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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Who do you think you are? Children's definitions of being a 'child'

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Abstract

We asked 92 children in North West England, aged 2–17, *if* they were children and what it *meant* to be a child. Our findings show that not all children think they are a 'child'. Although different age groups defined 'childness' in different ways, children reproduced normative Western discourses of childhood, including ideas which subordinate them. The children in our study seemed unable to articulate their capabilities and contributions. We argue that children and adults need to co-produce positive definitions of childness to facilitate adult acceptance of children's participation in society and continue the struggle against adultism.

KEYWORDS
adultism, childness, children's perspectives, participation, social construction

INTRODUCTION

Questioning what childhood is and who the child is, was central to the development of Childhood Studies (CS). To articulate the social construction of childhood, research focused on how society shapes childhood, through legislation, the economy and culture and how discourses of childhood vary historically and culturally (Hendrick, 1997; James & James, 2004; Qvortrup, 2009; Sen, 2021). Many argued that children constituted a subordinate minority group with fewer rights than adults (Alanen, 2001; Alderson, 2020; Mayall, 2001, 2002) and limited recognition as 'citizens' (Bacon & Frankel, 2014). From its inception, CS sought to challenge and move beyond deficit views of children as 'natural, passive, dependent, vulnerable, incompetent and incomplete' (Canosa & Graham, 2020: 26) and promote children's status as citizens and competent social

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actors who are 'active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live' (Prout & James, 1997: 8).

As it developed, CS has drawn attention to how normative adult-created Western discourses of childhood as a time of fun, innocence, play, learning and freedom from responsibility have come to dominate international policy and practice (Imoh, 2012). Discussions often refer to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which constructs the 'child' as anyone below the age of 18. Yet, as Hollindale (1997) notes, although we have all been children, we cannot assume that adult constructions correspond to children's own sense of childness. We cannot assume *how* children will define the category or even *if* they see themselves as children. Yet, the latter seems to have been taken for granted in CS research. There does not appear to be any research that has directly and systematically asked children *if* children consider themselves to be children.

Research exploring children's definitions of being a 'child' has tended to focus on a narrow age group and/or begins from the presumption that 'child' and 'adult' are oppositional categories. Lowe's (2012) study of 16 children aged 3–4 years revealed that four main constructs were prevalent among the children: the child as playful, unknowing, needful and unauthorised. This was a small-scale study conducted in one nursery. Cassidy et al. (2017) report on the views of children aged 4–10 from seven countries across North and South America and Eastern and Western Europe and found minimal differences between what children said in different countries. They associated being a child with fun and play, developing and learning. In contrast, being an adult was associated with the responsibility to work, decision-making and freedom.

The methodology of Cassidy et al.'s study sets up this comparison between child/adult. After reading a short stimulus story, children were asked to engage in dialogue around the following questions:

> If you were given the opportunity to take a pill that would turn you into an adult in an instant, would you take it? If so, why would you take it? If not, why not?

Adams' (2013, 2014) study is closest to our own in that she does compare and found evidence of age-related differences in how children define being a 'child'. However, her research also invites children to compare and contrast the 'child' with the 'adult'. When interviewing the children, she posed the following scenario:

> Imagine that a creature from another planet came to Earth and saw human beings for the first time. The creature sees adults and children and does not understand the difference between them. The creature asks you 'what is a child?' How would you answer the question?
>
> (Adams, 2014: 167).

It is therefore no surprise that one of her key findings was that the children were 'operating with social constructions of adulthood alongside the constructions of childhood' (Adams, 2013: 529). Adams studied 56 children aged 7–11 and found that children described the concept mainly according to physical descriptors (age, size and maturity), behavioural characteristics (being less sensible than adults, always learning) and lifestyle activities (playing, having fun, restrictions and going to school rather than having a job). While most children saw being a child as being a smaller version of an adult, the older children were more likely to refer to size than the 7/8 year-olds. As the children got older, they also equated childness with being more heavily restricted than adults.

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These restrictions were not only largely seen as negative but also indicated that adults cared for them. Indeed, being an 'adult' was not always seen as the ideal state of being. When asked if they would prefer to be a child or adult, 63% of the children said they would rather be a child. While the younger children tended to see adulthood as 'boring', the older children saw it as 'stressful'.

