



# New Zealand therapist insights into the intersecting fields of sexualities and childhood

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## Abstract

Little research has been published about therapists' insights into the intersecting fields of sexualities and childhood. In this paper, I focus on therapists' responses from my recently completed doctoral research project in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this study, I analysed "talk" by adults (parents, teachers, and therapists), responding to the question: What language is used to describe childhood sexuality by adults in Aotearoa New Zealand? Through group and individual interviews, participants were invited to respond to a range of vignettes about children's actions that some people regard as sexual. The analysis shows that therapists, like parents and teachers, drew on heteronormative ideas of child development to describe and shape children's expressions of sexuality. Questions about gender and sexual pleasure in childhood are discussed and the article concludes with an invitation to counsellors to examine their own positioning in their talk about the child and sexuality.

## Keywords

Aotearoa New Zealand, childhood, child sexuality/sexualities, therapists

The doctoral study from which this article emerges asked what language is used by adults in Aotearoa New Zealand to describe childhood sexuality (Flanagan, 2019). As a counsellor, my interest in research about children and sexuality stemmed from a background of counselling in agencies where I was asked to work with boys in response to "their sexualised behaviour" (see Flanagan, 2003; Flanagan & Lamusse, 2000). My curiosity about how child sexuality is language increased further working alongside parents, social practice professionals, and teachers (Flanagan, 2011, 2014). The language adults use in relation to childhood and sexuality has traditionally not been clear and has taken many forms. In addition, some of the more harmful effects of language include labelling and isolating practices for children and their families, which occur in schools and neighbourhood communities (Flanagan, 2010). Drawing from narrative approaches to counselling, I argue that language used in storying people's lives constitutes their identity (White & Epston, 1990). Therefore, a counsellor's attention to the ways in which children and families are spoken about by others, such as teachers, and how they speak about themselves, is critical in shaping children's identity and understanding of themselves in relationship to others (see Winslade & Monk, 2007). Language is key to this task of therapeutic storying of identity (Monk et al., 1997). While there is some literature about counselling and therapy that focuses on practice with children (see Friedrich, 2003; Johnson, 1999; Lamb, 2006), there is little written about therapists' personal perspectives on their understanding of, and approach to, this topic. This article aims to report on therapists' talk about childhood and sexuality from the doctoral research and invites readers to reflect on and unpack the effects of the language that adults use in their talk about the child and sexuality.



## Theoretical concepts

This section briefly introduces the theoretical concepts concerning: 1) postmodern questions of knowledge; 2) social constructionist critique of meaning; and, 3) poststructuralist analysis of power.

A postmodern framework (Lather, 1991; Lyotard, 1984) invites questions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed, what knowledge does, and how it is (re)presented. This study involved the reading of material about child development and childhood studies, and literature on sexual development. A postmodern lens assumes and analyses relations of power that are produced within constructions of childhood and sexuality, and a critical attention is given to the politics of language and power relations about childhood and sexuality. A social constructionist critique (Gergen, 2015; McLeod, 2011) of essentialist and universalist notions of the person was also adopted. Social constructionist ideas offer a platform to question, through language, understandings of truth and reality.

Lastly, poststructuralism is the theoretical exploration of postmodern ideas (Richardson, 1997; Weedon, 1997) and focuses specifically on links across language and power. Poststructuralist theory helps inform awareness and analysis of power relations and is particularly helpful with regard to analyses of gendered and cultural notions of childhood. I drew particularly on the discourse work of Foucault (1972, 1982, 1990), Derrida's (1976, 1978) approach to deconstruction, and Butler's (1990, 1992, 1997, 1999) work on queer theory to expand the approach to querying normative practices in gender and sexuality. The research project focuses on text and language as discursive practices that align with particular ways that sexuality/gender are iterated and reiterated in the lives of children.

## Theorising sexuality/gender<sup>1</sup>

To engage in useful reflection on the thinking and language around childhood and sexuality that counsellors might find useful, I now include here selected literature reviewed in the study.

### Cultural perspectives

In reviewing literature, I scoped various definitions and cultural perspectives on sexuality. Within the context of Aotearoa, diversity and inclusion of multiple sexualities existed in pre-colonial Māori society (Kerekere, 2017; Te Awekotuku, 1993, 2003; Wall, 2007). "Historically, Maori society was based on sexual diversity and acceptance of difference" (Aspin & Hutchings, 2007, p. 415). British/European and Christian colonisation had effects for Māori and Pasifika cultures and their practices of sexuality in structures and practices of marriage, family, clothing/nudity, and divisions between adults and children (Aspin & Hutchings, 2006, 2007; Fitzpatrick, 2015). Understandings of sexuality and childhood were shaped by colonising effects of politics, religion, and science. Drawing on Aspin and Hutchings' (2007) work, Fitzpatrick (2015) further notes that, "rationalist approaches to sexuality were imposed on Māori in New Zealand via colonisation and in line with Christian traditions; the same can be said for the experience of various Pasifika peoples" (p. 121) and, that "prior to colonisation, Māori notions of sexuality were not predicated on current norms" (p. 121). Kerekere (2017) and Te Awekotuku (2001) also argue that recent notions of Māori sexuality are shaped and reshaped by colonisers and missionaries.

