



Children at Work

Film Summary: Young children have always been part of the work force in British Columbia. Through the story of the explosion at Coal Creek mines in Fernie, this film examines the issue of child labour.

Curriculum Application

Social Studies 9
Social Justice 12

The Essential Question:

How has Canada developed legally, socially and economically in respect to labour laws and child labour since the turn of the century?

Summary of the Lesson Activities

1. Focus questions on the vignette provide a short lesson option. (15 minutes)
2. Lesson includes background Information on Child Labour with an emphasis on BC history.
3. Primary Sources investigation using photographs of child labour in BC, Canada and the world.
4. A web-based inquiry activity where students investigate current child labour situations in the global community.

Learning Standards

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the economic factors that contribute to child labour. **(causes and consequences)**
2. Demonstrate an understanding of turn of the century labour practices and be able to draw comparisons with contemporary examples. **(continuity and change)**
3. Successfully conduct online research and analyze online materials to better understand historical, social and economic issues in the history of child labour in Canada and the world. **(evidence and perspective)**

Materials and Resources Provided

- [Children at Work Episode 1- Working People-a History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Lesson Strategy “Children at Work” (Document 1)
- Class set of “Working Children” Essay (Document 2)
- Class set of “Children at Work”- Photo Analysis (Document 3)
- Photographic Analysis sheet (Document 3a)
- Class set of Web Inquiry handouts (Document 4)

Additional Suggested Materials

- [Knowledge Network-Edge of the World: B.C.'s Early Years “Coal Miners Lament”](#)
- [Video-“These were the reasons...” Ch1 Early Stories -working without a union.](#)
- Video: [British Columbia: An Untold History-Labour and Persistence](#)
- [Canada's History](#)
- Canada's History: [Canada's Boy Miners](#)
- Dictionary of Canadian Biography
 - [Robert Dunsuir](#)
 - [Samuel Myers](#)
- [On the Line A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement p279-280](#)
- Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia Lessons.
[Miners vs. Dunsmuirs](#)
[Vancouver Island War](#)
- [WE. Child Labour](#)
- [UNICEF: Child Labour](#)

Vignette Questions

1. In the Crow's Nest Mining disaster of 1902 128 miners were killed, how many were boys under the age of 16?
2. In which industry were children employed in the most dangerous conditions?
3. In British Columbia, what legal protection did child labourers have?
4. Children injured on the job often faced an adult life of poverty. Explain
5. What public service removed many children from the workforce after World War I?
6. What embarrassing labour distinction did British Columbia have for all of North America?

Lesson Activities

1. This lesson is intended to be taught in a Social Studies 9 Laurier Period unit or a Social Studies 10, Human Geography unit related to economic and human development. Teachers may adapt it for Social Justice 12 classrooms.
2. Download the lesson plan for “Child Labour Then and Now”
3. Suggestions in the lesson plan provide for an introduction strategy that includes a bridging strategy from past knowledge of the Industrial Revolution to the video and current global conditions.
4. Read the essay excerpt from Neil Sutherland and follow the optional discussion questions
5. Photos that are included in the Lesson resources can be built into a power point or be used in class sets for further discussion. See the Photographic Analysis sheet for instructional suggestions.
6. Create a handout or a PowerPoint presentation on the Child Labour facts provided in the lesson.
7. Engage the students in a Child Labour inquiry as a summative exercise for evaluation.

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Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by John Decaire

Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Document 1

Children at Work Lesson Strategy

Lesson Introduction:

This lesson is intended to be taught in a Social Studies 9, Laurier Period unit or a Social Studies 11, Human Geography unit related to economic and human development. Teachers may adapt it for Social Justice 12 classrooms.

The teacher can begin the class with a brief introduction of the topic of child labour. Teachers should begin with students' prior knowledge of the role of child labour in the Industrial Revolution (Social Studies 9). They should review its widespread use at the turn of the century in Canada.

