

SEXUALITY IN CHILDHOOD

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How does one know what is normative sexual development in childhood? Although Freud (1905/1975) boldly discussed the normative sexual lives of children, at least in terms of their unconscious lives, few following Freud have developed a theory of normative sexual development. Many scholars and sexuality educators have proclaimed that people are sexual from birth on, but because it is difficult to do research with children regarding their sexual thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, researchers rely on retrospective reports by older individuals as well as on observations by adults. Quite a bit of attention has been paid to children's sexuality via clinical reports and concerns regarding children who have been sexually abused. The emphasis has been on distinguishing normative play from sexual acting out. However, understanding children's normative sexual development from this vantage point ~~has its problems.~~

In this chapter, I review the evidence on childhood sexuality after first discussing theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. I write from a postmodern perspective that contextualizes norms within ideologies and histories of sexuality, and so at the same time as I examine the research, I sometimes question the ways in which these norms have been established and suggest that they are fluid, even when presented as biological givens. I also write from a clinical perspective with regard to disordered and problematic behavior in hopes that this chapter will be of help to clinicians as well as scholars. The effects of early sexualization through victimization, marketing, and media are also a part

of this discussion of what is normative or expected within changing historical and cultural contexts.

THEORIES OF CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY

Freud was one of the first to write that people were born sexual creatures. Early on in his career, he made the discovery that childhood sexuality was connected to early sexual abuse experiences but, as Masson (1988) wrote, in response to enormous criticism from colleagues, exchanged this theory for one in which the unconscious rather than experience played the most important role. In conjunction with what has come to be called *drive theory* (explaining instinctual sexual energy and the drive to release it), Freud (1905/1975) developed his theory of psychosexual stages. According to this theory, infants cathect to (invest libido in) various objects (actually, body parts) as they develop, first to the breast whereby sucking becomes the sexual act by which libido is discharged. Children develop through stages labeled *oral*, *anal*, *phallic*, *oedipal*, *latency*, and *genital*. In each of the first three stages, a different part of the body becomes the focus of sexual pleasure as well as release. Both the phallic phase (when the child's focus becomes the phallus) and the oedipal phase (when the child's focus becomes sexual feelings for the other-sex parent) have met with criticism with regard to their privileging of the penis, and this criticism has come from within psychoanalytic theory as well as from ~~without.~~ The theory has also been criticized for its heterosexist bias. Those who do research on childhood sexuality

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have also questioned the existence of a latency period whereby sexual drives, according to Freud, go underground (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991; Lamb, 2002, 2006; Okami, Weisner, & Olmstead, 2002). These theorists have suggested that these sexual impulses and behaviors go underground to the extent that they are hidden from parents and the culture but that they continue.

Although Freud's (1905/1975) theory of sexual development has been widely criticized, his emphasis on sexual feelings, whether conscious or unconscious, was remarkable and brave. Ego psychologists such as Erik Erikson and object relations theorists such as Klein, Winnicott, and Fairbairn went on to deemphasize the sexual nature of these phases (Erikson, 1966; L. M. Flanagan, 2011). Erikson (1966) contextualized the stages of psychosexual development in their cultural context as expressions of crises in interpersonal growth throughout life. The object relations theorists emphasized the importance of attachment to a primary caregiver and the internalization of that relationship as a foundation for all future relationships, including sexual ones. Thus, although theories of interpersonal, relational, and intersubjective interactions arose from the work that followed Freud, something was lost in leaving behind a picture of the infant and child grappling with actual sexual feelings and thoughts, whether conscious or unconscious. That is, in focusing on the relationship, the idea of the child as a sexual being was no longer explored until recently, when Fonagy (2008) took up the charge. Object relations (psychoanalytic) theorists, Fonagy (2008) and Fonagy and Target (2006) described children's development of a sense of self through the ability to infer states of mind in themselves and in others. Representations of internal experiences such as arousal or sexual experiences become associated with certain affects on the basis of how a child's primary caregiver reflects or mirrors these experiences back to him or her. In Fonagy and Target's research, mothers reported that the way they responded to a baby's sexual arousal was to look away or ignore it. If a baby cannot find him- or herself in the other, the baby will not be able to control or understand his or her self states. This, Fonagy and Target warned, may intensify sexual arousal rather than help a child to

manage it and may interfere with a child's ownership of these feelings, thereby making a state of arousal feel incongruent or alien.

Although Foucault's (1978) approach to sexuality is far too complex to explain in one or two paragraphs, this perspective is important to include for its emphasis on examining childhood sexuality in its historical context and exploring the ways in which discourse reveals ethics and ideology of the time. Foucault was interested in how repression is expressed and represented through discourse and how sexual pleasure manages to move people beyond repressive labels and practices. He described the medical and psychiatric establishment as regulating child sexuality as it does adult sexuality in order to predict damage and trauma, to support certain institutions as regulators, and to encourage self-surveillance in ways that confirm the power of these institutions. With regard to children, Foucault stated that the child is imagined as one who needs to be protected, setting up three intertwined groups: children as the innocents, psychiatrists as the establishment that defines trauma and harm, and dangerous adults who abuse children. For Foucault, pleasure was the only way out of this situation because pleasure undoes and undermines the regulated ways in which sex is permitted. In short, Foucault makes one think about how childhood sexuality is managed and what ideologies and discourse influence how it is viewed.

Theories that arose out of feminism, queer studies, and theories of gender tend to be postmodern. Fine (1988) translated Foucauldian analysis into a feminist analysis of discourse in sex education as it pertains to adolescent girls' development. Queer theory is concerned with the production of heteronormative identities (Rasmussen, 2006) by controlling discourses. Both Fine (1988) and Rasmussen (2006) argued that the discourse that surrounds sexuality controls who can be sexual and in what ways, marginalizing some forms of sexuality for various groups (e.g., adolescent girls or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths).

