



# Sexual childhood: Questions for practice to prevent harmful/problematic sexual behaviour

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# Whakatauki *Māori proverb*

*Hutia te rito o te harakeke,*

*Kei whea te kōmako e kō?*

*Kī mai ki ahau;*

*He aha te mea nui o te Ao?*

*Māku e kī atu,*

*he tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata*

If the heart of the harakeke (flaxbush) was removed, where will the bellbird sing? If I was asked what was the most important thing in the world; I would be compelled to reply, It is people, it is people, it is people.



This proverb reflects the Maori reference to the harakeke (flax) plant as a whanau or family group. The outer leaves are the tupuna (ancestors); the inner leaves are the matua (parents); the most inner leaf is the rito (child). Only the tupuna are cut as the matua are left to protect the child. Accordingly the proverb reflects that to ensure the voice (singing) of the next generation, care and protection of children is necessary.

# In pairs or threes

- Why did you choose this workshop?
- What are you hoping for from this workshop?

# Overview

## Background

### Part 1

- Concepts of 'the child', childhood
- Childhood sexuality
- Interrogating practices that hide sex/sexuality for children

### Part 2

- Approaches that confront silence
- Possibilities for responses to problematic sexual behaviour?
- Effective and ethical approaches to working with children



# Background

- Counsellor/therapist (families & groups)
  - Prison & community sex offender programmes with male adults and adolescents (1995-1999)
  - Statutory agency and NGO; sexual abuse counselling with boys aged 5-16 years (1999-2007)
- Since 2007 counsellor education @ Uni of Waikato
- Published child-focussed articles
  - For counsellors (2000 [with J. Lamusse], 2010), carers (2003), educators (2009, 2011)
- Research focus on childhood and sexuality
  - Ethics and gender (2012, 2013, 2015)
  - Doctoral research (2014a, 2014b, 2017, 2019)

# Presentations to ANZATSA

- 2002 *Play or Prey? Responses of school principals to pre-adolescent sexual behaviour*. 2nd Biennial Conference, Sydney, Australia.
- 2004 *The Problem Wrestlers: A perpetration prevention strategy with sexually abusive pre-adolescent boys*. 3rd Biennial Conference. Auckland, New Zealand.
- 2011 *Children's sexualised activity: New Zealand media and community discourses*. 'Issues from the frontline of sexual assault: Prevention, protection and recovery'. VOTA/ANZATSA Symposium, Melbourne, Australia.
- 2019 *Sexual childhood: Questions for practice, prevention of hsb*



## Part 1

- **Concepts of 'the child', childhood**
- **Childhood sexuality**
- **Interrogating practices that hide sex/sexuality**

# Concepts of 'the child', childhood

- What knowledges do we call on?
- Historical, sociological, psychological knowledges
- Cultural knowledges



## How do we understand 'the child' and childhood?

Please turn to the person next to you and discuss your understanding of childhood:

-How do you define a child? Childhood?

-What three main ideas surface for you about concepts of childhood?

-When do you think childhood ends?

-And what defines 'the end' of childhood?

# Concepts of childhood

- Developmental
- Determinism
- A range of interrelated concepts that are considered 'universal' :
  - Natural and normal
  - Medical and biological
  - Age and (im)maturity
  - Societal norms and morality

# Concepts of childhood

- Contemporary ‘fragmented’ discursive concepts:
  - Fluid and multiple; not a single universal childhood, but ‘child’ and childhood are shaped in social and cultural contexts
  - Language constructs childhoods – how we speak of childhood shapes current realities of childhood
  - Cultural knowledges – values and practices that ‘speak’ of childhood in culture

# A Māori model of wellbeing

## Te whare tapa wha

(The four walls of the house)

