1 Are Children Sexual?

Who, What, Where, When, and How?

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One of the most important criticisms of sex education initiatives, media reports about the sexualization of childhood, and government policies around childhood is that there is a presumption not only that children are inherently innocent, but also that they are not sexual (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Hawkes & Egan, 2008; Robinson, 2013). That is, the presumption of childhood innocence is accompanied by, or supported by, a belief that sexual feelings, thoughts, activities, and preferences are exclusive to adulthood and are not common among, or appropriate for, children. Critics of an approach to childhood that conflates innocence with a lack of sexuality argue that children are indeed sexual, but rarely explain how, or they reduce the way they are sexual to examples of heteronormativity in children's talk of having "boyfriends and girlfriends" or making sexually harassing statements (Renold, 2007; Robinson, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2015). Critics do this in order to make a point about heteronormativity of childhood discourse, and to show how the concept of innocence is used in an anti-LGBT conservative (Fischel, 2016; Robinson, 2013) or a racist agenda (Bernstein, 2010; Fields, 2012). But in so doing, they also reduce children's sexuality to something that seems to have very little to do with sex at all. Finally, those critics who aim to preserve sex and sexuality against protectionist claims almost always focus on adolescents or pre-adolescents (Renold et al., 2015) and thus unwittingly support the idea that children (individuals below the age of 11 or 12 years) are not sexual. They have simply moved the mark between innocence and knowingness down on a chronological developmental timeline, but kept the distinction.

But children are sexual, in almost every way that adults are sexual. One would never say that because children's cognitive capacities are different from adults, that they do not have them or that their cognitive capabilities are only developing. From the perspective of the child, they think, consider, question, and analyze, and the capacities of children at any particular age vary widely. Sexually, children have sexual feelings and desires. They have some sexual knowledge, depending on what they have seen of others, watched on screens, learned from other children, or participated in with others. The vast majority of children do not have sexual intercourse or bring other children to orgasm, thus drawing a distinct line between certain adult behaviors that represent being sexual, but some have found the pleasure of masturbation and some have had experiences in which they have

touched other children and other children have touched them for sexual pleasure. We present this research later in this chapter.

When adults argue that children are innocent asexuals or that children have rights, they may at heart agree on one thing, that children are vulnerable, that children need protection. For the more conservative "childhood innocence" proponents, this is protection from corruption – the corrupting influence of sex. For those who would argue against their innocence, it is a need for protection from those who would deny children their rights to sex and sexuality. Both, are interested in protecting children from potentially exploitative adults, even if they see potential exploitation in different kinds of adults.

In this chapter, we review theories and research about childhood sexuality to affirm that children's sexuality not only exists but is an important organizing aspect of their emotional lives. We argue that children's sexualities may be different but as complex and complete as those of adults. Taking into account children's difference from adults, in terms of development and life experience, we attempt to disentangle innocence and (a)sexuality, and to argue for a resurrection of childhood innocence in the form of vulnerability. This perspective is in tension with an orientation toward childhood that conflates innocence with asexuality.

Surely protecting children from exploitation is a good thing. But Foucault (1978) warned of the growth of institutions to regulate and also of professionals who surveil childhood sexuality, adult experts who have expertise about behavioral norms and the circumstances around which knowledge about sex should be shared with children. As a result of this expert culture, any acknowledgment of children's sexual desires and behaviors is connected to an ideology around normativity and presented within a discourse of risk and prevention.

While advocates for a view of childhood that includes sexuality argue for children's and adolescents' right to a quality sex education and to pursue their preferences and interests, what is left undiscussed is what children do with their sexual feelings, thoughts, relationships, and behaviors. Is it unsavory or does it seem "perverted" to focus on the sexual lives of children except when such talk is medicalized or biologized? Perhaps. But in this chapter, we review some of the literature, from the biological to the sociological, that attempts to understand how and to what extent children are sexual beings, with an ear toward the kinds of discourses that make talking about children and sex permissible.