Unlike Lowe, Cassidy et al. and Adams, our study offers insight into *if* as well as *how* children associate with the label 'child'. It does not assume that children who do not see themselves as children will automatically see themselves as 'adult'. It captures the perspectives of a broader age range of children (aged 2–17) addressing one criticism that CS research has tended to exclude younger children (Oswell, 2013). Importantly, it also repositions the meaning of childhood as an important research endeavour.

Over the past 20 years, critiques of social constructionist perspectives, and the biological/social dualisms (Prout, 2005) it can set in play have meant that 'few works pursue the question of what childhood is or who the child is' (Sen, 2021: 73). However, scrutinising the language children use to talk about children is important in understanding how they construct the category child, and their relationship with it. Language is central to human interaction. It constitutes one 'significant symbol' (Crossley, 2022) that both reflects and builds the conventions and norms that are embedded within social life. Language is an emergent property of generational social relations, and we can learn much about the role, position and status of children by studying how children talk about being a child. Indeed, language is one important 'childing' practice (Punch, 2005) whereby children constitute themselves and other children as 'children'.

As history shows us, language can be used to perpetuate prejudice and discrimination as well as to liberate and redress aspects of social inequality. Although we are accustomed to thinking about racism and sexism, there is no generally accepted word to describe prejudice against children (Young-Bruehl, 2012). Confusingly, the term 'childism' (Young-Bruehl, 2012) can be used to describe discrimination against children, although it is more commonly used in CS to mean respect for children, with 'adultism' being used to denote prejudice against children (Alderson, 2020; Wall, 2022). If there is to be widespread and meaningful participation of children in society, then children (and adults) need a language for recognising the skills and competencies that children have. Our research provides rich insight into how children's sense of self and experiences compare to the (lack of) social and moral status they attribute to the label 'child'.

METHODOLOGY

This study addresses three questions:

1. How do children construct the category 'child'?
2. Do (which?) groups of children define themselves as children?
3. In what ways do they associate and/or disassociate from being a 'child'?

Ontologically, we see childhood as socially constructed by macro social forces and micro-processes of human meaning-making (Prout & James, 1997). Childhood is shaped by social structures and lived, done, reproduced and potentially transformed by children and adults as they actualise, take up and invest in their identities as 'children', or otherwise (Alanen, 2001). However, we do not deny the role of biology in shaping childhood and our project potentially allows us to examine the significance that children themselves attach to this.

The study has an interpretivist epistemological orientation (Mason, 2017). It seeks to engage with children's perspectives to build a picture of what being a child, or otherwise, means to them. In structured interviews, 92 children were asked two questions:

1. Are you a child?
2. What makes (or does not make) you a child?

The study was conducted by the authors in collaboration with undergraduate students in North West England. The students conducted one-to-one interviews with a child they knew, in the child's or the interviewer's home, as an activity linked to their studies. This research design allowed children to speak for themselves in familiar and potentially less pressurised environments. This contrasts with Adams' (2014) research, which took place at school and interviewed children in small groups. We were keen to avoid this approach as in schools 'the balance of power is heavily skewed towards adults' (Robinson & Kellett, 2004: 91). While our approach allowed children more opportunity to speak for themselves, it did not provide the independence that speaking to an unknown researcher can allow. None of the participants talked about romantic relationships or sex/sexuality, which may have been because they were talking to someone they knew well (often a parent/sibling).

Consent was gained from children and parents/carers. The children's responses were recorded verbatim along with the age and gender of the child. Where children named others in their answers, these were recorded by their relationship to the child (friend, brother, etc) rather than by name. The study obtained ethical clearance from the University Ethics Committee.

Using Nvivo, we coded the children's responses to each question and explored these both within and between age groups. By focusing on age, we do not assume that age is *the* most important feature that unifies diverse groups of children. We have chosen age because we recognise that children's childhoods, and therefore potentially their views, attitudes and identity, are structured for them along age lines. This is most visible through the schooling system where children are separated into age sets and treated differently within the different types of institution (pre-school/nursery, primary and secondary school) (Simpson, 2000). Reflecting educational trends in North West England, we divided our sample into three main age-groups: pre-school, aged 0–4; primary school, aged 5–10; and secondary school aged 11–17.

Our sample was skewed towards older children and females (see Table 1). The way the sample was accessed meant we were unable to control its composition, or to collect data related to the children's intersectional identities. While there may be some gender patterns within the data, they are not strong enough to report, and the skewed nature of the sample, along with its size make these fragile. Similarly, the sample was predominantly white, making comparisons focused on variables of race and ethnicity unfeasible. Age, however, seems to be consistently significant in the ways children define childhood.

