A History of Child Labor

There was a time when many U.S. children toiled in factories for 70 hours a week, until child labor laws went into effect in the 1900s.

Grades 6–8, 9–12

In the late 1700’s and early 1800’s, power-driven machines replaced hand labor for making most manufactured items. Factories began to spring up everywhere, first in England and then in the United States. The factory owners found a new source of labor to run their machines — children. Operating the power-driven machines did not require adult strength, and children could be hired more cheaply than adults. By the mid-1800’s, child labor was a major problem.

Children had always worked, especially in farming. But factory work was hard. A child with a factory job might work 12 to 18 hours a day, 6 days a week, to earn a dollar. Many children began working before the age of 7, tending machines in spinning mills or hauling heavy loads. The factories were often damp, dark,
and dirty. Some children worked underground, in coal mines. The working children had no time to play or go to school, and little time to rest. They often became ill.

By 1810, about 2 million school-age children were working 50- to 70-hour weeks. Most came from poor families. When parents could not support their children, they sometimes turned them over to a mill or factory owner. One glass factory in Massachusetts was fenced with barbed wire "to keep the young imps inside." These were boys under 12 who carried loads of hot glass all night for a wage of 40 cents to $1.10 per night.

Church and labor groups, teachers, and many other people were outraged by such cruelty. The English writer Charles Dickens helped publicize the evils of child labor with his novel *Oliver Twist*.

Britain was the first to pass laws regulating child labor. From 1802 to 1878, a series of laws gradually shortened the working hours, improved the conditions, and raised the age at which children could work. Other European countries adopted similar laws.

In the United States it took many years to outlaw child labor. By 1899, 28 states had passed laws regulating child labor. Many efforts were made to pass a national child labor law. The U.S. Congress passed two laws, in 1918 and 1922, but the Supreme Court declared both unconstitutional. In 1924, Congress proposed a constitutional amendment prohibiting child labor, but the states did not ratify it. Then, in 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act. It fixed minimum ages of 16 for work during school hours, 14 for certain jobs after school, and 18 for dangerous work. Today all the states and the U.S. government have laws regulating child labor. These laws have cured the worst evils of children working in factories.

But some kinds of work are not regulated. Children of migrant workers, for example, have no legal protection. Farmers may legally employ them outside of school hours. The children pick crops in the fields and move from place to place, so they get little schooling.

The Canadian provinces today have child labor laws similar to those in the United States. Most other countries have laws regulating child labor, too. But the laws are not always enforced. Starting in 1999, over 160 countries approved an International Labor Organization (ILO) agreement to end the worst forms of child labor. The ILO is a part of the United Nations and the agreement came into effect in the year 2000. According to the ILO, the number of child laborers around the world has been falling. However, as of 2006, there were still 218 million child laborers worldwide; 126 million of them were engaged in hazardous work. The ILO also runs the world's largest program to help countries eliminate child labor.

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