How do we capture the sexual diversity (diversity in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) inherent to developing children's sexuality? From a postmodern perspective, which contextualizes norms within ideologies and histories of sexualities, how do we also keep the child central in our theorizing? While it is difficult to do research with children themselves on their sexual thoughts, feelings, fantasies, observations, and behaviors, we can look at studies of those who have observed and talked with children. And we can look at what has been deemed problematic in order to figure out the underlying "normal" it opposes.

Before looking at the actual research on childhood sexuality and childhood "abnormal" sexuality, we review theories of childhood sexuality. We then comment

on the methods used to study childhood sexuality before presenting the empirical research. Following the empirical research we present narratives of childhood sexual experiences that speak to both the presence and complexity of childhood sexuality within childhood relationships. We finally look at influences on childhood sexuality, the world around children that shapes the form their sexuality takes. In the end, we hope to preserve the idea of childhood vulnerability but do away with the notion of innocence.

Theories of Childhood Sexuality

The biological perspective of childhood turns to hormones as the drivers of sexual development (Buchanan et al., 1992) and sexual identity (Bailey et al., 2000; Byne, 2007). The longstanding myth of the suddenly sexual adolescent relies on our understanding of the influx of hormones around age 11 or 12 years, which purportedly draws a line between childhood and adult sexuality. If hormones bestow an adult or adult-like sexuality to adolescents, within this theory any childhood sexuality will be seen as abnormal or "just play," "experimentation," and "practice" (Lamb, 2002; 2006).

Freud was interested in the biological aspects of sexuality but connected early sexuality to drives that made certain areas, according to development and an interaction with social and environmental demands, erogenous zones. Freud developed his Theory of Psychosexual Stages (Freud, 1976 [1905]) in which infants cathect various parts of the body connected to their relationships with their parents and others (the mouth when nursing; the anus during toilet training). Within his early Drive Theory, this concept of cathexis was a way to explain that energy from instinctual drives powered that investment in the particular body part for each phase of development. In early Freudian theory, early childhood was a particularly sexual period, as all human beings are born with sexual and aggressive drives to control. And during the development of the ego, the period Freud called "latency," there is a resting place, a time of relief from drives that prepares individuals for puberty and a return of the sexual drive in full force. There have been various critiques and reshapings of this theory, with particular attention to the idea that "latency" may be a way of explaining a period where sexual feelings are not permitted in families and in the culture (Friedrich et al., 1991; Lamb, 2002, 2006; Okami et al., 2002).

The ego psychologists who followed and built on Freudian theory, as well as the interpersonal group, and object relations theorists who also followed Freud all de-emphasized sexuality (Erikson, 1966; Flanagan, 2011). They emphasized the ways cultural context produces differences and relationships. Even more recent child analysts don't fully revive the idea of the sexual child. In their focus on children's development of a sense of self in relationship, any arousal or sexual experience is associated with whatever affect a caregiver bestows on such experiences. That is, sex and sexuality is defined in relationship with the mother. For example, Fonagy

(2008) and Fonagy and Target (2006) note in their observations that mothers ignore a baby's arousal, which may lead to a kind of sexual development in which a child will not understand this experience in relationship or fully integrate it into a self-state.

Another important theory of sexuality, Foucault's, found Freud to be treating sexuality as its own agent, with its own power, independent of whatever institutional power shapes and deploys it (Foucault, 1978). As Dorfman writes, for Foucault "power precedes sexuality" and sexuality is only one instance of power (2010, p. 158). Foucault also criticized psychoanalytic theory for not seeing its own discourse in the service of a regulating force, in its "dividing practice" of separating normal from pathological. Well-known analysts in the 1950s and 1960s saw homosexuality as pathological (Milchman & Rosenberg, 2018).

Foucauldian theory is used by many to understand power, normalization, and a hegemonic construction of childhood (Foucault, 1978). Looking at childhood sexuality in its historical context, Foucault showed how an analysis of discourse about sex, including the psychoanalytic discourse, can reveal ideology, ethics, and norms. Norms regulate what childhood sexuality is and isn't and are a part of a surveillance system that supports the status quo and "truth claims" about childhood sexuality. Discourse reveals ethics and ideology of the time (Foucault, 1978). Sexual pleasure "shorn of disguise" (1980, p. 191), according to Foucault, was one way in which individuals can escape the omnipresent press from institutions that regulate our being.