Pacific people had a history of diversity and openness as ideas of sexuality were not closed to same-sex or aged prohibitions (Fitzpatrick, 2015). Colonisation has affected Pasifika cultures regarding sexual diversity and children's access to knowledge. Similar findings are reported about Māori approaches to childhood and the effects of colonisation on child-rearing and parenting practices, and effects on education practices (see Selby, 1999). In Māori culture, childhood was not divided up as in Western concepts where stages of development are dominant (see Metge, 1995).

## Sexuality as discourse

Studies of sexuality comprise sexology, psychoanalysis, and social theories, including feminist perspectives and masculine constructions of sexuality. Rather than reproducing a Western-dominated definition of sex/sexuality in languages of biology, medicine, human development, or a psychodynamic view of instinct, I utilised Foucault's (1990) problematisation of the concept of "sexuality as an effect of power" (Jackson & Scott, 2010, p. 17). Foucault names six "relations" of power strategies that are evident when real time examples of sex/sexuality become visible. These include: reproductive function; sexuality/sex in "its heterosexual and adult form"; marriage; the politics of two sexes; age; and social class (Foucault, 1990, p. 103). These "strategies" offer perspectives of sexuality discourse through which text/language can be analysed and understood.

Foucault asks a number of questions about the "incitement" of the discourse of sex. These include:

What were the effects of power generated by what was said? What are the links between these discourses, these effects of power, and the pleasures that were invested by them? What knowledge (savoir) was formed as a result of this linkage? (Foucault, 1990, p. 11)

These questions serve to focus how sexuality can be interrogated as a powerful form of governance in constructing childhood. Shaped within practices of gender, class, and age, the bodies of women and men, girls and boys, are subjected to social norms of masculinity and femininity, adulthood and childhood. These gender practices are continuously reinforced in language and action and therefore have effects on children's bodies and adult bodies. Children and adults are, in effect, disciplined by age and sex-knowledge through practices of language and behaviour.

## Sexuality discourses in families and schools

For example, Foucault (1990) notes that within the family, power is developed "along its two primary dimensions: the husband-wife axis and the parents-child axis" (p. 108). Through the family, social norms are reproduced in the practices of individuals as "husbands" and "wives," and as "parents," in creating and recreating normative sexuality, and in ideas of "childhood" that are steeped in heteronormativity and supposed ignorance of sex/sexuality knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

So too, "schooling" is identified as a particular site for the reiteration of sexuality discourses (see Fitzpatrick, 2013), including the construction of gender (Davies, 1993), heteronormativity (Smith & Gunn, 2015), sexuality (Burke, 2011) and of masculinities (Mac an Ghail, 1994; Sexton, 2015). Children's educational institutions, from early childhood through to secondary, are spaces in which gender and sexuality are constructed according to dominant cultural social norms. Early childhood education, claims Taylor (2013), is "a key training ground for conformity and compliance through the introduction of social norms and the encouragement of self-regulating behaviours" (p. 197). Blaise (2010) identifies two specific silences in her research with young children that construct normative understandings of sexuality: same-gender desire and non-normative gender behaviours. Blaise states that "children know a lot about heterosexuality and romance, and about how femininities and masculinities are constructed through relationships" (p. 7).

## Child sexuality discourses

Ideas of “innocence” dominate the various discourses in which children are positioned as immature, ignorant, vulnerable, and at risk of abuse (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; James et al., 1998; Taylor, 2010). The assumption is that children should not know about sex because sex is adult business. Adults therefore act for and on behalf of children, since children are unable to think and act maturely (Blaise, 2009, 2010). By taking a particular view of children as at risk, a risk mentality over time produces moral panics (see Robinson, 2012). Parents and teachers, on the other hand, are positioned as responsible in children’s lives for their development as good, healthy, and heteronormative citizens.

Using poststructuralist theory, notions of innocence are deconstructed to produce questions about the potential harm for children of ideas of innocence, and also possibilities for recognising children’s agency. Children can know about sex as children, and approach knowledge of sex/sexuality without being at risk. Robinson (2012) points to a fundamental paradox of perception of children’s innocence, in that “asexuality” positions children as “too young to understand sexuality” (p. 268). And yet, “the construction of heterosexual identities and desire in early childhood is a socially sanctioned integral part of children’s everyday educational experiences—for example, mock weddings, kiss and chase, mummies and daddies” (p. 268). Robinson also queries thinking that suggests that corruption of a child’s innocence would lead to “children’s promiscuity and immature sexual activity [and] the formation of the promiscuous adult or the deviant adult citizen/sexual citizen” (p. 264).

