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Finding a Sexual Dialogue with Children: A Dutch Model

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Fall, 2005

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Key Words: sexuality, education, youth

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Abstract

This paper investigates the ways in which Dutch children, under the age of 12, learn about sexuality. This is a holistic investigation of three different avenues of education that children receive; parents, schools, and organizations. Through a framework of developmental psychology, I examine how the methods of, and dominant theories behind, education reveal a larger cultural conception of childhood sexuality.

Through in-depth interviews, I spoke with one parent who lives in Amsterdam, one primary school teacher from the *De Theo Thysen* School in Amsterdam, two primary school sex educators from the *Hulpverlening Gelderland Midden* in Arnhem, and a representative from *Rutgers NISSO groep* in Utrecht, the *Nationaal Instituut voor Gezondheidsbevordering en Ziektepreventie* in Worden, and *De Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervorming* in the Hague.

Common themes manifested among these sources of information that were indicative of a cultural understanding of the child's sexual development as a period vital to a healthy sexual life as an adult. Children were spoken to frankly about sexuality, but in a manner that compliments their cognitive development, as they are seen as developing the foundation for an adult sexual life.

Through this research I highlight a current debate concerning the fate of formal sexual education in primary schools with an assessment of the current and proposed systems.

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Introduction

How does the Dutch culture talk to children about sexuality and what is the reasoning behind their approach? I will investigate the Dutch model of sexual development and the dominant theories of sexuality in children under the age of 12. Specifically, I will examine what sexual information is deemed appropriate at different ages in Dutch society and how this is integrated into methods of education. Through these approaches, I hope to gain an understanding of how dominant Dutch culture looks at, and understands, the sexuality of children.

It should also be stated that the demographic that I am studying cannot be generalized to the experiences of every child in the Netherlands; it is specific to the dominant Dutch culture and may not represent the subgroups, communities, and cultures within the Netherlands that hold alternative beliefs towards sexuality.

In addition, I should clarify my use of the terms “sexual education” and “sexuality”. The term sexuality is often associated with sexual acts, but I am using the term to encompass the many different aspects of sexuality, such as, types of relationships, feelings and emotions, physical behaviors, sexual health, one’s body, the physical and emotional changes one experiences throughout life, and so on. In addition, my definition of sexual education is also broad. It is not limited to the formal sexual education that children receive in schools; children learn and receive message about sexuality from a multitude of sources; parents, peers, teachers, movies, magazines, etcetera.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints and language barriers, I will focus my project on three specific channels that influence the information children receive; parents, educators

that work in primary schools, and organizations that conduct research and/or influence school models of sexual education.

I chose to examine children under the age of twelve because this marks the average age at which children, in the Netherlands, enter into secondary schools. Children, who are beginning to experience the affects of puberty, begin to receive compulsory sexual education in secondary schools, as opposed to primary schools in which sexual education has remained optional. In addition, many of the organizations that deal with sexuality, in the Netherlands, focus their energy on children who are in secondary schools and older.

There has been limited research conducted on the development of sexuality in children under 12 years old, but there has been a recent push to understand children as sexual beings. Recent studies, such as William N. Friedrich's article, "Normative Sexual Behavior in Children: A Contemporary Sample,"¹ have shown that it is a common practice of children to engage in a variety of sexual behaviors throughout childhood (Friedrich). My research will uncover how children's sexuality is perceived in the Netherlands and the resulting messages that are inscribed in children that eventually affect their sexual mentalities and behaviors. I would like to draw the connection between the promotion of an honest and open attitude towards sexuality during childhood, in the Netherlands, with a highly positive and openly expressive sexual future.

My research will examine the different avenues of education that may be helpful models for strengthening or critiquing the methods of sexual education for any group, school, or private use. I will catalogue approaches and perspectives towards childhood

¹ Friedrich worked in collaboration with Constance R. Shafran, Jennifer Fisher, Daniel Broughton, Margaret Houston on this study

sexuality and education, for children under the age of 12, that are useful in constructing a basis for a healthy sexual life. People can use this study as an accessible resource of ways to spark conversation with and educate children about sexuality.

Literature Review

There have been many research studies examining the sexual behavior of children in relation to, and as a result of, sexual abuse. Only in the past decade, or so, has there been an interest in the sexuality of children independent of sexual abuse. Therefore, there is limited research in understanding the sexual life of children.

Understanding children's sexuality, and the typical behaviors that children engage in, aid in grasping how children think about, and understand, sexuality. A foundation of knowledge can help determine the basis from which people talk to, and educate, children about sexuality. The following research outlines how the sexuality of children is currently being perceived and includes research specific to the Netherlands.

Theo Sandfort, a researcher in the Department of Clinical Psychology at Utrecht University and The Netherlands Institute of Social Sexological Research, in conjunction with Peggy Cohen-Kettenis, a psychologist in the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Academic Hospital in Utrecht launched the study, "Sexual Behavior in Dutch and Belgian Children as Observed by Their Mothers." Sandfort and Cohen-Kettenis executed this study to investigate the types, and frequencies, of sexual behavior in children ages 0 to 11 to establish a better understanding of the "normal"² sexual development of children.

This study consisted predominately of Dutch children, with only 7% Belgian mother's reporting, and about 72% of the children were between the ages of 2 and 6. This study was limited in its ability to set a standard for "normalcy." This study verifies that sexual behavior is prevalent among children, under the age of 12, and highlights that sexuality is always evolving with focuses shifting as certain behaviors increase and

² The use of "normal" can be interpreted as typical; behaviors found to be pervasive among children.

decrease in frequency as a child grows. The study found families that display high levels of physical intimacy and openness surrounding nudity, as well as, mothers who “hold more permissive attitudes towards sexuality,” observed higher frequencies of sexual behaviors in their children. It should be noted that this does not prove that children, in the situations described above, engage in sexual behaviors more frequently. Instead, these higher frequencies could be attributed to the child feeling more comfortable engaging sexual behaviors more publicly. The mother’s attitudes towards sexuality in children may also contribute to these reported frequencies; they may increase her ability to observe the behaviors. A higher awareness and acceptance of behaviors that may be expressions of sexuality can drive up the number of reported behaviors.

The demographic of this study should be critically examined; it must be taken into account that the respondents were mothers, generally well educated, who took the time to fill out a survey about their child’s sexuality. This limits the generality of the results found in the study. These results could very well be only indicative of a certain type of household that would participate in a study about sexuality, a context that may affect the types and frequency of sexual behaviors in children. It is also unlikely that a mother would be present during all the sexual behaviors her child engages in, therefore, the validity of the results can also be skewed by partial observations of the mother.

Regardless of the studies limitations, this research has affirmed that sexual behaviors in children exist independent of sexual abuse. It is natural, and can be expected, that children continuously discover their sexuality throughout their childhood. Debunking traditional notions that we must protect children from the topic of sexuality,

these findings point out the inherent sexuality in children, highlighting the importance of starting a dialogue of sexuality when these behaviors manifest in childhood.

Floyd M. Martinson is a Research Professor of Sociology, at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, The United States. In 1994, he published the book, The Sexual Life of Children, which focuses on the experience of children, and the various realms of their sexual life, in the United States, combined with perspectives and statistics from other cultures. In his sixth chapter, “Sexual Education”, Martinson highlights the importance in avoiding the repression of sexual knowledge and experience in children. He emphasizes the damaging ways negative messages can shape the perspectives and attitudes a child holds towards sexuality later in life.

In chapter five, “Dreams, Fantasies, and Myths”, Martinson refers to a Goldman & Goldman study conducted in 1982 to call attention to cultural differences. This study found that children, who were deprived of truthful information and explanations about sexuality, constructed mythical answers to the sexual questions they had. In addition, these children’s ability to understand complex biological concepts developed on a lower level than those children in countries that offered honest information about sexuality.

