

## THE AMERICAN PANIC ON SEX ABUSE by an anonymous therapist

As a society, for the past four decades the United States government has been leading the way to attack sexual abuse in our country and around the world. Victims of sexual abuse have been gaining a voice, and young people are being empowered to say no to unwanted sexual imposition. Prison sentences for child molesters have become much longer, sex offender treatment programs are plentiful. Almost one out of every 100 American men is now legally labeled as a sex offender. This includes those who are either currently imprisoned, on probation supervision, or on a lifetime sex offender registry. But, we are told, many more are undetected. New scandals of sex abuse are revealed practically every month.

As a result of all this publicity, virtually all schools and youth organizations now have policies prohibiting adults from being alone with children. But have these changes gone too far? Teachers are prohibited from touching students, even in friendly ways. And the newest attention is being given to the problem of “juvenile sex offenders,” with hundreds of therapy programs being established for “children with sexual behavior problems.”

According to the US National Center for Victims of Crime, from 25% to 35% of all child molestation is perpetrated by children. You read that right: about one third of all sexual offenders against children are themselves juveniles. In fact, of all ages, the age that is most common for someone who is legally defined as “sexually abusing children” is teenagers who are 14 years old. “Sexual aggression” has been identified by sex abuse therapists in children as young as 6. Let that sink in.

Sex abuse specialists acknowledge that children are curious about sex, and yes, they like to imitate older people. But they assert that “normal children” don't have sexual attractions, desires, and fantasies. Does that sound like an idea that is based in reality? Sex abuse specialists focus on those juveniles who engage in what they call “sexual aggression,” which they define not only as those using “coercion or manipulation,” but also including those who have “attempted or completed oral-genital contact or intercourse with someone else.” It also includes any sexual behavior with another child who is younger, smaller, or less knowledgeable about sex. How can children be labeled as “sexual aggressors” merely for attempting sexual contact? How can a 14-year-old be a sex offender, when they can't even legally consent to sex? Let alone a 6-year-old?

These unique sex offender treatments require adults and children who've abused to concentrate on and never forget the destruction they've caused to their victims and the victims' families. They are drilled how to empathize with their victims, to always remember that they themselves were the victimizer. They are given exercises in how to recognize when their sexual feelings return, and how to repress them. These programs emphasize the need to separate those labeled as “sexual aggressors” from “normal children,” to help them develop long-term safety and supervision plans to protect normal children from them, and make sure they know that prison is their future if they're not careful.

Some of these programs monitor the young person's sexual feelings and fantasies (with logs or sometimes with electronic devices connected to their genitals) and exorcise them through aversion therapy or sex drive-reducing drugs. These techniques are completely different from, and much more drastic than, those used with non-sexual violent youths. This is based on the claim that sexual violence is so much more damaging and fundamentally different from other kinds of violence. They are taught that they can't be trusted around normal children without repressing their sexual desires their whole lives. So now therapists are developing programs to help them do this. Will they work? Can anyone repress their sexuality their whole life? If not, these young people will need to be monitored their whole lives, or else permanently removed from society.

So what's the result of all this? Is it working? Sexual abuse therapists claim that abuse rates have declined slightly, but not nearly enough. At the current rate of improvement, they say, it will take centuries to eradicate sexual abuse. They want to find better ways to identify potential predators and pedophiles when they're young, to teach them how evil and destructive their sexual feelings and behaviors are, and to force them to repress their sexuality for life. Therapists want to find better ways to protect normal children from the deviant ones by teaching the predators how destructive sex is before age 18, by controlling and monitoring all interactions that adults have with adolescents and children, and by screening all juveniles who work with younger adolescents or children by measuring their sexual desires.

Will this kind of approach work? We must look at the big picture. Something is horrifyingly wrong with our society. How did we come to this point? Have Americans ever been in a similar panic about childhood sexuality in past eras? In fact, we have. In the 1880s and 1890s, a number of medical doctors and food producers were certain that masturbation was the cause of numerous illnesses. Parents were instructed to observe their offsprings' behavior closely, to teach them the great harm that masturbation caused. Dr. Sylvester Graham even invented a cracker that he marketed to parents, which he claimed would suppress the desire of children to masturbate. He was so proud of his invention that he named it after himself. And so, the Graham Cracker was born.

This was soon followed by a corn producer named Kellogg, who invented a breakfast cereal (also named after himself) which he marketed as Kellogg's Corn Flakes. He publicized his food for parents to get their children to eat his cereal every morning, thereby inhibiting their masturbatory behavior. Other inventors jumped on the bandwagon, even making metal corsets that parents could lock into place on their children's bodies at night, preventing them from even touching their genitals.

Mercifully, those metal corsets eventually were discarded, when it was realized children could find inventive ways to masturbate during the daytime. But both Graham Crackers and Corn Flakes have become a permanent part of the American diet, even though subsequent research

studies showed that neither of these foods had the slightest effect on masturbation rates among young people.