The discourse of the “knowing child” is both ironic and highly problematic in that a critical way of increasing children’s competence and resilience is to provide them with language and knowledge about sexuality and an understanding of what constitutes ethical and unethical sexual relationships. It is the perceived “innocence” constituted in the dominant discourse of childhood that is tenaciously protected by adults that can lead to their vulnerability. (Robinson, 2012, p. 265)

The current language of childhood and sexuality is linked to a narrative of heteronormative gender and power relations. As such, this narrative has recounted ideas and practices that identify the antecedents of today’s sociocultural expressions of sexuality and childhood, and the multiple discourses framing education and social policies, as well as family life and parenting.

The transgressive notion that children may be sexual beings disturbs many parents’ and teachers’ ideas about childhood and sexuality, begging the question: How are counsellors placed in their work with children and families and schools when professional expectations of counselling might sit uncomfortably with personal perspectives of childhood and sexuality?

## Methods of inquiry and analysis

This section outlines the methodological approaches adopted in the research, including the methods of inquiry and analysis that were used.

### Deconstruction of text

Derrida’s (1976) ideas of deconstruction were applied in the study to unpack dominant knowledges about child sexuality. Deconstruction is an analysis of language to expose distinctions between an idea of a fixed meaning for a text and the possibility of multiple meanings. Text, in this context, is not only written text but includes spoken word, such as within participants’ talk. Adopting deconstruction to question hierarchical understandings of sexuality and childhood opens space for other understandings.

## Discourse analysis—deconstructing relations of power

The research analyses sociopolitical and sexuality/gender discourses. Childhood and sexuality are viewed through lenses of both poststructuralist, including feminist poststructuralist, and social constructionist perspectives. The language that shapes childhood in relation to adult participants is interrogated, using a Foucauldian approach, for its power relations. Alongside discourses on sexuality and gender, constructions of childhood are interrogated as messy, complicated, and queer (Taylor, 2013).

## Methods of inquiry applied in this research

While children did not participate in this research as respondents, the focus was nonetheless on children's experience and adults' interpretation, understanding, and responses. Corsaro (2011) calls for researchers to "give voice to children's concerns...[and]...their struggles to gain some control over more powerful adults and adult rules" (p. 52). The three sites selected for research interviews included child-focused settings: two schools, and a counselling agency that worked with children as clients. These sites allowed access to adult participants who engage daily with children and the concerns that children experience. Prior to introducing the participants, I describe ethical review, and then the methods of inquiry: vignettes and interviews.

## Ethics

Aware of the power relations within the practice of counselling, I wanted to use reflexivity as an "ethical notion" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 262). As such, my approach to ethical review for this research was beyond a compliance with codes, but as a practice of the researcher-self. This study received ethical approval from the University of Waikato Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee.

My curiosity for this project began within professional counselling practice, about how sexuality in childhood might be understood, and responded to, by significant adults in children's lives. As such, research ethics are here viewed as relational (see Tolich et al., 2016). Postmodern approaches to ethics in human research highlight relational aspects of people engaging in knowledge production, and how people's knowledge is (re)produced. So, I positioned myself in relation to my researcher-self and in relation to research participants. Taking up an ethical reflexivity, I was aware of questioning my own intentions, negotiating gender positioning, and thinking about safety for participants—and, as researcher, my own safety (see Flanagan, 2015). Ideas of curious inquiry and practices of deconstructing discourse, from narrative counselling, were brought into this research (see Monk et al., 1997). Alongside the counsellor knowledge, I brought to the researcher position knowledge from parenting, school trusteeship, counsellor education, and involvement in research ethics review.

## Vignettes

In the interviews, participants were invited to respond to six vignettes that described a range of children's experience and struggle. Vignettes can be a form of ethical and sensitive research practice, providing space for participants to speak directly and distantly, from personal experience or an imagined response (Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). Talk about sex/sexuality can be difficult for some people, so the hypothetical nature of vignettes offers distance from personal experience; a less threatening way to explore sensitive topics; opportunity to offer an imagined response to a scenario; and a space to offer personal information if participants choose to (Barter & Renold, 1999, 2000). The intention for the use of vignettes was to initiate discussion about childhood and sexuality and to elicit the "talk" to be used for analysis.

