Parental interpretations of “childhood innocence”

Implications for early sexuality education

Abstract

Purpose

Despite general recognition of the benefits of talking openly about sexuality with children, parents encounter and/or create barriers to such communication. One of the key barriers is a desire to protect childhood innocence. This study explores parental interpretations of childhood innocence and the influence this has on their reported practices relating to sexuality-relevant communication with young children.

Design/methodology/approach

One hundred and ten UK parents and carers of children aged between 4-7 years were involved in focus group discussions. The discussions were transcribed and thematic network analysis was subsequently applied to the data. Following the reading and re-reading of the transcripts for meaning, context and content, individual comments and statements were identified within the dataset and grouped to generate themes.

Findings

Childhood innocence was commonly equated with non-sexuality in children and sexual ignorance. Parents displayed ambiguity around the conceptualisation of non-innocence in children. Parents desire to prolong the state of childhood innocence led them to withhold certain sexual knowledge from their children; however, the majority also desired an open relationship whereby their child could approach them for information.

Originality/value

UK parents have a strong desire to maintain the social construction of their children as inherently innocent. This discourse is affecting the way in which they communicate about sexually-relevant information with their children.

Keywords

Communication, parenting, sex and relationships education, children, sexuality and the family, intergenerational relations

Paper type

Research paper

Background

Introduction

Research indicates that early sexuality education is important for physical and mental aspects of an individual’s health and wellbeing. Robinson (2012a, 2012b) suggested that a child’s access to sexuality knowledge is crucial for building competency and resilience skills in the early years and for developing an understanding of one’s own sexual subjectivity. Research also reveals that sexuality education can reduce the likelihood of sexual risk-taking behaviour, protect against sexual abuse and benefit healthy sexual development (Cook and Fathalla, 1996; Kirby, 2002; Kirby and Lepore, 2007). The international children’s rights and advocacy agendas are consistent with this approach (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003; UNESCO, 2009; UNPD, 1994;). Despite this, children’s access to sexuality education remains controversial and highly debated (Fields, 2005), in part because of beliefs that comprehensive sex education is destructive and fears that such awareness will root ideas in children’s minds that may lead to early sexual experimentation (The Christian Institute, 2011).

Quite extensive research has focused on examining the association between parental communication and sexual behaviour in the teenage years (Diiorio *et al.*, 2003; Martin *et al.*, 2007; Whitaker *et al.*, 1999), although causality is sometimes difficult to attribute with confidence because of the cross-sectional or retrospective nature of much of this research. In a survey of 13-17 year olds, Aspy *et al.* (2007) found that the extent of parent-child communication was associated with increased likelihood of using contraception, and Karofsky *et al.* (2000) reported that teenagers who perceived a better level of communication with their parents were less likely to engage in sexual intercourse. Fewer studies have, however, examined the role of parents as sexuality educators of younger children with limited research exploring the parental concerns and anxieties associated with sexuality education at

young ages (Ballard and Gross, 2009; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Frankham, 2006; Geasler *et al.*, 1995; Stone *et al.*, 2013; Walker, 2001).

Sexual Knowledge and Childhood Innocence

Childhood innocence is a founding assumption of contemporary Western thinking and a ‘natural’ state which should be protected from threat (Taylor, 2010). Historically, and to the present day, notions of childhood innocence and protection result in a representation of the child as non-sexual and a dismissal of childhood sexual subjectivities (Bhana, 2008; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2012a; 2012b; Scott *et al.*, 1998; Taylor, 2010). Recent Australian research by Davies and Robinson (2010) has illustrated how parents’ communication about sexual matters with their children (aged from 3 to 5 years) is greatly influenced by dominant discourses of childhood and childhood innocence.

Within the adult-child binary (the concept that childhood is a special status distinct from adulthood and as such a ‘boundary’ needs to be crossed to get from one side to the other), the perceived innocence of a child is seen as something to be protected by adults, with everyday discourses (and developmental perspectives) depicting children as having non-existent or immature sexuality (Robinson, 2012b). Robinson (2012a, 2012b) argued that infringing cultural norms of childhood can result in both public and private anxieties in society which then act to maintain the desire of adults to protect their child’s innocence, especially their sexual innocence; this is achieved, in part, through the withholding of information about sexuality.