Sexual script theory (Gagnon & Simon, 1973) is somewhat of a social learning theory that focuses on adults' sexual behavior and argues that individuals develop scripts for normative sexual behavior

through observation and participation in culture. This theory is also supported by feminists who are social constructionists (Firth & Kitzinger, 2007). Relating this theory to childhood, one would argue either that children's scripts for sexual behavior are nonexistent or that their play involves practice of adult sexual scripts.

It is good to note that there are a few other "big" theories seeking to explain childhood sexuality that emphasize experience and culture, although anthropological studies have for some time contributed to an understanding of sexuality that is culture specific. Margaret Mead's (1961) early study marshaled a new way of questioning sexual development that took into account context and its relation to other cultural practices. She showed that the view of adolescence as stormy and sexually problematic did not exist in Samoa, where freedom for experimentation and a healthy attitude toward bodies and sex influenced a different kind of adolescence for girls growing up there in the 1940s. She wrote that among the Dobuans, "where the sex life of girls begins long before puberty, there is no initiation into tribal life and there is no cultural fear of menstruation. Among these people adolescence goes unremarked" (Mead, 1947, p. 7). Herdt's (1981, 1982) famous study of the ritualized homosexuality of boys in a culture in Papua New Guinea introduced the idea that people's perceptions of sexual orientation and of child sexual abuse are culturally and historically situated. In this culture, he found that masculinity, rather than homosexuality, was supported through the passing of the seed from men to young boys through fellatio.

There are collections of ethnographies that include childhood experiences and parenting practices that speak to the great cultural variety in sexual development and education around the globe (e.g., Martinson, 1994). A quick perusal of the many examples Janssen (2002) surveyed from the scholarly literature shows that masturbation of infants and children is common in some cultures for pleasure and ~~for~~ amusement and that sexual play is often permitted until a certain age or a certain ritual, for example, among the Zuni when boys get on top of girls and mimic adult intercourse.

Developmental theories tend to integrate biology and culture, nature and nurture; however, no one

developmental perspective is used today to explain sexual development. Developmentalists generally look for the presence of certain behaviors and then for indications of change over time, whether in stages or gradually. They do not tend to question, as social constructionists do, why certain behaviors are considered sexual but not others. A common expectation is that biology provides the groundwork for sexual development, which culture then tweaks (e.g., Segal, Weisfeld, & Weisfeld, 1997). Thus, researchers look for the presence of hormones as well as for initial signs of activities and feelings associated with sex and sexuality. One focus of the developmental perspective is to look for the earliest showing of a sexual behavior. Another is to examine the sexual activity specific to a certain age group or developmental group, a grouping that would be considered established by biology, schooling, or traits that have some biological basis.

The biological perspective on childhood sexuality holds that biology and hormonal development are the driving forces behind sexual development (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992) and sexual identity (Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Byne, 2007; Weisfeld, 1999). Indeed, in Western societies, many ascribe to the belief that children are asexual and become sexual with the influx of hormones around age 12 (as can be seen by the absence of childhood sexuality sections in most major developmental textbooks, e.g., Belsky, 2010; Berger, 2010). Although hormones contribute to sexual changes in childhood and to the transition from childhood to adolescence, this narrow view of sexual drives, interests, thoughts, and feelings serves to reduce childhood sexual experiences, dismissing them as "just play," "experimentation," and "practice" (Lamb, 2002, 2006).

METHODS OF STUDYING CHILDHOOD SEXUALITY

Childhood sexuality is often studied as a gateway to adolescent sexuality (Martin, Luke, & Verduzco-Baker, 2007), but it deserves attention in its own right no matter how difficult it may be to obtain data in this area. Many sexual behaviors, at least in Western societies, are carried out in private and therefore

difficult to study in standard ways. Attempts at quantitative work in this area have been reduced to (a) tabulating numbers of adults who remember and are willing to report their sexual activities as children (Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Leitenberg, Greenwald, & Tarran, 1989; Okami, Olmstead, & Abramson, 1997) and (b) describing observations by adults who have observed sexual behaviors in children (Fitzpatrick, Deehan, & Jennings, 1995; Freidrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston, & Shafran, 1998; Thigpen, 2009). It goes without saying that the latter approach in particular provides, at best, a limited way of understanding what sexual behaviors exist in childhood and how those behaviors are exhibited. Instead, these types of studies inventory the kinds of sexual behaviors adults observe and are biased to the extent that adults need not only to see these behaviors to report them but also to recognize them as sexual, which is a subjective determination (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011). Thus, the wording of questionnaires with regard to individual sexual behaviors does not always distinguish acts performed with sexual intention from acts that do not, for example, “undressing together” or “showing genitals” (Haugaard, 1996, p. 84) and “hugging and kissing” (Haugaard & Tilly, 1988, p. 215).

Although quantitative retrospective reports by adults are few, those that exist have lent credence to the belief that sexual behaviors occur throughout childhood, including middle childhood, the time psychoanalysts refer to as *latency*. Retrospective reports bear their own biases with regard to what is remembered, what is reported if remembered, and what is classified as sexual (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011). Worries about sexual abuse of children as well as postchildhood experiences may lead adults to reinterpret memories of mutual play as abusive experiences (Lamb, 2002). At the same time, abusive experiences might also be remembered fondly as early sexual play and games because they were experienced that way or because they were reenvisioned as a means of coping with abuse (Lamb, 2002).

