Childhood Studies

at University of Bristol
Studying childhood has never been more important or timely. How is childhood changing? What societal pressures do children and young people now face? How are families and personal relationships negotiated? How does technology impact on children’s lives? Are young people affected by austerity? Will the current generation of young people be able to afford a house? How are the rights of children being protected? Does the environment affect children’s well-being? What makes a difference to children’s health? How do children’s lives differ between the global north and south? These are the questions addressed in our interdisciplinary Childhood Studies degree. Drawing on a range of different subjects - social policy, psychology, education, sociology and law – it provides insights into how to think about and put into practice children’s needs, rights and development in the UK and internationally.

Studying Childhood Studies here in Bristol means being part of a department which is one of the very best in the country. We are proud that the degree is top in the National Student Survey and the Guardian league table. The staff that will teach you are renowned experts who will show you how to use ideas and evidence to come to your own conclusions about childhood.

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Bristol is an excellent location to explore these issues; it is a city with a high proportion of young people, engaged with issues of environment and sustainability, wrestling with inequalities, and enriched by cultural diversity. It is a great place to study and relax, and is regularly voted as one of the best places in the UK to live.

We look forward to seeing you next year!

Esther

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Professor Esther Dermott explains more about Childhood Studies at the University of Bristol

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The secret life of 4-year olds

You may be aware of, or have even recently watched, the hugely popular Channel 4 television programme ‘The Secret Life of 4 (and 5) Year olds’ – a documentary series that follows pre-schoolers as they navigate the trials and tribulations of growing up. One current research project underway in the School for Policy Studies (working with Professor Paul Howard-Jones in The School of Education) is to archive the data from this show for which the University of Bristol has exclusive access.

During the making of the 2016 series, a total of 49 children participated, all of whom wore radio mics, from the start to the end of each day’s filming. Every conversation, question, discussion, argument and tantrum was captured, offering rich pickings for potential childhood studies focussed research. Our objective is to clip, archive and catalogue, approx. 6 terabytes of audio data, recorded over the 6 weeks. The first stage in appraising this data has been the use of production logs to pinpoint specific sequences, followed by listening - to find, select and clip the relevant audio - then grouping and adding metadata by theme.

Themes identified so far are death, gender, friendship, power (including conflict and competition), family and morality. The aim is to have a fully searchable and accessible dataset and input is currently being added metadata by theme.

As Childhood Studies students it is intended that you will use some of this data in your studies, for example in the year 2 unit Play and Creativity where you can learn about the important role of children’s play for their learning, development and cultural engagements.

Children in the care system often struggle to comprehend the reasons for being placed in care and to make sense of their experience with their birth family, which can be extremely traumatic. Many have gaps in their memory, which research has shown can contribute to poor mental health in adolescence. Alternatively, having a coherent narrative of adverse experiences has been associated with recovery from trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Adshedd, 2012).

The way coherent narratives are created for children in care in the UK, and in other parts of the world, is through life story work and the development of a life story book – which can help the child to construct an identity (Cook-Cottone and Beck, 2007; Loxterkamp, 2009). In an earlier project I interviewed adoptive parents and children about their experiences of their life storybooks (Watson et al., 2015b, Watson et al., 2015a) which revealed a number of challenges around the use of this method, which sometimes left children confused, with unanswered questions and a lack of ownership over the story of their life. It also became apparent that children in care create memories through interaction with tangible birth objects, which life storybooks do not ordinarily accommodate, such as toys, baby clothes and blankets, mementoes and other gifts from their family.

Dr Debbie Watson describes an innovative new project which helps children in care understand their life story

trove: helping children in care understand their life story

Dr Debbie Watson is currently a Reader in Childhood Studies and Director of the Doctoral programmes in the School. She teaches on a number of Childhood Studies units including Play and Creativity where the importance of children’s objects and cultural activities are considered.

Dr Debbie Watson describes an innovative new project which enabled me to work with a creative designer to develop a prototype product which addresses some of these challenges, for children both in long term authority care and adoptive placements. trove is a digitally enhanced memory box that utilises raspberry pi and RFID technologies to enable children to record their own memories and to attach these to their precious birth objects; as well as providing a safe “container” for their mementoes and memories.

In 2016 we conducted a small trial with 10 adopted children aged 5-15 years where each child had a trove to use and customise for a period of 4 weeks. Data collected included pre/post interviews with adopters and stories/photos of the child’s special objects.