The children's responses were thematically analysed, using descriptive and more abstract (pattern) codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our coding framework revealed that children talked

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics by age and gender.

Gender	Age 0–4	Age 5–10	Age 11–17	All
Male	3	15	19	37
Female	8	21	26	55
Total	11	36	45	92

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TABLE 2 Pattern codes and descriptive subcodes.

Pattern code	Descriptive subcodes
Embodiment	Age
	Size
	Development
Lived experiences	Activities—leisure, school, not working
	Life circumstances—living in families, dependence, freedom from responsibility, living within constraints
	Behaviour—being silly, immaturity, lacking knowledge, people who make bad decisions
Capacities	No subcodes, limited data

about their identities, as children or otherwise, in two main, often inter-related ways, in relation to:

- **the ways they embody childhood—**by virtue of their age, size and their developmental stage;
- **their lived experience—**defined by the things they did, the way they lived, behavioural markers and living with constraints.

A very small number also spoke about their capacities as children (Table 2).

We are reporting frequency data alongside the key themes to give a sense of their importance to children as a group and to show variations between age groups. This gives us 'not a quasistatistical rendering of the data, but rather a description of the patterns or regularities in the data that have, in part, been discovered and then confirmed by counting' (Sandelowski, 2000: 338).

FINDINGS

Are you a child?

The question 'Are you a child?' brought a more varied response than might be expected. While most of the children (75%) said that they were children (see Table 3), a quarter said they were not children or were ambivalent about the label. Among the children who said they were children, many offered a categorical 'yes/yeah' response. While, for the pre-schoolers, this may partly be explained by their linguistic range, the fact that these short answers appeared across all age groups points to the perceived obviousness of being a child for some children, as well as their awareness of being classified thus.

Only five of the 11 pre-school children interviewed said they were children, making them the group who were *least* likely to say that they were a child. The consensus on being a child was strongest among the primary school-aged children (5–10). Most of these children (86%) just said yes in response to question one, some pointing out how obvious it was that they were a child—*'Course I am stupid!'* (Female, 7). All of those who said 'no' placed themselves outside of the category 'child' by giving themselves alternative labels—'big girl', 'medium kid' and 'kid'. Thus, association with the label 'child' required no justification, whereas disassociation demanded explanation.

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TABLE 3 Reponses to interview question 1 (Are you a child?) by age group: number and proportion of age group for each response.

Are you a child?	0–4 *N* (%)	5–10 *N* (%)	11+ *N* (%)	Total *N* (%)
Yes				
All responses	**5 (45)**	**33 (92)**	**31 (69)**	**69 (75)**
Single word response	5 (45)	26 (72)	18 (40)	**49 (53)**
Yes, of course		5 (14)	4 (9)	**9 (10)**
Explained yes		2 (6)	9 (20)	**11 (12)**
No				
All responses	**6 (55)**	**3 (8)**	**9 (20)**	**18 (20)**
Single word response	3 (27)		2 (5)	**5 (5)**
Playful	2 (18)			**2 (2)**
Alternative label		3 (8)	5 (11)	**8 (9)**
Comparison to others	1 (9)		2 (5)	**3 (4)**
Ambivalent				
All responses			**5 (11)**	**5 (5)**
Yes and no			1 (2)	**1 (1)**
Yes and teenager			3 (7)	**3 (3)**
Redefinition of question			1 (2)	**1 (1)**
All				
Total responses	11	36	45	**92**

Bold values indicate to highlight the general patterns.

While 20% rejected the label 'child', and 11% were ambivalent, 69% of the secondary school-aged children said they thought they were a child. Sometimes their ambivalence reflected the betwixt and between status of being a teen: 'No, I'm a teen, but yes, I'm a child'. Like the primary school-aged children, some of these older children used alternative labels to distance themselves from being a 'child': 'boy', 'teenager', 'young adult'.

Children's determination of whether they were a child was sometimes influenced by the views of others—teachers, parents, siblings and others.

> Yes [I am a child] although some adults e.g. teachers see me as a young adult
> (Female, 14)

> Mum and dad treat me like a child...even the teachers say we are 'children' in class so that's why I am a child.
> (Male, 10)

> You think I'm a child [his sibling] the way you treat me
> (Male, 12)

> Also the fact that I am seen as naïve in the eyes of the public due to my youth
> (Female, 14)

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They also viewed their status as defined by the law.