Sandfort and Cohen-Kettenis’ previously mentioned study, “Sexual Behavior in Dutch and Belgian Children as Observed by Their Mothers”, began to uncover the influence of one’s household in the development of one’s sexuality. Martinson expanded the influence of one’s environment to include a cultural context. Martinson focused on how different cultures produced different attitudes and understandings of sexuality in children, but Sandfort and Cohen-Kettenis went on to examine how the differences manifested in sexual behavior. In collaboration with William N. Friedrich, an affiliate of

the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota and Jacqueline Oostveen, an affiliate of the General Health Service in Hilversum, conducted the study, “Cultural Differences in Sexual Behavior; 2-6 Year Old Dutch and American Children.” This investigation plunges into the effects of culture on the sexual behaviors observed in children ages 2 to 6. This study compares the sexual behaviors of children, as perceived by their mothers, in both the Netherlands and in the United States. This research found that the sexual behaviors that were found to be more frequent boys, rather than girls, in the United States, such as, ‘showing genitals to kids and adults’, ‘touches sex parts at home’, and ‘masturbates using their hand’ were also reported more frequently for boys, rather than girls, in the Netherlands. This pattern was typical of girls as well; in both the United States and the Netherlands ‘talking flirtatiously’ and ‘cross-gender toy selection’ were both sexual behaviors that had a higher frequency in girls. Aside from gender, the study also found a similar effect of family sexual behaviors on the sexual behaviors of children in both countries, which is a similar finding to the above mentioned study, “Sexual Behavior in Dutch and Belgian Children as Observed by Their Mothers.”

The findings of “Cultural Differences in Sexual Behavior; 2-6 Year Old Dutch and American Children” depart from the aforementioned studies with its illustration of the tendency for Dutch mothers to report higher rates of sexual behaviors in their children, that than the American mothers. Of the 25 sexual behaviors being observed in children, 20 of the 25 behaviors were reported at a 5% higher frequency in Dutch girls than in American girls and 22 of the 25 boy’s behaviors had the same effect. In addition, 5 of the 25 behaviors observed in Dutch girls, and 7 of the 25 behaviors observed in Dutch males, were observed at a 20% higher frequency in the Netherlands. This research

suggests that not only are sexual behaviors present in children ages 2 to 6, but the scale on which one determines a “normal” frequency of sexual behaviors is sensitive to, not only one’s family, but also one’s cultural context.

This study illustrates the effects of context by clearly demonstrating that the expression of liberal sexual behaviors is a product of one’s environment, which is shaped by one’s culture and the dominant theories of sexuality it holds. This is important to my research because it supports my assumption that Dutch children, due to the cultural upbringing, are more uninhibited in experiencing and expressing their sexuality.

Tony Sheldon wrote the article, “Researchers Call for Sex Education in Primary Schools”, for the *British Medical Journal*, this fall, which discusses the findings of *Seks Onder je 25e*, a study launched by *Rutgers NISSO Groep* (RNG). This study has found that, not only, are more children in the Netherlands having sex, but they are having sex at a younger age than they were 10 years ago. While use of contraception and condoms has risen, 7% of children ages 12 to 14 reported having had sexual intercourse and this group remains at risk for unwanted pregnancies and health problems. The study found that one third of boys and one fifth of girls, in this age group, reported not using contraception with their last partner. *Seks Onder je 25e* found that 90% of teenagers receive sexual education within schools, which has been found to be the most valuable and important source of information for children. As a result of these findings, the individuals at RNG who conducted this study are pushing for more comprehensive education in primary schools as a proactive approach, asserting that it is important for children to be educated before they start having sex.

Amy Schalet, PhD, is affiliated with the Center for Reproductive Health & Policy at the University of California at San Francisco. She launched the study, “Must We Fear Adolescent Sexuality?” to investigate how one’s parents, and the larger society, in the Netherlands and the United States, perceive the sexualities of teenagers differently. Schalet uses statistics such as “American teenage girls are 3 times as likely to have an abortion, and 8 times as likely to give birth, as are their Dutch counterparts, even though both are typically 17 years old when they first have intercourse” and “Dutch teens use contraceptives more frequently and more effectively, and have fewer sexual partners, than do their American counterparts” as a springboard for her investigation.

Through in-depth interviews with parents, Schalet teases out the cultural differences that she finds to be the sources of these differing sexual behaviors. Schalet found that while the mentality of parents in the United States, which healthcare professionals, sex educators, and policy makers affect, is to *dramatized* adolescent sexuality, Dutch parents *normalize* adolescent sexuality. Schalet found that Dutch parents, typically, felt that teenagers had the ability to be “self-regulating sexual agents” that could take responsibility for their feelings and actions. Parents also spoke about sexuality in relation to relationships and love rather than an individual and biological context; taking adolescent’s feelings seriously and believing children have legitimate feelings of love. Schalet found that Dutch parents, with the support of healthcare professionals, sex educators, and policy makers, have normalized adolescent sexuality. By normalize, Schalet makes a point that they use the term *gewoon*, which translates to “normal, usual, or ordinary”, which she interprets to mean *right*. Dutch parents felt that

they would rather normalize the sexuality of their children as to not sever the parent-child relationship.

This study acknowledges the acceptance of sexuality in Dutch adolescence, but it does not address children under the age of 12. Schalet's study highlights an accepting perspective towards sexuality that may translate to younger children, but there have not yet been studies that address this question explicitly. In my study, similar to Schalet's, I will examine how children and their sexuality is viewed and treated in Dutch society through in-depth interviews to find common themes that run throughout my research. Although, deviating from Schalet's model, I will not limit my research to the role of parents, I will consider the influence of organizations and education in schools as well.

Theoretical Framework

The nature of the information that children receive about sexuality is often based on their perceived ability of understanding. Developmental Psychology is a helpful framework for understanding the general patterns through which people psychologically develop across their lifetime. Through the work of Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget I will outline the psychosocial and cognitive development of children. Then, through a critique of Jerome Bruner, I will underscore the importance of cultural context.

Erik Erikson formulated eight stages of psychosocial development. Erikson argues that a healthy mental development is contingent upon the individual's progress through each stage. A child must confront and successfully overcome each challenge presented in all eight stages. I will focus specifically on Erikson's second stage, "Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt" which occurs during late infancy, defined by Erikson as 1 to 3 years old. This stage is important to my research because Erikson postulates that children, during this stage, begin to recognize themselves as independent of their caretakers. Children begin to explore and manipulate their world on their own and if they are restrained or reprimanded too strictly, they are apt to form a sense of shame and self-doubt (Sheehy 73-77).

If you do not approach sexuality in a truthful and straightforward manner you are running the risk of damaging the development of one's sexuality. When children begin to discover their sexuality, through self-stimulation, play, or the pursuit for knowledge, it is important not to discourage these behaviors. Through Erikson's theory it can be understood that negative experiences of a child, during this time, can greatly influence the probability that they will grow ashamed and hesitant to discuss this natural aspect of

their life. It is important to maintain a direct and approachable channel of sexual education to inhibit poor decisions, and behaviors, and promote the freedom of sexual expression.

Jean Piaget was influential in the realm of child development in investigating how children gain knowledge. Piaget, as stated in Child Development and Personality, asserted, “To present an adequate notion of learning one first must explain how the subject manages to construct and invent not merely how he repeats or copies” (Mussen 39) Piaget explains children as actively constructing their reality; their development is a succession of acquired information that is incorporated into the child’s current knowledge through the modes of “assimilation”³ and “accommodation”⁴. These modes are the processes through which children rearrange their mental schema, and intellectually grow, as their pass through the four developmental stages that Piaget pioneered.

For, approximately, the first 18 months of life the mental activity of the child is predominately dominated by “the coordination of simple motor actions with incoming perceptions” (178), thus this period is characterized as the sensorimotor stage. From 18 months to age 7 the child develops language and meanings to objects in the preoperational stage, but the child’s “words and images are not necessarily organized into firmly articulated concepts and rules” (309) From age 7 to 12 the child *graduates* into the concrete operational stage, where the child learns rules about their environment. In this stage children acquire the ability to master operations as illustrated through their understanding of mental representations, conservation, relational terms, class inclusion,

³ Assimilation is, “the incorporation of a new object or idea into an idea or schema the child already has” (40)

⁴ Accommodation is, “the tendency to adjust to a new object, to change one’s schemata of action to fit the new object” (40)

and serialization⁵. Piaget's final stage, formal operations, begins at the onset of 12 years and continues throughout life. This final stage is where individuals fulfill Piaget's goals of development, "to reason abstractly, to think about hypothetical situations in a logical way, and to organize rules (which Piaget calls operations), into complex, higher order structures" (38-39).

Piaget recognizes a difference between the way a child and an adult understands the world; he perceives children as gradually building up their knowledge to the level of an adult. Piaget's theory recognizes that a child's understanding of complex concepts can be limited due to their evolving processes of reasoning. Piaget's theory helps those educating children to track the children's cognitive capacities, at each age, to tailor their curriculums to suit each stage. Children understand information differently as they develop and, therefore, they may not be able to understand certain topics about sexuality that are too complex for their abilities. Educators, of all kinds, can emphasize the processes of reasoning, that are typical within each stage, in order to facilitate the greatest amount of understanding from children.