The trial has already made considerable difference, with one family stating that they have had some “really dark difficult times” but that trove is “transforming their family life”. Indications from this small trial suggest the use of trove opens up helpful conversations about adoption, siblings and life stories. By supporting children with their past and future narratives, it is anticipated this will help encourage a deeper sense of identity and address concerns of further loss and dislocation that can occur when children lose objects of importance.

It’s such a worthwhile project. We’ve had really good discussions with the kids and... that is the benefit of it. It’s not just the actual object but it’s all the discussions that we have around it, up to that point you tell them what had happened to them, but with trove there was that shift, we could actually tell them: “You can now take your own story into your own hands”, It’s not just about what people are telling you, or what’s in the book- the life storybook. You can make your own history.

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Harri, adoptive father

Hannah Brana-Martin is a Research Associate at the School for Policy Studies.

And already, the ability to empathise is well established in some;”I will give you a present because you’re sad”
“Thank you so much”
“You’re welcome”

Differences in approach seem apparent when the children are deliberately encouraged to take part in competitive situations. There is certainly a fascinating breadth of reactions to winning and losing to be observed.

Gender is a steady theme throughout the data-set with the children seeming to already have firmly established ideas about what it is that girls/boys do or perhaps ‘should’ do/wear or how they behave. For example, one clip starts with teacher asking a child about “what makes you a girl?”. This leads to a discussion about boys wearing earrings. But one child is keen to point out that they should be “boy earrings”.

As the audio data includes everything (i.e. not just the selected content for the television programmes) with some references to personal data, future access and usage will need to be considered and managed carefully. Data will be anonymised as much as possible but researchers will still be able to cross reference the clips with some background data on each child including family set-up, siblings, home town and parents’ employment, as well as gender and age. This will be an excellent research and teaching resource.

As Childhood Studies students it is intended that you will use some of this data in your studies, for example in the year 2 unit Play and Creativity where you can learn about the important role of children’s play for their learning, development and cultural engagements.

Boy - “Why are you marrying him instead of me?”
Girl - “Because I just kissed him and you can’t kiss too many men”
Boy - “Did your mum say you can’t kiss anyone else”
Girl - “Yeah”

Hanna Brana-Martin is a Research Associate at the School for Policy Studies.
The age of reason?

Dr Jo Staines explores how conceptualisations of children affect our ideas of their responsibility and autonomy within the English legal system.

The minimum age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is one of the lowest in the world. At the age of 10, children are deemed to have full responsibility for their offending behaviour and are considered able to understand the consequences of committing a criminal offence. This is in stark contrast with other age limits established by law, such as the right to vote, marry, join the armed forces, have sex, or almost any other decision that has potentially long-lasting consequences for the child.

Establishing the age at which children gain responsibility – be it criminal responsibility or the right to individual choice and autonomy for decisions made within civil legislation – is complex. These age limits are often based not on any facets of psychological, neurological or emotional development, nor on any physical stages of development (for example, you can fly a plane before you can drive a car, yet the skills needed to do both are similar) but depend more on our ideas of children and childhood as, for example, innocent or ‘evil’, dependent or self-reliant. For example, the age of sexual consent (16) derives from the 19th century, when the development of the idea of children as innocent, virtuous and naïve led to the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885. Conversely, the age of criminal responsibility (10) was, in effect, established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, in response to public fears about “feral”, unruly and out-of-control youth.

Complex interplay

The process of assigning legal responsibility to a child requires law-makers to bring together different complex sociological and psychological theories of childhood and child development, and moral, cultural, social, political and/or religious beliefs. The age at which children are deemed competent varies across, and within, different cultural, political, social, religious and historical contexts, as well as being affected by the nature and perceived gravity of the decision. This creates an inconsistent narrative of children and their legal status (Cipriani 2009) and leads to a tangible contradiction between the construction of the legal personality of the child and the statutory assignment of social rights and responsibilities within both civil and criminal statute (Goldson 2013).

Learn more

Studying Childhood Studies at Bristol will enable you to learn more about the conceptualisations of children across time and place. In particular, subjects such as ‘Youth Justice’ or ‘Children and Young People in the Law’ will encourage you to engage with debates about how children and young people are affected by both criminal and civil legislation. While ‘Introduction to Psychology’ and ‘Child and Adolescent Psychology’ will help you to understand children’s emotional, psychological and moral development.

