

Flanagan, P. (2013). Meaning and social reality of sexuality in the lives of children in Aotearoa New Zealand. In S. Wray & R. Rae (eds.), *Personal and Public Lives and Relationships in a Changing Social World*, (pp.132-148). Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. ISBN 978-1-4438-4968-5

## CHAPTER NINE

# Meaning and social reality of sexuality in the lives of children in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>1</sup>

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Language...may be a vehicle of disregard, denying the child personhood, dignity and respect. When critically examined, however, language may also 'expose' injustice and provide the impetus for 'change'. (Saunders and Goddard 2001, 445)

### Introduction

How sexuality in pre-pubescent childhood is spoken about varies enormously within societies: almost swinging like a pendulum between perspectives of healthy and normal exploration, to panic of children being victims of abuse and ideas of sexualisation by the media (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Jackson 1982, 1990; Postman 1994). Reflecting initially from my practice as a family counsellor, and more recently as a counsellor educator and researcher, this chapter explores multiple discourses in children's lives on the meaning and social reality of sexuality. The aim is to question and deconstruct concepts that have shaped discourse of childhood and sexuality, and which is currently a binary position of children who are safe (i.e. asexual or un-sexual) or not (sexualised) (see, for example, Postman 1994). The intention behind this questioning of constructions is not to deny this dominant discourse, but to expose the presence of multiple discourses, and multiple meanings for

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<sup>1</sup> *Aotearoa New Zealand* is a more inclusive name for the country, signifying the intent of partnership in the treaty between the indigenous Māori people with the British Crown in 1840 at Waitangi, and of more recent development of bi-cultural hopes and social justice actions in partnership between Māori and non-Māori peoples.

children's words and actions. Put simply: children's sexual actions are frequently ascribed adult notions of sexuality, or taken to mean that maltreatment has occurred. My argument here from counselling practice and research is that sexual actions by children do not necessarily mean some harm has occurred, but that adults' understandings and responses are informed by discourses that guide them to assume the worst. This can have effects for children's identities, through disruption of their relationships within family, in addition to experiences of isolation and exclusion within school, neighbourhood and friendship contexts.

Material from Aotearoa New Zealand is presented in this chapter: practice stories, media articles and research. I question the limitations of literature that has developed a construction of childhood and sexuality, and suggest that it is a partial view of sexuality in children's lives. I draw upon this material to expose some of the tensions and dangers for children of a constricted understanding of sexuality in children's lives. Sexuality and childhood are examined and theorised within an understanding of contexts, discursive positioning and fluid ideas of social reality. Using social constructionist understandings of children's identities, child sexual activity is located, not as an individual action, but as occurring within discourses (e.g. childhood, culture, gender, education, sexuality). Deconstruction of discourses will support investigation of how adults, and in particular teachers, counsellors, and parents, are shaped by these discourses, in order to comment on and discipline/guide children in their development of sexuality.

Taking up Smart's (2007) concept of *personal life* as a locus of research, I turn to children's centeredness in relation to sexuality. What is a child's understanding of sexuality in their lives and what of adults' understanding of childhood sexuality? Are these understandings congruent? In exploring ideas of how children develop and learn within contexts of family and relationships, networks and experiences, this chapter argues against rigid understandings of sexuality in childhood but seeks to shift the sensitive topic of sexuality in childhood as necessarily flexible and positioned within relational and social contexts. Finally, I question the policies and practices that continue to unhelpfully position both adults and children when responding to child sexual language and actions.

I now first locate myself within this area of interest, before leading into an examination of the literature and subsequent analysis of discourses that shape positioning in adults and children's lives around sexuality and sexual activity.