Jerome Bruner's work fused the cognitive psychology and education field; like Piaget, Bruner was interested in the development of knowledge in children. Deviating from Piaget's ideas, Bruner did not believe that a child should be shielded from certain topics that were deemed too complex for their present ability. Instead, as quoted by Mark Smith, Bruner believed that, "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development" (4) This concept led to the

⁵ Mental representations are the ability to "produce a mental image of a serious or actions"; conservation is the understanding that "length, mass, weight, and number remain constant despite superficial modification in their external appearance"; relational terms are understood as "relations between two or more objects"; class inclusion marks the ability to "reason about the whole and its parts simultaneously"; serialization is the ability to "arrange objects according to some quantified dimension" (311-312)

development of the “spiral curriculum”, which is concept particularly structured to develop knowledge over time, “a curriculum as it develops should revisit this basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them” (4) Bruner’s ideas further Piaget’s thinking; he takes into account that children may process information differently, but does not believe that the introduction to certain subjects, such as sexuality, should be delayed or withheld from children. He asserts that topics should be introduced, and structured, in a way that fits their present cognitive ability. Then, topics should be continually revisited, in the future, and built upon throughout their intellectual growth. Therefore, one must not postpone dialogue about sexuality with children, simply, they must be in tune with the child’s development in order to ensure effective sexual education.

Bruner’s later work expanded his theories further, forging into the new field of Cultural Psychology. His ideas understood developing individuals in the larger context of their environment and, thus, as affected by their culture. Bruner perceives formal education, also, as a product of cultural influence;

It is surely the case that schooling is only one small part of how a culture inducts the young into its canonical ways...What we resolve to do in school only makes sense when considered in the broader context of what the society intends to accomplish through its educational investment in the young. How one conceives of education, we have finally come to recognize, is a function of how one conceives of culture and its aims, professed and otherwise (1).

Bruner uncovers education as a lens through which one can examine the qualities of a culture that permeates one’s entire environment. Bruner’s concept assists in highlighting the importance of a holistic view of one’s sexual education. Children receive messages and information about sexuality, from their culture, through many different avenues; all of these collectively contribute to their development and resulting mind-sets. Therefore it

is important to examine these channels as parts of a whole cultural education that a child receives.

Assumptions & Limitations

It is also important to acknowledge the assumptions I hold and the different lens through which I am examining this culture to. I must acknowledge these assumptions and my dispositions, that I have carried with me into this new culture, in order to remain aware of the ways in which they way bias my perspective on my research.

Before coming to the Netherlands, I had always seen Dutch culture as being extremely sexually open. I had read about their low sexually transmitted infection, teenage pregnancy rates, effective secondary sexual education. I can here expecting to find the sexually open atmosphere that had been portrayed to me over the years and was filled with assumptions about their sexual education system. I had imagined, not only, an extensive system for secondary sexual education, but also for primary schools.

To those that I am researching, I am a foreigner that is temporarily studying their culture, one that I am just getting acquainted with. I have to remember that I am alien to this culture and cannot begin to claim that I understand the country, its history, or its values and tendencies. I must remember that my cultural lens as an outsider will distort my understanding. Not only am I a guest in this country making judgments about their culture, but I also do not speak their language. Therefore, I will have to rely on their ability to speak my language in order for us to communicate effectively. Not only is my reliance on the English language insulting, but it also limits the scope of my research.

My Dutch illiteracy also limits my ability to access resources essential to my research. I am not able to read research, articles, or sexual education materials that have not been translated to English. The media is a large, and influential, source of sexual information and messages and, unfortunately, my research must automatically omit this

vital aspect due to my lack of Dutch language skills. I, also, cannot speak with subjects that are not capable of expressing themselves in English, which includes children, who, as the focus of my subject, are such an integral part of my project.

The language barrier also limits the interviewees' ability to express themselves, although they spoke very high levels of English, it is not their primary language. Therefore, they were continuously searching for English words that adequately describe what would have been easier to say in Dutch and information can be lost in subtleties of the language and word choice. I must also recognize my level of education and remain sensitive to the ways in which my education may manifest. I, also, needed to continually be aware of the level of English of my interviewee and speak at a speed and vocabulary level that can be clearly understood.

In congruence with my identity as a foreigner, the fact that I am from the United States may increasingly affect people's reactions to me. People can have very strong impressions and emotions about the culture of the United States that can color their perceptions and reactions to me. Our political actions, general stereotypes, or personal experiences may give people reason to hesitate to trust or open up to me about their sexuality. Identifying as a US citizen without being able to speak Dutch may reinforce the ethnocentric stereotype of citizens of the United States and hinder people's desire to help and educate me.

As a white, middle to upper-middle class individual I may ignore the variety of ways class and ethnic backgrounds affect one's holistic sexual education. I have to remain sensitive and alert to the ways in which different cultures within Dutch society are diversifying the attitudes towards the sexual development of children. Some families

may treat issues of sexuality different than what is thought to be the typical Dutch way. I have to avoid sweeping generalization about the culture that may only be particular to a certain ethnic or class group.

I need to also remain aware of my identity as heterosexual and keep in mind how sexual orientations and behaviors beyond my own may be under- or misrepresented in my study or in the materials and structures I am examining. It should also be noted that people engage in different types of sexual behavior and define ambiguous terms such as “sex” and “virginity” very differently. I need to be as specific and direct as possible to find the information I need.

Through these lenses I need to be aware of the assumptions I make. I must remain aware of who I am and the context through which I am perceiving what each interviewee is explaining. It would be impossible to wipe clean all biases and remain completely object in my research, but the simple acknowledgment of them helps to remain perceptive to the myriad of ways the holistic experience of sexual education is diversified.

Methodology

My main objective of this study was to understand the ways in which Dutch children learn about sexuality through three different sources; parent, schools, and organizations that influence sexual research and information. I will examine the perceptions of the sexual development of children and methods of sexual education that each participant maintains. I selected participants that fell into the three different avenues; one primary school teacher from the *De Theo Thysen School*, in Amsterdam: Gerda Pool, two primary school sex educators from the *Hulpverlening Gelderland Midden*: Corinne Vellekoop and Jeanette Tyssen. I also met with representatives from three organizations, Yuri Ohlrichs from the *Rutgers NISSO groep* (RNG), based in Utrecht; Sanderijn van der Doef from the *Nationaal Instituut voor Gezondheidsbevordering en Ziektepreventie* (NIGZ), (English Translation: the Netherlands Institute for Health Promotion and Sickness Prevention), based in Worden; and Dik Brummel from *De Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervorming* (NVSH), (English Translation: Dutch Society for Sexual Reform), based in the Hague. In addition, I spoke with one parent who lives in Amsterdam: Karin Fikke, but Corinne, Jeanette, and Sanderijn spoke about their experiences as parents as well.

I conducted an in-depth interview with each participant once; spanned from forty minutes to ninety minutes. I investigated each subject's perspective on the development of children's sexuality and their opinion on how children, under the age of 12, should be educated about sexuality. Interviews allowed for me to select a certain sample of people that, I felt, could provide a deep understanding of the current perspectives on childhood sexuality and education. Interviews also allow for the chance to clarify any points of

miscommunication or misunderstanding of my questions or their answers. I loosely followed interview guides that can be viewed in the Appendixes, which focused on each participant's involvement with my topic. Although, during each interview I asked questions that were reactions to the specific information they were supplying. All information is taken from each of these interviews; the first quote is sited, but thereafter only the name of the interviewee is used.

It must be noted that my sample is largely biased. Limited time, my inability to speak, and understand, Dutch proficiently, as well as the individuals' willingness to participate all skewed my findings. Also, as I mentioned before, my results are the experiences of a sample of people that are not representative of the entire Dutch culture, but they do provide insight into the experiences of some.

The Participants

Karin is a resident of Amsterdam and parent to one daughter of 8 years old. My interview with Karin focused largely on her different attitudes and perspectives towards her daughter's sexual development and education. Karin also spoke about the discussions and atmosphere that she stimulates with her daughter throughout her growth. I asked her to describe the environment and discussions she stimulates with her daughter. I was interested in how and when sexuality is spoken about and how Karin perceives her daughter in relation to the subject of sexuality throughout her development.

Gerda works at the *De Theo Thysen* School, in Amsterdam. She teaches children ages 8 to 10 years old, but this school only provides regulated sexual education for the children ages 10 to 12 years old. Gerda provided vital insight into how sexuality is dealt with in classrooms that do not have separate, structured sexual education, which is common for younger children in the Netherlands.