These anxieties can act as a barrier to open, parent-child sexuality communication because of the fear of overexposure to sexual knowledge (Dyson and Smith, 2011; Newby *et al.*, 2011). In a UK-based study, Stone *et al.* (2013) found that, among parents of 3 to 7 year

olds, childhood was frequently perceived as a time of presumed sexual innocence; moreover, parents believed that providing young children with knowledge about sex and relationships would destroy this state. In particular, parents reported that they feared that their children might begin to start behaving and thinking in sexual ways which were viewed as being appropriate for adults only. Indeed, the concept of childhood adultification, in which children display precocious knowledge deemed inappropriate to their development, has been widely discussed in certain sectors of academic thinking (Fields, 2005; Poulin-Dubois *et al.*, 2002).

Other research has produced similar results. For example, in a UK-based needs assessment designed to explore the factors that predispose, reinforce, and enable parent–child communication about sex and relationships, Newby *et al.* (2011) identified a parental belief, among others, that avoiding talk around sex and relationships was equated with the protection of childhood innocence. Similarly, Dyson and Smith (2011) found that Australian parents had concerns and fears about overexposure to sexuality knowledge and maintaining childhood innocence. However, despite these reservations, the vast majority of parents expressed a desire for their children to be well-informed about the topics surrounding sexuality and relationships. Davies and Robinson (2010) also found evidence that parents were acutely aware of the need for early sexuality education, in part to counteract cultural discourses of heteronormativity (the cultural bias of viewing opposite sex relationships as the norm); however, parents’ approaches were still heavily influenced by the view of the innocent, non-sexual child.

Using data collected as part of a broader study investigating parental perspectives regarding the early sexualisation and sexuality education of children in the UK, this paper investigates the concept of innocence, how innocence is interpreted by parents, and how parental desire to maintain childhood innocence may obstruct honest and open discussion of

sexuality and sexual relationships and be in conflict with their wish for their children to be well-informed.

Method

Procedure

Parents or carers of children aged between four and seven years were eligible for inclusion in the study. Contact with potential participants was made using recruitment flyers and posters distributed in schools, Children’s Centres and relevant community groups in Southern Central England. The study was advertised as exploring parents’ views regarding sex and relationships education for children, and the wider issue of the sexualisation of children. Interested parents and carers who responded to the adverts were informed by letter about the purpose of the study, their personal involvement, their right to withdraw, and also how the material collected was to be used. Each letter was followed up with a telephone call to arrange participation in a focus group discussion (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger and Casey, 2009). Most focus groups were held in local community centres and light refreshments were provided. Participants were given a one-off honorarium of 10 pounds sterling for their involvement. A member of the research team acted as facilitator of the group and an assistant attended to take notes. Discussions were digitally recorded with participants’ full consent. Ethical approval was obtained through the University of Southampton ethics and governance procedures (equivalent to IRB); the ERGO reference was 821.

Each discussion began with “icebreaker” questions asking parents about their own sex and relationships education (SRE). The facilitator then steered the discussion to cover parents’ approaches to sexuality education, responding to children’s questions and behaviour, external influences on children, the role of parents and schools in sexuality education, and resources and support available for parents. Examples of core questions included: “How do you

respond to questions that your children ask you?”, “Have you ever initiated a conversation with your children about anything to do with sex and relationships?” and “Do you discuss how your children will learn about sex and relationships with other adults?”; in all cases, such trigger questions were followed by probing to explore reasoning and justifications. Questions of childhood innocence were not specifically asked but arose spontaneously as parents responded to other questions. The discussions typically lasted between 80 and 120 minutes, and generated much interest and active involvement.

