructed’? Justify your answer.

1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. i) Write your own answer. Refer to section 1.3.2.
2. i) In Medieval Europe, infancy is generally considered to occur at birth or at the end of breast-feeding which prolongs up to age of three. The stage of childhood is considered to end at around seven years when an individual attains the competency to perform certain domestic or industrial tasks.

The eighteenth-century philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau considered childhood occurring between birth and twelve years. Childhood differs across time, place and culture. Hence, there is no universal agreement on the definition of child.

3. i) Refer to section 1.6

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