With regard to children in particular, he was concerned with three kinds of regulatory experiences: the institutions and concomitant discourses that imagine the child as an innocent in need of protection; the medical establishment that defined trauma and predicts harm; and whatever discourses encourage the self-surveillance around sexuality, pleasure, danger, and harm. His view is that childhood is managed – not only by parents but by society – and only pleasure can undo the ways in which sexuality is regulated (Foucault, 1978). In some ways, this conclusion echoes the complaint that ends Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), that society (through the superego), and self (through the ego), will never give permission for pleasure to reign.

Foucauldian discourse theory, which sees the regulation of sexuality implicit in ideologies, discourses, and institutions, doesn't exactly show the mechanism through which norms are internalized. Feminists Firth and Kitzinger (2007) took up Sexual Script Theory, which helps to explain the social construction of sex. It is a social learning theory developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973). Sexual Script Theory sees individuals as learning from observing and presents one view of how children learn what makes up sex, how one is sexual, and what one does when sexual. This kind of theory seems to apply to adolescents and young adults, given that there are no examples of sexual scripts for children in this literature. Guessing how script theory might be applied to childhood, it is possible to see children's play as repeating the adult sexual scripts they pick up through observation (Lamb & Coakley, 1993).

Pleasure and freedom are taken up by the field of anthropology, which has offered a view of childhood sexuality as culturally specific. Margaret Mead's (1961) study of a sexually free society, where the transition to adolescent sexuality is simple and not stormy, raised awareness in the 1960s that the way adolescent sexuality is conceptualized is dependent on culture, authority, power, and fear. Anthropologist Gilbert Herdt (2006) raised questions about gender identity and sexual abuse in his famous study of ritualized oral sex performed by young boys on older adolescents and men in a culture in New Guinea. He discovered that heteronormative masculinity, for that culture, was supported through what they saw as the passing of seed from men to young boys through fellatio. Other anthropologists have discussed the cultural variability around the globe (Janssen, 2002; Martinson, 1994).

Developmental psychologists rely on theories that integrate nature and nurture arguments, but no one theory is used to understand sexual development. Developmentalists look for change over time and thus theoretically are likely to find that childhood sexuality is different from adolescent sexuality, and that these differences are supported culturally and biologically. Developmentalists also tend to look for stages and transitions, although this is a bias of developmental psychologists that Kagan (1984) has written a great deal about.

Methods of Studying Childhood Sexuality

Sexual behavior tends to be carried out in private and thus is difficult to study. This is particularly true of childhood sexual behavior. Do we ask children? Do we ask their parents and teachers? Do we ask adults for their foggy or clear memories of childhood sexual practices? Earlier work Lamb (first author) carried out involved asking adult college students if they recalled a childhood sexual experience with another child, and other scholars have done the same (Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Leitenberg et al., 1989; Okami et al., 1997). Some researchers have surveyed parents and adults who work with children (Fitzpatrick et al., 1995; Friedrich et al., 1998; Thigpen, 2009). Of course, the adults can only report on what they see and what they see misses the stories, feelings, and emotional life that are integral to the sexual experience of a child. These observations by adults are also subject to interpretation. Is what they saw considered sexual or a sexual game to the child participating (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011)? Surveys often focus on sex acts rather than sexual feelings or experiences, adding up how many children were observed undressing together or showing each other their genitals (Haugaard, 1996; Haugaard & Tilly, 1988) which are arguably not sexual acts at all. Retrospective studies by adults are rare and contain biases. In reading narratives of childhood sexual play in games, it is possible to worry that some may have reinterpreted memories of play into memories of abuse and *vice versa* (Lamb, 2002).

Interview studies have explored the meaning of childhood sexual experiences (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011; Tebele, Nel, & Michaelides, 2013). When Lamb interviewed adult women about their own childhood sexual experiences, she tried to ask questions in such a way as to gain a deeper understanding of what could have been sexual. The questions aimed at understanding how the thoughts, feelings, and bodily experiences remembered and experienced at the time helped a person to categorize some experiences as sexual.

