CONCERNS about children’s sexuality: what they reveal about adults’ concepts of childhood

Bethany Webber

Contemporary anxieties about the sexualisation and eroticization of childhood appear grounded in questions regarding exposure and acceptability. However it seems such concerns are not only modern; fears and debates have spanned time and culture. This article explores some of the reactions and interpretations of children’s sexuality such as the prohibitive stance of the Victorian era towards the masturbating child, the furore that arose from Freud’s theory of innate sexuality and current panics surrounding the eroticization of children, influenced by the fear of sexual abuse. It is demonstrated that these concerns threaten the image of the child and the way adults view the period of childhood. Central to the issue of children’s sexuality is the understanding that childhood is a time of innocence.

Key words: childhood, adulthood, sexuality, eroticization, sexualisation, innocence

This essay aims to show that the adult concept of childhood innocence is central to the debate and fears which surround children’s sexuality. Adults feel the need to protect and to preserve the notion of childhood innocence because it is suggested that the loss of innocence is synonymous with the loss of childhood (Postman, 1994). Ideas about childhood and about sexuality are socially constructed and the influences of time and culture have an impact on the understandings of children’s sexuality (Montgomery, 2009). These fluctuating interpretations have revolved and continue mostly to revolve around exposure and acceptability, because of the adult ideal of the sexually innocent child. This essay will aim to show this by discussing the Victorian reaction to the masturbating child and the furore that derived from Freud’s theory of innate sexuality. The current concerns about the eroticization and sexualisation of children, especially girls, will also be addressed and these examples will be shown as fears because they threaten the adult view of the sexually pure and asexual child, which Montgomery (2009) suggests is at the heart of the Western construction of childhood.

This issue has the potential to be controversial and provocative, it lies on the border of taboo and this is because of the way children are viewed in our society (Rousseau, 2007; Jackson, 1982). The highly emotive subject of children’s sexuality evokes senses of morality and has led to public scandals, panics and moral crusades (La Fontaine, 1998 and Best, 1990, cited in Montgomery, 2009). Adult reactions to children’s sexuality are formulated because of the attitudes, ideas and beliefs that are held about children and the period of childhood, but also about the nature of adulthood and therefore where the boundaries lie and what is allowed within the remit of each of these categories (Corteen and Scraton, 2003). Throughout time and culture interpretations of children’s sexuality have fluctuated, leading to societies having different expectations of children’s sexual behaviour and holding different fears about children’s exposure to sexual matters.

These varying interpretations have informed what Foucault (1984) suggests is the long process of creating sex into a discourse. Over time the cultural understandings, descriptions, limitations and
relationships between adults and children have become defined. Expectations and ideas of acceptance have been formed which outline and control the nature of sexual desire. Notions about appropriateness surrounding sexuality have been, and continue to be, affected by factors such as gender, class and age, and acceptability hinges on these factors (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009). However, what is thought of as sexy and sexual is interpreted through the eyes of the adult and it could be argued that the notion of sexuality, in the same way as the concept of childhood, is formed by adults for adults (Montgomery, 2009; Robinson and Davies, 2008; Meyer, 2007).

Throughout the developing discourse about children’s sexuality a powerful influence is the image of the child. A dichotomy exists between the puritan vision of the inherently sinful child, in need of constraint, and the romantic idea of the child as innocent and pure, requiring nurture (Hill and Tisdall, 1997). These two concepts reflect understandings of the nature of the child and they impact on how adults interpret children’s acts of sexuality and exposure to sexual matters. Both images of the child require protection, but for different reasons; the potentially evil child needs protection from themselves and the corrupting society who may lead them into temptation. Equally the innocent child, who is by the very nature of being innocent understood to be unknowing and vulnerable, must be protected and guarded by adults against the corruptions of society and of knowledge (Robinson and Davies, 2008).

These interpretations of the child give power to the adult and acceptability to their reactions of control, which affirms their belief in the need to act as a filter of information and as the gatekeeper of knowledge, giving exposure to children when and if they are deemed ready (Erricker, 2003). Adults use a variety of methods of protection in an attempt to preserve the nature of childhood innocence, by keeping secrets and shielding children from information the child’s state of purity can be maintained (Postman, 1994). Jackson (1982) suggests that sexuality in the child threatens and challenges our understanding of what the child is, so 21st century society acts to suppress and deny children’s sexuality until an appropriate time in development.