The vignettes constructed for this study were informed by children's experiences shared within my counselling practice over some years, including stories of actions deemed "inappropriate" by some adults (urinating, kissing, nudity, genital touching, talk about intercourse). Each vignette was developed from a number of children's experiences brought together as a fictionalised account (Flanagan, 2017). These vignettes were trialled during a consultation phase early in the research with principals and teachers, and then within a pilot with teachers and parents, during which developments were made to clarify aspects of the stories.<sup>3</sup> Each vignette was read aloud to participants and sections of their responses were selected for analysis that highlighted specific practices in language and thought. Unstructured questions within interviews gave participants opportunities to include remembered voices of children as they told personal stories in response to the vignettes, both about themselves and about children.

### Interviews

Participants were invited within the two schools and one counselling agency for interview as individuals or in groups to include a range of teachers, parents and counsellors. Individual interviews offered participants space to respond to the vignettes in the safety and privacy of one-to-one dialogue. The three group interviews (one each of teachers, parents, and counsellors) supported a broader discussion among participants and a less structured way of exploring topics that were spoken about. Interviewing is not a neutral activity (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Scheurich, 1995), and I was aware of possible effects of the research on participants: for example, how might people respond to the vignettes if there might be connections to their own personal experiences, and how people might respond to me as a middle-aged man asking questions about children and sexuality? I considered a range of power relations within the interviews (particularly gender), and following the interviews, where I selected what was said for analysis and then construct meaning from this analysis.

These interviews, of around 60 minutes in the particular school or agency, were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were sent to participants for checking. Since transcription is a form of interpretation, I used verbatim, or orthographic transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2013), focusing on *what* was said rather than attention to how it was said. My reading of the transcripts was then a "looking for what the language does" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 187). Through reading and rereading and repeated listening to recordings of the interviews, a number of themes and possible directions for analysis emerged.

### Participants

There were three phases in this study: consultation with schools and agencies across both the North and South Islands of New Zealand; a pilot trialling the information and consent forms, and the vignettes; and then participant interviews (with teachers and parents in the schools, and with parents and therapists in the agency). During the consultation phase, while exploring avenues for advertising for participants, one school principal and one agency team volunteered to participate. Following the pilot, a further school was identified to include the perspectives of beginning teachers. These became the three sites for the study and where interviews were undertaken.<sup>4</sup>

The two schools were large primary schools and the counselling agency was in a larger city.

Within the community agency, six therapists participated in individual interviews and four of these six agreed to participate in a group interview as counselling practitioners together. The therapists, all women, identified themselves as a psychologist or social worker or counsellor. Within the group interview, participants shared about what value they found for themselves from discussing the vignettes together. Some of the therapists reflected on personal and professional benefit for them, as three of their comments indicate:

[S]o much of the research on children's work is all from the Northern Hemisphere.

That's why it's really exciting and want to support you in this. (Therapist A)

[There is] the value of having time to reflect on the conversations, that aren't clinically based—you know, we come together [for] case reviews...but there's little time and space to be able to offer support. But this was interesting, hearing the value of just being able to talk about children and sexuality, yeah. I think that the languaging is quite key to provide people with a language of how to talk about sexual stuff. (Therapist B)

I have enjoyed this opportunity to have the dialogue with other clinicians...I wonder if there's some value in having a process like this for orienting [new] clinicians...a discussion about different ideas, different positions, different ways of looking at this...and conversations that we don't have the time to sit and have and reflect on. (Therapist C)

Due to limitations of space, and the understanding that selected material speaks to specific discourses shown in the literature and through participants' talk, the contributions of only two individual therapist interviews are represented in this article.

### **Analysing the talk**

Discourse analysis in this study asks how childhood is shaped as sexed and gendered. Viewing text as producing and reproducing sexuality/gender discourses, the analysis explored fragments of text that speak to wider frameworks. A social constructionist perspective views social representations and social practices. What participants say is constructed as discursive text, and while it is theirs, it is also not only theirs: it is text that is spoken in discourse and across discourse by many people, including some of the other participants. This article draws from data provided by therapists who participated in the study, but their responses do not necessarily focus on their identity as therapists. The words they use are shaped within multiple identities: as parents, mothers, partners, siblings, and neighbours—as well as therapists. The text, therefore, is analysed discursively within wider social and cultural ways of speaking and extends beyond “therapist-talk.”

### **(De)Constructing normative childhood sexuality**

The research project aimed to make a contribution towards deconstructing discourses around child sexuality for the purpose of adults' understanding, particularly counsellors and teachers. The selected fragments of text in the next sections are presented because they provided specific material for analysis of discourse. They expose the effects of language that regulate children's knowing and experience. I hope that these examples provide opportunities for reflection in our work as counsellors; about how we hear what is said and, in responding, thinking about that which informs what we say.