Some research on early childhood relies on observations (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011). It is harder for younger children to keep secrets and hide sexual behavior from those responsible for their well-being. But when surveys or observational studies find that sexual behavior declines after the age of 5 or 6 years, the findings are suspicious. There are few ways to find out whether the behavior declines, or if it is done more secretly or shared less with adults.

Are Children Sexual?

In this section we review the empirical studies that examine how children are sexual, beginning with children's sexual interest. Studying sexuality in childhood is difficult, in part, because we don't know what counts as sexuality and to what extent our ideas about sexual innocence inform what we study. Is the sexuality of children different than adults? (Many of these studies appear to be motivated by researchers' desires to understand adult sexuality in its nascent forms.) Do the sexual meanings we attach to certain behaviors have similar meanings for children? (Similar meaning is taken for granted in a number of these.) And what role does our attachment to childhood innocence, as an ideology, play in the development of our research methods and in the analysis of the data?

John Money (1986), using sexual scripts theory, described "love maps" as a way of understanding preferences in childhood. While he claimed that love maps could occur as early as 8 years old, once again, this research is limited by what younger and older children can and will share. Other research was aimed at discovering the roots of same sex or heterosexual attraction and perhaps at arguing for a biological basis, as in the work of Herdt and McClintock (2007). They propose that there are two kinds of puberty. One has to do with the adrenal glands, and occurs between the ages of 6 and 10 years. The second and more familiar puberty has to do with gonad development and changes. Adrenal puberty stabilizes attraction by the age of 10 years. And if one were to look at the sexual preferences, processes, and rites around the world, one would see that the age of 10 years is an important turning point. Other sexual interest researchers appear to point to the same age. For example, one study of 137 males found their first same-sex attraction was between the ages of 9.27 and 10.66 years (Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1993), while another found same-sex attraction beginning around the age of 8 years, although 30 percent recalled this feeling before elementary school (Savin-Williams, 1995).

As noted earlier, sexual behavior is harder to report on, particularly in cultures in which there is presumed childhood innocence, which has come to mean asexuality. Some reports focus on arousal and masturbation. An early report by Kinsey and associates reported orgasms in infants (1953), and this was substantiated by Rutter (1971) almost 20 years later. And the fact that male infants have erections and female infants have vaginal lubrication has been taken as evidence that they may have sexual responsivity (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Martinson, 1976, 1994). But are these responses sexual? To consider these responses to be sexual, however, is quite telling; furthermore, the very limitation of what constitutes physiological sexual response to these two, potentially arbitrary, genital responses betrays a bias with regard to what is meant by "sex." Children masturbate in toddlerhood on through childhood; research supports this finding (Friedrich et al., 1991; Friedrich et al., 1998). Children also try to look at others undressing (Friedrich et al., 1998), although, once again, it seems unclear whether this should "count" as sexual behavior. And this study showed that mothers with more education were more likely to report sexual behaviors and see them as normal. Another study of 2–12-year-old African American children showed similar findings as Friedrich et al. (1998) regarding sexual behavior throughout this age period, but lower levels of masturbation (Thigpen, 2009). This author argued masturbation was also less pronounced in African-American adults. Unlike Friedrich's predominantly white sample, in his sample, the frequency of sexual behavior didn't decline or become more covert over the 10 years studied (Thigpen, 2009).

If a study of childhood sexuality stopped at masturbation, it would indicate a bias against children's capacities for play, pleasure, relationship, and fantasy. Why should those capacities be components of adult sexuality and not childhood sexuality? Few studies, however, look at childhood play and researchers sometimes reduce their definition of sexual play to touching or "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." One study of 233 parents in Ireland found that 36 percent of their sample engaged in sexual play (Fitzpatrick, Deehan, & Jennings, 1995). One study identified sexual experiences between peers in common childhood games played across South African cultures (Tebele, Nel, & Michaelides, 2013). Participants consisted of 16 Zulu individuals who reported sexual experiences situated within the games of *undize* (hide and seek), *icekwa* (touch and run), and *khetha* (choose the one you like). While most of the participants did not disclose how old they were when playing these games, a female participant reported masturbating and touching peers' genitals at the age of 9 years, and a male participant reported that he began touching and kissing girls at the age of 7 years.