Applying psychology – learning what makes us tick

We are all psychologists in some ways... most of us are interested in why humans and animals behave the way they do, and in finding out what types of experiences make us the way we are. Once we know something about psychological reasoning and research we can apply it to all aspects of society – no matter who we are.

Professional applied psychologists, such as sports, forensic, occupational or clinical psychologists, apply psychological research findings, theories and methods to solve practical problems. Personally, it was my desire to help solve problems in nurseries, schools and colleges that led me to become an educational psychologist. This role enables me work with parents, staff and young people in educational settings, applying psychological knowledge and skills, to change what is happening and make a positive difference to individuals, families and whole settings.

This emphasis, on change and applying knowledge to make a difference to societies, is a strong part of the BSc Childhood Studies course. The team focus on encouraging students to think deeply about what they see around them - what people are doing, saying and thinking in society - and how they can get involved to have a positive impact on the situations they see.

An appreciation and knowledge of psychological research and theories can help us do this more effectively, through ensuring we draw from an evidence base rather than our own feelings and hunches. Our understanding of the human brain, relationships and behaviour are often based on personal beliefs, prejudices, facts, hopes and coincidences. People often respond to scientific reasoning about the mind and body by supporting conventional beliefs that may have little validation through research or an evidence base. We need to be able to see beyond our own thinking biases. Once we know more about research evidence and consider how our own thoughts and views are formed, we are in a better position to question conventional and received beliefs (even our own!) and there are many popular assumptions and neuromyths out there that need challenging!

Did you know?

that a neuromyth is a common-held misconception about how the brain works which is adopted as ‘fact’ in society.

An example of a neuromyth in education, which we could do with encouraging more people to question, is that learning can be improved if children are classified and taught according to their preferred learning style. This misconception is based on research which found that visual, auditory and kinaesthetic (tactile) information is processed in different parts of the brain; however these structures are highly inter-connected and there is now known to be extensive transfer of information (Glimore, 2007). So, although individuals may have a style preference, children don’t process information more effectively when it is presented in their preferred learning style (Coffield, 2004). The message to educators is that there is no substantial support for learning styles - teachers need to make use of diverse teaching styles, and help children and young people become responsible for their own learning process through understanding themselves and knowing how they learn best.

Within the psychologically based units on the Childhood Studies course (for example “Introduction to Psychology”, “Language and Literacy” and “Child and Adolescent Psychology”) you will have the chance to explore the evidence base of psychological theories (such as conditioning and cognitive behaviour therapy). There will be a strong emphasis on how we can apply this understanding in our daily lives, in what we and others might do, to mindful aid an ever-changing society.

Did you know?

Dr Jak Lee is a Chartered Educational Psychologist. She is a lecturer on the BSc Childhood Studies and Professional Tutor on the Doctoral programme, within the School for Policy Studies, which trains new Educational Psychologists. She also works as a Senior Psychologist for Adams Psychology Services.
One of the many benefits of studying the BSc Childhood Studies course at the University of Bristol is the opportunity to get involved with charities and volunteering projects which can provide first-hand experience of some of the key issues explored within the teaching. For me, this includes being involved in a project that supports the health and wellbeing of children, young people and whole communities through sustainable development.

Last summer I travelled to Malawi along with a group of 11 other students to undertake a social project in Nancholi, Southern Malawi, for Bristol Volunteers for Development Abroad (BVDA), a registered student-led charity at the University of Bristol. Working closely with the local NGO ‘Nacholi Youth Organisation’ we taught local communities about the use of chlorine and safe water sources as well as the dangers of water-borne diseases. We also helped to distribute and plant Moringa trees, which purify the water, and carried out ‘Fendona’ (pesticide) spraying to prevent Malaria in the home.

Alongside this, our volunteer group coordinated two large HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, aimed at youths in the local community, who we had become very close to over the seven week period through group activities such as drama, music, football and netball.

One project which I felt very strongly about was a gender empowerment workshop which I organised in the last week of our stay, having gained an in-depth understanding about these issues in the Youth, Sexualities and Gendered Violence unit during my 2nd year.