### **Talk that produces children's knowledge about sex as heteronormatively gendered**

In this section, I focus on how notions of heteronormativity and developmental discourses around age and innocence are organised in participants' talk. A spotlight is shone on the effects of reproduced talk that construct norms about gender as “appropriate” words and actions. It will show how language can be a dividing practice that serves to objectify children as inside or outside subjects of normal childhood, and as female or male. Masculinity discourses take a prominent place in the substance of these dividing practices. Further, these practices draw on a history of repetitive and reiterative chains about childhood as “innocent” and sexuality as heteronormative.

### “It’s more acceptable for boys to be overtly sexual”

A number of participants spoke about the social acceptability of boys showing or talking about their genitals, but not girls. Val (a pseudonym), one of the two therapist participants included in this article, responded to the vignette about a young girl rubbing herself between her legs, when she said:

**Val:** ...like the urinating thing [referring to an earlier vignette], we kind of tolerate boys touching their genitals much more often than we do girls touching their genitals.

Researcher: Any ideas?

**Val:** I don’t know, really. It’ll be a question that I give some thought to.

Maybe because [a] boy’s [genitals] is on the outside, so we kind of expect that they’ll need to adjust it and fiddle with it, and play with it. I don’t know, we just seem to have different expectations of boys and girls. And maybe it is a biological or physiological thing, you know, ’cause it’s kind of like the peeing thing [in Vignette #1]...That it’s there, it’s more acceptable for boys to, kind of be overtly sexual, than it is for girls.

**Researcher:** And that’s something that in our society you think is present?

**Val:** Yeah, I do.

Researcher: Do you think that sort of message sometimes has effects for the clients who are coming to see you here [in counselling]? In the sense that message of how society allows boys to be more overt in some ways...?

**Val:** I suppose—and this is probably more evident in [the work with] adolescents, and [in the work with] children too. I guess it means that we might [not] be quite so quick to pick up on girls concerning sexual behaviour. And we might take a different meaning of that for quite a long time before it gets to a point where we identify it as concerning.

Val made a clear political statement about a sociocultural accepted gendered positioning: “we kind of tolerate boys touching their genitals much more often than we do girls touching their genitals.” She located biology and physiology as a reason for boys’ focus on and handling of their genitals. Their genitals are on the outside (of their body) “so we kind of expect that they’ll need to adjust...fiddle...play with it.” Interested in her other thoughts apart from biology/physiology, Val responded directly (“that it’s there”), that it is more socially and culturally “acceptable for boys to...be overtly sexual, than it is for girls.” She identifies that, not only are boys more likely to be “tolerated” touching their genitals than girls, but she also comments on the social acceptability of boys’ “overt” sexuality.

Val’s reflection on gender produced an understanding for her about her work with children in therapy. Val held a sense that gender difference had effects for recognising whether particular sexual behaviour may be harmful or problematic. She reflected that girls’ sexual behaviour may be viewed less problematically in terms of being harmful to others, compared with boys’ sexual behaviour.

Gender surfaced within this interview, in Val’s responses, as a discursive site of power relations. In her talk, gender is constituted and reconstituted as a binary, through sexuality and sexual behaviour. Within language about boys and girls, and ideas of boys’ and girls’ behaviour, assumptions about males and females re-tell constructions of gender, and reconstruct gender in the telling as something natural (see Davies, 1993). As Davies noted, “The division of people into males and females is so fundamental to our talk...that it is generally understood as a natural fact of the real world rather than something



we have learned to see as natural” (p. 7). Stating “it’s more acceptable for boys to, kind of be overtly sexual, than it is for girls” both reiterates constructions of masculinity as hegemonic and challenges the heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity that is in contrast to feminist views of gender.

The dominant constructions of gender as binary, shown in this excerpt, and practised strongly within the language of our society and experienced daily within everyday talk and media, shut down possibilities for those within our communities who do not identify as binary gendered. Highlighting the binary invites us, as counsellors, to reconsider the language we use, and how that language constructs the reality of people’s experience as gendered.

### **Talk that produces little place for sexual pleasure as a child**

This section focuses on knowledge about/of sexual pleasure and presents examples of the use of euphemisms in speaking about sex and how this talk separates notions of pleasure from sex. Ideas of childhood innocence can position children as unknowing, immature, and as protected or constrained from knowing.

This is a contested area for research and researcher where colliding notions of childhood and sexuality sit uncomfortably with cultural and societal discourses about sexuality as the domain of adult experience and about childhood innocence. It is also contentious for counsellors as children might acknowledge the experience of pleasure in actions that are not acceptable in particular contexts or within their families. Foucault’s (1990) ideas on desire and pleasure offer a useful lens through which to examine participants’ language regarding notions of sexual pleasure in the lives of children. Through the ideas and constructions that participants share in their talk, I deconstruct notions of sexual pleasure in childhood.