Same-sex play and games have been considered by some researchers as signs of early non-heterosexual preferences (Rutter, 1971), while Kinsey et al. (1953) dismissed it as casual. Rutter (1971) also dismissed same-sex play occurs as a "transient phase" or an isolated event in 1 of 4 children.

Some researchers choose to talk to children rather than survey the adults around them. In her study of 377 urban children aged 6–12, Pluhar et al. (2005 as cited in Pluhar, 2007) found that 17 percent of the children surveyed had played games that

involved boys and girls hugging or kissing each other. Of 11–12 year olds, she found that 10 percent had "made out," 6 percent had touched a boy's penis, and 5 percent had touched a girl's vagina.

Other researchers ask adults to look back and tell us about their childhood sexual experiences. Haugaard's (1996) sample of 600 undergraduates completed a survey showing that 59 percent of them had at least one sexual experience with another child during childhood. Of these, 38 percent of these were before age seven, 39 percent between the ages of seven and ten, and 35 percent during ages eleven and twelve.

Focus groups of children have proved to be a useful method of observing what children know about sex and how they formulate this sexual knowledge (Davies & Robinson, 2010; Robinson & Davies, 2015). Researchers have initiated discussions with children using media images from sources such as magazines and children's storybooks that depict cultural representations of gender, love, kissing, marriage, and family (Davies & Robinson, 2010; Robinson & Davies, 2014). Even in a group of children as young as 3–5 years old, children attempted to collaborate with peers to fill in knowledge gaps about sexuality and continued to independently assemble fragmented information into coherent narratives, with the resulting narratives often based in myth or partial truths (Davies & Robinson, 2010). The children's discussion also revealed that parents were often inaccurate in assessing their children's broad sexual understanding, sometimes by overestimating a child's ability to interpret relationships (e.g., misidentifying gay partners as friends), but more often by underestimating the amount of sexual knowledge that their child has gleaned from peers and media (Davies & Robinson, 2010).

This author, in Lamb and Coakley (1993) asked 128 undergraduate women specifically about different kinds of sexual play. In their study, 85 percent had played some sexual game in childhood and a quarter of these had shown their genitals to another child, 15 percent had touched another child's genitals while clothed, 17 percent while unclothed, 6 percent had used some object around the genitals in their play, and 4 percent had engaged in mouth-genital contact. The authors also asked about bullying (persuasion, manipulation, and coercion) and found that for these women, cross-gender play was more likely to involve persuasion, manipulation, and/or coercion.

As there is coercion and bullying in other kinds of children's play, one could expect there would also be some in sexual play. In one study of undergraduates' recollections, it was found that when there was coercion, predictably, the sexual play experience was less positive. But these findings also revealed that the kind of sex involved had little to do with how pleasurable or positive the experience was. If an experience involved genitals, it was neither more nor less positive, and thus the atmosphere of the play and, perhaps, the mutuality of it, was most related to how positive an experience it was (Haugaard & Tilly, 1988). And with regard to sexual play and games affecting long-term sexual adjustment, no correlation has been found (Leitenberg et al., 1989; Okami et al., 1997).

Research is thus particularly difficult with children, given we don't know what really counts as sexuality and use our adult perspectives and limited observations to

make decisions about what to include and what not to include. We do not know if the sexual meanings we attach to certain behaviors have similar meanings for children nor what role our beliefs about childhood innocence, as an ideology, play in the development of our methods or in the analysis of data.

Sexual Stories from Childhood

Given the difficulties of empirically studying childhood sexuality, some researchers have collected narratives from adults about their childhood sexual experiences. More than a decade ago Lamb interviewed more than 100 women about their sexual experiences and sexual play and game experiences in childhood. These ranged from "chase and kiss," "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," and "playing doctor," games that individual women interviewed considered "normal," to games concerning Barbie dolls and games that mimicked adult experiences like playing "house," "school" with a sexual twist, going to a nightclub, or even pretending to be prostitutes. Individual women interviewed had a range of feelings about these games. Most of the stories of sexual play were with other girls, which troubled some adult heterosexual women; some recall couching same-sex play in heterosexual narratives, "You be the boy and I'll be the girl."