Corinne was originally a doctor's assistant, after which she became a school health educator, before she started her profession at the *Hulpverlening Gelderland Midden*, which was explained as the Arnhem version of the *Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst* (GGD). Jeanette works with Corinne, but she is also a primary school teacher, two days a week, for group 2, which is comprised of children ages 5 and 6 years old. Corinne and Jeanette, through their work with the *Hulpverlening Gelderland Midden* have, for the past three years, been involved in a government project to stimulate sexual education in primary school. They visit the primary schools in their area—they have visited 200 thus far, at which they teach three health education classes to group eight, which is comprised of children ages 11 to 12. During these classes the topics of

sexuality, drugs, and alcohol are covered. They have recently been interviewed and filmed for an English documentary on models of primary sexual education, in the Netherlands, that will air in January. During my interview with Corinne and Jeannette, we focused on their work related to sexual education. They explained how prevalent primary sexual education is, what the general themes are, what knowledge is distributed at each age, and what problems arise

Yuri works as a consultant and sexual education trainer for teachers at the RNG. RNG formed when the Rutgers Foundation, a family planning organization, and the Netherlands Institute for Social Sexological Research (NISSO) merged and created a center for sexual research. My interview with Yuri focused on his work in relation to sexual education in schools. He described the different projects he is currently involved with, along with his recommended materials and methods of distributing of sexual knowledge. He also spoke about the theories behind the structuring and ways of teaching children about sexuality.

Sanderijn is affiliated with NIGZ. In my search for contacts for this project, I was referred to Sanderijn by organizations and individuals on four separate occasions. She considered one of the Netherlands experts on childhood sexual education. She originally worked as a sex educator at the family planning organization, Rutgers, and worked specifically as an AIDS educator in secondary schools. Sanderijn explained her transition into primary sexual education as result of her having children, “I saw a lot of things happening with my children and they asked me questions about developing so I thought, I am not working at a family planning institute so there must be a lot of material that I can use to talk to my children and there was nothing...so that’s when I decided to

develop material.” (10 November 2005) Sanderijn has written curriculums for sexual education in schools, such as *Relaties & Seksualiteit*, as well as a collection of books such as, *Wie ist das met der Liebe?* My interview with Sanderijn focused on her work and opinions related to the sexual education of children in schools and at home.

Dik is affiliated with the NVSH. The NVSH was established in 1881; it is the oldest society in the world of its kind. They put out a magazine to its members every other month, *de nieuwe sekstant*, which had been in circulation for around 40 years, which includes articles relevant the broad subject of sexuality. This magazine is the successor of the magazine titled, *Sensible Parenting*, (English translation). The NVSH created the Rutgers Foudation that is now RNG. In 1967, the NVSH recorded highest membership, over 200,000 members, a number that has since dropped to a little over 1,000 members. Dik believes that this drop in numbers is characteristic of a shift in the public’s attitude, “the whole atmosphere has changed...the general opinion is not in favor of sexual reform, more freedom, and more change. On the contrary the atmosphere is generally that sex is a dangerous thing and that it is risky...we find ourselves in the minority opinion.” (17 November 2005) Their largest project of the NVSH is their website, www.nvsh.nl, which serves as a reference for the many aspects of sexual knowledge. My interview with Dik focused on the position of NVSH on children’s education and perception of the current sexual climate of the Netherlands

Data Collection & Analysis

I am going to discuss some general themes that I found throughout my research, introduce a current topic of debate, and conclude with an assessment of the current understanding of childhood sexuality and education.

Themes

My research sample included various individual's involvement in dealing with the sexuality of children, but through the previously mentioned theory of Bruner, one can understand that all channels of sexual education and communication are being influenced by a larger cultural context. The way in which parents, teachers, and organizations engage in a sexual dialogue with children are a lens through which one can see the underlying cultural perspectives towards the sexuality of children. The individuals I interviewed educate children in different ways but there were common themes that manifested among them. The methods through which children were educated about sex were all influenced by understanding the child as in the process of development and by the belief that children's interests reflect this development.

Not Even a Question: Providing Answers for Children's Questions

Children have questions about everything when they are growing up and, just as they ask about the weather, objects, animals, and other people, they inquire about their bodies, where they came from, babies, pregnant women, and other aspects of sexuality. Throughout my interviews, participants emphasized the importance of answering children's questions about sexuality.

Karin stated she would give the following advice to a parent that was having trouble talking to their child about sexuality,

Well when it's too difficult for you to talk about it with your child, seek help. Well I would start with friends and relatives that you trust, that can help you and help you talk about it with your child...then try to arrange something that your child can go to, a relative, a close friend, someone to whom the child can turn to with questions (16 November 2005).

Corinne and Jeanette utilize a “asking anything” box in their classroom to assure that children's questions get answered. The “ask everything box” is a box in which children can ask anonymous questions that the teacher will read aloud and answer. It functions as safe place for children get the questions they need answered even if, for some reason, they do not feel comfortable asking it aloud (16 November 2005).

Gerda expressed that when children ask her questions about sexuality you must answer and explain whatever the child is trying to figure out. She went onto say that if a teacher feels uncomfortable answering a question that a student asks then, “the teacher has to ask other colleagues to help the child, but if you can't help the child you need to find a solution to help them” (15 November 2005).

Each interviewee articulated that children's questions should not be left unanswered and that some form of the sexual education should start in childhood. It is commonly believed that sexuality should be addressed and not ignored, but I will examine how and why sexuality is discussed with Dutch children.

How Does One Talk to Children?

Education: Stage of Development

First I will discuss how the representatives from each organization understood childhood sexuality and the educational methods they recommend to teachers and parents. Then, I will draw a connection between the way these organization's structure their curriculums and the teachers' and the parent's attitudes towards educating children.

Models

Sanderijn stated that she felt that children should receive sexual education, in schools, when they start primary school at age four. She also recommends that the child's education should be delayed until they enter school;

When at home, I think you can start even earlier. You can start with children even when you can't communicate verbally. In a non-verbal way you are educating children from the day they were born, you send, in a non-verbal way, messages to children about everything and also about sexuality.

Both at home and at school, Sanderijn believes that, "sexuality should be a positive message in the first place"

Yuri, Corrine, and Jeanette had a similar ways of introducing the topic sexuality in schools. This is most likely because Yuri recommends Sanderijn's materials and Corinne and Jeanette use them as the foundation for the structure of their lessons. Therefore, the following outline of Sanderijn's opinions towards, and concepts of, sexual education were generally shared among these three participants in their interviews. Each felt that information should be given to children, at a young age, but that this information should be basic and simple so that the child can understand it. The approach takes into account the development of a child's cognitive abilities, as outlined Piaget's stage theory, and structures its educational method in a way similar to Bruner's "spiral curriculum". Information and concepts that are complex are not withheld from children; they are simply framed in a way that compliments the child's level of development. Also, the previously mentioned Goldman & Goldman study, conducted in 1982, found that when children are provided truthful information their ability to understand complex biological concepts increased.

Sanderijn feels that you can tell children about emotions and feelings; her examples included how one feels about their friends, what they feel when they love someone, who are the different people, or pets, that they have feelings towards and love. Body knowledge, the differences between girls' bodies and boys' bodies, and relationships can also be discussed. Relationships would consist of, what are different types of relationships and what does the child feel is appropriate in a relationship. What each child deems appropriate can be understood as the child beginning to think about what their wishes and boundaries are and how they can effectively communicate this to other people.

Sanderijn is also very concerned with the myths that children create about their bodies and reproduction and she feels that, even at this age, children should start learning about reproduction and the process of conception. Even though this process is very complicated for young children to understand, Sanderijn believes that one can effectively explain a basic understanding;

Telling, in very simply words, about the sperm coming out of the penis and the egg that already lives in the body of the mother and that when they are in love the penis goes into the vagina, the sperm goes out and meets the egg and there this will grow to a little child. Some children do not understand a clue of this story, others do a little bit...you tell them that this is something adults do together when they love each other then they know this is something not for children...and when they grow older you can adjust some more information.

Here, Sanderijn's approach is very clearly taking a formation similar to Bruner's theory of the "spiral curriculum". Children may not have the cognitive capacity to understand the intricate complexities of the process of conception, but she frames this information in a way that caters to the child's current status of development and then, later, continues to revisit the topic and add more information.