Qualitative research, generally consisting of interviews, enables researchers and clinicians to explore the meaning of childhood sexual games with individuals who report them and potentially offer insight into an individual’s sexual experience at the

time, ~~although always~~ through the distorted lens of memory, and ~~his or her~~ current conceptualization of the experience (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011). Qualitative questions aimed at understanding the thinking, feeling, and bodily responses of a child help to conceptualize and categorize such experiences as sexual while at the same time addressing what *sexual* means to people of different ages. Qualitative research can also help to define the wide (or narrow) range of sexual behaviors in childhood. As a starting point for such research, interviewing adults about their memories can establish what might have counted as sexual when the behavior occurred and what adults are now retrospectively counting as sexual behavior (Lamb, 2002).

Observations are another form of qualitative data (Kaesler, DiSalvo, & Moglia, 2000). Although they, as do survey data involving parents and teachers, limit findings to what is indeed observable, observations are still valuable (de Graaf & Rademakers, 2011). For younger children, observational reporting might be very helpful given that it is harder for them to keep secrets and hide their activities from the watchful eyes of those responsible for their well-being (e.g., preschool teachers observing sexual behavior). One quantitative study, however, did directly ask children about sexuality (Pluhar, DiIorio, Jennings, & Pines, 2005). Yet any account that says that sexual behavior declines after age 5 or 6 warrants suspicion; researchers should reinterpret such accounts to mean that sexual behavior is no longer observable after age 5 or 6.

ARE CHILDREN SEXUAL?

Research on the sexual behavior of children falls into three categories: (a) research that examines sexual interest of children, which usually attempts to trace the origins of certain adult preferences and practices; (b) research that reduces sexuality to acts such as masturbation or touching another child’s genitals and aims to determine the presence and frequency of these acts; and (c) research that explores the narratives of childhood sexual experience primarily through memories. Although the first two foci are interesting, they tend to answer one or two questions to which many scholars already know the

answers and so become primarily a project of documentation, ~~one~~ in which first times, numbers, and beginnings assume priority: Do children participate in sexual activity? If so, what kind? Some of these quantitative researchers also examine the extent to which childhood sexual experience influences adult experience. Research that explores the stories and memories of childhood sexuality aims to answer questions concerning how children are sexual and the meaning of their sexual practices.

Sexual Interest of Children

The research that examines the sexual interest of children appears to focus not on what makes children sexual but on the ages at which they begin to show sexual interest. This kind of research seems motivated by a desire to learn about what leads to adult preferences rather than about childhood sexuality in and of itself. John Money (1986) created a theory of the development of sexual arousal in which he described “love maps.” Working within a sexual scripts model, he defined *love maps* as schemas for preferred sexual objects and behaviors. His research indicated that the formation of love maps can occur as early as age 8.

Herd and McClintock (2007) hypothesized that the advent of adrenal puberty, which occurs between the ages of 6 and 10, as opposed to gonadal puberty, which begins around the age of 11, is a source of adolescent sexual subjectivity, that is, the feelings, thoughts, and awareness of their own and others’ sexuality, including feelings of attraction. They argued that attraction becomes stable and memorable around the age of 10 and that if one were to consult cross-cultural child development sources, one would see a much greater range and diversity of sexual development than observed in Western cultures. They supported this observation through data from a variety of cultures showing the age of 10 as an important age for puberty rites, sexualizing processes, and other indications that a child is newly perceived as a sexual person. Middle childhood is not a time of latency (as research reported in the next section has also confirmed) but a time in which psychophysiological arousal (including erotic feelings) produces “memorable and stable sexual attraction” (Herd & McClintock, 2007, p. 184).

Those researchers who explore childhood sexual interest seem to be interested most frequently in the determination of heterosexual or homosexual (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) feelings. One study (Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1993) examined reports from 137 men regarding their first homosexual attraction, which was identified as falling between the ages of 9.27 and 10.66 years. Savin-Williams (1995) found that gay and bisexual adults reported feeling same-sex attraction at an average age of 8, although 30% recalled this feeling before elementary school (18% after puberty). Thus, the age range is very wide.

Although analyses of the sexual interests of children are rich in theory but lacking in data, there seems to be some agreement that sexual attraction begins before adolescence. Although anthropologists Herdt and McClintock (2007) focused on the age of 10, it seems important to remember that gay and bisexual adults have offered memories of sexual attraction that come before elementary school. Whether these memories exist in heterosexual adults remains a question for research.

Sexual Behaviors of Children

As noted earlier, a significant portion of childhood sexuality research has focused on establishing the presence of sexual behaviors in childhood and then subsequently determining the frequency of these behaviors. Within this model, very little research has been done on childhood masturbation. Although de Graaf and Rademakers (2006) suggested that this paucity may be partly due to ingrained societal perceptions of childhood innocence and parental discomfort with childhood sexuality, it may also be explained by the fact that observing masturbation in children is difficult after they ~~attain~~ a certain age. When a child is young, researchers must rely on parental observation and interpretation of any act concerning touching the genitals as a form of masturbation.

Research on masturbation. Reports and research about sexual responsivity and masturbation have tended to define sex narrowly—as having to do with genitals, arousal, and, ultimately, orgasm. For example, Kinsey et al. (1953) reported orgasms in

children as young as 7 months, and Rutter (1971) observed “orgasmic-like” responses in male infants as young as 5 months. In addition, infants seem to be born with the capacity for a physiological sexual response in the form of erections in male infants and vaginal lubrication in female infants (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Martinson, 1976, 1994). 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.

