

# What were conditions like for children working in nineteenth century factories?

You are going to use primary evidence to find out what conditions were like for those children who worked in factories in the nineteenth century. The only problem is that the sources do not agree. You therefore have to work out which sources are **RELIABLE** and can help you with your investigation.

## CHILDREN IN THE MILLS

If businessmen in the Industrial Revolution were going to develop their factories they needed people to work for them. Many of the early textile factory owners employed large numbers of children. This was not shocking as children had always been expected to work before the Industrial Revolution. Some of the children in the mill were **apprentices**. These children were often orphans, who were sent to the factories from the large towns. They lived in the apprentice house near the factory. Other child workers came from the local area. Their families relied on their wages to survive.

The factory owners paid **overseers** to make sure the children worked as hard as they could. The more work the children did the more the overseers were paid. The overseers were given whips. Children had many advantages as factory workers. They were paid less than adults, and apprentices were not paid at all but just worked for food and shelter. Children were also more supple, so it was easier for them to crawl under the machines to repair broken threads. They did this when the machines were working and some were badly injured. Some children were given an education at work but many were not.

Let's see what the primary sources say about conditions for the children:

### Source A

Leonard Horner, a factory inspector, describes what happened to a young girl in a textile factory  
"She was caught by her apron which wrapped around the shaft. She was whirled round and repeatedly forced between the shaft and the carding engine. Her right leg was found some distance away."

### Source B

An extract from the Memoir of Robert Blincoe. Blincoe was an apprentice from the age of seven. This describes his first day at work.

"They reached the mill at about half-past-five in the morning. The moment he entered the doors the noise appalled him and the smell seemed unbearable. His first task was to pick up the loose cotton that fell upon the floor. He set to it eagerly although he was much terrified by the noise of the machinery and half-suffocated with the dust.

Unused to the smell he soon felt sick by constant bending. He therefore sat down but soon found out this was strictly forbidden. His overseer used his whip to prove this point. He stayed on his legs until 12 o'clock. Blincoe suffered greatly with thirst and hunger."

Source C

Robert Blincoe giving evidence to Parliament about working conditions.

"I have seen the time when two weights have each been screwed to my ears. Then three or four of us have been hung on a beam over the machinery, hanging by our hands. Mind, we were apprentices without a mother or father to take care of us. Then we used to stand up, in a skip, without our shirts, and be beat with straps. Then they used to tie up a 28-pound weight to hang down our backs."

Source D

Elizabeth Bentley was questioned by Parliament. She started working at the age of six.

Q: Explain what you had to do.

A: When the frames are full, they have to stop the frame, and take the flyers off, and take the full bobbins off, and carry them on to the roller, and then put the empty ones on.

Q: Suppose you slowed down a little, what would they do?

A: Strap us. The girls had black marks on their skin many a time, and their parents dare not come in about it, they were afraid of losing their work.

Q: What part of the mill did you work in?

A: In the card-room. It was very dusty. The dust got upon my lungs, I got so bad in health. When I pulled the baskets all heaped up the basket pulled my shoulder out of its place and my ribs have grown over it. I am now deformed."

Source E

Mr John Moss, an overseer, was questioned by parliament.

Q: Were any children employed at the factory?

A: There were 111. All apprentices from London between the ages of seven and eleven.

Q: What were the hours of work?

A: From five o'clock in the morning till eight at night.

Q: What time was allowed for meals?

A: Half an hour for breakfast and half an hour for dinner.

Q: Would the children sit or stand to work?

A: Stand.

Q: Were they usually tired at night?

A: Yes, some of them were very tired. I have frequently found some asleep on the factory floor.

Q: Were any children injured by machines?

A: Very frequently. Very often their fingers were crushed and one had his arm broken."

*Source F*

*Royal Commission on Factory Employment (1832)*

*"People working at home are in most cases working from an earlier age for longer hours and less wages than children employed in factories."*

Source G

Dr Andrew Ure "The Philosophy of Manufactures" (1835).

"Ill-treatment of any kind is very rare. I have visited many factories in Manchester and I have never once seen a child beaten. Nor did I ever see a child unhappy. They seemed to be always cheerful and alert. It was delightful to see the ease with which they fixed the broken threads. They were delighted to show off their skill to a stranger. They showed no exhaustion when they left at night; they immediately began to skip about and to play games, the same as boys leaving school."

Source H

Nassau Senior, a factory owner, gave his view (1837)

"The easiness of the work makes long hours possible. Most of the work is merely that of watching the machinery, and piecing the threads that break. The work is not as hard as a shopman behind a counter in a busy shop."

You have now seen a range of views on the conditions of the factories for the children.

It's time to sort these ideas out!

**TASK 1**

In pairs, write 20-35 words on each source explaining what it says about conditions for children.

You can write in notes but you both need to write your ideas down.

**TASK 2**

Draw a table in your book like this:

In favour of child labour	Against child labour	Not sure

Put the letter of each source under the heading you think is correct.

### TASK 3

We now need to find out why the sources are different. Think carefully about the author of each source and why they might be saying what they are saying.

For each source (A – H) answer the following questions:

Who wrote it?

Why did they write it (what was their MOTIVE)?

Is it balanced or just one point of view?

Give it a mark out of 10. 10 is completely trustworthy (reliable) , 1 is completely unreliable

Which source is the most reliable?

### TASK 4

You now need to explain all your findings in a piece of written work. You need to follow the plan below, filling in the gaps and adding lots of detail.

WHAT WERE CONDITIONS LIKE FOR CHILDREN WORKING IN NINETEENTH CENTURY FACTORIES?

Some sources say... (EXPLAIN WHICH SOURCES SAY CONDITIONS WERE BAD AND GIVE EXAMPLES OF THE BAD CONDITIONS)

However, other sources suggest ... (EXPLAIN WHICH SOURCES SAY CONDITIONS WERE FINE AND HOW THEY TRY AND PROVE IT)

We have to be careful about which sources we use because ... (EXPLAIN THE PROBLEMS WITH SOME OF THE SOURCES)

I believe that ...

You will be marked on how well you explain the ideas in the sources and how clear your English is. If you feel confident you can quote from the sources to support your arguments.