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A COMPARATIVE SURVEY OF BELIEFS ABOUT “NORMAL” CHILDHOOD SEXUAL BEHAVIORS

MARSHA L. HEIMAN

Private Practice, Metuchen, NJ, USA

SANDRA LEIBLUM

University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Piscataway, NJ, USA

SUSAN COHEN ESQUILIN

University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—New Jersey Medical School, Newark, NJ, USA

LAURA MELENDEZ PALLITTO

University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey—Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Piscataway, NJ, USA

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study sought to collect data on what adults believe constitutes normal childhood sexual behaviors, and how variables, such as role, gender, and life experience might contribute to the formation of one's beliefs.

Methods: A survey describing 20 different scenarios of children under the age of 13 interacting with themselves or other children in a sexual manner was administered to four groups of adults: sexual abuse experts; therapists involved in a sexual abuse training program; medical students attending a human sexuality program; and group facilitators of the human sexuality program.

Results: Behaviors that involved oral, vaginal, or anal penetration were judged by a majority of adults to be abnormal sexual behaviors in children under 13 years of age. Professionals working with sexually abused children rated certain sexual behaviors as more abnormal than adults participating in a human sexuality course. Both sexual abuse trainees and facilitators of the human sexuality course showed more directional biases than other groups, with trainees always rating behaviors in the direction of abnormal and facilitators always rating behaviors in the direction of normal. Females also judged many of the sexual behaviors to be more abnormal than males.

Conclusions: Role and gender significantly influence what adults believe constitutes normal and abnormal childhood sexual behavior. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

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INTRODUCTION

DEFINING THE BOUNDARIES of normal childhood sexual behavior is an ominous task since so much of what is deemed “normal” is determined by the social, cultural, and familial context of the

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Reprint requests should be addressed to Marsha Heiman, Ph.D., 296 Amboy Avenue, Metuchen, NJ 08840.

times. Freud revolutionized the field in the early 1900's, challenging the notion of children as naive and asexual beings with his emphasis on infantile sexuality and psychosexual stages of development. With the explosion of awareness of sexual abuse in the last two decades and increasing awareness of the capacity of young children to behave in sexually aggressive ways, there has been a greater need to delineate the boundaries of normal childhood behaviors.

Literature about children's sexual knowledge, interests, and experiences in relation to their own bodies and in interaction with others remains limited. Some investigators speculate that the paucity of research on childhood sexual behavior when compared to other areas of child development reflects a culture that is profoundly ambivalent about human sexuality (see Frayser 1994, 1993). Even when examining adult sexual behavior, Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata (1994) note that ". . . never before in history has there been such a huge disparity between the open display of eroticism in a society and that society's great reluctance to speak about private sexual practices" (p. 8).

Remnants of a romanticized image of children as innocent and pure, and therefore, devoid of any sexual desires, arousal, or erotic interests remain deeply embedded within the culture and the psyche. Langfeldt (1990) has suggested that due to the diverse beliefs and attitudes around sexuality within society, combined with the lack of markers to guide parents, children are often left to themselves to decipher the parameters of acceptable sexual behaviors. Frayser (1994) further argues that the lack of balanced, comprehensive sex education programs which focus both on positive and pleasurable sexuality, while also teaching responsible sexuality, "reveals a culture at odds with the bulk of evolutionary, developmental, and cross-cultural evidence demonstrating that children are sexual beings, whose exploration of sexual knowledge and play, is an integral part of their development as fully functioning human beings" (p. 210).

Whatever the reason, gathering norms on typical sexual patterns and behaviors at different developmental stages is a methodological challenge, particularly in the older years when many children have been socialized to conceal their sexual activities. In addition, child to child sexual interactions present special dilemmas for determining what is acceptable and normal. Age, size, and power differentials which typically are used by both professionals and the public to identify a particular sexual act as abusive (Finkelhor & Redfield, 1984), may be difficult to define in interactive child sexual play.

Research on Childhood Sexual Behaviors

There have been three major lines of research conducted to study children's sexual behaviors. One approach has been to survey parents (Friedrich, 1990, 1993a, 1995; Friedrich, Gamsch, Boughton, Kuipers, & Beilke, 1991; Friedrich, Gamsch, Damon, Hewitt, Koverola, Lang, Wolfe, & Broughton, 1992) and other caretakers (Lindblad, Gustafsson, Larsson, & Lundin, 1995; Phipps-Yonas, Yonas, Turner, & Kauper, 1993) about their observations of children's sexual activities; a second has been to gather retrospective reports from adults of their memories of early childhood sexual experiences (Haugaard, 1996; Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; Lamb & Coakley, 1993); and a last has been to study children who are brought for treatment due to concerns about their sexual behaviors (Gil & Johnson, 1993; Johnson, 1988, 1993). This literature, albeit incomplete, reveals several consistent findings regarding the level of sexual activity, the type of sexual activity, and the dynamic quality of children's sexual behaviors. First, children are curious about their own and others' body parts, with ". . . younger children having considerable more freedom regarding their bodies, as well as touching of themselves, their peers, and family members" (Phipps-Yonas et al., 1993, p. 1). As children grow, there is a steady decrease in the overall level of observed sexual behavior (Friedrich et al., 1991). Sexually abused children, however, are observed by their caretakers to display significantly more sexualized behaviors when compared to their nonabused peers (Friedrich, 1990,

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