One of the important findings of this set of interviews was that the type of play seemed unrelated to the amount of guilt a woman held about that play at the time, when she was a girl, or later as an adult. That is, what many would consider an innocent story (e.g., of kissing) and what many would consider a more sexual story (e.g., involving genitals) seemed not to be related to how much guilt the woman expressed. The stories also revealed that children had sexual feelings of arousal – feelings that researchers had been wary to discuss or track earlier. For example, one woman described the "thrill" when she and a cousin slept together, pulled up their nightgowns, and touched bottom to bottom (butt to butt). Another woman recalled laying down on the floor, pretending to be a glamorous dead woman clad in a slip, an image she had seen appearing in her grandfather's detective magazines. When her cousins, playing at being detectives, entered a room to find her lying dead there, she reported being overcome with sexual feelings. In the interviews, participants conveyed sexual feelings through the following kinds of remarks: "We did wondrous things with her," "It was very thrilling," "It was titillating and fun . . . it was a feeling," and "It was very, you know, intoxicating . . . very arousing" (Lamb, 2004, p. 378). Some simply remarked, "I think I got sexually excited" (Lamb, 2004, p. 378).

Who could deny these feelings as sexual experiences of childhood even though what many adults call sex was clearly absent? The adult women also appeared confused about whether these experiences were sexual or "just play"; however, when any arousal was involved, they tended to worry that what they experienced was sex and that it was more adult-like with the presumption that children shouldn't feel those feelings.

I analyzed the feelings of guilt that many individuals spoke about in the interviews. Women seemed more likely to express guilt if there was arousal during the game, calling arousal "adult-like" or "more like a boy." Girls who experienced arousal saw themselves as quite different from other girls, stating the belief that girls were not supposed to be sexual or so actively sexual. They used words like "very bizarre" and made statements like, "I was a girl and I shouldn't want that." When a girl was more assertive in the play she would especially see herself as strange or male.

Outside of my research on the stories of childhood sexual play and games, very few researchers have looked at the nature of childhood sexual experiences with other children. One exception is Tebele et al. who also collected adults' recountings of childhood sexual games played with peers (Tebele et al., 2013) in the broader examination of early childhood sexual experiences. They found that adults reported experiences of kissing and touching as young as 7–9 years old. Of course, the age at which anything is remembered to have occurred is subject to distortions of memory and, in fact, difference in memory abilities at different ages.

There are few narratives of boys' sexual play and games. If boys are studied, it has been in the context of exploring histories of those who have gotten in trouble for sexual acting out (Flanagan, 2010) or are interested in hegemonic masculinity as it is expressed in boyhood (Cohan, 2009). Emma Renold examined how boys aged 10–11 years "performed" masculine sexuality at school and noted the way they publicize heterosexual relationships, harass girls, and talk publicly about sex (Renold, 2007). But these studies about boys appear to focus more on the way boys perform their gender roles rather than on their experience of sexuality as children.

Special Topics Relating to Childhood Sexual Development

Parental Influence on Development of Sexuality

While it is often assumed that peers have a great deal of influence on children's sexuality, it is important to explore parents and family members as well (Martin et al., 2007). Some scholars research parental communication (DiIorio et al., 2003; Grossman et al., 2016); however, few have explored sibling influence.

Studies indicate that many Americans believe parents ought to be the primary educators of children around sexuality (Pluhar et al., 2006), but parents do not tend to communicate with younger children, perhaps because they have been influenced by the notion of childhood innocence (DiIorio et al., 2003; Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2011; Pluhar et al., 2008). When children reach middle-school ages, parents begin to communicate more (Byers et al., 2008). And those who have more liberal views toward sex education are likely to discuss topics in greater depth than those who do not (Byers et al., 2008). Those who became parents earlier in life are also more likely to communicate with their children about sex and to involve