## **Practice informs research**

This research area forms part of a professional interest from my counselling practice, now taken into an academic position in postgraduate counsellor education, and researching counselling practice. My own counselling practice was informed by social constructionist theory (Burr 1995, 2003), discourse theory (Davies 1991; Foucault 1972; Winslade 2005), and ideas of narrative approaches to therapy (Brown and Augusta-Scott 2007; Crocket 2008; Monk *et al.* 1997; White and Epston 1990). These ideas sit within postmodern understandings of people and therapy (Parker, 1999) in dialogue with poststructuralist and feminist theories (Drewery and Winslade 1997; Lather 1991). Practices within some traditional approaches to therapy may subject people as damaged or broken objects – and where therapy is viewed as a prescription, within a medical model, for healing (Carrey 2007; Gergen 1991; McKenzie and Monk 1997). Postmodern counselling approaches focus particularly on the ethics of the process of therapy: for example, how language plays an integral part in constructing problem discourse, and a person’s individual and social identities. Some of the philosophical ideas underpinning narrative approaches are informed by Foucault’s writings about discourse, power/knowledge, and the relations of power (Foucault 1972, 1980). Waldegrave *et al.* (2003), writing about “Just Therapy”, specifically identify the social and economic contexts of problems, focussing therapy as an ethical practice attending to the discourses of power within culture and gender. Drewery’s (2005) notion of “position calls” further develop the understanding of ethics in therapy, how speech is constructed in conversation, and that therapeutic conversation in particular, holds a responsibility to explore ways of speaking that invites inclusive opportunities for clients to speak into, rather than speech that closes possibilities, thereby excluding clients opportunities to speak. Thus, therapy is a linguistic action that is political, identity-producing, and located within socio-cultural contexts (see Madigan 2007; Morgan 2006; White 2007).

It is within these wider contexts of the politics and ethics in practices of language that I situate a critical reading of the literature and research on sexuality in childhood – and bring forward into this chapter a theory and research perspective on child-centred meanings of sexuality.

I have previously written of my counselling practice related to children and sexuality, and how my curiosity about different and sometimes opposing perspectives by adults about children’s actions was awakened (Flanagan 2009, 2010). Briefly, different responses in primary school settings created an interest to explore how principals understood children’s sexual actions, and how principals made decisions upon their own understandings, together with the policies their schools had developed (Flanagan 2009). I then facilitated a range of professional development opportunities with principals and teachers, social workers and foster care-givers around children and sexual development and activity (Flanagan 2003, 2010, 2011). My research interest

continues in questioning how the media constructs sexuality in childhood, noticing that the outcome is frequently sensationalised and supporting a response of moral panic to children's sexual activity. A current study researches stories that teachers, counsellors, parents and children hold about ideas of sexuality in childhood, and how these stories (favourably and unfavourably) position adults and children within multiple discourses.

The next section explores the literature on sexuality discourse, and then connects how these ideas are taken into writing about children and sexuality.

## **Discourses of sexuality**

Adults themselves can struggle to speak about sexuality in their lives. How we do speak about sexuality, and the language we use, is constrained by current discourse on ideas of privacy, sensitivity, sacredness and social acceptance. There is a struggle to find language and to acknowledge the limits of our language, within this sensitive area of people's lives. When we come to articulate children's sexuality, it appears all the more difficult. Vivien Burr (2003, 107-108) states that:

...the discourses of sexuality on offer in our present society offer a limited menu for the manufacture of sexual identity. However, two well-established discourses in particular call upon us to identify ourselves with respect to them: 'normal' sexuality; and 'perverted' sexuality ... Given these representations of sexuality that are culturally available to us, we have no choice but to fashion our identity out of them. ...The discourses of sexuality available within our language leave us with very few other alternatives.

Weeks (1986, cited in Robinson 2005, 67), "points out that sexuality only exists through its social forms and social organization" and that this is constructed in the binaries of heterosexuality/homosexuality and normal-natural/deviant-unnatural identities. Frayser (2003) describes the shift in 'cultural maps' as social constructions of sexuality have moved from reproductive to relational and recreational understandings. Frayser further states:

An expanded view of sexuality has meant an expanded interpretation of what is sexual; sexual activity is not synonymous with intercourse. Words, looks, touches, pictures, and movements can all be construed in sexual ways. (2003, 267)

What landscapes are possible in this expanded view of sexuality, especially when studying children within the shift in cultural maps from a dominant reproductive understanding to relational and recreational understandings?