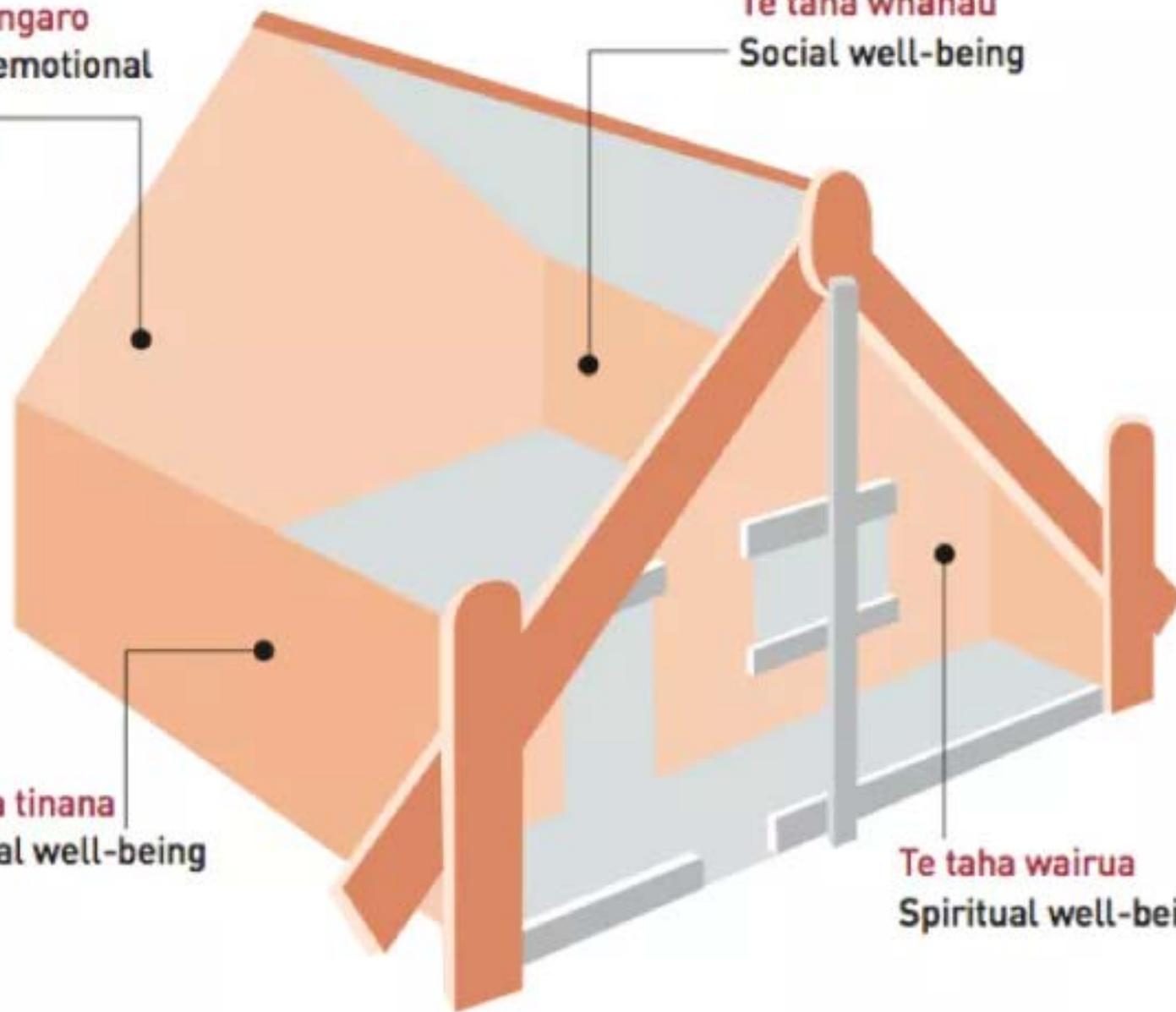
- Whānau            Family and social wellbeing
- Tinana            Physical wellbeing
- Hinengaro        Mental/emotional wellbeing
- Wairua            Spiritual wellbeing

**Te taha hinengaro**  
Mental and emotional  
well-being

**Te taha whānau**  
Social well-being

**Te taha tinana**  
Physical well-being

**Te taha wairua**  
Spiritual well-being





## Children's development

Dependent on family, community and society for the child's

- physical wellbeing
- social wellbeing
- mental wellbeing
- spiritual wellbeing

How might we understand sexual development for the child within these four dimensions?



## **With your neighbour, discuss:**

In your context, how do the practices of responding to children's sexual behaviour respond to these dimensions:

- Children's social wellbeing
- Children's physical wellbeing
- Children's mental wellbeing
- Children's spiritual wellbeing

# Childhood sexuality

- Historical and current knowledge of sexuality and childhood sexuality
- Questions about the notion of childhood innocence
- What might an understanding of sexual childhood mean?

# Historical and current knowledge of childhood sexuality

- Paediatric sexology – to address sexual problems (hypermasturbation, gender disorders)
  - Moll, 1909; to improve ‘sex-hygiene’
  - Wilson, 1913; ‘hygiene of mind and body’
  - Money, 1990; medical focus on physiological pathologies
- Psychoanalytic views (instinctual sexual drives)
  - Freud, 1905; Oedipal, castration and penis-envy ideas
  - Lacan, 1958; symbolic power of the phallus
- Developmental psychology (normal/abnormal)
  - Friedrich, et al., 1991, 1992, 1998, 2001; normative sexual behaviour, CSBI
  - Johnson, 1999; natural and healthy sexual behaviour