#### **“Safe” self-soothing or “enjoyable” masturbation?**

Further within her response to the vignette about a five-year-old girl rubbing herself between her legs, Val questioned the language that adults might use to describe this action.

**Val:** ...my head automatically went to masturbating, and that’s because I’ve seen children masturbate at school. I think, I mean, language is interesting. I think that the other thing...was the idea about Mum or Dad, or whoever, having a conversation with [the girl] about masturbating, and you know, that will be influenced by their beliefs about whether that’s acceptable or not. And then, hearing [a colleague] talk about self-soothing, and thinking, well, that’s probably the same thing, but self-soothing is much more tolerable as far as language goes for some people. It gives it a different meaning. When I think of self-soothing I think, okay, you touch it and it feels nice—which isn’t particularly different from masturbating, I don’t think.

**Researcher:** The connotation [being]?

**Val:** The language around it, it’s, yeah, it’s more age appropriate I guess, and it’s more, it’s easier for adults to hear that, perhaps, than perhaps a word like masturbating.

**Researcher:** Because masturbation has a different sort of contextual meaning?

**Val:** It does, it’s sexual.

**Researcher:** When you’re pubertal or post-pubertal?

**Val:** Yeah, it does. And there's something about the difference between self-soothing which you can kind of suck your thumb and the gratification, I suppose, that we expect will come with masturbating.

I think that Val's reflection on the word "masturbation" as holding a sexual meaning, compared with a colleague's use of "self-soothing" as "much more tolerable as far as language goes for some people", highlights how language produces meaning within contexts, and produces power relations in terms of contrasting childhood and adulthood, and constructing sexuality as an adult/non-child domain. The euphemistic language of the vignette describes the girl using one hand to rub herself between her legs. For Val, however, masturbation and self-soothing are "probably the same thing," but there is some contradictory explanation, which is also clarifying. "It gives it a different meaning." For Val, these descriptions produce a difference in relation to adults' beliefs about childhood and their tolerance for child sexuality. She considers one is "more age appropriate," and this reproduces the frequently used cliché in which truths of childhood are delineated by age. And yet, Val considered that "self-soothing," as touching and feeling that is "nice," "isn't particularly different from masturbating," Val identified the girl's rubbing of herself, even if described as "self-soothing," as "masturbation"; an action that is a sexual action and can include a sexual meaning.

Val's talk identifies a distinction between the effects of language. To use a euphemism such as "self-soothing" connects with notions of pleasure in thumb-sucking, and of childhood as ignorant and innocent of sexual pleasure. To suggest that a child may experience sexual pleasure from self-soothing might extend the action and experience beyond what is acceptable to adults who believe in childhood innocence. Masturbation is not an acceptable word to use for many people, suggested Val, since the language starkly refers to sexual pleasure. The use of euphemisms in this context not only suppresses ideas of sexual pleasure but silences speaking about masturbation in childhood. The child's bodily experience is not responded to, and the use of an oblique and inoffensive description (self-soothing) hides the possibility of pleasure. The contrast of pleasure, as potentially initiated by a child as an intentional act for pleasure, cannot find space for meaning in this talk, because it is unacceptable. The "go to" language is "self-soothing."

The action/speech of hiding masturbation in childhood relates to Foucault's (1990) idea that "the sexuality of children has been subordinated and their 'solitary habits' interfered with" (p. 41). While Foucault refers to masturbation by males, his words are relevant, considering the actions inflicted on girls during the moral hygiene movements of the 1880s (see Egan & Hawkes, 2007, 2008; Sprague, 1990). Foucault (1990) found:

Educators and doctors combatted children's onanism<sup>5</sup>

like an epidemic that needed to be eradicated. What this actually entailed, throughout this whole secular campaign that mobilized the adult world around the sex of children, was using these tenuous pleasures as a prop, constituting them as secrets (that is, forcing them into hiding so as to make possible their discovery)... (Foucault, 1990, p. 42)

Val spoke of masturbation, where the child in the vignette "rubbed herself between her legs" within a public context of school, both in class and outside as the class were lining up. This word, masturbation, is in contrast to the phrase, self-soothing, which is described as more acceptable language.

The relations of power within the language of self-soothing and masturbation are produced within the naming of the behaviour. These practices of speech and action in response to the girl's "rubbing of herself between her legs" locate knowledge/power in the language that describes what is happening



and in the responsive action of overlooking or responding to the girl's behaviour. The girl's private act within a public place transgresses behavioural social norms. Most children have social and cultural knowledge that masturbation should be hidden in secret privacy, and not discoverable or performed in public.

While the vignette does not speak of masturbation, or clearly state touching in the crotch area, it did produce talk that included this focus and understanding. However, within this talk, ideas of pleasure were absent. It seemed that genital touching held only other meanings, and there was no talk about any comprehension or space to safely speak about sexual pleasure for a child.

