



Sexual Development Conference Mapping Uncharted Territory

On a topic where level-headed discussion is hard to come by, there is one point on which everyone can agree: there is a lot we don't know about children's sexual development. Last May, participants in The Kinsey Institute's Sexual Development Conference met to discuss this important—and little understood—aspect of human sexuality.

What methods are appropriate for studying sexual development in children and adolescents? How does child sexual abuse affect adolescent sexuality and, ultimately, adult sexuality? Is it possible to come to a consensus on what constitutes "normal" sexual development? Conference participants discovered that each of these questions contains a universe (some might say minefield) of other questions.

"Children are sexual beings in various ways. And we don't know very much about that," says Institute director John Bancroft. But how to study, and then talk about, childhood sexuality? Very carefully. David Finkelhor is director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. Finkelhor, who participated as a discussant, emphasizes that these are "complex conceptual and research issues." Not surprisingly, methodological issues, and the difficulties inherent in studying normal childhood sexual development, were high on the agenda.

The conference, which was funded by the W. T. Grant Foundation, comes at a critical historical moment. Children are daily confronted with a plethora of sexual messages—from benign to abusive—and their responses to those messages are all over the map. William Friedrich, clinical director of Child and Family Services at the Mayo Psychiatry and Psychology Treatment Center, notes that the policies now being formulated to deal with the sexual behavior of children and young people are made on the basis of minimal data.

Like other participants, Friedrich came away with the realization that "we need more information, and developmental research is critical. We especially need a longitudinal study to bridge the gap

between pre-teen and adolescence." Conference discussant Anke Ehrhardt agrees: "Sexuality isn't something that just suddenly starts in adolescence. We need to take a long-term look at sexual development."

And yet long-term studies that trace the sexual development of a cohort of subjects from infancy to young adulthood are extremely rare. The focus—in research as well as in the media—has overwhelmingly been on the trauma of child sexual abuse. Ehrhardt, director of the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, points out that "it's very important to bring together people with different backgrounds to focus on children's sexuality, because this area is typically looked at only through the lens of abuse. Normal developmental issues have been almost entirely neglected and ignored." To that end, this meeting brought psychologists, psychiatrists, clinicians, historians, anthropologists, sociologists, social workers, and other professionals to the table. "There were the sort of differences one would expect from mixed disciplines," says Bancroft, "but this is a healthy dialogue to have."

Diane DiMauro directs the Sexuality Research Fellowship Program at the Social Science Research Council. She was discussion leader of the conference's final panel, on the political and advocacy aspects of a potential consensus document. While a consensus statement on normal childhood sexual development may be further down the road, DiMauro observes that perhaps the biggest achievement of the Sexual Development Conference is that it brought the right people together to address the topic in an authoritative, serious, open way. "We wanted to try to carefully map out what is known and what is not known, and start filling in the gaps. This conference was an essential first step in that direction." ■

A volume of essays developed from conference papers and the ensuing discussion is forthcoming from Indiana University Press in 2002.

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