The distinction between life stages and sexuality is grounded in a biological interpretation. Muller (2006) suggests that since the 18th Century the prepubescent body has been considered to be unknowing of sexual desires and urges, these are thought to only appear at about the age of 14, when the child is biologically understood to be ready. This emergence in the mind and the body marks the division between childhood and adolescence and suggests that childhood is a time of unknowing and innocence, whereas adolescence is a stage of curiosity and experimentation which leads to the sexual maturity of adulthood (Muller, 2006). This cultural understanding still remains prevalent today and maintains sexuality as the preserve of adulthood and sexual innocence as a characteristic of childhood (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009; Corteen and Scraton, 2003). These understandings make it socially acceptable for traits of sexuality to be associated with the adolescent and the adult, but not with the child and therefore culture acts to shape, modify and regulate behaviours and responses to physical instincts.

A historical example from 1608 can show that this understanding of the biological influence, combined with cultural understanding about appropriateness has existed for even longer than Muller suggests. Extracts from the diary of Heroad, who was the physician of Henry IV of France, reveal the life experience of his son Louis XIII. During Louis’ first three years of life the court were tolerant and encouraging of his displays of sexuality, no harm was perceived to come from his solitary sexual acts and amorous play with his sister. Yet when he reached the age of 7
attitudes changed and Louis was expected to learn decency, he was understood to be becoming a man and his actions were now perceived as genuine sexual activity. It is not possible to generalise from this account whether the behaviour of Louis XIII was accepted because of who he was, or whether this sort of behaviour was condoned throughout France at this time (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009).

If current cultural understandings regard children to be in a state of sexual dormancy, this creates a notion of asexuality and this idea has its roots in the romantic conception that was born following the Enlightenment, in the 1760s. Higonnet (2002) suggests that this was a time of denial about the sexuality of children. This Romantic Movement was influenced by Rousseau and his book Emile (1760, cited in Milam 2002) which created a romantic cult of childhood, regarding the child as pure, virtuous and in touch with nature (Milam, 2002). These special qualities defined childhood as a time of innocence and goodness. However Rousseau believed that this purity becomes corrupted by the influence of society and culture and with regards to sexuality, Rousseau understood it to be an awakening of imagination and curiosity in adolescence, as a consequence of civilization’s flaws, rather than a biological response (Milam, 2002; Higonnet, 2002).

The romantic vision of the sexually unknowing child was depicted in artwork around this time, such as Boucher’s A Sleeping Baby (1731, cited in Higonnet 2002). Viewed by today’s standards this image could be considered erotic and the pose struck by the little girl understood to be sexually suggestive. At the time however, the interpretation was not associated with adult perversity or childhood corruption, but was understood as infantile sexual ignorance and was viewed as a source of enjoyment and because of this understanding there was not a concern regarding the child’s exposure (Milam, 2002). This suggests a very different view from today, where adults could be seen as a danger to children and could even be committing a criminal offence by looking at images such as these.

The powerful notion of the child being sexually innocent and unaware continued into the Victorian era where the adult ideal was not so concerned with asexuality, rather the idea of unawakened sexuality (Cox, 1996). However this idea was contradicted by the acts of the masturbating child. Masturbation was perceived as sign of a lack of parental control, an independence and autonomy held by the child that was feared (Gittins, 1998). This act of sexuality offered a suggestion that the child maybe sinful. Sexual experimentation was viewed as an abnormality and acute attempts were made to halt such practises. Sexuality in childhood became highly forbidden and contested, surveillance increased and adults were encouraged to supervise their children to protect and guard them against their masturbating tendencies (Gittins, 1998; Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Cox, 1996). The interpretation of this act was viewed from a psycho-medical standpoint, which feared the repercussions of blindness and insanity. This led middle class parents to go to extreme lengths to control their children, using hand clamps as restraints and performing clitoridectomies on persistently ‘offending’ girls, who were understood to be pathological (Montgomery, 2009; Gittins, 1998; Hill and Tisdall, 1997). The act of masturbation indicated that children were not perhaps as sexually innocent as they were believed, or hoped by adults to be and this Victorian panic represents the fear that existed regarding acceptable sexual behaviour.
Another panic and threat to the innocence of the child was Freud’s belief that the child had sexual feelings from birth (Montgomery, 2009; Freud, 1970). Jenks (2005) and Comini (2002) claim this theory invaded the nursery and assaulted the pristine idea of the child. In 1905 Freud released ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ which made links between childhood experiences and adult personality and behaviour and suggested that psychological problems in adulthood could be attributed to unresolved sexual conflicts encountered during childhood.