After the video the teacher should explain that because of incidents like this, over the years governments across countries like Canada, the United States and Great Britain, began to tighten child labour laws. Particularly after the Second World War, it became very uncommon in Canada and the US for families to rely on the children to work for pay in order to support the family. Initiate a discussion with the class.

Possible questions and prompts (Optional: The teacher may wish to create a handout or worksheet of the following questions for distribution instead):

- What do you know about child labour?
- What is wrong with child labour? In your opinion, at what age is paid labour appropriate?
- Where does child labour take place today? Do you think it is still common?
- Do you think the children should have to work?
- Why do you think children in Canada's past often had to go to work? How do economic factors affect child labour?

Hand out and read aloud with class the excerpts from the essay entitled "Working Children"(Document 2).

This gives a good overview of the state of child labour in BC at the turn of the century. Discuss the following essential points which do not arise in the excerpt:

- Turn of the twentieth century union workers and middle class reformers believed the "proper labours" for children was in school, and not at paid employment;
- Families, union workers, and reformers together held a loose consensus that children should work at chores in and around the household. This was a good practice and formed a healthy lifelong habit. In fact, J.J. Kelso of the Children's Aid Society said that a boy should work and learn to love to work;
- Child labour laws deal mostly with formalized commercial (stores and restaurants) and industrialized (mines and factories) worksites; historians have illustrated that from the 1920s through the 1950s, children's unpaid chores and labour was vital to the survival of farming families across Canada, and very helpful even to urban families;
- Children's formal paid labour (for example, from coal mining), was certainly vital to the family economy around 1900. Certainly up until the end of WWII it was not uncommon to surrender earnings from paid employment to a mother or father at home and receive a small allowance for personal discretionary spending.
- After 1945 it became much more common for working children (a sixteen year old is still a child) to keep their earnings and spend it on themselves;
- When teens today spend money on themselves, they are still directly assisting their "family economy" because they, and no longer their parent(s), often pay for their own clothing, shoes, cell phone, etc.

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Body of the lesson:

The teacher should try to relate the history of child labour in BC (**including the fact that up to 2021, BC had the most permissive child labour laws in North America. Minimum working age was raised from 12 to 16 in 2021**¹) to the current child labour issues across the globe. In order to grab the student's attention on the subject or initiate some conversation, the teacher can create a handout or a PowerPoint with the following child labour facts and then present them to the class:

- There are approximately 150 million children aged 5-14 working in the developing world.
- Worldwide 215 million children under the age of 18 work;
- In the 5–14 age group, 53 million children are in hazardous child labour;
- 60 % of child labour is used in agriculture: harvesting of tea, bananas, cocoa, fruit and vegetables;
- An estimated 14 million children work in manufacturing: carpets, clothing, shoes, basketballs, bricks, glassware, etc;
- Child workers suffer more accidents than adult workers. One quarter of all working children will suffer work related injuries or illnesses;
- In developing countries, like India and Brazil, unions are the main advocates to end child labour.
- Until 2021 BC had the lowest child to work threshold in North America: With their parents' permission, a child may work in most industries at age 12 in BC. The Law was revised in 2021

Sources: UNICEF, The International Labor Organization and The Child Labor Education Project

¹[New rules protect young workers | BC Gov News](https://www.bccbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/young-workers-age-raise-12-16-1.6212548)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/young-workers-age-raise-12-16-1.6212548>

Enclosed in this lesson plan package are photos of child labour both at the turn of the century today (Document 3) and a Photographic Analysis to assist with the interpretation of the photos (Document 3a). These can be incorporated into a PowerPoint or handed out to the class in handout form. It might be informative to draw comparisons between the two. Most of these photos are not assigned dates, but 19th century photos are easily distinguishable from more contemporary ones. It may be useful to ask the class *how* they can tell the difference between the more modern and old photographs.

Once this is done, the teacher can handout and explain the "Child Labour Web Inquiry" sheet (Document 4) The class will require access to a computer lab or a class set of media devices with internet access to be able to complete this activity.

