



Child Labor during the Industrial Revolution

When the Industrial Revolution began, there was a high demand for labor. Families quickly migrated from the rural farm areas to the newly industrialized cities to find work. Once they got there, things did not look as bright as they thought they would. To survive in even the lowest level of poverty, families had to have every able member of the family go to work. This led to a high rise of child labor in factories. Children were not treated well as they were overworked, and underpaid.

Wages and Hours:

Children as young as six years old during the Industrial Revolution worked hard hours for little or no pay. Children sometimes worked up to 16 hours a day, with a one-hour total break. While that was considered the high end of hours worked it was not uncommon for children who worked in factories to work 12-14 hours. Not only were these children subject to long hours, but also, they were in horrible conditions. It was the children that often ran the large, heavy, and dangerous equipment. Many accidents occurred, injuring or killing children on the job. It was not until the Factory Act of 1833 did things improve. Children were paid only a fraction of what an adult would get, and sometimes factory owners would get away without paying them at all. Orphans were usually subject to slave-like labor. The factory owners justified not paying them, saying that they gave the orphans food, shelter, and clothing and a structured life.

Treatment:

The treatment of children in factories was often cruel and unusual, and the children's safety was generally neglected. The youngest children, who were not old enough to work the machines, were commonly sent to be assistants to textile workers. The people who the children served would beat them, verbally abuse them, and take no consideration for their safety. Both boys and girls who worked in factories were subject to beatings and other harsh forms of pain infliction. One common punishment for being late or not working up to speed would be to be "weighted." An overseer would tie a heavy weight to a worker's neck, and have them walk up and down the factory aisles so the other children could see them and "take example." Weighting could lead to serious injuries in the back and/or neck.

Movements to Regulate:

Some people in this time period strongly campaigned for the abolishment of child labor, or at least the improvement of conditions. Factory owners loved using child labor, and they supported their reasoning with ideas that it was good for the economy and helped build a child's character. Many parents were forced to approve of it because they needed the income. There were, however, some important figures that fought for the regulation, improvement, and/or abolishment of child labor. The first step to improving conditions was in 1833 with the Factory Act passed by Parliament. This limited the amount of hours children could work. Specifically, children 9 to 13 years of age were only allowed to work 8 hours a day. Those 14 to 18 years of age could not work more than 12 hours a day. Children under 9 were not allowed to work at all.