> You stop being a child when you are 18 because laws make you an adult then
> (Male, 15).

Some children (only those over 15) seemed to suggest that their status as 'child' or not child was chosen rather than imposed:

> Yes, I would class myself as a child
> (Female 17)

> ...I just feel like a child
> (Female, 17)

What is clear is that it cannot be assumed that children will always associate themselves with being a 'child'.

What is a child?

The children associated being a child predominantly with their physical forms, the ways they lived and, to a much lesser degree, specific capacities. The ways children talked about being a child varied across the age groups (see Table 4). Embodied aspects of childhood were more significant to the two older groups of children, and the specific aspects of the bodies they talked about changed as they grew older. Similarly, children talked about their lived experiences in different ways, with the younger two age groups of children more focused on play, the older two on school and the oldest on their experiences of dependence and restriction. Very few children mentioned any specific capacities associated with being a child.

Embodying childhood

Children talked most about the ways that they were defined by their bodies: through their age, size and developmental stage. All age groups mentioned size and physical development, and both groups of school-aged children also talked about age (see Table 5).

Age was the most cited signifier of being a child. A total of 67% of the 11–17 years olds mentioned age compared to 42% of the 5–10 year-olds, and none of the under 5s. Furthermore, the way they related to the concept of 'age' varied. Some children offered their age as an unquestionable explanation of their 'child' identity.

TABLE 4 Embodiment, lived experiences and capacities.

	Age group 0–4 (*n* = 11) (%)	Age group 5–10 (*n* = 36) (%)	Age group 11–17 (*n* = 45) (%)	Total (92) (%)
Embodiment	5 (45)	27 (75)	33 (73)	65 (71)
Lived experiences	7 (64)	23 (64)	38 (84)	68 (74)
Capacities	0 (0)	2 (6)	4 (9)	6 (7)

Note: NB, children's responses could be attached to more than one code, as they talked about multiple aspects of childness.

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TABLE 5 Embodiment: age, size and physical development.

	Age group = 0–4 (11) (%)	**Age group = 5–10 (36) (%)**	**Age group = 11–17 (45) (%)**	**Total (92) (%)**
Age	0 (0)	15 (42)	30 (67)	45 (49)
Size	4 (36)	12 (33)	6 (13)	22 (24)
Physical development	1 (9)	10 (28)	5 (11)	16 (17)
Children coded to embodiment	5 (45)	27 (75)	33 (73)	65 (71)

> I am 8
>
> (Male, 8)

> My age makes me a child
>
> (Male, 15)

Others used it to reason whether they were a 'child':

> ... because you're not 0 now. You're 6, 5 or 4. And because you're not like 22 or 42
>
> (Female, 6)

> I am younger than 18... no I am younger than 13. When I am 13 that makes me a teenager and not a child anymore. At 18 you are a grown up
>
> (Female, 8 ½)

While most children agreed that age determined childness, there was no consensus on when childhood ended. 13, 16 and 18 were commonly suggested but sometimes, children of the same age had differing views:

> I'm a teenager. I don't think I'm a child because I'm in my teens
>
> (Female, 13)

> I think I'm in between child and teenager, but I don't think I'm that old
>
> (Male 13)

> Obviously I am a child
>
> (Female, 13)

And while some suggested that factors other than age could determine if they were a 'child', even these statements showed their awareness of the role of age in categorising children.

> [I am not a child] Because I believe myself to be more mature than others my age
>
> (Male 14)

> Anyone under 18 is a child, unless they live on their own for any reason... When you look after yourself, you're an adult
>
> (Male, 15)

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Only one child challenged the idea that childhood is defined by age:

> Because I know people say you're a child if you're under 18, but I don't actually know who made that rule and the day you turn 18, you don't change that much. Some people could mature when they're not 18 - so before they're 18 or even older than 18
>
> (Female, 12)

Overall, the data suggest that children are highly aware of the importance of age in positioning them as a 'child', and this awareness increases with age.

In contrast, size becomes less significant as children age. For the younger children, being small was a key indicator of childness.

> I'm very little
>
> (Female, 4)

> [I'm a child because] of my height
>
> (Male, 10)

But even among the younger children, there were those who positioned themselves as a non-child by drawing on their increased size or age, offering alternative labels to distance themselves from being a 'child'.