Closure:

To end the lesson, teacher should review the Canadian context discussed including the fact that some impoverished Canadian families still use informal child labour today in and around the homes, and teens in British Columbia classes do sometimes give part of their earnings to support the family. Teachers may now wish to discuss how we as Canadians can contribute to ending child exploitation and labour. There is a wealth of information online as to things that everyday people can do. Some of these acts include the following:

- Find out where your food and clothing comes from and who makes it. Then find out what labour practices are like there.
- Be selective in what you buy. Buy Fair Trade products that guarantee that no worker was exploited when the product was made. They cost a bit more, but they are never made with child labour.
- Buy locally: Child labour is illegal here and workers generally have more rights than in countries where child labour is common. Give your business to ethically run industries.
- Get Involved. Volunteer for a credible child welfare NGO like UNICEF Canada.

Assessment – "Child Labour Web Inquiry" (Document 4)

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Working People: A History of Labour in BC

Lesson: Children at Work

Document 2: Working Children: *Research Document prepared by Lani Russwurm*

The labouring experiences of British Columbian children has varied widely depending on time and place, existing technology and labour pools, gender and class, tradition, prevailing ideas about childhood, and the perceived needs of the economy. Children have contributed to the household economy with paid and unpaid work, on farms and on city streets, in the home and in factories and mines throughout BC's history.

For pioneer families and during hard times, child labour was essential for survival. But it was also seen as preferable to idleness and a demonstration of good character. Rural children performed copious amounts of labour on farms that included clearing land, harvesting, chopping wood, collecting water, and milking cows, often before and after school, or in lieu of school. Children also learned gender roles through their labour; girls helped with child rearing and other domestic chores, while boys were expected to do outside work. The patterns were similar for urban children, although the nature of the work often differed.

Before WWII, urban children laboured at numerous unpaid tasks to contribute to the household economy. Even in the city, work performed by children was often of an agricultural nature. They picked wild berries that grew throughout Vancouver, tended to cows and chickens, and weeded gardens. Urban children scoured alleyways in search of wood scraps for fuel and sometimes coal on the waterfront. Sometimes children from poor families would be sent out to beg. Others stole to raise money, often brass or other metals and goods that they could easily sell. Getting caught could land them in jail or, for persistent young offenders, the reformatory, which could be as bad or worse. Children sent to foster homes were sometimes treated more as labourers than family members.

Paid work available to children outside the home was structured by gender. Girls had fewer options to make money than boys and often babysat or helped with other domestic chores, picked fruit, or worked in retail. To the chagrin of the daughters, parents sometimes bought bicycles for their sons so they could earn money delivering newspapers or other goods or working as messengers. A typical arrangement would be for the boys to turn over their earnings to their parents, who in turn gave the boys a small allowance.

Another job commonly filled by boys was setting pins at bowling alleys before mechanized pinsetters were introduced. Like other child labourers, pin-boys were vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions, but unlike most other young workers, were unionized and therefore in a position to collectively struggle for better conditions. In Vancouver they formed the Union of Amusement Workers of Canada, which in the early 1930s was affiliated with the militant, Communist-controlled Workers Unity League. In March 1932, the Japanese pin-boys at Chapman's Bowling Alley went on strike to fight a wage reduction, for union recognition, and to get rid of the Japanese "boss" system whereby a Japanese "boss" supplied Japanese boys to an employer below the wage rates of whites. The "boss" acted as an overseer, subjecting the boys to arbitrary discipline,

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and taking a cut of the wages paid out. After a week of picketing under the watchful eye of the police, 14 picketers were arrested on charges of obstructing traffic and vagrancy and spent a week in jail before going to trial. The Canadian Labor Defence League successfully defended the strikers. Meanwhile, the YMCA recruited “a full staff of white boys who were glad to get the work.” After three intense weeks, the strike was called off. Talk of unionizing pin-boys resurfaced a decade later when it was some of them were working as much as 12 hours a day, sometimes for as little as a dollar per day.