Yuri expressed that a discussion of sexuality should begin, in schools, at age four and continue each year. He believes that, although the information should remain basic, an awareness and attention to a child's natural sexual development is important. He alerted me to the materials of Sanderijn, specifically her *Relaties & Seksualiteit* workbook, and outlined the curriculum that Sanderijn explained above. Yuri went onto specify that different types of relationships, such as gay and lesbian relationships should be discussed and that children should know that the anatomy of men and women are necessary to conceive a child, but that having a child is not tied to a relationship of marriage (21 October 2005).

Although Dik separates the ideals of the NVSH from the majority of the Netherlands, some of their ideals match those that I found throughout my research. Dik explained that, in the past, when their society was larger, the NVSH had sexuality education teachers all across the Netherlands. These teachers would visit schools in the cities and towns throughout the Netherlands, even the classes of the four year olds, and they discussed many of the same topics that I have found to be recommended to primary schools by Sanderijn and Yuri. He stated that the conversations, in the youngest classes, were usually about;

Little boys and little girls and what the difference between them are and how they play together and what kind of things they know about each other and what they want to do, be, later on...When they are a little older, like 9 or 10, of course a lot is discussed; falling in love and having a crush on someone. You could ask them, 'have you done any kissing yet?' That is a wonderful topic to talk about. There must be a great deal of openness and intimacy, that's the great advantage of children under 12 years old, if one can make that rough distinction.

Dik's description focused on the children's experiences, which might include "practical experience, whether it's falling in love, even trying to kiss, playing games, certainly

playing games...playing house or doctor” and emphasizes a more intimate, personal conversation.

Theory Behind the Models: In Tune with the Development of Children

Dik’s description demonstrates a shift in topics between the two age groups he compares. The focus of the conversation changes as the children grow; therefore, children are still being understood as in the process of development. Information is not necessarily being blocked from children; simply, the conversations that are being stimulated are sensitive to the child’s age. Although the model Dik illustrated varied from Sanderijn and Yuri’s models, this pattern of considering the children as developing different interests and abilities is evident in all three.

Yuri explained that RNG has collected a lot of information and done intensive literary research to understand the sexual lives of children and what their interests and questions are. From this research, RNG developed a framework of what sexual education should consist of for each age group. Sanderijn also matches the information she suggests at certain ages with the patterns of interests and level of development she finds. This method very much matches Piaget’s perspective on development; when one is trying to understand a class of individuals one must pick out certain themes and make generalizations that will characterize the group as a whole. Sanderijn and Yuri do their best to have materials that will appeal to the majority of each age group by focusing on the majority of the children’s curiosities.

Then materials that Sanderijn has created and those that Yuri, and RNG, recommends are effective in facilitating and structuring a conversation about sexuality. Although, I often found that adults try to be in tune with individual children and use them

as their guides. I found that children are understood as individuals developing in their own time and that one listens and observes the child to use them as a compass in their conversations and distribution of information.

When I asked Gerda at which age she felt people should start discussing sexuality with children she responded, “I need to see the child. You have to watch the child...you have to look very careful when you are talking about sex with children. Some children are very childish and some are very mature so each are different, individual.” Gerda relies on the manifestations of one’s development to guide the educator.

Karin also uses this tactic. She explained that when she discusses sexuality with her daughter she decides where and how far the conversation will go through her daughter, “I measure with her development; what does she make of it, what are you concrete questions at that point?” Karin follows her daughter’s lead, she believes that her daughter seeks out the information that she is ready to learn, and;

If she asks me a question then she isn’t too young to know otherwise she wouldn’t have asked it. When a question is out of her league, I think she wouldn’t ask me that question or she would rephrase that question into her league...I’ll answer any question, gladly.

Karin sees her daughter as seeking out the information that is relevant to her. Karin trusts that her daughter’s interest in certain topics are indicative of the degree of her development and capability of understanding, and being ready for, certain levels of different concepts.

Corinne and Jeanette also spoke of the ways in which children lead their discussions with Corinne emphasizing that, “every lesson is different because every class is different.” Although they use Sanderijn’s materials as a basic structure, Jeanette explained that it is a model, not fixed plan, “we change things because when you are the

teacher you notice that some things work and some things don't...children change so we have to change as well." Corinne and Jeanette cater their education styles to each class, using the children as their gauge; if the class is quiet they will use different tactics to stimulate conversation, such as planting questions in their "ask everything box".

The NVSH no longer teaches sexual education, but they do distribute information on their website, www.nvsh.nl. Dik emphasized that the information is not distributed based on age; anyone, who wishes, can navigate through it;

We have ideas about children's rights and children's rights to be informed...anybody of any age can look at the whole sight, that's one principle. We don't warn anybody against the content of this site...we don't accept age distinction or discrimination.

Dik emphasized that the website serves as a source of information, not of prescribed methods or approaches; they try to focus on facts;

We try to be informative to the facts...what we don't do is moralize and preach, that's a principle and we try to avoid that. We've always tried to clear out the question, to clear it up, to provide sufficient information, to explain what something is, and to show the reality of this life.

The "basics" section under the "sexual information" component of the website includes five main topics: skills, problems, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, and the facts of life. Dik expressed that he felt the facts of life section is not necessarily intended for children under 12, but the language is simple so younger children would be able to understand the information. Again, it is understood that children do not process information in the same way as adults, but that does not mean they should be shielded from the information. Information is simply presented in a certain way that helps children conceive complex topics.

Dik went on to critique Sanderijn's new book, which is approach to facilitate conversations between adults and children about sexuality, "the writer, who is concerned with 'what is the proper way to think about this topic?' This is the moral approach, the moralistic approach; 'how do I think correctly?' And, what's important is, 'how do I preach correctly to other people?'" Dik made the point that this is not what the NVSH attempts to do, they are concerned with conveying facts;

There is a great deal of information, real, true information, lying around and that is what, we might say, should be distributed. So little children are, of course, limited in many ways, but older people too, and adults too, and school people too....you would rather think of how to go about with an individual person, whatever their age, and not divide people into under 12 and over 12.

In congruence with the other participants, Dik understands children are developing and believes that children will seek out the information that they want to know. The other participants expressed that when children asked for certain information they would provide this for them, but Dik places the information out there for the children to navigate in their own time.

Using the presence of pornography on the NVSH website, Dik demonstrates a principle beyond just not holding back when children ask for certain information. He provides as much information as possible for all people to access at their leisure;

Pornography is a typical aspects of sexual life and the sexual world...people have parental controls, they don't want these kids to see it...we say life is not without surprises or shocks even...you need nor to overrate it or moralize it because its only part of the whole picture so we don't mind if a 12 year older sees this; they see it anyway. If they can't see it at home because they've got a parental button that forbids them, they se it with a friends...some will have more interest than other.

Dik understands the children will develop in their own way, and in their own time, and that people should make this information available to them because it is simply part of

the world; it is not going to damage them. Children will pay attention and seek out the information at a time when they are ready for it. Dik perspectives towards children are similar to those that I found in other interviews, but he does not see the information as something he is distributing to individuals at certain times. The NVSH functions as an accessible resource of sexual information that is not catered to one specific group.

Why Talk to Children?

In congruence with the aforementioned theory of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Sanderijn drew a connection between the childhood experiences surrounding sexuality and one's sexual mentality and behaviors later in life. Sanderijn emphasized the importance of recognizing the affects of how society treats the sexuality of children;

When I talk with them [adult patients] about their youth and the way they were educated, in younger years almost always you can tell that sexual problems are stemming from younger years...I think parents, but also schools have an important task in the sexual development of children and with sex education you can stimulate children to develop in a healthy, responsible, satisfying way.

Sanderijn is clear in underscoring the responsibility of the adults in society to create an atmosphere that fosters a complete and fulfilling sexual development. She believes that the ideal adult sexual life, which she characterizes as "healthy, responsible, satisfying", starts its development in childhood and therefore, education must also begin in childhood.

There are many explanations behind why Dutch children are partaking in conversations about sexuality, but I believe all these reasons are stemming from one source. There is a common understanding of sexuality as a fundamental part of every person, which is also an evident and essential part of children that should be taken seriously. Children are seen as in the process of developing the foundation for their

future sexual life. Therefore, adults take this period seriously, as it is perceived to set a mold for their adult life. This time is crucial for stimulating comfort, through the process of normalization, and autonomy, through self-responsibility, to prepare children for their adult life.

Legitimizing the Sexuality of Children

Children's sexuality, though understood on a different level than the sexuality of adults, is not belittled. The notion of sexuality is relative, it means something different to children than it does to adults, but this does not mean it is not consequential and important to a child.