### **Sexuality in children's lives**

A number of landscapes are painted in the literature, both historically and currently. Early writing about childhood sexuality includes Freud's (1905) psychosexual theory and Moll's (1912) medical "natural history", followed by a range of sociological studies: Martinson (1973), Yates, (1978), Jackson (1982), and a sociological history of childhood sexuality by Egan and Hawkes (2008). There are also clinical studies presented by Friedrich *et al.* (1991), Johnson (1999), Ryan (2000), and DeLamater and Friedrich (2002). These authors largely explore a developmental appreciation of so-called 'normal' or typical interest and activity in sexuality among children. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as a consequence of a greater awareness of sexual abuse) there was recognition of children sexually abusing children. Within developmental and forensic approaches, psychiatry and psychology research began to explore 'perpetrators' abuse histories, family environments, and other biological, social and environmental factors (Araji 1997; Cantwell 1988; Finch 1967; Johnson 1988; Tharinger 1988, cited in Burton *et al.* 1997). Over time, children who act out sexuality have been categorised, labelled, assessed and pathologised by educational and social service practitioners (Flanagan 2010). Child protective developments, based on research with sexual offenders, gave rise to knowledge that understood offenders 'careers' stemming from their own abuse backgrounds; that child sexual activity could indicate possible abuse; that sexual interest and activity may develop unhealthily into harmful behaviours (Araji 1997; Cantwell 1988). A number of authors have published opposing arguments against the swell of concern and panic around children and sexual activity (Jackson 1990; Okami 1992), and call for further research into children's perceptions and intentions of what is happening for children in their own worlds.

What is understood as 'normal' in child sexual development has been defined, along with defining concerning problem sexual behaviours, and abusive and molesting behaviour (see, for example American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) 1999; Johnson 1999). The research methods and categories include the following:

- Retrospective studies inviting adults to describe their own childhood experiences and actions (Lamb and Coakley 1993; Larsson and Svedin 2002)
- Observational studies, such as parent or other adult (e.g. researcher) reporting on what is observed through children's interactions or individual behaviour (de Graaf and Rademakers 2006; Friedrich, *et al.* 1991; O'Sullivan 2003)
- Analysis of case studies and data taken through clinical practice, collated and analysed at a later date (Johnson 1999)
- Historical and sociological presentations of childhood and sexuality in political contexts (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Foucault 1978)
- Biological and medical (and psychiatric) descriptions of scientific studies (AACAP 1999; Friedrich *et al.* 1992)

Information from such research holds value in contributing to some understandings of the complexities of sexuality in children's lives, and the negotiation in learning to relate with others in sexual ways, but there is a gap in understanding children's own perceptions and how they currently construct their identities as sexual beings in relation to others. For example, how children live out, test out and enact their identities in relation to each other and with adults: their parents, teachers and others. The way we currently speak and write about childhood sexuality is constrained within the language available to describe these representations: so childhood sexual identity is also largely fashioned out of the ideas of 'normalcy' and 'perversion' (Burr 2003). In western societies a dominant discourse is that of understanding sexual actions by children as deviant, and possibly a sign or symptom of abuse (Egan and Hawkes 2008; Jackson 1990).

Kerry Robinson (2005, 68-69) identifies "primarily three dominant contradictory discourses that operate around children and sexuality". She names the three discourses as: a socially constructed binary relationship between adults and children where children are perceived as being asexual, innocent and immature; a gendered representation of childhood sexuality as tainted innocence and 'the knowing child' (cf. Freud's 'seductive child') whereby the child is held responsible for sexual activity; and a moral panic in which children are viewed, "as sexual beings but lacking the maturity to comprehend and emotionally and physically control such behaviours". Robinson warns that these discourses are unhelpful because they position children as vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. None of these discourses give voice to children as active social agents, but position them as passive, and without authority with which to contribute to adult knowledges. Rather than provide a framework in which childhood and sexuality can be considered within indigenous and specifically

situated settings, these discourses offer essentialist notions of a universal nature with no regard for social and cultural contexts.

What is missing is research that is informed by children's own discourses about sexuality. I propose my current study will contribute by inviting adults and children to share narratives on sexuality in childhood, with analysis of discourses that shape and support ideas and practices in the narratives.