One of the more dangerous jobs children done by children in BC was coal mining. The proportion of children working in British Columbian mines was never as great as other coal regions. Adult Asian and sometimes native men filled the unskilled, low waged positions filled by boys in other contexts, and in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of boys available to work in the resource-based economy was limited. Nevertheless, boys did work in the mines, although as John Belshaw notes, “the evidence for under-age labour is hard to come by. Sadder still, it most often crops up in the roll-call of colliery deaths, as was the case in 1879, when Reuben Gough, a fourteen-year-old, was listed among the fatalities in an explosion” in a Vancouver Island mine.

There is at least one documented case of a nine-year-old coal miner in BC, but most were boys between the ages of 13 and 16 who entered the trade as apprentices to their fathers or older brothers. Mine owners were initially happy with this arrangement as it reproduced the workforce at low cost. But in later years, advances in mining technology reduced the skill required to do the job, and after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, owners were more than happy to use Chinese labourers and paid them even less than white boys.

One of the worst mining disasters in the province’s history occurred at a mine operated by the Crowsnest Mine Company near Fernie in the Kootenay Region on 22 May 1902. An explosion in the mine claimed 128 lives, ten of whom were boys under 16. Newspapers reported that “the first body recovered was taken from No. 3 mine about 11 o’clock, and was that of Willie Robertson, a lad of 13.” Nine other victims were boys under sixteen, including one young “slave buried under fifty tons of rock.”

Conditions at the mine were notoriously dangerous, but the papers initially blamed the explosion not on the company, but the many “foreigners” who worked in the mine. One early theory was that a “careless Italian” used an open lamp in a particularly gaseous mine shaft. Others felt it was the result of a curse that was put on the town after its founder, William Fernie, betrayed the local native family that told him the location of the massive coal deposits in the area. An inquiry later faulted the company for the highly flammable coal dust in the air and recommended a system for watering “the installation of the most approved system of watering for laying dust in coal mines.” Another inquiry was held in response to allegations that mine inspector Archibald Dick was being paid off by the company to turn a blind eye to safety violations. Two days before the explosion, he reported that “everything was in good order.”

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In the early years of the 20th century, the school attendance officer in Vancouver “reported ‘a great many young-looking children,’ some no more than nine years of age, working in department stores, laundries, and offices, others ‘street trading’ in merchandise, newspapers or magazines.” This changed rapidly after the First World War when full-time child wage labour was largely supplanted with mandatory, public schooling. New technologies and raised standards of living have reduced the need for children to contribute to the household economy. Nevertheless, child labour has never been definitively outlawed. The rise of unions and major improvements in workplace safety standards have improved work conditions for most of us, but there remains no nation-wide rules restricting child labour in Canada, one of a minority of countries that has not ratified the International Labour Organization’s Convention on Child Labour. Provincial regulations limiting child labour are in place in certain industries (beginning with coal mining in the 1870s and notably in the film industry today), but generally, children are able to work in most industries when they reach the age of twelve in British Columbia, the youngest “start work” age in North America*.

*UPDATE.... in 2021 BC adopted new legislation¹ making the new minimum age 16, and that new legislation is in line with ILO standards.

1. [New rules protect young workers | BC Gov News](https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021LBR0027-001400)
<https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2021LBR0027-001400>

Quotes:

“School holidays! No one asked where you were going for holidays. You knew you were going to do your part to help clear the land during Easter Holidays.”

-Resident of Evelyn in the Bulkley Valley on growing up in a pioneer family

“She had an awful life, with real chores, hard work. My father never spoke to her and wouldn’t even look at her.”

“If you went to high school, your parents had money and anybody who didn’t have money, the kids left school at 13, 14, 15 ... I didn’t go to school after 13 because I had to go to work. People were poor. I earned about \$3.00 a week.”

-a Cedar Cottage resident on growing up in the 1920s

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Document 3 Children at Work-Photo Analysis



Miners at the Pit Mouth, Coal Creek, Fernie BC 1913, Fernie & District Historical Society



Sterling Mill workers circa 1900, City of Vancouver Archives, Mi P34.