Karin felt that her daughter's sexuality was something of importance and to be taken seriously, stating that it's important for her daughter to know, "that there is sexuality. Knowing that it is something which has to do with feelings, feelings that she's beginning to discover, in her body, at this age" and she helps her to understand this by, "my being open about it, not being gigglish" Karin treats her daughter's sexuality respectfully and is certain not to mock it, or laugh it off. She sees her daughter as someone who has a legitimate sexuality, regardless of her age.

When I asked Corinne to provide me with an example in which sexuality is brought up in primary level classes, she explained that it may happen when "they [children] are in love in the classroom...My daughter, when she was in group 2, and there were lots of girls and boys who like each other at that age, and then the teacher talks about it." Corinne believes that children can form real feelings towards, and relationships with, one another and these emotions are not belittled because of their age. These

relationships are not comparable to those of adults, but they are understood as valid and meaningful experiences of the child that matches the developmental level of a child.

Not only are children seen as capable of forming real relationships and feelings, but Sanderijn also legitimized the physical sexual feelings of children, “children of four and five years old they play, they have sexual play and they have experience with sexual feelings in their own way” Children’s sexual lives are understood in a context of their development, and in congruence with Piaget’s theory of development, children are experiencing life in a different way than adults do, but that does not devalue their experiences.

Normalizing Sexuality

Sexuality is seen as an aspect of human beings and as a child develops, their sexuality develops as well. Adults see the process, and the child’s interest in it, as a normal aspect of their life and feel it is important for children to see it this way too. Adults feel that sexual education enables children to understand what is going happen with their body, emotions, and general development, so they can feel comfortable with themselves. This comfort is secured through the process of normalizing their experiences and the topic of sexuality.

Normalizing the sexuality of children, and their interest in it, was apparent in my interview with Sanderijn. Sanderijn sees the process of normalizing sexuality as a two-part job; she feels that not only should it be made clear to the children that their sexual feelings and behaviors are normal, but that this needs to be made clear to the adults as well;

Children of four and five years old play, they have sexual play and they have experience with sexual feelings in their own way and this is what you can talk

about with them...Children of three years old are touching their own genitals because they get a nice feeling from that and what I teach parents and educators, care takes of children, that it is normal.

These behaviors of body exploration are similar to children's verbal curiosities.

Sanderijn articulated that the inquisitiveness of children and their natural inclination to ask questions pertaining to sexuality are, for them, "just a normal question, but for us, as adults, it is sometimes embarrassing to talk about because we connect that subject with something intimate and we have all kinds of associations with it, but children do not."

She understands children's behaviors and questions about sexuality as a natural curiosity about life. Like any other verbal or physical investigation they engage in; they are simply trying to find out, and piece together, information in order build towards a comprehension of their world. This understanding corresponds with Piaget's stage theory; children are actively building their cognitive ability and making sense of their world. As seen through Piaget's stage theory, children are using their different senses to understand the world around them and these physical curiosities are the same as the verbal curiosities that children have. They are not infused with the meanings and associations that adults have; they are simply involved in a process of investigation.

It is important for adults to see their children's sexual interests as normal because, in congruence with Erikson's theory, messages that are sent to children at an early age affect the attitudes and behaviors of their adult life. Therefore, when adults understand the propensity of children to maintain a curiosity in sexuality they can convey this message of normalcy to their children, which is an attitude I found throughout my interviews.

Karin also felt it was important that her daughter understand her sexuality as a normal element of her life;

It [sexuality] is not something that is secretive or abnormal or wrong; everybody has it...I think the latter is the most important, not something secretive, something that can be talked about... [later in the conversation] What's important is the bond of trust. When she has questions on which she can't find answers, or questions which trouble her very much, she can come to us [her and her husband].

For Karin, normalizing her daughter's sexuality enables a comfort in her daughter's ability to reach out for answers or help to her parents. Karin explained her tactic for helping her daughter to understand this is "being open about it...its like talking about meatballs." I believe that, here, Karin is making the point that sexuality is not a topic that one should be scared to discuss with a child, it is just like any of aspect of their life and should be open to conversation. She would not want her daughter to feel like her sexuality was something that could not be discussed and maintaining a continual dialogue about sexuality, an open wave of communication, helps to ensure that this channel of communication will not be closed by discomfort.

It is important to understand the sexual behaviors of children as normal in order to facilitate and promote a positive conception of sexuality for them. Dik also expressed the importance of children understanding their sexuality as a normal part of their life;

If you could set up a system where all children, from an early age, indeed, consider every aspect of life, and this one too [sexuality], as normal and natural and can express themselves in this way, that would be a great benefit to that generation.

Jeannette articulates the benefits of normalizing children's sexuality, very well in explaining one of her and Corinne's methods;

We always try to say [to the children], 'all those changes [in your body] are normal. When you start [changing] early and when you start late, its normal;

when it grows big or when it stays a bit smaller, it's all normal. You are you, so you are unique, so your changes are you unique as well.'

They want children to feel that there is nothing abnormal about the changes they are experiencing, or anything they are feeling. They want to extract and expunge any discomfort, or uncertainty, children may feel that might obstruct a child's access to, or diminish their desire to seek out, information.

Stimulating Autonomy and Responsibility

Being understood as sexual beings, children are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need now, and in the future, as they are understood as destined to face certain sexual situations.

As explained previously, Sanderijn suggested that children, even at age four, learn about what they want and don't want in relationships right now and in the future. They need to determine boundaries for themselves and learn how to communicate these boundaries to others. There is a strong sense of responsibility instilled in children and a sense of ownership over their bodies.

Gerda expressed, when asked what she felt was important for children, at the age she teaches, to understand about sexuality, "especially for the girls, 'no is no'; everybody has to know what their limits are."

Jeanette explained many situations in which children are learning about their own boundaries, "we always say... 'with body language you can tell a lot as well, but don't think that the other one is able to read your mind, you have to make clear what you want'" In addition to children thinking about what they want and feel comfortable doing they also try to instill a certain amount of autonomy. They emphasis the child's ownership

over their body and the importance of *their* ability and responsibility to maintain a sense of security and comfort with it;

[we] try to make them feel more sure [about themselves], but then I always say ‘if you stay unsure then you better go to the doctor. Then these worries will go away because, most of the time, the doctor will say ‘well this is normal, nothing is the matter’ ...If you keep on worrying then go, don’t wait, go”

Corrine and Jeanette also discussed how they stimulate children to make decision and attitudes about their life. They do an exercise in which the children talk about their future. Examples of how children want to live their lives, are providing in their sexual education notebook, for example, if they want children when they are younger, or if they don’t want children at all and then, Jeanette explained that, “they can choose whether they agree with one of them or if they don’t agree with one of them they can form their own opinion”

Children, though understood as experiencing sexuality different than adults, their experiences with and education about sexuality is not undervalued. Because a child is seen as in the midst of a process of development, this period is seen as incredibly significant in preparing them for their future. Childhood is a time that shapes one’s adult life; as Jeanette puts it, sexual education is preparation for a “sexual career”. Childhood is seen as a period in which children explore and learn about their world. Therefore, they are being supplied with the knowledge, as well as the skills and responsibility, for their sexual life, but, now, the question remains, what methods of education are integral to a child’s development?

Debate: Regulated or Accidental Sexual Education in Primary Schools?

The article, “Researchers Call for Sex Education in Primary Schools”, mentioned in the Literary Review section of this paper, discussed research done by the RNG. After

investigating the sexual behaviors and attitudes of children they are pushing for more primary sexual education. The RNG is taking a realistic and proactive approach towards sexuality with children. They would rather implement prevention, rather than intervention, education by formally starting the conversation of sexuality at a younger age. This frank, straightforward method of dealing with sexuality has been proven effective in secondary sexual education, as the article illustrates, through the sexual awareness and responsibility of adolescents in the Netherlands. This article underscores the present as the time in which primary sexual education needs to be reexamined and widely distributed; the conversation of sexuality needs to start earlier.

Sanderijn explained that the government is financially backing a primary sexual education project. There are five pilot regions, across the Netherlands, in which sexual education in primary schools is being promoted;

It is very important that we got the money from the government because it means that the government agrees with us that it is necessary to do, to start already with, sex education in primary schools. Although it is not compulsory, but it is necessary...[making sex education in primary schools compulsory] would be my goal...The first step is stimulating primary schools to do the sex education and experience the fun of giving sex education and being conscious of the importance and after that I think it will take some 3 to 5 years to let it be compulsory. It takes time.