Perhaps more sexual than simple physiological responses, masturbation has been seen as an indication of early sexuality. Martinson (1994) reported adultlike masturbation in children as young as 2.5 years in both sexes. Although unable to estimate incidence, Kinsey et al. (1953) reported masturbation in female infants and girls ages 3 years and younger, with 23 observations of completed orgasm and one observation of masturbation in a 7-month-old. In presenting their survey research of parents and professionals, Friedrich et al. (1991) and Friedrich, Fisher, Broughton, Houston, and Shafran (1998) indicated that children of both genders normally touch themselves on their genitals between the ages of 2 and 9. In their review of literature on normal childhood sexuality, de Graaf and Rademakers (2006) cited Galenson’s (1990) observations of sexual arousal in infants ages 15 to 19 months, which included flushing, quick breathing, and sweating. Brenot and Broussin (1996) observed that self-touch may occur even earlier, in utero.

Research on children’s sexual behaviors with other children. Beyond studying arousal and masturbation, a number of researchers have examined other kinds of sexual behaviors in which children engage, albeit always using adults as reporters. In an early study, Friedrich et al. (1991) researched common sexual behaviors among 7- to 12-year-olds, those children presumed to be in latency. What was discovered, through surveying adults, was that sexuality during this age period was expressed through words, looking at nude pictures, trying to look at people undressing, and kissing nonfamily adults. In a later, very large study involving 1,114 children

screened and rated by caregivers, Friedrich et al. (1998) found that sexual behaviors peaked at the age of 5 before dropping off. This finding is not surprising given that the assessment was of observable behaviors and in light of the fact that children between the ages of 5 and 8 become more interested in privacy (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Friedrich et al. (1998) also noted that the most common behaviors reported were touching one’s own body parts at home or trying to watch others undress. Again, these limited findings seem all too expected when one considers that the results come from asking caregivers for their observations. Rather than ~~considering~~ these the most commonly performed behaviors of young children, researchers should ~~consider~~ these the most commonly observed sexual acts. Friedrich et al. also found that mothers with more education reported more sexual behavior in their children and were more likely to believe that sexual behavior is normal. Again, it is not surprising that mothers who find sexual behavior to be normal are more willing to interpret what they see in their children as sexual and also report it to others.

Because many existing studies in this area have focused on predominantly White samples, Thigpen (2009) surveyed caregivers of 2- to 12-year-old African Americans to expand approaches to this question. Although the African American children were reported to engage in sexual behavior, their sexual behavior was not pronounced or elevated. Thigpen’s findings were similar to those of Friedrich et al. (1998), but Thigpen encountered a lower level of reported masturbatory behavior that he argued might stem from lower levels of masturbation among African American adults. He also found that the frequency of sexual behavior did not decline or become covert when children approached adolescence, which may be because African American children begin sexual maturation earlier than White children.

Other studies have inquired about the sexual behavior adults ~~may~~ have observed in children or about adult opinions regarding the sexual behavior of children. Sexual play with other children was reported by 36% of one sample of 233 parents in Ireland (Fitzpatrick et al., 1995). In research that surveyed teachers of 5- to 7-year-olds, Kaeser et al.

(2000) found that teachers observed verbal comments about sex and students attempting to touch or touching other students' genitals, butts, or breasts. Haugaard (1996) asked social workers and doctoral-level psychotherapists about the acceptability of various sexual acts between 4-year-old children and between 8-year-old children. Professionals found most acts acceptable for 4-year-olds (kissing, undressing together), ~~but not~~ touching another child's genitals. With regard to 8-year-olds, 40% of the female professionals ~~still~~ thought it was acceptable for two 8-year-olds to show each other their genitals, whereas only 25% of male professionals thought this. With regard to touching, 16% of female and 6% of male professionals thought this behavior was acceptable.

Some studies have arrived at questionable conclusions because of insufficient skepticism regarding survey data. For example, Rutter (1971), relying solely on caregiver reports, stated that children's interest in genitals increases between ages 2 and 5 and decreases between ages 6 and 12, when it then increases again. Today, one can guess, as was noted earlier, that the reported decrease may have more to do with what is observable than with what is true. He also observed that same-sex play occurs as a transient phase or isolated event in one of four children. Once again, looking back, researchers might now argue that same-sex play necessitated greater hiding or discretion because of homophobic concerns about same-sex sexual attraction (Lamb, 2006). Rutter (1971) and Kinsey et al. (1953) dismissed same-sex sexual play as transient, in the case of Rutter, or "casual and fruitless" (Kinsey et al., 1948, as cited in Martinson, 1994, p. 58), presumably because it did not relate to adult sexuality or had little to do with heterosexual development. As I describe in the next section, many of the imaginative games female children play with each other have a heterosexual storyline and so simultaneously promote and reflect same-sex and heterosexual practice and interest.

Pluhar et al. (2005, as cited in Pluhar, 2007), as noted earlier, ~~directly asked children themselves~~ about sexual behaviors. Of course, asking children may not be any more reliable a method than asking adults what they have observed. Given the cultural

taboos regarding sexual play in childhood, many would most likely deny this sort of play or report only the most minimal of experiences. In ~~his~~ study of 377 urban children ages 6 to 12, 17% of the children surveyed had played games that involved boys and girls hugging or kissing each other; of 11- to 12-year-olds, 10% had "made out," 6% had touched a boy's penis, and 5% had touched a girl's vagina.

Taken together, this kind of research indicates a common interest in what children do, an interest that ~~can~~ be fully explored ~~neither~~ by surveying adults or ~~even~~ by interviewing children. Yet having a few of these studies indicates what falls within the realm of possibility for children of all ages. The research by Pluhar et al. (2005) suggests that children exhibit sexual interest and participate in acts that are considered sexual, although touching someone's penis or vagina is considered part of a problematic sexual category.

Retrospective research on children's sexual behavior with other children.