> I'm not a baby
>
> (Female, 2)

> I am a big girl!
>
> (Female, 5)

> I'm a medium kid... [a child is] a little person who will grow up into a big person
>
> (Male, 7)

Some children in the 11–17 group still relied on size to position themselves in relation to childness (*...I'm little*, Female, 11), but others questioned whether this, by itself, was an indicator of child/adult status.

> I'm small, but some adults are small?
>
> (Female, 11)

Physical development is most important to the primary-aged children. Some talked generally about growth or development, or moving from infancy to childhood:

> ...I'm still growing
>
> (Female, 6)

> A child is big feet, long hands, bigger clothes and long hair... not baby
>
> (Female, 6)

Some children, on the cusp of puberty, mentioned their lack of secondary sexual characteristics.

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> ...I'm not fully developed yet, with hairs and that
>
> (Male, 10)

> You have boobs and bigger clothing than me
>
> (Female, 11)

And although most older children did not mention their development, some were aware that their bodies were still changing:

> ...my body still isn't fully developed
>
> (Male, 17)

Thus, children associate being a child with being small, young and having developing bodies. Size is especially significant for the youngest children, age for the oldest children and physical development for the middle age group.

Childhood as a lived experience

Children's explanations of childhood identified aspects of their lives that define them as children—the things they do, the way they live and the ways they behaved (Table 6).

Each age group talked about the things they did (activities) as markers of childhood, but the extent to which they referred to their life circumstances and behaviours tended to increase with age. Many children (though not the preschool children) talked about going to school as a defining characteristic of childhood, perhaps reflecting the amount of time spent in school. They also talked about school-based learning and homework:

> Because I'm in high school, learning stuff
>
> (Male, 12)

> I have to do homework
>
> (Female, 11)

However, while some children saw attendance at high school as an indicator that they *were* children, others felt this demonstrated that they were not, and leaving school and starting work was a clear indication of adulthood.

> [I'm not a child] *Because I'm in high school*
>
> (Male, 11)

TABLE 6 Activities, life circumstances and behaviours.

	Age group = 0–4 (11) (%)	Age group = 5–10 (36) (%)	Age group = 11–17 (45) (%)	Total (92) (%)
Activities	5 (45)	16 (44)	23 (51)	44 (48)
Life circumstances	3 (22)	8 (27)	27 (60)	30 (41)
Behaviours	0 (0)	6 (17)	11 (24)	17 (18)
Children coded to lived experience	7 (64)	23 (64)	38 (84)	68 (74)

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> I go to work Monday to Friday 9-5, this makes me an adult
>
> (Male, 17)

They also talked about how they spent their leisure time. Play was an important aspect of childhood for over a third of the under 5s and one in eight 5–10 year-olds, but only mentioned by 9% of over 11s. However, school and play were both often stated as facts of childhood life rather than attributed with positive or negative value. These children are responding to the question: 'What makes you a child?':

> Toys
>
> (Female, 3)

> When I play
>
> (Male 4)

> I play with games and play with my friends and go to school
>
> (Female, 10)

Some children also associated being a 'child' with being physically active:

> Small, cute, toys, run around
>
> (Female, 3)

Some of the children mentioned their friends as an element of their child identity (*Playing with my friends*, Male, 6) while for others, activities outside of school, including friendships, mark them as 'not child':

> I walk home from high school, hanging out with all my friends, I play Fortnite, X Box games for adults. I get stressed from homework
>
> (Male 11)

Across the sample, the children talked about living in families, being dependent, free of responsibilities and living with constraints. A fifth of the children talked about living in families. Living with parents who cared for them dominated these statements, but having siblings and family celebrations also feature:

> Because I have parents
>
> (Female, 11)

> I live with my mum and they don't live with their mum and dad. I live with my brother and sister, and mum and dad don't
>
> (Male, 6)

> Because of Christmas
>
> (Male, 5)

But the children made clear that they did not just live with their families—their dependence on their parents, in multiple ways, was also key to identifying them as children. Some of the children

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just stated that they were dependent on their parents, others talked more specifically about being practically, emotionally or financially dependent. The children talked more about dependence as a defining characteristic of childness as they aged.