These responses to the topic of childhood sexuality demonstrate the willingness of sex researchers and the government to, again reiterate the themes of accepting the sexual nature of children and being open and receptive, not aversive, to their needs. While these aspects of society may see primary sexual education as an answer, my research did not find unanimous support for the idea.

Corinne and Jeanette are a part of this project. They specifically teach to group 8, Corinne explained that most schools only teach sex education in group 8, but “I think that

in all the classes, in school, teachers talk about it, but not so in a project, more now and then” Later, when I asked Corinne how she felt about starting regulated sexual education earlier in primary schools she stated, “I think it would be better, but I think it’s difficult because all the teachers must be comfortable with it” and Jeanette added that it is difficult to get teachers to agree that sexual education should be taught each year. Jeanette explained that when they visit schools they give them the option;

We have three bags [that includes classroom materials], like that, one for the smaller, one for the middle children, and this one for the elders. The first time we bring all three bags and then all the teachers get the opportunity to see what’s in it and if its something for them...and then they have to decide whether they use it or not.

Jeanette and Corinne’s experience illustrates that while there is an effort to stimulate primary sexual education, it is still remaining, for the most part, localized in the older groups of the primary schools.

The school that Gerda teaches at also only provides sexual education to group 8. She provided insight into the methods, which Corinne was referencing, of discussing sexuality in a classroom that does not have a distinct sexual education class. Gerda spoke about her experience teaching 8 and 10 year olds, explaining that when questions of sexual nature come up in the classroom, “they [the school] appreciate that you talk about it, but it is accidentally. Accidentally, when they [children] come and ask you something sexually related then you have to explain.” She explained that this has happened, but not frequently and while she feels comfortable answering the children’s questions, not all teachers do because “some teachers have had a bad experience in the past.”

Jeanette, who is also a teacher, explained that she understands it from the teacher’s perspective, “there are so many nice things to do with the children...there is so

much. Then it's easier, for the teacher, to use the materials they come and bring you, not because you don't want to talk about it, but because it's so much." Jeanette and Corinne explain that this is why they go to the schools each year; to make it easy for the schools to maintain an interest in the practice of sexual education.

Yuri also spoke about making it easy for teachers to teach sexual education. On November 18th, 2005, RNG launched a new website, www.seksuelevorming.nl, which serves as a tool to facilitate comprehensive and effective sexual education in schools. It discusses a framework of sexual education, and the different aspects of it, that is based on intensive literary research that RNG has conducted concerning the sexual development of children and their interests. It gives tips to teachers conducting these classes, including issues such as religion in the classroom, group dynamics, and advice from students. The website also provides teachers with a catalogue of materials that RNG feels adequately address sexuality.

Although these resources are helpful, do teachers and parents want to have compulsory sexual education in primary schools? When I asked Gerda she stated that she does not see a reason for change and would like to maintain the "accidental" approach, "not every child is so far [in their development] to understand; one children can understand, but not all are mentally developed...the informal approach is better than a regulated system"

Gerda stated that she is not often asked questions related to sexuality and, maybe, she perceives this infrequency as an indication that children are not ready, or interested, to learn about these topics⁶. However, it might be the case that, questions are not being

⁶ I stated before that I have found it common to feel that the questions and information that children seek out are often used as an indicator of their level of understanding.

asked because children do not feel as comfortable talking to teachers as one might think. Perhaps, if one opened up the channel of communication by starting formal sexual education when children first start school, children will recognize schools and their teachers as resources for sexual information.

Karin also agreed with Gerda's perspective. She did not see the point in changing the system that is currently in place,

When they're older they're more mature, sexually, and, like I said, children are different. Children are maybe even not ready when they are in the 7 or 8 group, but chances are that most of the children, in the group, are ready for it and when you go to the lower groups, I think chances are, most children aren't ready. They have questions, but, well, they have parents and I think that most of the parents, in Holland, are liberal and capable enough of handling that situation...And, also, that teacher, when it pops up when it's an issue in groups, teachers take it up...they talk about it in class...I think it's good that way. Why bother with an issue when it's not an issue. Well. All this danger of making it issues, I think, when you start too early with giving too much information, let children be children as long as they can.

Here, Karin states that she is not in favor of regulated sexual education at a younger age but, earlier in the interview, I asked Karin where she would prefer her daughter to get sexual information from and she stated;

Well, to put it straight, from me, but it's a mixture because I can't always tell if the information I tell her is understandable for her or if it's enough or not enough. So, the information that she gets from talking with her girlfriends or classmates or what her teacher tells her at school can bring up more, other questions, another image of it and the most important thing is the open mind with her so she won't hesitate to ask me. So it's a mixture of three sources I think.

It might be that Karin was adverse to the idea of formal sexual education at a younger age because of the connotations of sexual education. I think that when someone hears the term sexual education they are not thinking of the various aspects of sexuality. When one thinks "sex" education, they think about puberty and sexual intercourse or other physical sexual activities. Childhood sexuality, and the education of it, is very different than it is

for an adult. For children, sexuality is talking about feelings, different levels of relationships, body differences, and etcetera. It is not forcing and exposing children to topics they are not interested in; it is responding to the fascinations of the children.

Regardless of Karin's reasons for not being in favor of being sexual education in schools earlier, I think that Karin, in her second comment, makes a very astute argument; sexual information is a part of a holistic system of information. Messages are being sent from many different places within society, regardless of whether or not they are explicitly and directly educating children, so why not acknowledge each of these parts are resources for children.

Corinne and Jeanette spoke about how, not only do they want to stimulate sexual education in schools, but they want them to also learn to talk to their parents about it. Corinne stated that it was important for children, at that age, to learn to "talk about it with parents...when you don't talk about it now and then, you don't dare say it" They want to make sure, in schools, that children are maintaining communication at home.

I understand Karin's statement that "They have questions, but, well, they have parents and I think that most of the parents, in Holland, are liberal and capable enough of handling that situation," but I also believe that opening up channels of communication at school will not lead to a breakdown of communication at home. In fact, formal sexual education in schools may enhance conversations at home. Corinne explained one of the activities that they do with children "we ask the children to put in [their sexual education workbook] their own birth stories so they have to talk about it at home" Jeanette also pointed out that, while Karin and "most parents" may feel comfortable talking to their

children, not all parents do so. Jeanette explained that these lessons, and the accompanying workbook, could act a stimulus for conversation;

The parents can choose, 'oh, I just tell this story' or 'I take the opportunity and go through the book and tell more and talk more' and then they can choose, but they had the opportunity. Sometimes parents say 'I feel awkward just to say 'lets talk', but when you have an opportunity it's easier so we use this book as an opportunity.

Corinne makes the point that, "you shouldn't just do it at home or just do it in school, you should learn about sex from all kinds of directions because then you hope that it stays with them." It is important to hear information from a multitude of sources because each one can reinforce the other. Sexual education in schools can work in unison with sexual education at home, each feeding off the other.

Dik offered a critique of the system of the sexual education. Dik stated about Yuri's website that;

They [RNG] would like to start educating even the four year olds [in schools]. They want to start as early as possible. I must say, I see some advantages in that, but when I hear what the kind of message that they bring, I'm a little worried too, because it seems to me then again that the negative aspects are emphasized.

I think that these negative aspects of "intimidation, abuse", as well as others, need to raised to children, but I believe that Dik is correct in his skepticism. One must always remain critical of the ways and contexts in which sexuality is discussed. There are great materials and theories about sexual education, but what are children really hearing and learning about sexuality?

Assessment: Putting Theory into Practice

Dik is correct in his analysis of Sanderijn's work and of most people's tendency to moralize the issues of sexual education. Children are understood as growing individuals that are being conditioned to become fully developed adults existing and

participating in a particular society. Therefore, adults slowly, throughout the years, teach children how to act within their society, conveying societal norms.

Sanderijn discussed the issues of genital play with children and the importance of educating adults that it is a typical behavior of children, but she also discussed the need to educate children;

Educating children is also telling them how to behavior in our society...this is a rule we have in society that there are certain places you can do intimate behaviors and other places not, you don't do this in public, and this is what you have to educate you children also. This is not telling them "don't do that", "it's dirty", "its wrong, etc. because you are telling children that the behaviors is wrong and the child is wrong, but this is not what you have to teach them, you have to each them that's its okay to do that and that the child is of course okay and that you understand that it is a nice feeling and that there are appropriate times and places that you can do that and in other you can not do that.