Haugaard (1996) asked more than 600 undergraduates to complete a survey regarding sexual experiences in childhood, and 59% of undergraduates recalled at least one sexual experience with another child (recall, however, that "undressing together" was counted as a sexual experience). He found that 38% reported a sexual experience before age 7, 39% between the ages of 7 and 10, and 35% at ages 11 and 12. More men than women reported at least one experience between the ages of 7 and 12. In another retrospective study with more than 1,000 undergraduates, also counting hugging and kissing as sexual encounters, he found that 42% remembered at least one.

Lamb and Coakley (1993) also used retrospective reporting to identify percentages of types of child sexual interpersonal behaviors. In their study of 128 undergraduate women, 85% had played some sexual game in childhood, a notably higher percentage than that obtained by ~~those~~ researchers who queried parents or teachers. In this study, about one quarter of participants had shown their genitals to another child; 15% had touched another child's genitals while clothed; 17% had touched another child's genitals while unclothed; 6% had used some object around the genitals in their play; and 4% had

engaged in mouth–genital contact. Within their sample, cross-gender play was more likely to involve persuasion, manipulation, or coercion.

Beyond what children do and ~~with what~~ frequency they do it, one additional question in which empirical researchers have expressed interest concerns the effects of such play; ~~that is,~~ what the responses are of children who engage in such play and whether the play or sexual behavior in which children engage has some effect on adult development or, more specifically, adult sexuality. In a survey of more than 1,000 undergraduates, Haugaard and Tilly (1988) examined positive and negative responses to sexual encounters with other children in childhood. Most of the experiences reported were heterosexual. As expected, those who experienced coercion reported less positive experiences. Those who played with friends or relatives viewed their sexual encounters as more positive. The type of sexual act involved in the encounter (e.g., sexual kissing, exposing of genitalia, fondling, oral sex, intercourse) was not, interestingly, associated with the response. That is, sexual encounters that involved genitals were not experienced as more or less positive than those that did not. The authors concluded that more than the extent of the sexual experience, the atmosphere surrounding the sexual experience was what had the greatest influence on the overall response to it.

With regard to effects in adulthood, Okami et al. (1997) found that having had a sexual experience with another child between the ages of 3 and 6 had no relation to long-term adjustment. Leitenberg, Detzer, and Srebnik (1993) asked college students to report on their masturbation experiences in childhood and adolescence. Having masturbation experiences was not related to adult sexual adjustment examined through measures of sexual functioning, sexual satisfaction, and frequency of sexual difficulties. Leitenberg et al. (1989) asked college students about their sexual activity with other children before age 13. Having sexual activity with other children during childhood appears to have little relation to later sexual behavior and adjustment. Okami et al. suggested that it may be futile to look at long-term effects and that researchers instead need to focus on the interaction between peers and the contexts in

which they occur. Leitenberg et al. (1989) suggested that the mere absence or presence of sexual experience is too broad a category to show demonstrable impact, and future studies might investigate specific types of activity in this regard.

Sexual stories from childhood. The beauty of gathering stories from adults about their sexual experiences as children is that narratives provide not only a richer depiction of what occurred and in what context, but also provide insight into the affect and meaning of such events. As Lamb (2002) noted in her study of more than 100 women who were asked to look back on their sexual experiences and sexual play and games in childhood, the type of sexual behavior engaged in had very little to do with the affect associated with it. Although adults may differentiate between lesser and more serious sexual acts, a child, it appears, can feel every bit as guilty and stressed about something an adult might consider minor and feel positive and casual about something an adult might feel is fairly adult and substantially sexual. Of note in the examples in Lamb's book are those women who reported feeling a sexual thrill when simply touching bottom to bottom (butt to butt) at a sleepover and another woman who as a child simply laid down on the floor and pretended to be a glamorous dead woman clad in a slip in a story about detectives who entered a room to find a murdered woman. The "thrill" came when the detectives would say, "Isn't she beautiful?" Sexual feelings were conveyed by participants 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 even remarked, "I think I got sexually excited" (Lamb, 2004, p. 378).

To the extent that some of these games were not sexual by standards used by survey researchers to identify sexual behaviors and events, they demonstrate that what is considered sexual is highly fluid. These experiences are also a reminder of how narrow the definition of sexual is when it focuses on genital involvement, contributing to a cultural division between childhood sex and adult sex. Adult sex would purportedly involve more direct genital

contact and nonimaginative interactions, not play or practice sex, but real sex. This theme of what was real and not real about the sex was something with which Lamb's (2002) participants had difficulty as well, tending to define play that had some arousal component to it as more real and adultlike.

Lamb (2002) categorized the sexual play of girls into themes. There were the "chase and kiss," "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," and "playing doctor" games, all of which are considered normative in childhood in that a public discourse about such games exists. However, the intensity of the feelings while playing these games, the seriousness of the games, the level of genital involvement, and the guilt feelings varied among girls. There were also games concerning Barbie dolls, games that mimicked adult experiences such as playing house or school with a sexual twist, going to a nightclub, or even pretending to be prostitutes.

The majority of the sexual play and games that Lamb's (2002, 2004) participants reported involved members of the same sex. Earlier research suggested that cross-sex games may involve more coercion and bullying (Lamb & Coakley, 1993). Lamb conjectured that the games she reported were likely same sex because in the United States today, children are sex segregated in their play after about the age of 6. Moreover, girls' friendships are known to have many intimate qualities (Rose, 1995). Nevertheless, the same-sex quality of the girls' games troubled girls and made them wonder at the time and in retrospect whether they were lesbians, particularly if their games produced sexual arousal. Some girls protected their heterosexuality, and thus their feelings of engaging in more normative behavior, by couching their sexual play in heterosexual scenarios ("You be the boy and I'll be the girl") and then switching roles (Lamb, 2004).

