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Sünbülzade Vehbi (1814-63)

CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

FROM THE 15TH TO THE 20TH CENTURY



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Chapter 5

The Emotional Bond between Early Modern Ottoman Children and Parents: A Case Study of Sünbülzade Vehbi's 'Ideal' Child (1700-1800)

Leyla Kayhan Elbirlık

Who would have thought it possible a century ago that the first hesitant words of infants or the blushes of adolescents—or the shape of houses—could become the objects of serious scientific study?

Henri Lefebvre¹

Studies focusing on the history of childhood in the Ottoman world have maintained that the extant sources allow for a limited view of how the idea of childhood was perceived in the early modern period. Compared to the sources of European history, historical accounts on Ottoman children and biographical narratives focusing on children's lives are rare in the Ottoman context. Nevertheless the *Shari'ah* court records and fatwa collections that reflect the daily concerns of the populace are primary documents that inform on children's lives and attitudes toward childhood. These normative-theoretical sources offer only a partial view of children's relationship to their surroundings, as well as their reception by society at large. Recent works have linked the reticence of such sources on the subject of children to their assumption of them as 'fragile', 'passive receptors' lacking agency, and therefore not being historically meaningful actors.²

While the field of Ottoman childhood study is developing to call this perspective into question, the need for furthering our knowledge on the relationship between parents and children is even more pertinent, as well as similar source-related concerns with respect to child-rearing and nurturing practices. Views on parenthood not only bring into consideration a variety of sensibilities and tension points vis-à-vis children, but also allow for a discussion of how childhood is perceived in a particular time and culture. Any effort in reconstructing child life through the court records and fatwa collections is inevitably restricted, given the 'canonised' language and formulaic recording of cases. They do not provide a