

The Depressing Stories Behind 20 Vintage Child Labor Pictures



Child labor has never been a particularly pretty part of society, but during the industrial revolution, the practice became even uglier than its earlier incarnations. Children were often put in dangerous industrial jobs and paid menial wages. While free public schools had become available by the time these pictures were taken, poor families still couldn't afford to pass up potential wages to be earned by their young children. In fact, even though public school was made compulsory in all states by 1918, many children continued to work whenever possible; there were no effective, standardized federal labor laws in effect until 1938. Even so, the mandatory schooling laws greatly helped reduce child labor and increased the education of the populace. If you've ever wondered just how ugly child labor could get, then you will certainly appreciate these powerful images by Lewis Wickes Hine, [courtesy of the Library of Congress](#).

Food Production

From farming to fishing to processing to canning, there was a time where practically all foods were grown with the help of child laborers – sometimes working as soon as they were old enough to understand what their family members were doing. While all of these jobs were dirty, some were particularly dangerous, requiring children to wield blades or operate shoddy machinery.

In this family of harvesters working in 1910, the children would start picking fruits when they turned three years old. While they would go to school after the harvest season was over, they'd usually start classes at least a month and a half in, since it was more important that everyone work as long as possible into the season.

This eight-year-old girl, working at a nearby cranberry farm that same year, was also held from school until the harvest was over. Work was so constant that her father even scolded her for pausing so the photographer could take this image – hence her look of worry.

This 12-year-old boy lost his hand while operating the mowing machine he is posed on. Despite being maimed, the child still helped his family harvest vegetables with his good hand as soon as he was able to get back in the fields. His mother lamented that “now we will have to educate him,” since he could no longer work as a manual laborer on the farm.

This five-year-old boy worked at an oyster plant in 1911, running barefoot on cracked shells as he retrieved buckets of shellfish to shuck. The company hired many children of his age to shuck oysters for as little as 30 cents a day, approximately \$7 in today's currency. If you've ever shucked an oyster yourself, you can appreciate just how dangerous this line of work can be, particularly for someone that young.

While there are quite a few children in this image of shrimp pickers, the youngest is eight years old and, while not pictured in this photo, the youngest boys employed by the company were only five. These employees would stand over a trough all day shelling shrimp until their fingers bled, and of course the acid and salt water only worsened the pain.

These two berry hullers were only two and three years old, but they worked long, twelve hour shifts, just like the rest of their family members. Hullers at the company would earn two cents per quart of berries finished, but there is no indication of how many quarts would typically be completed in a day.

Eight-year-old Daisy worked on the capping machine in a canning factory in 1910. While she was able to put 40 caps on the cans per minute, she still kept falling behind and getting in trouble. Daisy was still lucky though, as she could have been put on a much more dangerous part of the line where machinery featuring open gears would regularly injure workers.

Industrial Workers

Of course, child labor wasn't limited to the agricultural and fishing industries; practically anything made in an industrial setting was made with the help of children. These workers would often be put in dangerous situations and many ended up injured or permanently crippled as a result.

These days, coal miners still face a lot of work hazards no matter how OSHA-compliant their employer. Back before these types of jobs were regulated though, employees were given little, if any, protective clothing and forced to work ten or twelve hour shifts. These boys, photographed in 1908, stayed underground all day from 7 AM to 5 PM. The youngest boys at the company would be hired as "trappers," sent to open up the trap doors to allow the drivers through with their coal loads.

This boy lost his leg when he was only eleven when, working as a trapper, he got stuck between two cars. The company determined it was his fault and refused to offer him any compensation. Even after the accident, his father continued to work at the mine.

This thirteen-year-old was fortunate, as far as boy miners went, because he got to operate the trip rope, allowing him to spend most of his time outdoors.

These young boys worked inside a factory building in 1911, processing the impurities from the coal by hand. The dust was so thick at times that many of the photographer's shots didn't come out at all, yet none of the boys were given protective gear. In fact, they were instead beaten and kicked by their overseers if they didn't seem to be working fast enough.

Before machines were invented to streamline the process, bedsprings were linked by hand in factories like this one photographed in 1917. While the work was dangerous and difficult, at least this factory refused to hire anyone under the age of seventeen.

This textile mill, photographed in 1909, commonly hired children too young to even reach the tops of the machines to mend the broken threads. As a result, sights like this were common on the factory floor.

Unsurprisingly, factory accidents were an all-too-common occurrence. This 16-year-old boy lost his leg and arm in an industrial accident at a spring factory in 1908. Despite the fact that he spent two years at the factory, no one from the company stopped by to visit him after the accident and he received no compensation for his injuries.

This boy was fortunate in that he was able to receive \$10,000 in compensation for his two lost fingers after winning a lawsuit against the company he worked for. That's approximately \$200,000 after inflation.

He was injured after he fell asleep during an eighteen hour shift and accidentally turned on the machine in front of him in the process.

In some ways, though, factory life wasn't always bad. Some factories were far less dangerous than others, and employers would sometimes let their workers hire a reader, like this man, to read books and newspapers to them while they worked. For many young factory workers, this was the closest thing they could get to an education and was considered to be quite a job perk.

Home Workers

While working from home is considered a luxury these days, in the 1800s, most people who worked at home may as well have been in a sweatshop. Whole families would work on menial tasks in cramped tenements with no air conditioning and dim lighting, usually earning less than \$1 a day – that's per family, not per person. Inflated to today's monetary value, that would mean an entire family could earn about \$25 per day. On the upside, at least these workers were in a fairly safe environment.

Hunched over a tiny table, Mrs. Gay and her children, aged 5, 7, 12 and 13, would work to set stones into inexpensive jewelry pieces. The Gays were lucky in that their children could actually attend school. After the children got out of school each day, they would work into the evening, all so the family could earn an extra \$5 a week.

This family worked together to make artificial flowers. Even the five-year-old would work with the rest of the family. For every 150 or so flowers

completed, they would earn \$.08.

Mrs. Weeks would work with her children and grandchildren, ages 4-13, to string wooden buttons. The children in this family were able to go to school, but after school and on holidays, they would join in to help string the buttons. Even with all the extra hands, Mrs. Weeks rarely made more than \$7 a month, approximately \$180 in today's currency.

This family was already training the youngest daughter, a two-year-old, to make flower wreaths with the rest of them. They expected her to be able to work within the next year.

While these pictures can make you grateful that many countries have strict child labor laws in place, remember there are many places where scenes like this still occur on a daily basis.