In her feminist analysis of this play, Lamb made the point that the more sexual the game felt to an individual girl, the more aroused she may have been during the game and the more likely she was to describe the game as wrong and to feel guilty about it and see herself as more boylike. Girls who described themselves as very interested in sex in childhood saw themselves as different from other girls, and Lamb described this phenomenon as

coming from a cultural understanding of girls as asexual or of femininity as embodying a passive sexuality. A girl who wanted sexual experiences was outside of the norm. One girl who saw herself as too interested in sex described her behavior as "very bizarre," explaining, "I was a girl and I shouldn't want that." When a girl's role in play was more assertive, when she did not play the ravished, courted, or pursued passive female, she would define her subjectivity as "male" or "weird."

Very few stories of boys' childhood sexual experiences have been collected. Those that have been tended to examine the way boys may have gotten themselves in trouble or categorized as sex offenders (P. Flanagan, 2010). Those researchers who examine boys' sexuality have primarily examined how hegemonic masculinity is expressed through sexual posturing at the end of childhood and beginning of adolescence. For example, Cohan (2009) observed "conquest" discourse among adolescent boys and an attitude that turned sex into something done "for the sake of the group" (p. 161). Research conducted in three coeducational schools in England to explore the response to sex education showed that 13- to 14-year-old boys ask questions about penis size, erections, and positions in sex and girls want to know more about the pressure to have sex and contraception (Forrest, 2010). A British ethnographic study found that boys ages 10 to 11 "performed" masculine sexuality through highly publicized heterosexual relationships, sexual harassment of girls, and public sex talk (Renold, 2007). These studies have focused on gender roles as much as actual sexuality and tended in this way to focus on problematic male sexuality rather than any joyful aspects of sex (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, 2010).

The study of children's sexual experiences rarely includes the imaginative games that children play that incorporate sex, perhaps because the study of the sexual lives of children has been influenced by a framework that measures child sexuality against adult sexuality, marking progress through stages or steps toward a normative heterosexual, genital-involved sexuality that is imagined to be "adult." Instead, the scholar of childhood sexuality might do better to question the idea that play, practice, and experimentation are only the purview of childhood

sex and whether arousal and “real sex” are the purview of adult sex.

INFLUENCES ON CHILDHOOD SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Several influences on childhood sexual development have been heavily researched, especially parental influences. Parents and their educational strategies, beliefs and attitudes, and parenting strategies have all become grist for the mill of understanding how children develop sexually. Quite a bit of research has also been done on the effects of sexual abuse on childhood sexuality as well as on later sexual well-being. Finally, the media have recently been investigated as an influence on children’s sexual development since the American Psychological Association’s (APA’s) 2007 *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*.

Parental Influence on Development and Expression of Sexuality

Parents, peers, and the media are perhaps the primary socializers of childhood sexuality (Martin et al., 2007). The literature regarding parental influence on the development and expression of sexuality has focused primarily on parent–child communication about sex, examining the content and process of the communication, factors predictive of communication, and behavioral outcomes (DiIorio, Pluhar, & Belcher, 2003). Very little, if any, research has focused on peer or sibling influence in childhood sexuality, although most of the stories and events described in both qualitative and quantitative research are stories of sexual activity between peers.

Americans consider parents the principal sexual educators of children (Pluhar, Jennings, & DiIorio, 2006). Parents tend to communicate more with older children (Grades 6–8) than with younger children (kindergarten–Grade 5; Byers, Sears, & Weaver, 2008). Self-efficacy (with regard to talking about sexual issues) and comfort seem to influence whether a parent will speak to a child about sex (Pluhar, DiIorio, & McCarty, 2008). Also, in one study (Byers et al., 2008), those who supported comprehensive sex education were more likely to

encourage their children to ask questions or to discuss topics in greater detail than those who did not. Impediments to frank discussions about sex with children include parents’ desire to preserve what they see as the innocence of childhood (DiIorio et al., 2003; Hutchinson & Cederbaum, 2011), embarrassment, lack of knowledge, and poor communication style (DiIorio et al., 2003).

Gender also makes a difference. In a study of 631 mothers of 3- to 6-year-olds, Martin and Luke (2010) found that mothers spoke more to their daughters than to their sons about relationships, reproduction, and the morality of sexual behavior. However, mothers did not differentiate between boys and girls with regard to communication about sexual abuse or pleasure (few talked about pleasure at all). Research has consistently indicated that mothers communicate more with daughters than with sons and fathers communicate more with sons than with daughters (DiIorio et al., 2003; King & Lorusso, 1997). Mother–daughter communication tends to be more reciprocal, or interactive, and mother–son communication tends to be more direct, or one-sided (Whalen, Henker, Hollingshead, & Burgess, 1996).

Martin (2009) also described mother–daughter communication as *heterosexualization*. Although she found that mothers did not talk about sex but rather about romance (a love-filled, monogamous, reproductive relationship), this discourse served to socialize 3- to 6-year-old daughters into heterosexuality. Of the mothers surveyed, 62% never mentioned gays or lesbians. From this survey, it appears that parents who do educate children about the possibility of being gay or lesbian do not do so in a way that discusses sex.

Gender of parent seems to be related to the frequency of and initiation of sex education with children. Both male and female adolescents have more frequent conversations with their mother than with their father (DiIorio, Kelley, & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999). Depending on the topic, 1% to 16% of female adolescents had had a discussion with their father, whereas 7% to 30% of adolescent males had. With regard to discussions with mothers, as many as 60% of boys and 80% of girls discussed certain topics with their mothers. The conversations that male and

female adolescents did have with their parents were similar, but the conversations with boys seemed to emphasize the consequences of sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, and condom use, and the conversations with girls seemed to emphasize abstinence and normal development (DiIorio et al., 1999). Additional research has suggested that those fathers who discussed sex with their children generally discussed biology, the benefits of delaying sex, and potential negative consequences (Wilson, Dalberth, & Koo, 2010). A meta-analysis of work before 2003 showed that parental age and ethnicity, socioeconomic class, age, educational attainment, and level of religiosity have not been determined to be predictors of whether parent-child communication about sex occurred (DiIorio et al., 2003). The study examined 95 research studies from 1980 through 2002 and thus represented more than two decades of parental studies.