### **Child-centred meanings and social realities of sexuality**

This part considers the following questions: What is 'sexuality' when it comes to children lives? How might a child's sexuality be understood when there is a heightened sensitivity to any language or action that for adults may be potentially sexualised? How can children respond to allegations of being sexually harmful when power relations position them within a place they cannot speak? What is taken as evidence of actual sexual intent or behaviour? A number of short stories will be shared throughout this chapter in order to explore these questions. Each tells of some words or actions in children's lives, resulting in language that shapes meaning and creates social reality.

In proposing her thesis on sociology of personal life, Carol Smart (2007) refers to a series of sociological debates over 'the family'. One of these debates is described as "the changing status of children in families and the growth (or apparent growth) of child-centredness..." (2007, 12). Smart purports that the concept of personal life "also gives recognition to those areas of life which used to be slightly below the sociological radar" (2007, 29): such as

... sexuality, bodies, emotions, intimacy and can bring them together, creating a whole that is greater than its parts, rather than treating them as separate subfields in the sociological discipline. (2007, 30)

A child's identity is constructed within a range of discourses in which they are positioned. Critical to any investigation of personal life is an awareness of language which shapes descriptions and meaning(s). According to Richardson and St. Pierre, language "does not "reflect" social reality but rather produces meaning and creates social reality" (2005, 961). Discourses of children's sexuality are sustained when stories are 'told' and 'retold' by children, through their spoken and enacted lives (for ideas of children's identities shaped by narratives, see Freeman, Epston and Lobovits 1997; Morgan 2006), and these stories are also 'told' and 'retold' by adults, within the discursive frameworks that shape adults speech and actions .

Too often, reference to children *and* sexuality is constructed as problematic. A negative sense or response comes forward for adults with an assumption that there is something wrong (Okami 1992). Questions form within the education or family setting and the therapeutic encounter: “What is wrong? What has happened for this child to be interested or aware about sexuality – should sex not be adult business?” Since the exposure of child sexual abuse, attention to child sexuality has taken up a different perspective, raising concern about risk of molestation (Johnson 1999). There is awareness of children abusing children, and identifying why and how children come to be positioned as sexually abusive (Ryan 2000). Has this possibly brought an over-reaction whereby sexual actions between children are seen as indicative of abuse or sexual harm?

Research in Aotearoa New Zealand on sexuality in the lives of children largely focuses on child sexual activity as transgressive action which brings children into the arena of disciplinary and/or therapeutic responses. Some studies contribute to an emergent understanding that teachers and principals in Aotearoa New Zealand primary and intermediate schools are increasingly challenged by children acting out sexually with other children (Ayland 2009; Flanagan 2009; Russell *et al.* 2008). There is also a growing awareness by social service agencies and practitioners that their services are more frequently called upon to respond to referrals related to children’s sexual activity (Flanagan 2003, 2010; Relationship Services Whakawhanaungatanga 2007; WellStop *et al.* 2009). Where teachers and parents understand sexuality in childhood as transgressive, problematic, and deviant, there is little room for alternative and other possible meanings for sexuality and sexual activity in childhood to be viewed and perceived as developmental, healthy or productive.

## **Stories from practice**

The following stories introduce and describe some of the complexity of understanding and responding to children where sexual words or actions invite adult intervention. Each story tells of some words or actions in children’s lives, resulting in language that shapes meaning and creates a social reality in which children are positioned within adult discourse. The personal narratives told here come from a mix of stories shared by teachers and families within counselling, where details and identities have been changed for privacy and anonymity.

### *Logan*

At a rural, small-town school, Logan, a five-year old boy on his first day of school, urinated on the school playground field during the lunch break. Miss Brown, the duty-teacher growled at him, telling



Logan that what he did was offensive and attention-seeking. Miss Brown 'hailed' Logan into the principal's office where he was asked to explain his action.