This year, I am on a new committee for BVDA as Access Officer and hope to further explore the issues of sexism and gendered violence in different countries. This role also involves being the key point of contact for the well-being of student volunteers, helping them to prepare for situations as best as possible. I am really excited about this role and hope it will provide important experience towards my dream of a future career in therapy.

I always wanted to pursue a career in international child protection but was never sure about the best way to make this ambition possible. After discovering the BSc in Childhood Studies at the University of Bristol, I realised that not only did the course interest me, but it would also enable me to choose topics which are tiered towards my career goal and would enhance my knowledge of the routes that I need to take. Childhood Studies has provided me with an insight into the different issues concerning children and families both within a UK and global context, and has helped me to develop my own opinions and theories.

Volunteering in Moldova

Through the University of Bristol Student Union, I have become involved with the charity Volunteering Moldova, which aims to help vulnerable children in state run orphanages. Moldova is currently the poorest country in Europe and was previously a part of the Soviet Union; therefore, I believed that by visiting the orphanages, I would be able to gain an invaluable insight into the importance placed on children in a different culture, and the way that the children are perceived and treated as a result. I recently spent the Christmas period volunteering in one of the orphanages in Moldova, which really enabled me to combine my studying with volunteering, whilst providing one-on-one attention to children aged from two months to two years of age; something that they are usually neglected of. After studying the importance of topics such as play and secure attachments and the beneficial developmental outcomes that arise as a result of these things, it was challenging to be placed in an institute where these topics are disregarded and children are left in cots and play pens for the majority of the day with a lack of stimulation or attention.

Valuable experience

Despite my experience in Moldova at times being considerably difficult, it allowed me to develop an understanding of the value placed upon children and their role in society in another culture. My time away also allowed me to reflect upon my aspirations and it has motivated me to consider more ways in which I can have an impact on children’s lives across the world in the future. Overall the trip confirmed for me why choosing to study Childhood Studies was the right decision and how, when I graduate, I will be able to use my degree to improve the well-being of children across the globe.

Case study: Allys Brown tells us about her volunteering experience in Moldova

Encouraging child protection

Case study: Nelly, a current BSc Childhood Studies student talks about her recent trip to Malawi

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Lack of confidence with numbers

Although the latest research indicates that 15-year-old pupils in the UK are motivated by numbers and can see their utility, the UK still lags behind when compared to other countries in the world (Source: OECD PISA report). So much that in 2014 the education minister was rushed to Shanghai to discover the secret behind their pupils’ top scores in maths. Why? Numeracy not only increases individuals’ ability to succeed in life and in the workplace but at a national level it increases the country’s competitiveness and growth. In the social sciences, students underestimate the value of numbers and often think that to interpret or use numbers they need to have a mathematical mind. This, unfortunately, discourages students from taking any further maths. But this is a complete misconception! In the social sciences, particularly, numbers are used as a tool, which only works if students have a social sciences mind.

Sponsored tuition to help

Any social science student can learn to use and interpret numbers if they are motivated, engaged with the topic and, most importantly, if they receive learning support. With this purpose, in 2013, the University of Bristol became part of a £19.5 million national programme sponsored by the Nuffield Foundation designed to support students in the acquisition of quantitative training, by setting up the Bristol Q-Step centre, one of only 15 centres in the UK. Three highly skilled lecturers, including myself, were hired as part of the initiative to deliver new units that would not only appeal by their content to Childhood Studies students but would also equip them with the latest analytical tools to understand society. For instance, I deliver a unit called ‘Segregation and Inequality in Britain’. The aim of the unit is to consider the extent to which the UK is a segregated or unequal society giving particular consideration to what is meant by segregation and inequality and how these concepts may be formalised and measured. With interactive lectures and computer labs we use data to better understand the UK socio-economic landscape. A data analysis project gives students the opportunity to explore the topic they most enjoy studying whilst learning data analysis skills. This subject can be chosen as an open unit or as part of the new BSc in Childhood Studies with Quantitative Research Methods, and is taught by leading UK experts in quantitative methods. As proof that anyone can do it, no prior maths skills are required!

But now, students at Bristol will have the unique opportunity to engage with the more quantitative side of childhood studies. Childhood Studies at Bristol gives students the option to strengthen their degree and widen future career opportunities, with the help and support of lecturers who are truly passionate about teaching the use and interpretation of numbers.