> Because my mother do everything for me. I'm the responsibility for my mum
>
> (Female, 4)

> Emotionally, I am a child in the way that I still have my parents as a comfort when I need it
>
> (Female, 15)

> The fact that I rely on my parent's finance
>
> (Female, 13)

While some children thought that having dependents meant you were no longer a child, others believed that independence and the end of childhood were not necessarily linked:

> [I'm not a child] I am a big girl and a mummy. Annabelle [doll] is a child as she needs me to look after her and feed her
>
> (Female, 5)

> Being a child is about the age that you are, not the responsibilities you have. If you are 16 or 17, even if you have a job and pay the bills, you're still a child
>
> (Male, 15)

Some children felt that their lack of responsibility (for themselves and/or others) determined their child status. Most of these children were in the 11+ group, with just one in the 5–10s and no under 5s mentioning responsibilities, or lack of them.

> ...I don't have any responsibilities only my homework
>
> (Female, 13)

> I don't have to give full consent as I'm not 18 yet
>
> (Female, 17)

> ...don't have to pay bills suggests I'm a child
>
> (Female, 14)

> I play and adults are like servants because they do jobs for children
>
> (Male, 6)

However, not all children felt they were free of responsibilities, with this child wanting to distinguish her experiences from those of younger children:

> We have rules to follow and stuff like chores to do which is unfair as young children don't
>
> (Female, 12)

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And some children used evidence of having responsibility, even for decisions relating to their own lives, to distance themselves from being a 'child.

> I would class myself as a young man and not a child as I have more responsibilities ... additionally being in Year 10 I have to almost plan my future in the respect of choosing between college and an apprenticeship and then whether to go to university or start my working career
>
> (Male 15)

Many of the children talked about the things that they (or children generally) *do not do*. These responses came predominantly (44%) from the 11–17 year-olds, in contrast to 8% of the 5–10 year-olds, and none of the under 5s. Children saw their actions as constrained by external forces including the law, their parents and their teachers. They also talked about the fact that they do not work, pay tax, vote or own property. Children listed a range of things that they cannot do, sometimes making implicit or explicit comparisons to 'adults'.

> I can't drink, drive or smoke
>
> (Male, 11)

> I cannot go shopping by myself
>
> (Female, 13)

> 18+ can do things I can't do
>
> (Male, 11)

> I don't really have any authority over anything...
>
> (Male, 15)

> I have to do what I am told by mum, dad and teachers (Female, 12).

> I don't work
>
> (Male, 14)

> I do not have the rights of an adult. I cannot vote.
>
> (Female, 16)

The children did not associate being a 'child' with activities that involved going beyond the world of family, home and school. Many saw childhood as a time of powerlessness, in which their actions and autonomy were limited, in relation to themselves and others.

Particular behaviours were also associated with being a child, although not for the under 5s. The oldest children were most likely to mention behaviours. Most of the children who talked about (im)maturity were older, and they did so in a way that assumed the meaning of the term was known: they simply stated that they were immature and that was why they were a child, or that they were mature, and so were not a child.

> That I'm sometimes, I'm immature
>
> (Female, 11)

One child goes further, explaining the many ways she is still maturing.

> Intellectually, I am still learning and developing new skills from school and everyday life. Emotionally, I am a child in the way that I still have my parents as a comfort when I need it. And I may not be as emotionally strong as an adult. The final factor that makes me a child is socially. I may still be easily influenced by others. Also, I am still learning about different people and how to socialise
>
> (Female, 15).

Some of the children used what may be seen as derogatory language in relation to themselves or children more generally. They even couched behaviours that maybe seen as positive, such as laughing, in ways that make them seem negative. Thus, they created a picture of themselves as people who should not be taken seriously.

> Well, what makes a child, what classifies as a child? Cos like, if you were to say like, IQ wise, is that like meant to be like, a bit dim? Or is it meant to be like, your size, or your age, cos, I dunno?
>
> (Female, 12)

> I am silly
>
> (Female, 8½)

> I'm annoying
>
> (Female, 8)

> Laughing too much
>
> (Male, 12)

Children also described themselves as incapable in relation to decision-making and as having an inadequate knowledge base:

> Not knowing that much that you need to know
>
> (Male, 10)

> I still make immature decisions. Also, I do not think of problems my parents may have. I do not take it as a burden on me. Sometimes I am irresponsible, for example, making the wrong choices which may lead to serious consequences
>
> (Female, 13)

Overall, our study shows that children drew on normative Western ideas about what children 'do'—children go to school, play, live in families, are dependent, free from responsibilities and live with constraints.

