

Children and sexuality: Therapists working with families

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Adult concerns for children about words/actions

Counselling practice: groups, families, children

Collaboration with teachers and social workers

Interested in how children and their actions were talked about and understood



- Focus on language used by adults about children to explore cultural discourses on sexuality
- Used six vignettes within interviews to initiate talk about children and sexuality
- Transcripts from interviews became data for analysis
- Drew on poststructuralist and feminist analysis of discourse as language and practices of power/knowledge



Title:

Unpacking the effects of power relations in childhood sexuality:

**A discursive analysis based on
conversations with parents, teachers and
counsellors.**

Literature (1)



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- Theorising of sexuality and gender
 - Cultural perspectives
 - Science (Kinsey);
 - Instinct (Freud);
 - Commerce (e.g., porn)
- Feminist theories and masculine constructions
- Sexuality as discourse

Literature (2)



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- Theorising specific practices in childhood
 - Kissing
 - Masturbation
 - Sex talk

- Contemporary discourses
 - Innocence
 - Risk protection
 - Parental responsibility
 - Sexuality knowledge
 - Children's rights

Research questions



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- What language is used to describe child sexuality by adults (parents, teachers and counsellors) in Aotearoa New Zealand?
- What discourses about childhood and sexuality are visible within this language?
- How does this language construct specific notions of ‘the child’ and sexuality?
- How is ‘the child’ constructed as a sexual being within these discourses?
- In what ways, through language, might children be understood as sexual subjects within families and society?
- “What were the effects of power generated by what was said?” (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 11)

A discursive methodology



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- Discourse analysis
- Feminist poststructural analysis
- Inquiry using vignettes and interviews
- Ethics as reflexive and relational practice
- Analysis – interpretive and critical

Why vignettes?



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- Participants focus on real, specific events.
- A range of examples given for participants to explore widely their own perspectives.
- Participants might tell something of other stories (whether personal to themselves or someone closely connected, or of their professional experiences).
- Ideas connected with sexuality in childhood could be talked about.
- Discussion might bring forward speaking about gender and culture, or possibly other social discourses on childhood and sexuality.

Vignettes:



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1. A 5-year-old boy who urinates in the school playground;
2. Two 8-year-old children who kiss in the school playground;
3. A 5-year-old boy who pulls his pants down in the classroom;
4. A 5-year-old girl who rubs herself between her legs at school;
5. A 9-year-old boy who touches another boy's penis in the school toilet;
6. A 7-year-old boy who tells a 6-year-old girl about sex at school.

Discussion



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- With the person next to you:
 - What language might you use or call on to talk about childhood?
 - How might this language shape relationship with the child?
 - What does this language do to children and to adults?

Participants



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- 28 participants: 25 women and 3 men
- 13 parents
- 9 teachers
- 6 therapists
- 17 individual interviews
(5 teachers, 6 parents, 6 therapists)
- 3 group interviews
(teachers, parents, therapists)

Therapist participants



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- Part of a team within a community-based counselling agency servicing a city and rural region.
- Included practitioners from psychology, social work and counselling who are involved in individual and family counselling practice
- 6 women participants, 4 of whom participated in a group interview, and all participated in individual interviews

Group interviews



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Some of the therapists reflected on their perceived personal and professional benefit from participation in the group interview:

...[S]o much of the research on children's work is all from the Northern Hemisphere. That's why it's really exciting and want to support you in this. (Therapist A)



...[There is] the value of having time to reflect on the conversations, that aren't clinically-based – you know, we come together [for] case reviews...but there's little time and space to be able to offer support.

But this was interesting, hearing the value of just being able to talk about children and sexuality, yeah. I think that the languaging is quite key to provide people with a language of how to talk about sexual stuff. (Therapist B)



I have enjoyed this opportunity to have the dialogue with other clinicians...

I wonder if there's some value in having a process like this for orienting [new] clinicians...a discussion about different ideas, different positions, different ways of looking at this...

and conversations that we don't have the time to sit and have and reflect on. (Therapist C)

Therapist participants



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- Today, some transcript from 3 of the participants
- Val
- Maxine
- Sandra



- “It’s more acceptable for boys to be overtly sexual”
- (Re)Constructing gender binaries



- “The line has to be drawn somewhere”



- Understandings of pleasure
- ‘Safe’ self-soothing or ‘enjoyable’ masturbation?



- Finding space to speak about sexual curiosity and exploration
- Questions about what's normal in development



- Children are produced as sexed and gendered subjects within dominant discourses of compulsory heterosexuality and normative development (biological and psychological)
- Therapists focussed on silences in society in the talk about gendered norms of male sexuality and sexual behaviour

Questions for counsellors



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- How does the way we speak sustain dominant ideas and practices about childhood and sexuality?
- Adults struggle to find public and professional spaces that are available and safe to engage in discussion with other adults about childhood and sexuality



With the person next to you:

- What questions come forward for you from this presentation?
- Are there any particular ideas you take with you to think about for your practice?