



0145-2134(95)00016-X

PRESCHOOLERS' SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AT DAYCARE CENTERS: AN EPIDEMIOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract—The frequency of sexual behaviors in a population of preschoolers ($n = 251$) attending Swedish daycare centers was studied using a questionnaire given to the staff. Some behaviors turned out to be frequently occurring, like searching for body contact and responding to such contact. However, several behaviors were very uncommon (1% or fewer): touching an adult's genitals; attempting to make the adult touch the child's genitals; using objects against own or other child's genitals/anus; to masturbate obsessively, without pleasure or in a way that caused pain. Other behaviors occurred more frequently but were still uncommon (less than 2% of the children displayed such a behavior "sometimes" or "often/daily"): exhibiting own genitals; playing sexually explorative games; initiating games with a similarity to adult sexual activity; using sexual words; attempting to touch a woman's breast. Only masturbation and clinging body contact were positively correlated with behavioral disturbance. The correlations between age and single behaviors may be summarized as manifestations of the process of socialization. The results offer an incipient frame of reference for statistically normal expected sexual behaviors in preschoolers at daycare centers. The rarity of certain behaviors implies that their occurrence in an individual case may necessitate special clinical attention.

Key Words—Sexual development, Sexual disturbance, Normal sexuality, Sexual abuse.

INTRODUCTION

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT NORMAL sexual behaviors in young children is not only a matter of theoretical interest. It is also an important clinical issue since certain specific sexual behaviors like initiating "advanced" sexual games have been regarded as indicators of sexual abuse and consequently as important observations when evaluating sexual abuse (Lindblad, 1989; Wehrspann, Steinhauer, & Klajner-Diamond, 1987). Many professionals seem to have relied on developmental theories like the psychoanalytical for the identification of abnormal expressions of sexuality in different ages. Although based on empirical experience such theories have rarely been confronted with epidemiological studies concerning sexual behavior. Sometimes case studies have been called for in order to "verify normality." For instance, a behavior like inserting objects into the vagina has been stated as a normal expression of sexuality with

This study was supported by grants from Allmänna Barnhuset (The Public Orphanage) and the National Board of Health and Welfare.

Received for publication November 22, 1993; final revision received April 4, 1994; accepted April 12, 1994.

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reference to case studies (Martinson, 1972). However, case studies only have a minor value as a reference for normality although they may offer important clues.

Not only case studies and clinical experience but also controlled studies support the conclusion that deviant sexual behavior may indicate sexual abuse. Sexually abused victims exhibit more "inappropriate sexual behaviors" than physically abused children and nonabused psychiatrically hospitalized children (Deblinger, McLeer, Atkins, Ralphe, & Foa, 1989). In a study of abused ($n = 22$) and nonabused children with focus on knowledge of sexual matters, the abused children displayed unusual affective responses during the interview (Gordon, Schroeder, & Abrams, 1990). Furthermore, "sex play too much" and "sexual problems" were more often described in abused than in nonabused children (Hibbard & Hartman, 1992).

Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, and Beilke (1991) have assessed frequencies for sexual behaviors, using a questionnaire given to the mothers of 880 2- to 12-year-old children. A wide variety of sexual behaviors was described at relatively high frequencies. However, more aggressive sexual behaviors, behaviors imitative of adults (like putting mouth on sex parts, masturbating with object, inserting objects in vagina/anus, imitating intercourse) and attempts to engage others in sex acts were rare. A decline in overt sexual behavior with age was found. The frequency of sexual behaviors was related to the level of general behavior problems.

Rosenfeld, Bailey, Siegel, and Bailey (1986), found that children not uncommonly touched their parents' genitals on an incidental basis. The children touched fathers' genitals less often than mothers' breasts and/or genitals.

The relationship between sexual behavior and other behavioral symptoms is another area of interest. For instance, to what extent may specific sexual behaviors be part of a behavioral disturbance rather than expressions of abuse?

PURPOSE

1. To develop a questionnaire for observations of sexual behavior in children 2–6 years of age.
2. To investigate frequencies of sexual behavior in children 2–6 years of age observed by the staff at daycare centers.
3. To study correlations between the observed frequencies of sexual behavior and age, gender, and general behavior symptomatology.

METHODS AND POPULATION

The questionnaire. No questionnaire for observation of sexual behavior in preschoolers had been published in any journal familiar to the authors by the time this project started. Thus, it was necessary to construct completely new questions. These were developed from experiences of interviews with the staff at daycare centers. A personal interview with an observer was regarded as the most valid available expression of sexual behavior of a child. Thus, the first version of the questionnaire was given to the staff and was later compared with answers from the same staff about the same children ($n = 50$) given at personal interviews performed by one of the authors (IL). The items then were reconstructed and reformulated in accordance with experiences from this comparison. The second version ($n = 49$) was also compared in the same way with personal interviews of the observers. In this comparison the correlations of single items between questionnaire and interview were between .6 and 1.0 with one exception, "Avoids appearing naked in front of company" (.5).

The different sexual behaviors included in the final version of the questionnaire are listed

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