It has been argued that the unique aspects of the focus group methodology and any arising tensions and dilemmas of focus group participation can unduly influence the interactions which occur within the group context and the data obtained (Smithson, 2000). Limitations of the focus group methodology therefore include the tendency for certain types of socially acceptable opinion to emerge. This is especially pertinent when researching emotive topics such as children’s sexuality education. We argue, however, that since many of the responses that parents report in ‘real-life’ are similarly socially determined (for example, fear of others’ reactions) focus groups were a suitable place for parents to share their concerns and fears. Furthermore, by way of follow-up half of all participants were telephoned subsequently and were asked explicitly if there was anything they felt unable to say in the group context or wanted to amend. No participants reflected that they had felt inhibited or constrained by the group context.

All focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim; participants were given pseudonyms and all references to names and places removed. Thematic network analysis was subsequently applied to the data collected as described by Attride-Stirling (2001). Following the reading and re-reading by multiple members of the research team of a sub-sample of the transcripts for meaning, context and content, individual comments and statements were identified within the dataset and grouped to generate themes; samples of the transcripts were

rated independently by two or more raters and a very high level of agreement was obtained. Any disagreements were resolved through team discussion. All of the transcribed interviews were then entered into NVivo version 10 for coding, allowing the research team to explore and scrutinise thematic patterns and the relationships between individual themes and their links within the data as a whole.

This article focuses on the global theme of ‘construction and maintenance of childhood innocence’ that was strongly evident during the analysis. It outlines the different interpretations of innocence reported by parents within the groups, the confusions which arose for many parents when attempting to define what innocence and non-innocence means to them, and how these interpretations of innocence affected parents’ reactions and behaviour regarding the sexuality education of their children.

Participants

One hundred and ten parents and carers were involved in one of 27 discussion groups held; 82 women and 28 men. Two thirds (67%) were of white British ethnicity and 82% of participants identified themselves as British nationals. Just over half (56%) reported being Christian, 9% Muslim, and 33% reported not having a particular faith. The parents and carers who participated in the discussion groups all had at least one child in the target age range (4-7 years) and, in all, had caring responsibilities for 249 children (55% girls and 45% boys), of whom 225 were living in the same household as themselves. The median age of the children was six years, and the sample covered a broad family formation spectrum including two biological parent families, single parent households, step, adoptive and foster parents; no same sex parents volunteered for the study. Seventy-one percent of the sample were co-resident with a partner or spouse. Full postcodes were obtained from all participants and matched to an index of multiple deprivation (IMD); based on these analyses, 44% of

participants were from areas of high or very high deprivation with 41% in low or very low deprivation areas.

Findings

The construction and maintenance of childhood innocence emerged as a global theme in the analysis across parents of all socio-economic backgrounds. Parents used the word “innocence” or “innocent” frequently during many of the discussions and were asked directly by the group facilitator to explain and expand upon what they meant.

The Concept of Innocence

A number of parents considered that their conceptualisation of innocence derived from their perception of children as “non-sexual” beings, and expressed concerns about their child/children – or, indeed, other children - displaying behaviour which could be regarded as being sexual. The term “non-sexuality” has been chosen here rather than “asexuality”, because “asexuality” has adult connotations relating to lack of sexual desire (Prause and Graham, 2007).

Parents frequently emphasised the difference between “innocent” childhood play and sexual behaviour (a behaviour performed purposely for erotic experience and response) in young children. As illustrated below, Louise considers what she perceives as the non-sexual exploration of a child’s own body, and those of other people, but expresses her concerns about the potential impact of the social and media environment on inherent curiosity. [Note that in these quotes, F and M signify that this participant has a female or male child, respectively, and the number following F or M signifies the age of that child]:

> Louise: …It’s much more innocent than that, it’s just about physically exploring and seeing oh girls have got different things to boys and whatever. (Aged 41, F11, M9, M6)
>
> Naomi: They’re interested aren’t they? (Aged 33, M10, F5, F3)

Louise: They are interested, and that’s part.

Naomi: Because it’s different.

Louise: That’s part of normal life. Like you say, asking what things are. But I think because our kids are exposed to so much more sexual stuff … it becomes sexual … rather than just about exploring bodies.

The term “innocence” was also commonly linked to a lack of sexual responsiveness. For instance, parents equated children’s exploratory play with pre-sexual natural curiosity which was not perceived as “sexual” because sexual pleasure was considered an adult sensation. In the extract below Jill and Holly were discussing children exploring their genitals and were clear to distinguish between sexual behaviours and those which were innocent (FAC indicates the group facilitator):

FAC: And when you say there’s an innocence, what do you mean?