In this example of Logan at school, there are social, school and gender discourses that position him in relation to Miss Brown. While no specific conclusions can be determined it is possible to explore potential discursive turns within this story. Miss Brown possibly saw this *boy* performing an action that could be interpreted as a male activity positioning Logan as dissenting and 'outside the rules' of polite and civil society, and in a visible and threatening affront to females. This action by Logan was impertinent and sexually offensive to the *girls* on the playground. To the principal, Logan claimed there was no wrongdoing. He perceived the field to be a 'paddock', and explained that when he goes on the farm with his grandfather there is no problem about urinating on the paddock. Discourses from farming contexts with a level of pragmatism, and a physiological urgency to empty his bladder, informed Logan's understanding of appropriateness for his action. If he was in the class, or near the building, he would not have acted in this way. What effects could there be of Miss Brown's words and action toward Logan? The impact of Miss Brown's "speech action" (Drewery 2005, 305) offered little space for Logan to speak. The effect is a closed or exclusionary position call which lessens or denies a relational quality to this exchange. How might this event shape subsequent interaction for Logan with Miss Brown, or how Logan perceives his time with his grandfather on the farm?

### *Billy and Talia*

Billy, a seven-year-old boy from next door, was playing with Talia (Joan's six-year-old daughter) at Talia's house in the playroom. As Joan was walking past the playroom she overheard Billy say to Talia: '... and that is when I put my penis in your vagina'. Joan stopped short, momentarily frozen. She was unsure how to respond. Joan paused, took a deep breath, and then went into the room and told the children it was such a nice day to go outside and play.

As Joan heard Billy's words, what can you imagine might have gone through her mind? One immediate possibility was whether these children were actually exploring their physical bodies, and trying to imitate sexual intercourse. Or was it that Billy had witnessed sexual intercourse in some form: his parents? Watching pornography? On television? On the internet? Or was he a victim of sexual abuse? Or is there some other unknown possibility? Joan's positioning within discourses of childhood and sexuality, of adulthood and

parenthood caused dissonance for her: she thought it is not right that a boy of this age should be speaking like this; a boy of this age should not be trying to have intercourse! In sitting with these questions and anxieties Joan's speech action with Billy and Talia provided space for the children to not be closed and excluded in their relational conversation. While uncertain as to what that conversation was about, Joan resisted responding in disciplinary or judgmental ways. If the children considered their conversation to be potentially problematic, Joan's words and action offered them space and safety.

Joan contacted Billy's parents and explained what had occurred. They clarified that with their new baby Billy had asked many questions at home about where a baby comes from. When he heard that "Daddy puts a seed inside Mummy's tummy to make the baby grow" he asked how this happened. His parents answered his questions, and Billy was sharing his new learning with Talia.

Imagine if Joan had responded differently: if she had reacted and told Billy off, what effect might that have for him and Talia in their development and understanding, and ways of speaking about sexuality?

### *Jed*

Jed, an eight-year old boy, was overheard by other children saying that he was going to 'sex and rape' one of the girls in his class. The children told their teacher. Jed's parents were called in to meet the principal.

Jed and all involved are situated within discursive environments that shape their thinking and actions related to Jed's words. How do other young children understand what Jed has said: do they sense something aggressive, something sexual, or do the words have a sense of trouble that they should tell someone about? When they inform the teacher, what does this adult believe is being spoken in these words? How is the principal positioned as being responsible for safety in the school, and in relation to Jed and his parents? In what way do Jed's parents understand his words, and how are they then positioned as his parents by others in the school?

The principal and teacher would likely take up positions of protecting children, and assuming Jed has unsafe intentions. Jed's parents will be positioned within discourses that shape their thoughts and actions in relation to Jed, each other, the principal and teacher. Parental discourses might suggest ideas of neglect, failure or blame of each other as Jed's parents; gender discourses may have them consider Jed's words within ideas of male privilege, patriarchy, and sexual dominance; cultural discourses could offer ideas of judgment about the

effects of video games and internet access, or possibly Jed's friends who he relates to. The language used by Jed offers little room for alternative meaning for adults: it suggests sexual violence.

Concerned about this language, and with the support of the principal, Jed's parents sought counselling. In the context of safety Jed spoke about his confusion about what had happened. He had been teased by this particular girl, and he had wanted to "get back at her". His intention was to humiliate and hurt the girl, which is what he understood his words represented: to "kiss (sex) and hurt (rape)" her. Jed's words held a meaning that was markedly different from how the adults understood what he said.