“The germs of sexual impulses are already present in the new-born child and these continue to develop for a time, but are over taken by a process of suppression; this in turn is itself interrupted by periodical advances in sexual development” (Freud, 1970, p.42).

Unlike Rousseau who had interpreted sexuality as a product of cultural corruption, Freud believed that sexuality was a natural, unfolding process and the innately sexual child was led by drives. Behaviours such as the touching of genitals and thumb sucking were viewed as expressions of sexuality. However Freud acknowledged that these drives for bodily pleasure become hampered by the influences of acceptability and expectation within society, which then creates tensions, conflicts and repressions in the unconscious mind, manifesting as problems in the adult personality (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009; Montgomery, 2009; Freud, 1970). The treatment of these problems requires the adult to go through the process of psychoanalysis, because Freud viewed the child as a writing pad becoming imprinted with memories and these memories need to be revisited and understood (Mavor, 2002). This understanding of the child is similar to Locke (1693) who, centuries earlier, had suggested the ‘tabula rasa’ nature of the child, understanding that experiences leave an impression on the child which shape and impact on later life.

The impact of Freud’s theory led to unacceptable and unthinkable visions of sexual desire being present in the child and gave rise to a fearful and puritanical belief in a darker side of the child. The notion of innate sexuality caused a fear of libidinal sin, creating a rebirth in the puritan idea of original sin that had been present in the Victorian interpretation of sexuality (Jenks, 2005; Comini, 2002). The puritanical understanding of the child is formed from religious belief and questions the moral nature of the child. Children are viewed as sinners in need of salvation and the duty of the parent is to beat the devil out of the child, ridding children of the corrupting influence that is retained within. Through close supervision the adult can lead the child through a sin free life where good manners are learnt and control is gained over bodily functions (Gittins, 1998; Cox, 1996). This puritan view still has implications today in the understanding of children’s sexuality and could explain why adults feel the need to control and survey children’s sexual knowledge and exposure, for fear of the child being led into temptation.

Despite the furore that ensued due to Freud’s theory, the Romantic qualities of purity and sexual innocence have remained and continue to be the dominant discourse regarding children in the 21st century (Jenks, 2005). This could account for why Freud’s theory continues to be much debated and is still viewed as contentious. This prevalent concept of innocence creates the sense of childhood as a golden age and compounds feelings of a need for prolongation and protection of childhood and fuels fear over anything that can be perceived as a risk to this innocence (Robinson and Davies, 2008).
“The anxiety and controversy surrounding the issue of children and sex must be seen in the prolongation of childhood and the special status it is given. “ (Jackson, 1982, p.27).

According to Darbyshire (2007) nostalgia makes adults feel this way and the rose tinted memories of childhood create the wish for the sanctuary of innocence to last, free from the stresses and strains and the interruptions and corruptions of adulthood. The period of adulthood does not seem to be valued as a time to be cherished, rather it is characterised by seriousness, work and independence, whereas childhood is viewed as a carefree time of play and fun (Robinson and Davies, 2008; Corteen and Scraton, 2003). This dichotomy allows for certain knowledge and experiences to be the exclusive right of the adult and views the child as the powerless other, in need of adult protection (Robinson and Davies, 2008). Mavor (2002) suggests these mutually exclusive worlds are divided and polarized by the sexuality of adulthood and the purity of childhood as sexuality is often identified as a right and experience only for adults. This segregation reinforces the secrecy surrounding sexuality and allows for morality to keep sexuality in the realm of adulthood (Robinson and Davies, 2008).

Contemporary fears however, are suggesting that these polarized worlds are not so distinguished, children are being exposed to information that in previous years would have been kept only for adults (Postman, 1994; Plynott and Logue, 1993). Adult information is threatening the purity of the unknowing and ignorant child and society is panicking that this is causing a breakdown in children’s morality (Plynott and Logue, 1993). Postman (1994) suggests that, due to the deregulation of television, children are now witnessing matters of a sexual and violent nature, the lines between adulthood and childhood are becoming blurred and children are learning about the desirability and availability of sex. This medium is giving the impression that sex is applicable to all. As a result the traits of freedom and innocence, associated with childhood, are being lost because children are growing up too fast.