Jill: It’s not.

Holly It’s not sexual. (Aged 40, M7, F5)

Jill: It’s not sexual. (Aged 42, F7, M7)

Jill: It might be pleasant.

Holly: Yes, but it’s not sexual.

During the analysis of the focus group data, it was apparent that parents also equated innocence with lack of knowledge and awareness among children. For many, a child displaying precocious and accurate sexual knowledge was deemed inappropriate. As such, parents reported being fearful that sexual knowledge could somehow corrupt their child, ruin their innocence and rob them of their childhood. This is illustrated in the quote below:

Lorna: She’s four. This was only a few months ago, it was in the holidays, so yeah, it was like, no I don’t think you’re quite ready for the, the whole little seed thing. I was

> trying to think up a little story, a nice little way of putting it, you know, and I thought well I need to think about this a bit more so…of how to approach it and how to tell her. (Aged 35, F4)
>
> FAC: So what are you finding challenging at the moment; is it the words, the …?
>
> Lorna: Yeah, well, yeah the words and how far do I, well how much do I tell her at the age that she is now, you know.
>
> Emily: I think it’s like Pauline was saying, that you don’t want them to grow up too quickly. You want them to keep that kind of innocence. (Aged 33, M7, F4)

Children’s sexual ignorance was perceived as a quality which made them, and their behaviour, innocent to parents and this sexual innocence was viewed as something fundamental to a child’s life. In the example below, Siobhan describes innocence as the “basis” for a child’s life.

> Siobhan: And I think if they can stay innocent for a while. And they can have that sort of basis of their life, then actually that’s very precious, but then there comes a point where you have to break that. (Aged 37, F6, F3)

Parents frequently expressed a belief that childhood is a particularly precious period of life; and the term “magical” was commonly invoked. The concept of childhood innocence, particularly relating to children’s sexual ignorance, appeared to be central to this:

> FAC: Just picking up on what you said about innocence there. Do you have any particular ideas about innocence that influence how you approach this topic?
> Deborah: Yeah. Yeah. My daughter [aged 6] believes in Santa Claus. She still thinks that the notes that she finds in the morning and the fairy dust is from the fairy. And I

> think that’s really lovely. And it’s enchantment of childhood. And it’s quite beautiful. And, like I said, and I … my daughter knows there is information she doesn’t need, because she knows her boundaries. And like she’s made them, you know, and maybe, well I have I guess, but she understands her boundaries and she’s like I don’t need to know this stuff until I’m a teenager. (Aged 49, F6)

Many other parents also made reference to Father Christmas and the tooth fairy. In a number of the focus group discussions, parents drew parallels, for example, between young children being informed that Father Christmas does not exist and young children acquiring what they perceived as “inappropriate” sexual knowledge. Common views reported by parents were that telling children that Father Christmas and the tooth fairy are not real in some way destroys the magic of childhood - and that providing them with sexual knowledge could do something similar.

Other parents offered more abstract ideas when conceptualising childhood innocence. Below, Cindy provides another example of how parents perceive the world in which children live to be fundamentally different to the “actual world”. Her interpretation suggests that it is the way children view the world which makes them innocent, and exposure to information restricted (by adults) to the adult world would threaten such innocence and be harmful to the child.

> Cindy: I guess innocence is just when they just have, just know, they think the world’s all fluffy clouds and fluffy kittens. Yeah. Whereas maybe if they know more of the actual world, they might be a bit more hardened. (Aged 39, M8, M6, F6, F3)

Parental confusion. Although parents attempted to offer some explanations of what innocence meant to them, it was still clear during the discussions that the concept of childhood innocence is challenging, with confusion, ambiguity and doubt concerning its

conceptualisation. In particular, parents found it hard to articulate exactly under what circumstances a child would no longer be considered as being innocent. The quote below by Maddy is typical of many parents’ uncertainty and questioning of whether knowledge about sexual issues would actually mean that a child has lost their innocence:

> Maddy: Well it’s, for me it’s very challenging. Because we still believe in Santa Claus and fairies and, you know, and they have all the fairy books, fairy stories and fairy songs and everything. And yet very modern on the one side with all, you know, Michael Jackson. You know that type of thing, and their knowing all about sex and, you know, exploring and everything, so where is the innocence. Is that still innocent? Is she still innocent, because she knows the graphic information; does that make her not innocent? (Aged 36, F7, M4)

Chloe provides a further illustration of parental confusion:

> Chloe: Well I think it would be very difficult to draw a line about what stops a child…because I don’t think there would be any key points that you could say well that definitely stops them being innocent. I definitely think she’s very innocent in all the lovely ways that are currently, that I think is important in childhood, but I would certainly hate to say well if that’s happened that, or if she’s done that, definitely she’s not innocent. And I think different children are different aren’t they? (Aged 30, F4)

It is interesting that Chloe feels able to articulate in some way what makes an innocent child, but not what would make a child not-innocent.

Parents’ Sexuality Teaching and Efforts to Maintain Innocence

Analysis of the focus group discussion data clearly showed that the childhood innocence discourse was evidently impacting upon the way in which parents provided sexuality

education, responded to children’s questions, interpreted childhood play and reacted to certain behaviours.

Most parents reported that their young children had already asked questions such as “where do babies come from?” and “how do babies get out of the tummy?”. Although the majority of parents recognised their role as primary sexuality educators of their children, and the need to provide open and honest answer to children’s questions, many parents claimed that had responded to questions of a sexual nature by offering either partial truths or fictional accounts. Frequently used “stories” included wishing for a baby, asking God for a baby, babies being made through “special cuddles” and babies being born out of bellybuttons, or even ordered and picked up from shops.

> Naomi: I told mine that they open your belly button up, the littler ones. They open your belly button and take the baby out, you know because it was the only point I could think of where there would be a hole. (Aged 33, M10, F5, F3)

The notion that “children should be children” and are too young to be exposed to difficult adult topics (such as knowing how baby comes out a body) for fear that it may strip them of their childhood and innocence prematurely or encourage early experimentation, perpetuated the use of partial truths. The following extract being typical of a number of parents:

> FAC: When you told her that babies come out of the belly button, why did you choose to talk about it in that way?
>
> Isabel: I just, I just felt she was too young, personally. I do believe children should be children. (34 years, F8, M4)
>
> Trisha: There’s a certain level they need to know up to, isn’t there, at certain times. (30 years, M10, F7, F4)

> Isabel: I am a bit of a storyteller. Because I like to, you know she still believes in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy.
>
> Trisha: She’s a child.
>
> Isabel: Yeah, she’s a child.
>
> Trisha: And there’s certain things you have to keep as ….

By withholding or limiting the sexuality information they were providing parents believed they were “doing the best” for their children. As a general rule, however, many parents also displayed some degree of recognition that there would inevitably come a point where the child would learn the truth (meaning that their innocence would be destroyed or become fragmented), and they would have to retract what they had previously told them. As illustrated below, Joanna had considered the implications of using stories to explain sexual matters, but had chosen to tell her daughter the truth and not to tell lies, despite her obvious concerns:

> Joanna: It’s very difficult isn’t it! It’s always very difficult, because I have a similar [issue] to you with [other participant’s daughter]; the tooth fairy for example. I know that I perhaps upset a couple of people, because I told [daughter] the truth. And it is hard because everyone wants to keep their child as their lovely little innocent. But the fact is, you know, they’re not going to be forever. And although I don’t want to sort of push her into the maturity, I can’t lie to her. And I can’t not tell her things for the sake of other people. And that’s kind of how I felt a little bit like that. Yeah, so and it’s going to be difficult. Some people’s children are not going to start their periods until their sixteen. Some people are going to be sexually active younger. But if they ask you, I feel as though it’s my way of protecting her, is to tell her the truth. And then try and inform her as best I can without, you know, without. (Aged 41, F8, F7)