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Tales of capacity

Although many of the children interviewed described childhood in terms of the constraints it placed upon them, six of the 92 children did suggest competencies that came from being a child. It gave them social, physical and cognitive capabilities:

> I always make new friends
>
> (Female, 12)

> I'm quicker at running than my grandma!
>
> (Male, 11)

> Imagination – a child's imagination is infinite.
>
> (Male, 14)

> I am fun and energetic
>
> (Female, 12)

And the ability to bring happiness to others:

> Children are more important than adults because they would be sad if I wasn't here
>
> (Female, 7)

Sometimes their skills are a consequence of incompetence; this male can learn, but this process only emerges because of his own moral ineptitude.

> I always get in trouble, makes me learn from my mistakes
>
> (Male, 11)

One child suggested that being a child freed her from gender role constraints:

> I act like a lad
>
> (Female, 12)

Overall, the children were more focused on the things they could not do, rather than the things they could.

DISCUSSION

Our findings demonstrate children are aware of the social and biological markers of childness. As in previous research, children's consciousness of being a 'child' was linked with how they experienced their bodies and other people's reactions to them (James, 1995; Prout, 2000). The increasing significance attributed to age as children get older is also not surprising given that, as they age and move beyond the realms of their family, they are confined to age-based institutions such as schools. Age dictates when they join school and is used to chart their learning progress and journey through the school system (Wyness, 2019). It is through age that childhood is set

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apart as a distinct period in the life course and children are 'given justification of and for their separateness and exclusions from mainstream social life and central social institutions' (Hockey & James, 1993: 61).

In the context of family life, the children interpreted some restrictions placed upon them as expressions of care (protection), but as they aged, they became more focused on how their lives were regulated and their lack of citizenship. Similarly, Mayall found that children tend to identify childhood with having limited (or no) responsibility, being dependent, being a certain age and having restrictions, few rights and having to seek permission from adults. She argues that children 'identify power as lying with adults, and regard themselves as dependants that have to obey' (Mayall, 2002: 122). However, within the context of family relationships, both Punch (2005) and Mayall's (2001) UK research also suggests that parents are identified as protectors and providers, with legitimate claims to authority over them.

The children in our study drew on normative Western discourses of childhood in different age-related ways to bring meaning to the category 'child'. However, acceptance of childhood as a time of innocence, play, dependence and freedom from responsibilities was almost universal. These discourses are constructed and reconstructed through various social institutions including the law, social policy, education, the economy and media, in ways which do injustices to children (Moss & Petrie, 2002). They are a product of adult power and privilege. As (Lam, 2012: 150) notes, 'Adults, having enormous social and political power over children, can define the reality of children by shaping and restricting the ways in which it is possible to talk and think about issues concerning them in society'. Prejudice against children is built into the ways in which children are imagined (Young-Bruehl, 2012). Western discourses position children as lacking in adult competencies and in need of protection and regulation (McNamee, 2016). The children in our study were unable to challenge dominant discourses through drawing on images of child competence and contribution. The naturalness associated with being a child compounded this; children were *just* children and that was all there was to it. As some of our children's responses indicated, even asking if they were children at all was sometimes seen as asking the blindingly obvious and ridiculous.

Our study shows that children as well as adults participate in 'childing' practices which reproduce rather than challenge their low social status. Some children in this study presented themselves as people who should not be taken seriously, describing themselves as 'silly' or 'annoying' in the primary age group, immature and irresponsible in the older age group. These words seem to come from adult descriptions of their behaviour. There could be more positive ways of describing their behaviour, but these were not articulated. Just as Nikolajeva (2019) suggests a child's lack of attention can be interpreted as 'insatiable curiosity' (p. 31), silly could be entertaining and annoying could be determined.

This de-valuing and distancing is replicated in other studies. For instance, Mayall found that children 'do not give themselves credit' for their own moral agency (Mayall, 2002: 109). Britton's (2015) research also showed that older children (aged 12–17) are aware they are viewed negatively by the public and distance themselves from these negative stereotypes to present themselves as 'moral beings'. In this context, it is unsurprising that a significant proportion of the children in our study were unwilling to classify themselves as children. It is also unsurprising that, as Cassidy et al. (2017: 711) note, some children 'seem not to be aware that they might participate and contribute more fully than at present'.