Goldman and Goldman (1982, cited in Corteen and Scraton, 2003) agree with Postman (1994) and suggest that children are being bombarded with messages about sexuality on a daily basis. Walkerdine (1997) views examples such as scantily clad women and sexually explicit lyrics as intrusions of adult sexuality into the sanitized arena of childhood. Popular culture is presenting a threat of exploitation and eroticization, as is advertising and the media who are objectifying young girls, claims Walkerdine (1997). According to Cox (1996) this is because of the potency of the young girls’ innocence and it is this which is fuelling contemporary fears to mostly revolve around the female child. Feminists fear these gendered messages that are being sent, suggesting they represent the way society views women and this is constructing girls’ sexuality through the fantasy of the adult male (Purvis and Ward, 2006; Walkerdine, 1997).

Levin and Kilbourne (2009) are concerned that these dangerous advertising and media messages will also affect boys, suggesting that they will learn that this is an acceptable way to view and value females. However the profitability of the young age group is noted and targeted by large companies; the ‘tweenies’ or ‘teenagers’, as they are known, are valued as current and future consumers (Darbyshire, 2007). Sex sells and large manufacturers recognise this. Concerns from marketing companies purported that children are losing interest in toys such as Barbie dolls at a
younger age, a phenomenon the industry calls ‘age compression’ and their response has been to introduce ‘lingerie Barbie’, a doll dressed in a bustier draped in an alluring robe (Levin and Kilbourne, 2009). Figures such as Barbie and the Bratz dolls focus on fashion, appearance and sexiness and when this is combined with pop stars and celebrities, children could be learning to emulate these role models, learning to idolise and aspire to look and behave in a sexualised way.

These modern day fears are panics about the sexualisation of childhood and Meyer (2007) states this is becoming synonymous with current ideas and understandings of sexuality. Contemporary anxieties, just as has been the case throughout history, are grounded in questions about exposure and about acceptable behaviour. Young girls dressed in mini skirts, high heels and t-shirts with padded bras cause adults to feel concerned and uncomfortable. These are qualities equated with the adolescent and adult and by appearing on the young child they make the child appear knowing and erotized, giving rise to fears about what is happening to the naïveté of the innocent child, who is being construed in a sexual manner (Wyness, 2000). It is interesting that it is acceptable for the child to act and ‘dress up’ in adult clothes, yet dressing and role playing in the style of teenagers raises such concerns.

If looking and dressing beyond your years is an indicator of lost innocence, then this can be represented by the death of beauty queen Jonbenet Ramsey, who was murdered in 1996, at six years of age (Erricker, 2003). Erricker (2003) labels her the cultural icon for the dangers of being too mature, looking and behaving in such a way made this child vulnerable. Yet in some locations child beauty pageants remain popular and encouraged community events. Critics suggest these displays exploit children for parental fulfilment and say more about the search for identity in the adults than in the child (Giroux, 1998, cited in Darbyshire, 2007; Higonnet, 2002). The notion that parents would dress their children and encourage them to behave in such ways could contradict common understandings about the role of parents in teaching appropriateness and morality with regard to sexuality (Meyer, 2007).

However parents are not alone in the exploitation of children. For a long time advertising has used the child as the face of purity and the representation of goodness to sell products. This association has seen children linked to many products such as soap, detergents, body creams and health foods (Gittins, 1998). The expression of children as a sign of wholesomeness and old-fashioned values evokes warm and comfortable feelings about the uncorrupted nature of the child. However Gittins (1998) warns that society has been led to desire the child and see the child itself as a purchasable item. Since the 20th century the image of the child has become emotionally powerful, but this is contradicted by the consumer culture, the entwining of the child as innocent and naive, but commercial, sexual and obtainable (Higonnet, 2002). The combination of children juxtaposed with consumer goods has become used globally and Gittins (1998) fears this may account for children being viewed in the wrong way, with repercussions, such as acts of sex tourism in South East Asia and world wide child prostitution.

There is however an argument about children being valued as a source of income for families and a culturally and radically different understanding about sexuality can exist. Montgomery’s (2001, in Montgomery, 2009) research with parents in a study in Thailand indicated that these adults did not believe prostitution was having a damaging long term effect on their children; they viewed their young children’s bodies as investments. This example highlights the fact that childhood is a
The physicality of the child can be recognised and valued in different ways and Kincaid (1992) argues that there is nothing strange about seeing the beauty of children, but it is the way in which this beauty is portrayed that can cause anxieties. Equally it is the way that this beauty is interpreted, for example the images taken by Lewis Carroll of Alice Liddel in the 1870s. Carroll’s photography displayed young children reclining naked and semi naked on a chaise longue, supposedly preserving the simplicity of the child’s character, nature and purity, rather than anything more sinister (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009; Cox, 1996). Yet Auerbach (1982, cited in Cox 1996) suggests this image shows the mixture of sentimentality and sensuousness, the combination of the angel, the whore and the fallen woman. But, if this is the case, Carroll’s images are not alone in creating this contradictory gaze. Walkerdine (1997) cites the characters of Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz and Annie; both understood to be naive, but alluring, charming yet appealing, sexually knowing, but innocent.