Sanderijn is clear in stating that children are being instructed how to function in their particular society. As she mentioned earlier, we are always sending messages to our children about how they should act and think, both unconsciously and deliberately.

Therefore, when one is conditioning children to be a part of a larger society, the question then becomes an examination of the underlying society's ideals and attitudes.

In theory the positive side of sexuality may be emphasized, but closer attention needs to be paid to what is happening when these theories are being put into practice. Gerda felt that limits were the most important lesson for children about sexuality and while the negative is taking precedent over the positive, these are the concepts that she believes should be most emphasized.

Saderijn creates materials to facilitate discussions with children and Yuri trains teachers and facilitates the distribution of materials, such as Saderijn's, at RNG. Both of

them emphasized this importance of stimulating different attitudes and opinions other than one's own. Sanderijn stated that;

It is important to stimulate them [children] to see that there are different attitudes towards sexuality ...you can discuss it with them and let them choose themselves and that means that if you, as a teacher, think that sexuality is only appropriate between two people when they love...that is okay for you as a teacher...I think you have to tell children, also, that there are people that do not agree with that. That there are people who want to have sex without love and that you have to chose that for yourself, but that your parents can have one of these different attitudes and that in the years that you grow up, you have to develop, slowly, your own attitude towards that...It's up to the school...but, in my training of teachers I tell them that there are different ways to teach sex education and I think it's better to stimulate children to give them different attitudes we have here in Holland.

Yuri stated that, at the youngest age, children should know that biologically a man and a woman parts are necessary to make a child (he believes that topics such as in vitro or insemination would be too complex for a young child to understand), but that this is not tied to a relationship.

One can see where the foundations of these theories of openness to a variety of attitudes can be change shape when they are adapted into the classroom. Sanderijn even addressed the fact that the practice of sexual education is left up the schools and that she can only suggest what she feels is the best method.

When I asked Jeanette, who uses Sanderijn's models to structure her curriculum, what she felt was most thought were the most important attitudes to foster in children she stated, "Well I think what we want to achieve is that they don't separate sex from love" Jeanette's goal to solidify the connection between love and sex goes against the principle that Sanderijn stresses above. Although, I do believe that Jeanette's following statement, "and that it's not something that you do because you have to belong to a group or because you are already 15 and you haven't had sex before and to be yourself and be open about it

to your partner” is an important message that contradicts the latter. To “be yourself and be open” is not something that has to be restricted to one person’s beliefs and attitudes. The principles of stimulating an open mind for children to make their own decisions can be lost in practice when only one attitude is being conveyed.

Sanderijn, although stating that one must remain open to different attitudes, is also conveying contradictory messages. In her explanation of the process of conception addressed earlier in the paper she stated, “you tell them that this is something adults do together when they love each other”, placing the act of sexual intercourse in the context of love. Now, she could be specifically referencing love because she was speaking about young children, but she is still inscribing certain messages in children at a time, which she herself said, influences one’s adult life.

It is always important to remain aware of how your own attitudes and experiences may color the messages that your information, and its context, sends to children. Although, through Bruner’s understanding of cultural psychology, people and institutions are inevitably influenced by their culture and the attitudes and positions it propagates. Even Dik’s perspective of sexuality, though it attempts to remain unbiased, still perceives sexuality, and the education of it, in a specific manner. Information can never be presented and framed in a way that is without imposing a certain dogma onto children. Therefore, it is important for all of these individual’s understandings of sexuality to be heard because they all provide insightful perspectives that represent various attitudes and positions that children need to hear.

Conclusion

In understanding the way in which Dutch culture talk to children about sexuality and their reasons why, I was able to gain a sense of how the culture perceives the sexuality of its children. By taking a holistic approach to sexual education I was looking at this issue from a number of different perspectives, but through these I was able to tease out common cultural messages and ideals.

The sexuality of children is understood as a fundamental part of individuals and this is no different for children. It is seen as important to address sexuality with children because it is deemed an integral part of their life that is developing. Childhood is seen as a significant period of exploration to build a comprehension of one's environment where one begins to adopt a foundation for their future sexual life. Therefore, children taught to accept their sexuality as a normal aspect of their life in which they need to gain the knowledge as well as skills and responsibility that will facilitate a positive sexual life in their future.

Although there are themes that run throughout my research, implementing formal sexual education in primary schools is a current debate, but whether or not primary sexual education becomes compulsory is not the issue. What is important is the nature of the messages that are being sent in these classrooms. It is important to remain critical of the attitudes and values that are coloring the information, and its context, that you are presenting.

Although become aware of oneself can not eradicate the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes are going to continually bias information. Therefore, I believe, the pool of informational sources for young children needs to be expanded. The only way that

children can genuinely be exposed to the multitude of different lifestyles and opinions can be through increased exposure to a more diverse collection of sexual education avenues; messages cannot keep coming from the same directions.

My research can only take this subject so far. Research about sexual education with younger children is just evolving and therefore has a large potential for growth, both in the Netherlands and beyond. Specific to research in the Netherlands, individuals with more knowledge about the Dutch culture and language will be able to investigate other materials and education media as well as children's opinions. Children need to be interviewed, an assessment of young children's interests, needs, and preferred sources of information will provide invaluable insight and direction for sexual education.

Appendixes

Interview Guides

Interview Guide for Organizations:

1. What do you feel is the appropriate age to start discussing sexuality with children and what is the reasoning or the theories behind this?
2. What are the benefits of starting a conversation about sexuality at a young age?
3. How do you determine which concepts are important for each age (up to the age of 12)? How do you determine which concepts are not appropriate for each age?
4. In your opinion, what are the key concepts children should know after they leave primary schools? What topics of sexuality do you feel should not be discussed in primary sexual education?
5. Which model curriculum do you recommend to primary schools? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these models?
6. What are some of the areas of discomfort or difficulties do teachers feel about discussing sexuality with children under the age of 12 and what techniques you recommend to feel more comfortable?
7. What “holes”, if any, do you feel there are in primary sexual education?
8. Describe the ways different “life-style choices” should be integrated into sexual education? What are the advantages to exposing children to this? If no, what are the reasons behind this decision?
9. How is sexuality discussed beyond and biological perspective? How is this an important concept in sexual education?
10. In your opinion, what behaviors and attitudes towards sexuality are the most important to foster in children within this age group?
11. What aspects of your organization do you find unique and what do they contribute to a more comprehensive sexual education?
12. What about the Netherlands, on a whole, contributes to accepting the discussion of sexuality with children? What are the aspects that hinder this discussion?

Interview Guide for Teachers and Sex Educators:

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?
2. What ages do you teach?
3. How long have you been teaching sexual education?
4. How/why did this school decide to teach primary sexual education?
5. What do you think are the benefits of teaching primary sexual education as opposed to waiting until secondary school?
6. What curriculum do you use?
7. How do you start an open, honest dialogue with the students? What are some techniques you use?
8. What concepts do you focus on at this age? How do you determine these?
9. What are some of the areas of discomfort or difficulties teachers feeling about discussing sexuality with children at this age?

10. What techniques do you recommend to feel comfortable?
11. What “holes”, if any, do you feel there are in primary sexual education?
12. Describe the ways different “life-style choices” should be integrated into sexual education. What are the advantages to exposing children to this? If no, what are the reasons behind this decision?
13. How is sexuality discussed beyond a biological perspective? How is this an important concept in sexual education?
14. In your opinion, what behaviors and attitudes towards sexuality are the most important to foster in children within this age group?
15. What about the Netherlands, on a whole, contributes to accepting the discussion of sexual education at the primary age? What are the aspects that hinder it?

Interview Guide for Parents:

1. How many children do you have?
2. How old are your children?
3. Have your children received sexual education in school or from any other organization?
4. If yes, At what age? And, In what ways did you talk about what they were learning at home?
5. What do you feel is the appropriate age to start talking about topics related to sexuality?
6. Describe how the topic of sexuality first arose in your household?
7. What are topics you feel your child is not old enough to discuss?
8. How do you decide what is appropriate to tell and not tell your child at each age?
9. How do you prefer your children to learn about topics related to sexuality? (From what sources; school, peers, friends, etc)
10. What sources, do you feel, are most important?
11. What sources concern you the most?
12. Describe what kind of atmosphere you would like to create, or maybe already have, in your household concerning the discussion of sexuality.
13. In what ways do you talk to your child? How often and when do you bring up the subject?
14. What information related to sex, do you think, is important to know at your child’s age?

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