

Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution



"A girl named Mary Richards, who was thought remarkably pretty at the workhouse, and was not quite 10 years of age, worked at a drawing frame. Below the machine, and about a foot from the floor, was a horizontal shaft, by which the frames above were turned. It happened one evening, when her apron was caught by the shaft. In an instant the poor girl was drawn by an irresistible force and dashed on the floor. She uttered the most heart-rending shrieks! The floor manager ran towards her, an agonized and helpless beholder of a scene of horror. He saw her whirled round and round with the shaft - he heard the bones of her arms, legs, thighs, etc. successively snap asunder, crushed, seemingly, to atoms, as the machinery whirled her round, and drew tighter and tighter her body within the works, her blood was scattered over the frame and streamed upon the floor, her head appeared dashed to pieces - at last, her mangled body was jammed in so fast, between the shafts and the floor, that the water being low and the wheels off the gear, it stopped the main shaft. When she was extricated, every bone was found broken - her head dreadfully crushed. The poor girl was carried off quite lifeless."

During the Industrial Revolution poor children often worked full time jobs in order to help support their families. Children as young as four years old worked long hours in factories under dangerous conditions. The practice of child labor continued throughout much of the Industrial Revolution until laws were eventually passed that made child labor illegal.

What types of jobs did children do?

Children performed all sorts of jobs including working on machines in factories, selling newspapers on street corners, breaking up coal at the coal mines, and as chimney sweeps. Sometimes children were preferred to adults because they were small and could easily fit between machines and into small spaces.



Did they make a lot of money?

Another reason that businesses liked to hire children workers was because they worked for little pay. In many cases, children weren't paid at all, but worked for their room and board. When they did earn wages, children often earned 10 to 20 percent of what an adult would earn for the same job.

Long Hours and Dangerous Work



The Industrial Revolution was a time of few government regulations on working conditions and hours. Some businesses hired children because they were cheap, worked hard, and could do some jobs that adults couldn't do. Children often had to work under very dangerous conditions. They lost limbs or fingers working on high powered machinery with little training. They worked in mines with bad ventilation and developed lung diseases. Sometimes they worked around dangerous chemicals where they became sick from the fumes.

Did a lot of children work?

Child labor was a common practice throughout much of the Industrial Revolution. Estimates show that over 50% of the workers in some British factories in the early 1800s were under the age of 14. In the United States, there were over 750,000 children under the age of 15 working in 1870. A real effort to regulate and put an end to child labor in the United States began in the early 1900s. Many businesses were against it because they liked the cheap labor. Some families also needed the money their kids brought home. However, eventually laws were passed. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed that placed some limitations on child labor, set a minimum wage, and put limits on how many hours an employee should work.