Dr Julia Gumy is a Lecturer in Policy Studies with Quantitative Research Methods. Her research interests lie in the study of the life course, subjective and economic well-being, gender, comparative welfare policies and the use of quantitative research methods.

Did you know?

that the per capita consumption of cheese (US) correlates with the number of people who died by becoming tangled in their bed-sheets?

These and other spurious correlations can be found at www.tylervigen.com
Through the use of open units, I was able to pick this course. Since graduating from Bristol I have continued on my studies at the University of Nottingham and gave me plenty of opportunity to read into my interests and specialise in working with children and young people. The Childhood Studies degree was a perfect foundation for my aspirations and gave me exactly what I was looking for. Adding further to my knowledge, I went on to work therapeutically and complete my MA in Person-Centred Experiential Counselling and Psychotherapy. This is a two year course allowing me to really understand the different views people hold towards special educational needs and how to recognise and work with these. As a result of this I started working as a family support worker for a local authority and in order to build up the experience I would require to pursue my ambition of undertaking a doctorate in Educational Psychology. I was able to begin this course in 2014 after applying to several universities and receiving a place back at the University of Bristol.

The foundation of knowledge that I built during my time at Bristol is fundamental to my work. The law and policy that we studied has been key in my understanding of UK legal framework of the Children Act and the way that local authorities work including safeguarding.

The detailed understanding of child protection issues and how to recognise and work with these is also very important in my role. The lectures we had on issues such as child trafficking, sexual exploitation and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) meant that I initially understood a lot of the more complex issues faced by the children I represent, knowledge which I continue to build on.

The BSc Childhood studies course is a great way to start your career. The skills and knowledge you will gain are highly sought after by employers, and our graduates have an excellent track record of employment. Here’s a selection of what some of our students have gone on to achieve:

**Jo (2016)**

Studying Person-Centred Experiential Counselling and Psychotherapy

“I absolutely loved the course and really feel like it has added so much to my life. The Therapeutic Work with Children and Adolescents unit that I took at Bristol really led me to pick this course. Since graduating from Bristol I have continued on my studies at the University of Nottingham reading an MA in Person-Centred Experiential Counselling and Psychotherapy. This is a two year course allowing me to specialise in working with children and young people in the second year. I hope to go on to work therapeutically and creatively with children and young people. The Childhood Studies degree was a perfect foundation for my aspirations and gave me plenty of opportunity to read into my interests through the use of open units”.

**Katie (2015)**

Qualified Social Worker

My time at Bristol University were three of the most demanding, fulfilling and significant years of my life. The Childhood Studies course introduced a variety of topics that I otherwise would not have been introduced to or interested in and because of this began my desire to become a Social Worker. Through the excellent teaching and support that the team on the course offered, my interest in this profession and passion for matters regarding law and human rights flourished. The course attracts a variety of students from different backgrounds and builds successfully upon using these experiences to expand our knowledge which has benefitted me. I worked and volunteered extensively within the University but also in the City of Bristol and found it to be a diverse, welcoming and underrated city. From representing the University at Ballroom and Latin, to shadowing an outreach worker in one of the most deprived areas in the country, I made the most of the time I spent in Bristol. Without doubt I have left with lifelong friends and an experience that I don’t think I could have repeated anywhere else.

**Rose (2014)**

Inter-country child protection caseworker for Children and Families Across Borders (CFAB)

“My role as an Inter-country Caseworker at CFAB involves a number of different aspects but primarily I manage the social work cases of children who have been referred to us by a UK local authority. These children are involved in care proceedings as a result of abuse and neglect and we try to assist them by using our network of international social service partners in around 120 countries. I also work on our advice line service and advise local authority social workers, private individuals and lawyers, etc on a variety of issues - from whether a child may have been a victim of trafficking to how long it would take to complete a welfare visit.

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About BSc Childhood Studies

The Childhood Studies course at Bristol provides a truly interdisciplinary approach to the study of children and young people’s lives from birth to 19 years of age. Within a framework of children’s rights, it explores children’s participation, their protection and the provision of services for children nationally and internationally.

By studying at the School for Policy Studies, you will benefit from the expertise of internationally renowned lecturers and researchers from a wide range of related disciplines, including education, sociology, psychology, social work, law, social policy and economics.
At the time of publishing the BSc Childhood Studies degree was top of The Guardian’s 2018 university league table (classified as Social Work in the rankings).