However by today’s standards Carroll’s images are viewed as suspicious and inescapably erotic and Carroll himself could be judged as having perverse paedophilic tendencies, although at the time the parents of the children photographed did not find any fault (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009). This modern reaction is related to the fear of the sexual abuse of children, which is present and conscious in contemporary society and interwoven in current notions about children’s sexuality (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009). For example fears have developed about the appropriateness of touch in childhood settings, although noted as beneficial (Field, 2003) adults are withholding from touching children for fear of the misinterpretation that their touch is either violent or sexual (Stronach and Piper, 2008). According to Piper et al., (2006) common sense has become blurred by moral panics, due to this discourse becoming fed by the fear of the potential paedophile, the trust has gone and sexual assumptions are too quickly drawn.

Government legislation, rules and regulations that exist regarding the safeguarding of children are attempts to protect the innocent who are assumed to be vulnerable, weak and unable to defend themselves (Meyer, 2007). However viewing children in this way does not necessarily protect them. It could be argued that protecting children’s innocence could create ignorance in the child, which itself could act as a risk and a danger (Jenks, 2005; Higonnet, 2002; Aries, 1962). Erricker (2003) agrees and suggests that the protection of innocence is the promotion of ignorance. Although senses of morality may guide adults to feel they are doing the correct thing, acts of concealment can deny children the opportunity to think for themselves and critically reflect on their enculturation (Erricker, 2003). Wyness (2000) contemplates the idea of adults attempting to protect children by maintaining a state of blissful ignorance and uses the debate over sex education as an example. Wyness (2000) proposes that, rather than the lack of knowledge that is associated with the unknowing of innocence, knowledge can be empowering to the child. If the child is informed this can act as protection in potentially threatening and abusive situations and children can develop self-agency which may offer some protection.

However the suggestion of knowledge being power could be interpreted as a direct threat and confrontation to the ideology of innocence, hence arguments surround the age at which formal lessons should be given about this topic (Wyness, 2000). Perhaps the influence of knowledge is deemed as such a threat because it increases fears about the loss of innocence and could remind
people of anxieties about the nature of the child, the notion of libidinal sin making another appearance. If adults fear their child’s nature will be prey to temptation then they may see their role of protection in terms of prohibition. Erricker (2003) suggests that adults do this by limiting children’s contact with their host culture. However the United Kingdom has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in Western Europe and a growing problem with sexually transmitted disease (Office for National Statistics, 2009). This could suggest that the closeted approach is not necessarily the most effective.

Western culture deems the act of being sexually aware a threat to the children’s innocence. However anthropological studies can show that in many societies sexuality is not concealed, in fact it is a part of daily life and children learn to be open, knowledgeable and unashamed of such matters, whilst still remaining as children (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009). For example among the Amerindian group called the Mehinaku, who live in central Brazil, it was found that adults attribute sexual motivation to the behaviours of young children, in the same way that Freud did. They encourage sexuality amongst children as an act of generosity, understood as an ancestral custom and although sexuality is recognised and allowed in this culture, boundaries of acceptability still exist and discretion is still exercised (Gregor 1985, cited in Montgomery, 2009).

Such an example shows that the child’s body and acts of sexuality are perceived differently across cultural boundaries (Kehily and Montgomery, 2009). In the same way historical differences have existed regarding children’s expressions of sexuality and exposure to sexual matters. Attitudes have fluctuated, and still do, but the current concerns regarding the sexualisation and eroticization of children, especially girls, seems to be rife in Western society and this is influenced by anxieties over sexual abuse. The view of the child as asexual, innocent and unknowing has been affected and threatened by historical and current instances of sexual behaviour, exposure and knowledge, yet this prominent discourse still remains, and the view of childhood being a time of innocence, a precious time that must be protected and maintained, is what leads adults greatly to fear children’s sexuality.

References