Views regarding childhood innocence also appeared to influence how parents interpreted and reacted to childhood play. A particular exploratory behaviour of young children which was described frequently but caused great angst among parents was that of role-playing. Common examples included "mummies and daddies" and "doctors and nurses". Parents reported that such "innocent" play could cause anxiety but they did not want to overreact or react negatively as they feared this could either encourage the behaviour or lead to further questions, possibly of a sexual nature. The quote below shows Lauren's reaction after encountering a "mummies and daddies" role-play situation where her son (aged 5) and her daughter (aged 8), along with other children, were found to have taken down the underwear of another child in order to "change her nappy":

> Lauren: Well how I responded, I probably frightened the [pauses] rubbish out of them, and they probably will never take somebody else's knickers down again. But then I suppose in that, me reacting that way, that's also showing them that that's kind of, there's something to do with sexual-wise. (Aged 29, F8, M5)
>
> Brooke: I think sometimes we do over-sexualise, we sexualise things by doing that. They don't see it as sexual but we do, and now they will see it as sexual. (Aged 23, M7, F6)
>
> Danielle: Or they're going to be more curious as to why we reacted the way we did.
>
> Lauren: It's a difficult situation, because you don't want them taking people's knickers down.
>
> Brooke: And it is wrong, and it you can't do it, yeah.
>
> Lauren: But. But then again, they were only being…they were harmless playing, and they didn't see anything that was to them…
>
> Lorraine: And you are intrigued when you are young aren't you? (Aged 44, F13, F7)

Parental responses to other childhood practices also appeared to be linked with notions of childhood innocence. For instance, young children's self-exploration and 'masturbation' emerged as an important concern, concerns which were often related to their desire to maintain innocence. In general, most parents viewed self-exploration as natural and were only concerned that their children needed to be taught about when and where it was acceptable to touch their bodies in this way. Parents typically viewed it as a pleasurable but non-sexual activity (with some referring to it as innocent). In the following extract, Mary emphasised that it is "fine", "normal" and "not sexual" for her son to play with his penis; however, on reflection she questioned whether she should have reacted differently. She also virtually told her son that he should stop ("I think you might want to come out now!") which may have served to instil a level of embarrassment – or at least unease - to the situation. Inconsistently, her subsequent response was to contradict this by telling him that he doesn't have to hide away to engage in this behaviour. Mary's reason for wanting to "undo" her initial response (telling her son to stop) was that the behaviour was "not sexual at his age" and she did not want him to feel any embarrassment, yet her 'gut' reaction of stopping him may well reveal that at a deeper level she perceives her son as a sexual subject. Again, Mary is an example of a parent who perceives a difference between sexual and non-sexual behaviour in her child; however, it is not clear what *would* truly be perceived as "sexual". It is apparent that she is still uncertain about her response and her feelings about this situation and wonders if she should have reacted differently.

> Mary: …And we were [lying in bed watching cartoons on television], and he disappeared under the covers at one point. I'd, you know what it's like, you suddenly think, hmm what's he doing under the duvet. And when I had a little peep, I went to him "are you, are you playing with your willy under there [son, aged 6]?" And he's just discovered that it goes hard. I mean it does when they're tiny babies, you know. So,

> he went, “no.” So I left it for a bit and kind of, he didn’t appear, so I just looked again and went “I think you might want to come out now!” And he sat next to me and I went “[son], were you playing with your willy?” And he looked at me, “no, no, no, mum.” And I went, “do you know what, it’s absolutely fine if you were. You don’t have to hide away to do it.”. Because it’s not sexual at his age. You know, he was literally just fascinated by the fact that it suddenly goes ping! (laughter) And I did say to [husband] afterwards about it and I said “do you think I should do anything else?” and again he went, “oh I don’t know, I don’t know”! But I kind of think, I think it wasn’t sexual in any way. And I just think, it’s just like, just, you know, it’s fine [son], you don’t have to hide away to do that. Or be embarrassed about it, you know, it’s normal. And whether he’ll do it again, I don’t know. We’ll see what happens from there, but …... (Aged 42, M6, M4, M2)

Another mother reported how she had heard her two year old daughter and four year old son exploring each other’s bodies, but was not sure, even some years later, what a “correct” response would have been.