# Perspectives/constructions of sexuality

- Feminist perspectives
  - Challenged masculine-gendered, penis-centred views that focused on male satisfaction
  - Challenged male perceptions of 'normal sexual development'
  - Concepts of desire
  - Women's experience
- Masculine constructions
  - Not a fixed entity, but configurations of practice accomplished in social action; i.e. masculinities
  - Dominant masculinity: hegemonic, unitary, singular, biological, 'natural', misogynistic, heterosexual, homophobic, patriarchal
  - NB social contexts, schools as sites that construct masculinities
  - NZ constructions: 'the Kiwi bloke', being a 'real' man, big boys don't cry



## What sense do we make of sexuality in children's lives?

- Is sexuality relevant to children?
- Reactions and panics: that sexuality is dangerous to children
- Constructing good and healthy (sexual) citizens: The task of parents (and teachers?)
- That sexuality education should provide only 'appropriate' knowledge
- Children as citizens with rights to information about sexuality

The ambivalence we have toward our own sexuality is shown in our reactions to each other and in our rearing of children

...evidence of the separation of the sexual from the rest of our lives

...changes in sexual behaviour are more towards openness than toward promiscuity

There has been a massive plot to keep children ill-informed which has made them rely on the misinformation of their peers

(Donnelly, 1978, pp. 171-172)

The particular patterned way in which sexuality is talked and written about maintains it as a discrete, special area of life.

In combination with our ideas about the special needs of children and the exclusion of children from adult social life, this creates the possibility of regarding sexual knowledge as something beyond their grasp and the opportunity from gaining access to it.

(Jackson, 1990, p. 48)



## 5 myths and contradictions of sexuality education and childhood

1. Children are asexual and sexuality is irrelevant to young children's lives
2. Talking with children about sexuality is developmentally inappropriate
3. Sexuality education encourages children to be sexually active earlier
4. Children who transgress normative gendered behaviours in childhood will turn out to be gay
5. 'Once I've done "the talk" I've done my bit as a parent

(Robinson, 2013, pp. 137-140)

# Questions about the notion of childhood innocence

- The presumption of 'innocence' in childhood

# What is childhood innocence?

## Presumed innocence:

- naïve, immature, unable to understand or have interest in sexuality

## Western thinking

- Christian thought: Christ-like
- Locke (17<sup>th</sup> C) *Tabula rasa*
- Rousseau (18<sup>th</sup> C) 'Nature's child'
- Naturally innocent
- Sexual information withheld by adults
- Corrupted by adult sexuality
- A child with sexual knowledge seen as potentially evil and behaving unnaturally



# The effects of presumed innocence

- Adult disbelief and indifference to children's sexual interest or possible experience
- Children's curiosity into their own and others' bodies may be ignored or repressed
- Children do explore and curiously examine pathways to knowledge
- Adults can assume children's sexual interest as indicative of abuse
- Ignorance results in increasing vulnerability and that is the risk.

# What might an understanding of sexual childhood mean?

- Children's rights in international law
  - 1924 League of Nations *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*
  - 1959 United Nations *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*
  - 1990 United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*
- 'The sexual child' (Heinze, 2000) where laws regulate child sexuality

# The child's sexual rights/agency

- Martinson (1990) explores the legal status of children's erotic and sexual rights  
“the first aspect of the child's right to sexual freedom is his [sic] right to information about sexuality” (p. 123).
- Egan and Hawkes (2009) argue for the recognition of the sexual agency of children

# Sexual citizens

- Robinson (2012) refers to the child's "difficult citizenship"
  - Citizens in development
  - But not full citizens
- "Children's access to sexual knowledge before it is considered to be developmentally appropriate...is perceived as corrupting the child's innocence and potentially leading to children's promiscuity and immature sexual activity" (pp. 264-265).

# Linking sexuality knowledge for children to prevention of sexual abuse

- Silin (1995) 'passion for ignorance' and Bhana (2016) 'price of innocence' question ideas of protection of childhood in the face of AIDS and its effects for children.
- Each author calls for a realisation that innocence and ignorance are unsafe for children, and that ideas of protecting children must respond to an active and curious childhood even when this appears transgressive.