In these stories, children's experiences of sexual language or action are located in their relational and social contexts. Frequently the response by adults can be one of panic, and reactions to child language or action as possibly sexual or sexualised. The above stories provide understandings for how sexuality in children's lives can be experienced and explored with some safety.

### **Stories from news media**

Furthering the complexity of how to understand children's sexual words and actions in their lives, media portrayal of sexual actions among children accentuates adult concepts of sexuality. Media constructions of children involved in sexual activity with other children have used criminal or legal language (used within the realm of youth or adult justice) that was inaccurate and inappropriate for children. While presented as 'the truth' (and admittedly there may be something of truth contained) there are many narratives that are untold in the media about a child and family. It is of concern when children's words and actions are ascribed as intentionally abusive when a child's purpose may be quite different. My position is that media should develop use of relational language and approaches that consider child development, social and cultural location of children's actions, together with language that support these children and those harmed.

The news media also contribute to public perceptions of risk for children when there are stories produced related to child sexual abuse, especially if other children are reported as *offenders*. An unfortunate effect from this kind of reaction is that childhood sexuality takes up a notion of illegality and/or abnormality, where ideas of childhood innocence and purity have been violated, regardless of the action and the child's intention. 'Childhood' and 'sexuality' are thus viewed within the dominant discourse as mutually exclusive. Rather than holding a primary or dominant position of a developmental perspective of childhood, there tends to be a reactive, child protective notion that shapes responses in different contexts. Child protection discourses can

set up, and sustain, ideas of childhood that paradoxically increases risk (Robinson 2005), by discounting children's opportunities to speak to what the actions mean, and upholding adult knowledges of the child's best interests. Such restrictive meanings of childhood sexuality close possibilities for developing a perspective that offers positive outcomes for children and how they understand sexuality in their lives.

When exploring a range of Aotearoa New Zealand media articles comparison was made of the narratives of children's events with the headlines and stories that are conveyed by the articles. Over three distinct dates that the media reported on there was a moral panic and subsequent effects for these children. In each example there is a 'spin' that overdramatizes the children's actions, unhelpfully labelling behaviour that consequently positions the children and their parents and families as dysfunctional. The following news media articles cover three specific dates.

*31 July 2002*

Various news media reported on a story about a Catholic primary school near Wellington. Television New Zealand's (TVNZ) *ONE News* stated that "The police are investigating complaints that nine boys...sexually assaulted five female classmates during school hours" (Sex among school kids increasing 2002). TVNZ ran the item on their web site (nzoom.com) with the title, "Sex among school kids increasing". The title indicates sexual activity between children, and in the article call the actions "sexual assault" indicating abusive and non-consenting sexual activity between the children. It stated that "All of the children involved, and some parents, are undergoing counselling following the allegations..." The item also reports Pat Lynch, chief executive of the NZ Catholic Education Office, saying that "incidents of sexual activity between school children are more common than people may think, but they are rarely brought to the public's attention". The article continues, "Lynch says society makes it difficult for some young people to draw appropriate boundaries in matters of sexuality."

This report highlights a number of interesting points, presented in a simple, factual tone: there is an incident where the actions are understood as 'assault'; the actions are sexual; the people involved in the sexual activity are children; that sexual activity between children occurs more frequently than it is reported; that the children's actions can be seen as socially constructed.

Compare this with another news item on the same day about the same event, by Independent Newspapers Limited (INL) on their website [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz) (Surge in sexual abuse by children 2002). The headline takes a different tone than the previous one, and extending the idea of 'sex between children' to 'sexual

abuse by children'. One view may be that this more accurately reflects the event being reported. However, within this article comments are included from one girl's parents, and a reference to another event in Dunedin where two 12-year-old girls allegedly sexually assaulted another girl. There were also comments from Hamish Dixon, manager of Wellington's STOP sexual offender treatment organisation. The article states, "Police and sex offender counsellors say there has been a surge in the number of reported cases involving sexual abuse by children" without quoting or referencing any specific person. A link is then made to reporting about youth offending which dominates the rest of the article. The tone of this article then ascribes the children's actions as 'sex offending'. This reporting is inaccurate, confusing and unfair. The children involved should not be spoken of and reported in legal discourse, and painted as criminals. While these boys' actions were allegedly abusive, and the police had an involvement, media reporting should be responsible in the language used in describing children's identities. As children, they are not 'youth sex offenders'!

