CHAPTER 11

HISTORY OF THE FAMILY, YOUTH AND CHILD PROTECTION

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the development of perceptions about youth, families and the child protection system within a historical framework. By tracing the changes in these concepts we can begin to understand how current perceptions have become embedded in Western culture. There are two benefits to engaging in this process. First, by peeling away the layers of “fact” associated with youth, families, and child protection we can see that they are social constructions developed from the middle and upper class concerns about the state. Second, this process will determine that perceptions of youth, families, and child protection have not remained stagnant, as they are subject to changing societal, political, and economic environments.

The first part of the chapter will be divided into the following sections:

1) the creation of adolescence, which discusses how the period of adolescence became constructed as a distinct stage, controlled and supervised by various rules and institutions; 2) the creation of the family as an institution, which gives an overview of how families have been designated as the primary agent for looking after adolescents, with each member prescribed particular roles; and 3) the creation of the child protection system, whereby social workers were designated as the “experts” to infiltrate family life and promote the expectations of appropriate parenting. The second part of this chapter consists of the theoretical underpinnings that are guiding this writing. Foucault’s notion of governmentality and power relations will be explored with an
emphasis on how these two concepts facilitate a critical analysis of
my role as a social worker within a child protection system.

CREATION OF ADOLESCENCE

It needs to be acknowledged that outlining the history of youth is a
complex task, since these experiences are shaped by numerous
factors such as context, location, gender, class, and religion. As well,
the terms children, childhood, youth, adolescence, and teenager are
often used interchangeably. However, what these terms have in
common is their distinction as separate from adult or adulthood. As
Calvert (1998) suggests, it is important to look at why adolescence
became so important, especially from the early twentieth century
onward, for what purpose, and what have been the advantages and
disadvantages.

YOUTH.

There has been a lengthy debate about the beginnings of childhood,
youth, and adolescence. Much of this debate has stemmed from the
ambiguity that has existed around the transition from childhood to
adulthood. Some have argued that in medieval times, there was no
distinction made between adults and children (Aries, 1962), in that
they were in institutions together, “subject to the same disciplinary
and supportive societal forces” (Tait, 2000, p. 25). Ackland (1995)
states that prior to the modern period, the transition between
childhood and adulthood was relatively quick and unremarkable. He
states:

The in-between stage of youth did not always exist as it does
today. Phillipe Aries (1962) has shown that in Medieval Europe,
the movement from child to adult was instantaneous. “Once he
had passed the age of five or seven, the child was immediately
absorbed into the world of adults: this concept of a brief
childhood lasted for a long time in the lower classes”. In the
seventeenth century, “by the age of ten, girls were already little
women: a precocity due in part to an upbringing which taught