Nevertheless, entire generations of Americans grew up convinced that if they masturbated they would seriously injure their future health. This sex panic did not decline until medical researchers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did research to show that there is absolutely no correlation between masturbation and poor health. However, many Americans did manage to work themselves into severe stress over their desires to masturbate. In other words, their health was not impacted by the masturbation behavior itself, but it was impacted by their worry about it.

Could we today be replicating the same fallacy? That is, does our worry about the dangers of sexual behavior among young people below age 18, when they cannot legally consent to sex, actually result in real psychological harm to those same persons? If a person really believes that a certain behavior is harmful, then in actual fact there is a danger, at least for some. But even more importantly, the current U.S. laws prohibiting any sexual activity before age 18 directly criminalizes the current generation of young people. What kind of harm results, beyond the fact that a 14 year old may be labeled as a criminal “sex offender” for their entire life?

The current sex abuse panic is a peculiarly American phenomenon. Do other countries and cultures have this problem? Many academic studies, both historical and anthropological, show that in virtually all world cultures some children and teenagers are interested in sex with older people, and that at least some adults have sexual attraction to minors. If engaged willingly, and with kindness and consideration, these studies show that both older and younger partners can experience intergenerational erotic behavior positively, and can gain benefit from it.

Is it possible that we're looking at this entire subject quite wrongly? Is it possible that sexuality is like other aspects of human functioning and should be treated as such? Can it be that children are sexual in the same way that they're social, emotional, physical, artistic, and intellectual? That they vary in their sexual development—including attractions, desires, and fantasies—from immature to precocious, in the same way that they vary in social, emotional, physical, artistic, and intellectual development? Is it possible that non-normative sexual behavior is not necessarily any more dangerous than non-normative social, emotional, physical, artistic, or intellectual development? Is it possible that children interact sexually with younger, weaker, or less knowledgeable children for the same reasons as they interact socially or recreationally with them, and that such interaction has on average no worse effects? Is it possible that even coercive childhood sexual behavior is not fundamentally different from other forms of childhood aggression (especially physical or emotional aggression) and could be handled similarly, without getting the law involved, mostly with private discussions by parents and teachers?

Is it possible that seeing sexuality as similar to other aspects of human functioning would make sexual abuse understandable and help us respond to it more effectively and humanely? Making our assumptions and laws about sexual behavior so pathologizing and stigmatizing, may be

doing nothing more than punishing children for behavior that is in fact harmless or at least less harmful than our current legal responses. Is it possible that our assumptions and laws may be even inflating the rates of sexual abuse, scaring the public, and diverting resources away from behavior that is really harmful to children? Is it possible that treatment programs for sex offending children today might be as harmful and unethical as it was to convince children of the 1880s that masturbating would cause severe illness? We know it is not good to require children who hit others (or are diagnosed with conduct disorder) to dwell on the destruction they've caused to their victims and on their role as victimizers, to separate them long-term from other children, to threaten them with imprisonment, to develop special safety and supervision plans, and to have their feelings and fantasies monitored and exorcised with journals, electronic devices, aversion therapy, or drugs. Instead, we treat violence differently, focusing on changing the damaging behavior rather than pathologizing their entire being. In short, is it possible that the harm that "sex offender treatment" programs can cause to young people may be worse than the harm we're trying to prevent?

All children are not the same. Sexuality studies show that there is developmental appropriateness for sexual activity which varies from child to child, not just based on age, but is similar in variety to a particular child's developmental appropriateness for physical, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Child, adolescent, and adult sexuality, in other words, is similar to social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development through the lifespan.

And now to ask the heretical questions: Is it possible that even though children, adolescents, and adults on average differ physically, emotionally, cognitively, and sexually, they can still interact recreationally, socially, emotionally, intellectually, and even sexually, without causing harm, as long as each person is participating willingly and the older one is kind and considerate toward the younger one, keeping in mind common sense ideas about harm? Is it possible that an older person interacting sexually with a willing younger one no more interferes with the younger one's self-determination or leads them to "deviance" than interacting with them emotionally or intellectually? Is it possible that sexual activity can be engaged without destroying the psyche and the soul of the younger person?

Sexuality researchers are right when they say children are sexual, that some of them are attracted to older people sexually as they might be emotionally, and that they can learn by interacting in various ways with older people, in the same way they learn about emotions or physical activity by interacting with older people in those ways. By defining sexual abuse in the same way we define physical and emotional abuse—that is, without categorically labeling all interactions as abuse based solely on age, size, or knowledge—this will greatly reduce the scary statistics, eliminate the complexity of determining which interactions are abuse based on age, size, strength, and knowledge, and increase resources for addressing real harm.