

What was it like to be a young Iroquois girl or boy 300 years ago? In some ways, things weren't so different from life today. Youths sported "mohawk" haircuts and played lacrosse, just as many teenagers still do now. Other aspects of Iroquois life in the 1700s were not so familiar. Entire villages lived together in one house, for example. Perhaps even more surprising, women controlled most day-to-day functions. That's right—the Iroquois were a matriarchal society, meaning that the women were in charge!

As members of the Iroquois Confederacy, or Iroquois League, youths may have belonged to one of several well-known tribes. These included the Mohawk, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga, and Onondaga people. This political union was also called the Five Nations. Later, the Tuscarora became a sixth member of the confederacy, which then became the Six Nations—just as we have the "United States." Also like the United States, each smaller unit was governed both at a local level and by the larger whole. The Six Nations also had a constitution.

Whatever tribe they belonged to, the Iroquois were famous for their fighting skills. Boys were groomed to become warriors. By colonial times, the Iroquois tribes had banded together, agreeing not to fight each other. However, that does not mean they did not fight other tribes. The word *Iroquois* is actually an Algonquin word meaning "real snakes." Clearly, the Iroquois must have warred often with the Algonquin to have earned that name.

Girls, on the other hand, would master social and political skills. Iroquois women held more power than women in most other world cultures in the 1700s. Women not only tended crops, but they also elected tribal chiefs and controlled the house. When an Iroquois man married, he moved in with his wife's family.



An Iroquois warrior, as painted in 1796.

Iroquois society ran smoothly because each member knew his or her job and worked hard to carry it out. Even children had clearly defined roles and were expected to do certain tasks. While very young, they helped the women. Some days they might go into the woods to pick berries and fruits such as black cherries and wild plums. Most days, though, would be spent in the cornfields. While their mothers planted and tended crops, kids were responsible for

scaring away the birds, squirrels, porcupines, and deer, who would have otherwise eaten all the harvest.

As they grew older, youths practiced the skills they would need as adults. After doing his chores, a boy might go off into the forest and shoot with a bow and arrow. His first deer hunt signified his coming of age into manhood, and he had to be ready. He learned to wait patiently for the right time to hunt. Hunting was an important part of Iroquois culture, especially for men and boys. Hunting provided food, but it was also a source for furs - particularly beaver furs - that could be traded with Europeans. During colonial times, hunting and trapping for furs was very lucrative business for the Iroquois.



Shown here is a Mohawk chief, or sachem.

When a boy was ready for his first hunt in the fall, the men would organize a deer drive. They might travel quite a distance from their village, but this was all part of the excitement for a boy who was about to become a man. On the hunt, a youth would learn to go without food or sleep for long periods of time. He traveled light and might have only pemmican to eat for many days. Pemmican was a kind of jerky made from dried meat, berries, and maple sugar. Once they arrived at their destination, the men built two fences out of branches. Then they set controlled fires in the forest. To escape the fire, the deer ran toward the fences, where they were trapped. There, the hunters were waiting to shoot them and bring back meat and hides for the coming winter.

Another skill an Iroquois boy perfected was fighting. Before colonial times, the Iroquois fought other tribes to show their skills or to avenge a wrong. They made weapons out of what their surroundings offered. Traditionally, these were bows and arrows, stone tomahawks, and wooden warclubs. They also made a kind of armor from wood slats. However, once the English and French came to the Americas, the Iroquois had to update their tactics. Most Iroquois weapons had to be used at close range. Against the guns brought by Europeans, these were no match, so boys spent long hours practicing how to travel soundlessly

through the woods. This stealth allowed them to take their enemies by surprise. The Iroquois became infamous for the ambush technique.

Back at the village, a young girl would learn the skills she would need as a woman. She learned to farm alongside her mother and aunts. Corn was their most important crop. Squash and beans were other main staples. These crops were important because the food they provided needed to last the whole year. Corn, squash, and beans were called the Three Sisters, and girls were taught to respect these “gifts.” Cultivation of the Three Sisters showed how well the Iroquois adapted to their land and made the most of all it had to offer. Corn was not only the primary food source, but the stalks it grew on also supported the climbing bean plants. Squash grew as ground cover and naturally protected against weeds. A young girl would learn how these three crops worked together to help each other grow.

An Iroquois girl also cooked and sewed and tended to the smaller children. The longhouse was the domain of women. The Iroquois called themselves the *Haudenosaunee*, meaning “people who live in longhouses.” Each longhouse was home to several family clans, and each village had several longhouses. The interior of the house was set up like train berths, with sleeping areas along the walls and a corridor down the middle. Each family had its own room with a ledge for sleeping and a shelf for storing food, clay pots, and wooden bowls, which were made by the women.

A girl might learn other skills besides domestic and agricultural ones. Even though the men brought back fish and game from their hunts, the women controlled how the food was divided. A young woman learned to divide the yield fairly among all the families. Food was an important part of the Iroquois economy. Women also had political duties. Even though the chief, called a *sachem*, was male, he was chosen by women. Women also selected a man from each village to represent them at tribal councils. Often in summertime, men from all of the Iroquois nations gathered in a single village. A young girl learned to carefully watch how the selected man voted because women could remove him from the position if he did not do their bidding. Women also controlled marriage and divorce. A young girl learned how to choose the right husband for her future daughters. She also learned that if she wanted a divorce from her husband, she could set his things outside the door of the longhouse.

Although young girls and boys had defined roles that helped to keep village life running smoothly, life was not all work and no play. Boys played lacrosse and competed against teams from other villages. Girls played games with fruit pits

and bowls. Youths could also make music for rituals and ceremonies. The Iroquois had wooden flutes with six finger stops, which they blew from one end. Rattles were made from turtle shells, gourds, or horns with dried corn kernels inside. The Iroquois drum was made of wood and covered with stretched animal skin. Singing and dancing were important to Iroquois life.

Imagine that you lived 300 years ago instead of today. Would you have liked being a young Iroquois?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. Which statement accurately characterizes the Iroquois social structure?
 - A. The tribal chief inherited his title.
 - B. Men were farmers, hunters, or fishers.
 - C. Women controlled economics and politics.
 - D. Young girls were taught to become warriors alongside their brothers.
2. Which statement best describes the confederacy of Iroquois tribes?
 - A. Initially, five tribes joined together as one larger group called the Five Nations.
 - B. Clans made up longhouses, longhouses made up villages, and villages made up tribes.
 - C. The confederacy was made of different groups of Iroquois and Algonquin.
 - D. The confederacy started with five tribes but later became a group of four tribes.
3. Why did Iroquois women consider the “Three Sisters” to be especially significant?
 - A. Yellow and green were revered as holy colors.
 - B. Corn, squash, and beans could all be grown together.
 - C. The Iroquois were vegetarians.
 - D. Tomatoes, peas, and turnips were their main foods.
4. Think about your own childhood and compare it with that of an Iroquois youth. In what ways is your childhood similar to and different from that of an Iroquois boy or girl? Use specific examples from the reading passage to support your answer.