With regard to content, DiIorio et al. (2003), in their review of the literature, identified AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, dating, menstruation, reproduction, birth control, and pregnancy as commonly discussed topics. Research from the 1990s showed that 70% of mothers said they had discussed AIDS with their school-age children (first, third, and fifth grades), whereas only 41% of mothers said their children asked them questions about AIDS (Sly et al., 1995). Sexual abuse appears to have been a popular topic, especially for parents with younger children (Pluhar et al., 2006), and changes in a child's body, especially in daughters, were seen as a natural cue for a talk about sex (Pluhar et al., 2006, 2008). African American and Latina mothers reported that both body changes and an interest in boys were seen as signals to talk about sex (O'Sullivan, Meyer-Bahlburg, & Watkins, 2001). Parents of young children used media as a cue for initiating conversations, describing "teachable moments" (DiIorio et al., 2003). The earlier overall communication starts, the more likely it is to persist and develop further (Pluhar & Kuriloff, 2004).

Some researchers have noted that some content is consistently neglected in early talks about sex. For example, physical pleasure is neglected in conversations with girls (DiIorio et al., 2003; Downie & Coates, 1999). Also, some have indicated that girls

receive mixed messages about sex (e.g., Philpy, 2007). Pluhar and Kuriloff (2004) discussed Ward and Wyatt's (1994) finding that White and Black women reported simultaneously receiving positive nonverbal messages and negative verbal messages.

Findings are mixed with regard to the effects of parent-child communication on future sexual activity, delaying sexual activity, and use of contraception (DiIorio et al., 2003), with some studies showing an effect and others not. The quality of the parental relationship is particularly important in early childhood, however, and seems to have an influence on adolescent sexual relationships (Pluhar et al., 2006). One study of college women showed that the greater amount of communication from one's mother, the more the daughter in college would see herself as sexually assertive and would have positive affect around sexuality (Barone & Wiederman, 1997). Amount of communication did not relate to sexual experience. Of note, those women who reported receiving greater communications with a negative emotional tone also reported having more sexual experience and more negative thoughts about sexuality. Barone and Wiederman (1997) found no relationship between mothers' perceived emotional tone and sexual comfort, assertiveness, and affect. Moore and Davidson (1999) also looked at the possible effects of parents as first sex-information sources on daughters' behavior and attitude and found that parents being the first source correlated with safer sexual behaviors and more positive sexual attitudes.

Sexual Abuse as an Influence on Childhood Sexuality

It is well known among clinicians that children who have been sexually abused exhibit higher levels of sexual behaviors (Browning & Laumann, 1997; Einbender & Friedrich, 1989; Friedrich, Trane, & Gully, 2005; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). Indeed, many of the studies that have examined normative sexual behavior in children have done so to differentiate problematic behavior from the norm (Friedrich et al., 1991, 2001; Friedrich & Grambsch, 1992), so much so that some have argued that "the vast majority of the extant research on sexuality and early childhood is tied to

a social problem—childhood sexual abuse—while other aspects of sexuality in childhood are completely ignored” (Martin et al., 2007, p. 235). For example, Kendall-Tackett et al. (1993) looked across seven studies to find that 34% of sexually abused children had problems with sexual behavior; that is, they exhibited behavior that was developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful to themselves or others. Gray, Pithers, Busconi, and Houchens (1999) found that 95% of sexually abused children had problem sexual behaviors. However, how do these rates compare with those of children who had not been sexually abused? Friedrich and Grambsch (1992) compared 880 children who had not been sexually abused with 276 who had and found that those who had been sexually abused were more likely to have touched another child’s genitals, rubbed their bodies against other people, hugged a strange adult, or touched their genitals in public. Touching one’s genitals in private did not distinguish one group from another. However, Drach, Wientzen, and Ricci (2001) found that of those children with sexual behavior problems, only 25% had been sexually abused. Those children identified with sexual behavior problems were more likely to have been sexually or physically abused as children (Letourneau, Schoenwald, & Sheidow, 2004). Clearly, not all children who were sexually abused develop sexual behavior problems. Hall, Matthews, and Pearce (1998) identified several variables predictive of sexual behavior problems among sexually abused children: sexual arousal during the abuse, use of sadism, and a history of physical and emotional abuse. Even more recently, Kellogg (2010) found that several factors contributed to whether a child who has been sexually abused will go on to develop sexual behavior problems. These factors include experiencing penetration, experiencing abuse by a family member, and experiencing abuse when the child was very young.

