Child Labor Essay, Research Paper

Child Labor, is a term used to represent the employment of minors generally, especially in work that may interfere with their education or endanger their health. Throughout the ages and in all cultures children joined with their parents to work in the fields, in the marketplace, and around the home as soon as they were old enough to perform simple tasks. The use of child labor was not regarded a social problem until the introduction of the factory system.

During the late 18th century in Great Britain, owners of cotton mills collected orphans and children of poor parents throughout the country, obtaining their services merely for the cost of maintaining them. In some cases children five and six years of age were forced to work from 13 to 16 hours a day. Social reformers soon attempted to obtain legislative restrictions against the worst features of the child-labor system, but little was accomplished. Children were still permitted to labor in hazardous occupations such as mining. Popular agitation for reform steadily increased. In 1878 the minimum age of employees was raised to 10 years, and employers were required to restrict the amount of time per day and the number of days that children could work.

Similar situations of child labor existed in the United States at the same time. Beginning in the 1830s, many states enacted laws restricting or prohibiting the employment of children. On the national level, progress was more uneven, as the Supreme Court of the United States ruled several times that the child-labor laws under question were unconstitutional. An attempt to pass an amendment to the Constitution of the United States failed. Attempts at reform continued, however, and the Congress of the United States eventually passed the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, better known as the Federal Wage and Hour Law. This act was declared constitutional in 1941 by the Supreme Court. The act applies to all workers engaged in interstate or foreign commerce. Under the child-labor provisions of the act, minors 16 years of age and over may be employed in any occupation that has not been judged hazardous by the secretary of labor. The minimum age for work in industries classified as hazardous is 18. No minimum age is set for non-hazardous agricultural employment after school hours and during vacation. Minors 14 and 15 years of age may be employed in a variety of non-manufacturing, non-mining, and non-hazardous occupations outside school hours and during vacations for limited hours and under other specified conditions of work.

In the late 20th century, child labor remains a serious problem in many parts of the world. Studies carried out in 1979 show that more than 50 million children below the age of 15 were working in various jobs often under hazardous conditions. Their living conditions are crude and their chances for education minimal. In some countries, industrialization has created working conditions for children that rival the worst features of the 19th-century factories and mines.