This latter text, in contrast to the earlier one, takes on more of an emotive tenor and one contributing to a sense of moral panic in its reporting. The earlier item appeared to have some balance in reporting about the effects and responses for all the children, and indicating that sex activity in childhood occurs more than is reported. "Surge in sexual abuse by children" creates an image in the article of children identified as sex offenders, and views the boys who assaulted the girls as criminals. This representation is supported by quoting one girl's father, "If they're acting like that at 12 where's it going to be in four years?" He also said, "I really think that New Zealand's public needs to know what is going on at schools. They can't assume it's safe at school". At this, the article ends. What is the intention of this article? A likely effect is of fear mongering resulting from irresponsible journalism.

A third article on the same date, 31 July 2002 was also published on the TVNZ web site, [www.nzoom.com](http://www.nzoom.com) (Young sexual offenders on the rise 2002). Running with the title, "Young sexual offenders on the rise" this item could be mistaken as a companion with the other one that day related to the children's sexual actions at the Wellington region primary school. Rather, this 221-word article is a scant report about a study by Auckland University clinical psychologist, Dr Ian Lambie on adolescent offending. Of the 500 offenders studied the article focuses on those 200 in treatment for sexual offending. Without revealing much at all about Dr Lambie's study, this article mentioned:

He (Lambie) says most of the adolescent abuse is targeted at younger siblings and relatives and *incidents like the assaults by seven children at [the] primary school are rare* (italics mine). There is far more danger in their own home from somebody they know.

Dr Lambie's comment restored some balance in the midst of these media (mis)reports. An effect of how this article is presented on the same day, alongside the other(s) related to the primary school children's event, and with its particular headline, could be perceived as further sensationalising the school children's activity. One could be forgiven in thinking that there is an explosive development in children becoming adolescent offenders across the country – which is not the case. How are children positioned within this style of reporting? What effect could this have for their parents and teachers, and for their peers?

*6 March 2008*

On this date, two articles appeared with these titles: Age of sexual offenders getting younger (2008); Sex offender treatment in demand for kids (2008). These two articles– one published on the Christchurch Press site, the other in the parent company's website, *Stuff.co.nz*. are the same, but for the headline. My concern is how each headline shapes an understanding of the children in the story, but particularly how the second headline further shapes this story into one that is very different from its origin.

*15 March 2010*

In March 2010 there were media reports recording statistics of crimes in New Zealand July 2008-June 2009. These statistics included all aspects of crime, including youth and adult offences. The headlines were as follows: Twelve children arrested for sex assault in 2008/09 (2010); 5-year-old sex offender on crime list (2010). Once again, the information in each news item was identical. The first headline suggests that twelve children were formally arrested and processed within the police system for sexual assault. Legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand clearly specifies the limits to which police can engage with children, and who holds responsibility for child and youth justice. The second headline called a five-year old boy a 'sex offender'. This headline positions this boy within language that describes adult behaviour, and is not appropriate for a child of five years.

This media attention about sexual activity amongst children has positioned them within a discourse that shapes their identities as deviant or disordered in some way. While problematic family and social factors may

be present in children's territories of negotiating relationships, media descriptions often narrowly identify the "behavior" without regard to developmental and cultural contexts. Media reports also frequently contort the events so that readers are supported to assume a meaning through which children are labelled within the language of adult offending or perpetration. Such "offender" descriptions located in adult criminal literature is not appropriate, and is located within psychological and legal discourse. What position call is offered the individual children involved, but also the communities of families, schools and ethnic groups. They can be subjected to assumed and generalized descriptions that come from public reading of the media material. Such descriptions can invite exclusionary or isolating practices within wider communities.

The discursive shaping of these articles contributes to a narrow and binary way of thinking about children and sexual activity: that is, children should be innocent and asexual, as distinct from sexual children are abused, deviant and problems. Research of children's understandings of their own experience and meanings of sexual activity is therefore necessary to achieve alternative narratives apart from those told by adults.