The Media as Influences on Childhood Sexuality

In the past decade, a number of journalists (Bloom, 2004; Dalton, 2005) and researchers (Attwood, 2006; Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Lamb & Brown, 2006; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Merskin, 2004) have

pointed to what they have seen as early sexualization of children by marketers and the media. Since the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (APA, 2007), the primary focus has been on girls’ early sexualization and the way the media invite girls to participate in what some have termed *raunch culture*, *pornographication*, and *striptease culture* (Levy, 2005; McNair, 1996, 2002). One focus of this concern has been on media and marketing that promote to younger girls behaviors and products meant for older girls and adult women. Additional focus has been on their promotion of a narrow beauty ideal that equates becoming sexual with becoming sexy and on the overrepresentation of objectified female figures in the media that girls consume. Also, many have been concerned with the imposition of sexual looks on younger and younger girls, although little evidence of this was found in the research. Still, examples abound, such as the world of child beauty pageants in which girls wear adultlike clothing and makeup and are encouraged to flirt with the audience (Cookson, 2001), and magazine photo shoots that create an illusion of sexual maturity with certain poses, makeup, and lack of clothing (Cortese, 1999). Two chapters in this handbook (Volume 2, Chapters 1 and 12) address research on media effects as well as sexualization, and the reader can review these with regard to sexual development. It is important to note, however, that although scholars now know how exposure may produce earlier engagement in heterosexual intercourse (e.g., Martino et al., 2006), they still know little about how consumption of these materials can affect the sexual lives of children in childhood.

CONTROVERSIES REGARDING THE INNOCENCE OF CHILDREN

Considerable work relative to childhood sexuality has been done in two major areas: sexual behavior problems and the “innocence” of children. In the area of sexual behavior problems, clinicians and researchers are concerned with the trend toward labeling children with non-normative sexual interests and behaviors as sex offenders. In the area of the innocence of children, postmodern theorists have

unpacked the idea of childhood sexual innocence and described how certain efforts to limit sexualization of children are somewhat misguided and aligned with repressive forces against sexual freedom.

In a time when sexual abuse is considered a more heinous crime than physical abuse or neglect (and when the general public believes that sex offenders are incurable), attention to children who act out sexually has been controversial. Juvenile sex offenders, as they are called in some states, are reported publicly on lists that developed as community notification became popular; 25 states have included juveniles on these lists (Jones, 2007).

Children exhibiting sexual behavior problems are a heterogeneous group (St. Amand, Bard, & Silovsky, 2008). The Task Force on Children With Sexual Behavior Problems provided a definition: “children ages 12 and younger who initiate behaviors involving sexual body parts (i.e., genitals, anus, buttocks, or breasts) that are developmentally inappropriate or potentially harmful to themselves or others” (Chaffin et al., 2008, p. 200). According to this report, these children are not younger versions of adult sex offenders, nor will they likely become adult sex offenders (Carpentier, Silovsky, & Chaffin, 2006), so it is inappropriate to treat them as such or provide adult sex offender treatments (Letourneau & Miner, 2005; St. Amand, Bard, & Silovsky, 2008). The etiology of these problems is not clearly understood (Chaffin et al., 2008) and may be multiply determined. Research has shown that children who have no history of sexual abuse demonstrate a wide range of sexual behavior problems (Chaffin et al., 2008). Conduct disorders may manifest as sexually problematic behavior toward other children (St. Amand et al., 2008). Risk factors are maltreatment, substandard parenting practices, exposure to sexually explicit media, living in a highly sexualized environment, and even exposure to family violence (Friedrich, Davies, Feher, & Wright, 2003). The Task Force on Children With Sexual Behavior Problems called for case-by-case interventions that look at the child in his or her home and social environment, stating that environment is typically more telling than individual characteristics regarding sexually problematic behavior (Chaffin et al., 2008).

The second controversy, which deserves more attention than can be accomplished in this chapter, is the controversial topic of how innocent children are. Hawkes and Egan (2008) reported that although childhood sexuality was already normalized in the 1920s and 1930s, it came under strict management by parents and experts so that it would not grow into a distorted form of adult sexuality through poor parenting. Robinson (2002) argued that current constructions of childhood suggest that children are too young and innocent to understand sex. She wrote that the “notion of ‘childhood innocence’ is mobilized to regulate children’s knowledge” (p. 8). As the discussion of children who act out sexually demonstrates, those who do not conform to standards of childhood innocence can, on one hand, be demonized quite quickly. On the other hand, childhood sexual experiences are normalized by suggesting they are in some sense not “real” sex (Lamb, 2002, 2004).

Discussions about sexualization and the preservation of childhood innocence center around girlhood and, in this way, may further contribute to the long-established stereotypes of girls as more innocent than boys (Lamb, 2002). The worry is that girls in particular may be exposed to degrading, raunchy, and pornographic material (APA, 2007; Dines, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008) and that this exposure will contribute to a problematic development of sexuality and a narrow version of what sexuality is among these girls. Critics such as Thompson (2010) and Renold (2006) have critiqued the bias against sexuality that those concerned about the loss of childhood innocence seem to make and argued that most people who are concerned do not classify other imitations of adult activities, such as playing with kitchen sets, as equally problematic. Thus, these critics believe that present concern is really about the play as sexual, not that it crosses into adult areas. Those on the other side of this controversy have maintained that healthy sexual play is appropriate but that children may be incorporating into their play and ideas of sexuality a very narrow view, including the perception that the only thing of value about their sexuality is the extent to which they appear sexy to others.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have presented both empirical research with regard to the presence and frequency of childhood sexual behaviors and narratives of childhood sexual experiences, controversies around childhood sexuality, and overarching constructions of childhood sexuality. ~~Dismissing in part~~ biological understandings of sexuality that are based on hormones and puberty to examine the stories of childhood sexual experiences and controversies around them, has led to a number of questions. The following questions build on the most interesting discussions today, those that come out of discussions of sexualization, childhood innocence, and childhood deviance as well as those that come from a desire to understand childhood sexuality from the child's perspective. These questions should provide ample foundation for future research in this area:

1. How is childhood managed and who benefits from the management of childhood sexuality?
2. What are notions about childhood innocence based on, and why is innocence defined so specifically in terms of sexuality?
3. What are the themes and pleasures of boyhood sexuality?
4. How is heteronormativity conveyed in the management of childhood sexuality?
5. Who is defining sexual deviance within childhood and to what aims?

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