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Child labour in an unidentified cannery, c. 1900. Delta Archives, 1984-047-004.
Courtesy of Delta Heritage Society



Image E-05040, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum.

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Figure 5 Employees of a book binding company 1891, City of Vancouver Archives, Misc P12



Figure 6 Classroom 1914, Image B-03420 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum



Figure 7 Children work in an artisanal gold mine.
Image by Larry C. Price, Burkina Faso, 2013.



Figure 8 Bonded Child Labourer; Pakistan, International Labor Organization

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Document 3a Photographic Analysis Sheet

Interpreting Photographs

Like political cartoons, photographs must be carefully analyzed. Many people think that photographs have no bias because the image is a snapshot of an exact moment in time. However, there are many factors to consider when analyzing photographs. The photographer has bias, and can influence the outcome of the snapshot. It is important to remember that a photographer can influence, mislead, misrepresent, or dramatize; just as other artists can, using their distinct medium.

General questions to consider

- Who took the picture?
- What was the purpose of the photograph?
- Why did the photographer take a picture of this image?
- What were the photographer's point of view and what message was being conveyed?
- Was it 'staged' for effect or was this a spontaneous (candid) shot?
- Was there an interest group who paid to have the image taken?
- Was it created for propaganda, as a record of family history, or even as a joke?
- What is missing, or was omitted?
- What lies outside the frame of the photograph?
- Is there a caption, and, if so, does this influence your reaction to and meaning of the photograph?

Provided with permission by Elizabeth Byrne Lo- Burnaby School District

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Document 4: Child Labour Web Inquiry

Instructions

Use the internet to do research in order to find the answers to the questions below. On the last page of the handout there is a list of suggested internet sources you can use. If you go outside this list make sure your source is a credible one on the topic [for example, place more trust in websites ending in .edu (education facility) or .org (organization) rather than .com which is a “for profit” organization or speak to your teacher about what a credible source is]. After answering each question, fill in the name of the internet source you used to get your information.

1. Find an official definition of child labour as described by a website authority on child labour and write it out below.

Web Source: _____

2. In which Canadian province and in what year were children first prevented from working in mines?

Web Source: _____

3. How many child labourers are there in the world?

Web Source: _____

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4. List four countries where child labour is common place still

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____

Web Source:_____

5. List five of the most common child labour jobs.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

Web Source:_____

6. List four common negative effects on the health of children who carry out long or hard continuous work.

Web Source:_____

7. What social or economic factors contribute to child labour today?

Web Source:_____

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8. Go to [Introduction to Global Child Labor/](#) found at the University of Iowa website. Look under “Unions and the Global Struggle Against Child Labor” on page 12. After reading p. 12 answer the following questions.

8a. Describe what unions are doing or have done in two of the countries listed to end child poverty.

8b. Why do you think it is in the unions’ interest to end child labour?

Web Source: _____

9. Using all that you learned from the video, the information from the essay “Working Children” and the online research you’ve done, draw comparisons between working conditions for child workers in the 19th and early 20th century and child workers now. What are the similarities and what are the differences?

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Suggested Web Quest Sources

- International Labour Organization Website, “What is child labor?”
<http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.htm>
- Annotated slide show on child labour, created by the ILO
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/wdacl/english.htm>
- [Child labour rises to 160 million – first increase in two decades \(unicef.org\)](http://www.unicef.org/childlabour/index_0.shtml)
- The Child Labor Education Project, University of Iowa Labour Center (English Only)
http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/
- *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, “Child Labour”
[Child Labour | The Canadian Encyclopedia](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/child-labour)
- Vancouver Sun blog post – “What British Columbians think they know about child labour” July 16th, 2013
<http://blogs.vancouversun.com/2013/07/16/what-british-columbians-think-they-know-about-child-labour>
- *Huffington Post* blog post – “Canadian’s Choices Can Help End Child Slavery” July 18th, 2-13
http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/debbie-wolfe/fair-trade-products-child-slavery_b_3616450.html

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