### **Stories from school principals and teachers**

Research in the Waikato region of Aotearoa New Zealand explored the responses of primary school principals to 'child sexual behaviour' (Flanagan 2009). In this study, thirty-six primary school principals responded to a questionnaire that inquired about incidence, policy and consultation related to children's sexual behaviour in schools. Twenty-five of the participants (69%) had responded to complaints of children behaving sexually at school. 80% stated that they distinguish sexual actions as either normal or abusive. One asked, "What is normal?" Many principals were unclear about what behaviour was appropriate or not, or where they could access any support to consult or seek to refer. Principals did not have consistency in the ways they responded to incidents, nor any forum for consulting with peers. The findings suggested that if school management was to respond effectively to children's sexual behaviour in primary schools, teachers require some awareness of child sexual development to guide their thinking and response. They can then consider whether the action is a concern for abuse, or playful action, or an inappropriate but less severe engagement. One principal commented,

*I find it difficult dealing with parents who over-react and traumatise all children involved. I believe children are sexually curious and play sexual games. In my own experience as a child this was the*

*case and we were not abused or abusers. But where do you draw the line between learning sexual games and abuse indicators?*

The study of primary school principals found that management responses to child sexual behaviour in schools were often inconsistent, and that there is a gap for schools in relation to support, training and policy development (Flanagan 2009). Where one child and their family may find support from a principal and teachers, another child and family can face exclusion and social isolation. Learning and behaviour support and special education support services are sometimes called to assess and provide intervention to help a child. Frequently referrals are made to social services and/or health/mental health practitioners.

Further Aotearoa New Zealand research about children's sexual behaviour in schools includes a study which surveyed teachers about abusive and inappropriate sexual behaviour among Year 7 and 8 students (Russell *et al.* 2008) and an informal study surveying teachers about children's sexualised behaviour at school (Ayland 2009). Together these studies contribute to a growing understanding that teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are challenged by children acting sexually with other children. There is a concern for staff to not deal harshly with children who act sexually and inappropriately.

## **Deconstructing language and discourse**

The emergent landscape of understandings within discourses of sexuality in children's lives is dominated by perceptions of children as engaging in speech and actions that should be heard and seen within an adult realm. There appears little openness to children's worlds having space for sexuality as an embodied and lived experience, without connection to possibilities of abuse or some form of deviance. What is lacking is research that identifies and reports on children's understandings and discourses of sexuality, and how people understand sexuality in the lives of children in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have begun a PhD research project that involves interviews with adults and children about their understandings of sexuality in childhood. This will involve parents, teachers and counsellors, as well as children. The study will explore literature and narratives of children's sexuality, analysing the interview data using Foucauldian discourse analysis, and exposing historical and current ideas and practices around sexuality in childhood.

Readers are invited to consider different questions, engaging in broader inquiry, and invite fuller exploration of a child's specific actions that is informed by the child's own understanding. To find ourselves in a place of inquiry, the discourses that position children's sexuality and actions as abnormal, deviant or



pathological, need to be held with care. Media reporting largely upholds binary discourses of children as ‘evil’ or ‘innocent’, and the messages in media articles sustain a skewed, binary view of children’s lives. Examining some of the language of media articles, many stories takes up a position of regarding these children as sex offenders – on the road to a career of sexual offending. There is an agenda of a moral panic discourse with a seemingly biased focus on the worst. What is missing is any reference to the range of children’s experiences, or descriptions in children’s language. Rather than language acting to deny personhood, dignity and respect (see Saunders and Goddard 2001), children’s language could offer new possibilities. As Davies (2000, cited in Davies *et al.* 2006, 90) states, “All subjects are produced not only through dominant discourses and regulatory practices but also through the opening up of new possibilities in language”.

This chapter has outlined literature and practices for children who have been positioned within discourses of childhood and sexuality. It has explored adult constructions of language and meaning that dominates how children’s words and actions are described, and invited readers to consider multiple possibilities for what these words and actions could mean. Using practice examples from counselling, media reports and research from Aotearoa New Zealand, the ground has been prepared for a study that focusses on analysing discourses of narratives about sexuality in the lives of children. Importantly, this work intends to be child-centred, include children’s contributions, and offer space for inclusive position calls for children.

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