For those who felt they did not fit the normative definition of 'child', the only response was disassociation from it. Some drew on notions of adulthood to justify their position as a non-child; caring for others, working, having responsibilities, career planning, travelling alone, playing

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'adult' games and being stressed could all be used to justify not being a 'child'. Some children felt too 'big' or 'mature' to be a child. To be recognised for who they actually were, they applied alternative labels: being a 'kid' meant being older, being a 'medium kid' meant being bigger and being a 'big girl' meant caring for a child rather than being one. Although these children seem to be referring to growing towards adulthood, they do not make claims to being an adult—they are just not a 'child'. They are rejecting the simplicity of the adult–child dichotomy. This resonates with children from Bulgaria, China, Brazil and Scotland who proposed a category of person who is neither child nor adult to which teenagers belong (Cassidy et al., 2017).

Disassociation from the label 'child' was most prominent among the youngest and the oldest children, with most of the primary-aged children seeing themselves as children. This needs to be understood through a bio-socio-cultural lens (Canosa & Graham, 2020). Children are aware of the biological, social and cultural markers of childness. In English primary schools, the markers come together—children are consistently told that they are 'children', not only their bodies are immature and adult power is a consistent constraining, but also protective force (Halstead & Xiao, 2009). If a child is 'someone who believes on good grounds that his or her childhood is not yet over' (Hollindale, 1997: 30), then within this context, their acceptance of the label 'child' seems likely, and our data bear this out.

Interpreting the *rejection* of the label in the pre-school children is more difficult. They are the smallest set within the sample, their limited linguistic skills may have limited their responses, and when they did deny their 'childness' they did so, on the whole, with humour and/or without explanation. Where the children elaborated on why they were not a child, this seemed to be related to the move 'up' from being a baby—someone in need of constant care and attention. Other studies (Bacon, 2010; James, 1993) have shown how young children, want to orientate themselves to their future status as a 'big' child.

In England, as children move to secondary school and beyond, the relationship between their self-image/lived experiences and the markers of childness becomes less consistent and they are more likely to reject the label. The terms used to describe them become more varied; they may be called children, adolescents, young people or teenagers, for example. Their bodies are no longer necessarily small and undeveloped. They are given more responsibility for themselves (getting dressed, getting to school, choosing subjects, etc); more freedom to move around alone; a life that is less controlled by adults; they may be working. They have less 'grounds' for believing in their own childness.

Our research offers child-produced definitions of being a 'child' that move beyond a simplistic notion of age (as featured in the UNCRC). The children's accounts both recognise and reinforce the generational ordering of society, and sometimes the stigma and subordination the label attracts. We are not claiming that these perceptions of childhood are universal. Indeed, Kohan's (2018) research with around forty 8–year-old children in an Italian public school in Bari, uncovered children's positive definitions of childhood including children being imaginative, energetic and intelligent. Their conclusions suggest that these Italian children see childhood as a 'very privileged position in human life' (2018: 122). However, the globalised nature of childhood, influenced by non-governmental aid organisations, which operationalise dominant Western discourses of childhood means that paternalistic and deficit models of childness are echoed in different countries across the globe (Cassidy et al., 2017; Diana, 2020).

While there are discourses around rights, voice and participation which potentially draw attention to children's competencies and contributions, these are still created *by* adults *for* children, and are not readily expressed in the children's accounts. This both demonstrates the force of dominant discourses in preventing alternative conceptualisations and how the dissenting voices of

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CS have, as yet, been unable to shape everyday thinking about and of children and negative stereotypes abound. Among adults, children continue to be seen as untrustworthy, (Needham, 2021) and a burden on society that will 'eat us out of house and home' (Young-Bruehl, 2012). Working with children is seen as akin to working with animals, and working with young people a 'nightmare' that only a saint could tolerate (Conradie & Golding, 2013). 'Childish' is unquestioningly utilised as an adjective to cast shame on others.

An important challenge for CS to address, is how to promote conversations *between* children and adults (parents and practitioners) about the positive aspects of childness. Literature about child- and rights-centred practice promotes the importance of developing 'dialogic approaches' (Sharp, 2014: 358) or a 'shared language' (Frankel, 2018: 85) and we argue that developing more positive ways of talking about children is a vital aspect of this. Importantly, this needs to be done in a relational context of reciprocity and respect where children feel enabled to perceive themselves as agents (Sharp, 2014). Embedding these conversations into everyday across a range of social arenas and networks of social relations (at home, at school and in the community) could enable children and adults alike to anticipate, deliberate, question and accommodate different experiences and formations of self. This in turn may help to offer different ways of being, thinking and talking about being a child (Crossley, 2022). Only by sustaining this dialogue between children and adults will we raise political consciousness about adultism and remove ideological barriers to children's participation.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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