### **Finding space to speak about sexual curiosity and exploration**

Maxine, another therapist, reflected on an experience with a family where children had access to pornography. Responding to a vignette about two eight-year-old children kissing, she commented on parents' use of technology as a tool for distraction, with children witnessing adult activity online. She questioned whether sexual activity among some children, such as kissing, may be viewed by adults as harmful or dangerous. This opinion was expressed when, particularly, children are involved in potentially curious exploration about sexuality.

**Maxine:** So they [the children] type in "sex" on the computer, they get a lot more than what they bargained for... I wonder about parents and caregivers using iPads and iPhones and the computer as a way of coping, because it gets the kids out of their hair and then I wonder if there's less supervision...

**Researcher:** Have you seen an increase...of referrals using technology now?

**Maxine:** Absolutely. Well, certainly kids being exposed to really full on pornographic images...that they have stumbled across, and it's extensive, in terms of the images they've seen. Not just the bums and boobs that were around when we were kids...

Very soon after, Maxine shared a story about a family she had worked alongside, emphasising what she perceived to be the father's alternative perspectives on his sons' actions.

**Maxine:** Actually, what comes to mind for me...[pause] I'm just thinking of a father's comment. We worked with his two boys, who were ten and twelve. The father's comment of boys of that age that, this was a situation of two sets of boys who were engaging in penetrative anal sex, in the context of it being fairly mutual, and had a strong background of watching pornography together, the four boys [had] this sleepover, and a little bit of lack of supervision and knowingness from protective, good parents. But it was just kind of interesting while they were taking it incredibly seriously there was also a sense from the Dad that, isn't this kind of normal exploratory, you know, curiosity? As a young fella himself, and he thinks back to some of the behaviour that he engaged in with mates and he didn't kind of enhance on any of that, but I do kind of wonder sometimes, are we a bit too rigid in our, the rules around what we should be expecting kids to be engaging in. So, each different situation and each context...

The father Maxine is telling about in the interview recalls something of his own experience "with mates." It could be with this lens that the father considers his sons' behaviour is not unusual. He had said, "isn't this kind of normal exploratory, you know, curiosity?" Considering his own childhood and curious exploration of sexuality, Maxine recounted that "as a young fella himself...he thinks back to some of the behaviour that he engaged in with mates."



A problematic issue in this story, which adds to adults' complexity of thinking about children learning about sexuality, are the two activities of watching pornography and of engaging in (anal) sex. Maxine did not expand on the specifics of this story. However, the discursive settings of pornography and non-heteronormative sex do invite some reflection. Theorising sex and sexuality involve multiple possibilities for meaning, and particularly in relation to the effects of power/knowledge. The production of pornography has largely been shown to satisfy a male commercial market for pleasure, in addition to sex, and the viewing of sex, being a marketable product. Social and cultural responses to the use of pornography and acts of anal sex are that these actions are immoral and unnatural, as filthy or dirty. While the father did not speak of his sons' experience as pleasurable, did his own similar experience as a young person evoke understandings of pleasure? Furthermore, there is a contradictory positioning for the father in this example. As a man, possibly being or having been in a heterosexual relationship, talking about his two sons, he spoke about homosexual sex for boys as normal, exploratory, and curious. Sex discourses are produced in this example through power relations on childhood, on children relating sexually, on heteronormativity and challenges to understanding hetero sex as the gendered norm, and on parents and fathers called to account within a political and social practice that is counselling. Was there an unspoken experience of pleasure in sex for these boys?

What and how sexual behaviour is perceived within social contexts as normal or abnormal has effects for where and how this father might speak about his own experience, and the experience of his sons. There appears to be no space for this father to speak about his questions of curiosity and exploration for himself and his boys until he comes into a counselling context, and a therapeutic relationship with Maxine.

Maxine's pondering, "I do kind of wonder sometimes, are we a bit too rigid in our, the rules around what we should be expecting kids to be engaging in," invites going slow with making judgement or decisions about right and wrong. It also questions where men can find spaces to speak safely about their own same-sex experiences as children. A fear or shame for heterosexual men may be of being judged and labelled (possibly as gay, homosexual, perverted), and that discursive fear/shame subjugates this knowledge for men. The previous knowledge of this father as a sexual child experiencing sex was not spoken about until, and except in, this confessional context (see Foucault, 1990) of therapy, his children's therapy.

The context of counselling is a social practice of surveillance in which clients confess their thoughts and actions, and in which counsellors, wittingly or otherwise, through their own words and actions engage in shaping the families' lives. There is a policing, both of the boys' knowledge and experience of sex, but also of actions as children who transgress normative childhood. As children, these boys accessed (adult) pornography and engaged in (adult) sexual activity. Furthermore, this sexual activity crossed the boundaries of age and heteronormativity. In this case, the confessional space also acts to discipline parents who speak to their parenting practices, and where these practices might differ from expected norms.