## **Practices that hide sex/sexuality in children's lives**

- Assumptions about a child's inquiry
- Euphemisms
- Half truths



## Part 2

- **Approaches that confront the silence**
- **Possibilities for responses to problematic sexual behaviour**
- **Effective and ethical approaches to working with children**



# Approaches that do not fear children as sexual beings

Children's inquiry about sex

“Where did I come from?”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGxJ67DI1oM>



## **Confronting the silence around child sexuality**

- Focus where possible on family rather than the child (i.e., parents)
- In schools, supporting teachers to have conversations with parents about having conversations with their child(ren)



## Examples of language that hide sexuality

- Hiding knowledge of sex a reproduction
- Hiding knowledge of sex as pleasure

# Hiding knowledge of sex as reproduction

- Deferring knowledge: “waiting for the right time” (Mother about her 9-year-old son)

*“we did the seed story [with our son]. And I too use the appropriate words, ‘cause I think it’s better that they know what the correct terminology is. I’ve got a friend who’s done exactly that, who’s explained exactly what happens. We chose not to tell him exactly what goes on, we’re waiting for the right time and haven’t got to that yet. But then – it’s natural, isn’t it?”*

# Hiding knowledge of sex as reproduction

- Obfuscation: Keeping it vague (mother about 8-year-old daughter)

*“...let’s just be vague, and when they ask questions like that...just say, ‘Look, Mummy gets pregnant, like you plant a seed in the flower pot. I use with my kids, animals mating. They saw it on TV on the Discovery Channel. They saw how animals mate...and you just be vague”*

# Hiding knowledge of sex as reproduction

- Silence: Old school discomforts with reproduction (mother with adult children)

*“I guess my parents were reasonably old school and it’s not nice to talk about our bodies and our vaginas...and my mother’s rationale, ‘we didn’t want you to be curious about it and go out and do it’. And we’re Catholics, you know, it was a very taboo subject”*

# Hiding knowledge of sex as pleasure

- Parent view: Hygiene and health (mother of 3 children aged 4 to 9)
- Responding to story of 8-year-old girl 'rubbing herself between her legs'

*“why was she doing that?...My mind immediately goes to, ‘Is there something happening...some sort of interference by someone [pause], it’s not normal...I can’t think of any girls I know of at that age who would do that. ‘Cause at that age - they wouldn’t have sexual feelings - they wouldn’t do that for enjoyment would they?... Is there something medical... - is it itchy, is there an infection?”*

# Hiding knowledge of sex as pleasure

- Teacher view: The role of policy in schools
- Responding to a story about two 8-year-old children kissing

*“I probably wouldn’t tell them not to do it...well, it’s a kiss and it’s a nice form of interacting with someone. I don’t see a problem with it, but I think inevitably in a school environment that there would be some sort of [policy] about it not being acceptable...People sometimes take kissing the wrong ways...from a sexual point of view, there’s older kids at this school that would possibly see that...the problem in school might be that older children are more familiar with what kissing leads to...a prerequisite to sex. And that’s what it’s often portrayed as in the media...like, when you kiss, it leads to this and leads to that”*

# Hiding knowledge of sex as pleasure

- Therapist view: Finding space to speak about sexual curiosity and exploration

*“I’m thinking of a father’s comment. We worked with his two boys, aged 10 and 12...a situation of two sets of boys [at a sleepover] engaging in penetrative anal sex, it being fairly mutual...there was this sense from the Dad that, ‘isn’t this kind of normal, exploratory, you know, curiosity? ...he thinks back to some of the behaviour he engaged in with mates [at that age]...I do kind of wonder, are we a bit too rigid in the rules about what we should be expecting kids to be engaging in?”*



## **Responding to children's interest in sexuality as an approach to prevention of problematic sexual behaviour**

- Safeguarding and child protection approaches to include supporting factual and relational responses to children's sexual inquiries
- Parents and teachers to be supported to find safe spaces and language to talk about sex with children



## **Ethics of this approach, ethics of practice**

- Centres the child's knowledge, inquiry, and experience(s)
- Therapy with children is therapy with their family (parents/carers) and possibly including their teacher



## **Preventing harm: forming children as sexual beings**

Supporting children in knowledge about their sexual selves

- physically, socially, mentally and spiritually

Supporting parents and teachers in their care of children to speak about sexuality as

- physical, social, mental and spiritual relationship

[see for example, Balter et al., 2019]

# Metaphors of safeguarding children as sexual beings

- Vulnerable shoots in the centre of the flaxbush (te rito o te harakeke)
- Four walls of wellbeing (te whare tapa wha)
- This care is not left to parents alone but is the responsibility of family communities, learning communities, professional communities, and political communities...





Tōia te waka mātauranga

Mā wai e tō?

Māku e tō, māu e tō

Mā te whakaranga ake e tō

*Haul forth the canoe of education*

*Who should haul it?*

*I should, you should*

*All within calling distance*

*should haul the canoe*

[cited in Macfarlane, 2007)

# In your pairs or threes

- What in particular in this workshop caught your interest or attention?
- What question(s) come forward for you from this workshop?

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# Publications

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<https://www.waikato.ac.nz/staff-profiles/people/paulf/>

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