## **Counselling as a space to respond to the silence and invisibility of sex talk**

One clear outcome of this research was that women appear to be forefront in responding to children about concerns and enquiries regarding sex and sexuality, and mostly in response to boys. In the context of families, schools, counselling, and in the literature, the vast majority of those involved in responding to and supporting children around sexuality are mothers/women carers, women teachers, women therapists, and women researchers. Here, in this article, two women are speaking. When speaking gender and child sexuality, much of the talk was around masculinity or male sexuality. It is as if the context is one of responsible women and absent men.

### **The gendering of adult responsibility for childhood and sexuality**

Particular talk that sustains gendered ideas and practices related to discourses about ignorance-through-innocence about sex/sexuality in childhood can be seen in participants' talk. These include: that sex should be (heteronormatively) gendered; that sexuality is located within a male/female binary; that the "true" nature of sex/sexuality is to be hidden from young people; and that knowledge about sex is concerned with past practices that valorise patriarchal or male-centred views.

This research has exposed the ways that gender is constructed and reiterated in children's lives in both private and public spheres, and particularly how boys continue to shape gender as heteronormative in dominant ways through hegemonic masculinity.

### **Possible implications of this research for counsellors working with children and families**

What might this research offer counsellors? My hope is that sharing some of this research might invite counsellors to consider the positions that they take in their conversations with parents and children in relation to counselling about sexual behaviour or questions about sexuality and gender. And, what positions might be made available to parents and children through the ways in which counsellors speak and act in their practice. Particular questions that could support reflecting on these ideas include:

- How is counselling produced in our professional contexts as a space in which the struggles and silences of sexuality can be safely spoken by parents? And by children?
- What opportunities are there for counsellors to examine their practice regarding the ideas they hold and the questions they might ask when counselling children, families, and parents about sex and sexuality and gender?
- How are counsellors placed to support children, and their teachers and parents, within their school and learning settings?
- What invitations are possible to include men safely with counselling children, and to engage in conversations that question non-inclusive practices and language around heteronormativity and sexual diversity?
- What could this mean for counselling with families, particularly since the majority of counsellors are women?
- As our society becomes more aware and inclusive of diverse sexualities, how are counsellors placed to support parents and teachers in conversations about diverse sexualities, for example intersex and transgender?

## Struggles and silences: Where and how to speak sexuality

Jackson (1990) highlights the secrecy of sex for children, and how this assumes a parental responsibility to conceal the secret of sex from children. She argues:

It is not simply that we hide sex from children and then worry about how to reveal it to them...Secrets are themselves a creation of the deployment of discourse and an incitement to discourse. Ever since circumspection with respect to children and sex began to be observed this has been the case. It is now *the* secret which we conceal from children, and is defined as such by the fact of our keeping it from them. As such it serves as a continual compulsion to produce an ever increasing volume of words. (Jackson, 1990, p. 48)

Jackson's words alert us to the repression of secrecy in society and in the family around sexuality, positioning parents, in particular, as morally and socially responsible for holding this secret. I hope practitioners may find in this article an opportunity to reflect about their own ways of thinking about sex/sexuality in the lives of children, and to support parents and children in finding safe spaces to speak.

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## Endnotes

1. I use the phrase sexuality/gender to emphasise the intersectionality of sex/sexuality/gender explored within feminist poststructuralist critiques—see particularly the works of Judith Butler (1990, 1992, 1999).
2. At the time of writing, the *Keep It Real Online* campaign, by the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs, is a fresh and humorous approach to supporting parents to respond to concerns about children's access online to sites that may include online bullying, pornography, and online grooming. However, the advertisements about the risks of pornography and grooming continue to reiterate dominant notions of heteronormative sexuality. See, <https://www.keepitrealconline.govt.nz/>
3. The six vignettes used in the study are summarised here, as stories about:
  - i. A 5-year-old boy who urinates in the school playground;
  - ii. Two 8-year-old children who kiss in the school playground;
  - iii. A 5-year-old boy who pulls his pants down in the classroom;
  - iv. A 5-year-old girl who rubs herself between her legs at school;
  - v. A 9-year-old boy who touches another boy's penis in the school toilet;
  - vi. A 7-year-old boy who tells a 6-year-old girl about sex at school.
4. There were 28 participants in the full study; 25 participants were female, and 3 were male. Seventeen participants were involved in individual interviews (5 teachers, 6 parents, 6 therapists) and four of the therapists were involved in one group interview. The other two groups included seven parents and four teachers.
5. Onanism is used as a synonym for masturbation by males, and is a biblical reference to Onan in Genesis 38:9.

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