> Holly: I went up. But I let them carry on. I went up so that I was there if, if it did begin to cross a boundary that I was definitely not comfortable with. Then I could intervene. But I have reflected on that situation and just thought is that the right thing to do or is it not. I haven’t come out with an alternative approach that I am more happy with to be honest. (Aged 40, M7, F5)

Holly also expressed some concern about her child’s behaviour potentially “crossing a boundary”. In this occasion she is referring to her own sense of a boundary, presumably of appropriateness, which informs her about when she would need to intervene in her child’s

behaviour (although she does not specify what specific behaviours would constitute crossing a boundary that would lead her to intervene).

Parents frequently expressed concerns that children are exposed to more sexual material in the present day than they themselves were as children; many were concerned about the potential impact of this on the maintenance of their child/children’s innocence. The extract below shows Louise’s concerns about potential sexual behaviour in children which, similar to other parents, was clearly linked to the notion of a child being innocent. It also depicts concerns that children’s exposure to sexualised material leads adults to more likely view behaviour as potentially sexual, which creates further concern and anxiety:

> Louise: Well I think, no I think it was all completely innocent. But I think, our alarm bells rang that, you know, actually, potentially it, although it, I think it was completely innocent, it could turn into something which wasn’t completely innocent ... without anybody meaning it to. And I think, you know, partly as well because our kids are surrounded by so much sexualised stuff, what perhaps when we were that age would have been completely innocent. Because kids are exposed to more stuff and know about sex at a younger age, what is completely innocent exploring of your body has become sexual. When in fact it, it probably isn’t really. It’s much more innocent than that, it’s just about physically exploring and seeing oh girls have got different things to boys and whatever. (Aged 41, F11, M9, M6)

Despite parental concerns regarding the provision of “too much” information to young children, many parents were acutely aware that children needed some sexuality knowledge as a form of protection and in order to be safe. Parents were clearly challenged, desiring their children to be well-informed - but not to an extent that would jeopardise their innocence. This common dilemma is clearly illustrated by Daryl:

> Daryl: No, but I’m pretty much the same really. I’d like to be able to give them like the accurate information and everything, but without, I suppose, well I suppose sparing the more gory details and things. I mean if you sort of expose them to big wide world too much, they then become, sort of, or lose their innocence and are no longer sort of children, as such. (Aged 34, M2, F4)

Discussion

Although the sampling methodology for this study relied on self-selected UK parents (mainly mothers) so generalisation is limited, and the sample may over-represent those parents who are favourable towards improving their child’s sexuality education and potentially also those individuals who are relatively open to talking about sexuality matters with other adults, the findings of this study do demonstrate that parents have a strong desire to maintain the social construction of their children as inherently innocent. This discourse is in turn affecting the way in which they communicate about sexually-relevant information with their children. For a large proportion of the parents involved in the group discussions, the use of term innocence implied “lesser knowledge”, and in contrast to ignorance, was generally viewed as a positive term. In particular, they viewed that the innocence (or lack of knowledge) children displayed at young ages stemmed from a lack of exposure, a context which many parents wished to preserve for as long as possible. For others in the group, the term innocence also implied “non-sexual”, where children’s lack of sexual responsiveness, and awareness or understanding regarding particular behaviours classified them as innocent. Indeed, many parents were aware that their interpretation of their child’s behaviour was from an “adult” perspective, and others expressed some perplexity when deciding what actually constitutes sexual behaviour or sexual awareness in young children. Martin and Luke (2010), found for example, that US mothers of pre-schoolers described their children as non-sexual

yet say they were less likely to allow their young sons to see them undressed, indicating that mothers see boys, at least, as possessing some sexuality and highlighting a more complex picture of parental views regarding childhood sexuality; one which needs further investigation.

As has been found in other studies (Ballard and Gross, 2009; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Frankham, 2006; Geasler *et al.*, 1995; Stone *et al.*, 2013; Walker, 2001), the desirable approach to communicating about sexual matters for the majority of parents, was one which would support an open parent-child relationship; where the child is comfortable to approach the parent for sexuality-related information without embarrassment or feelings of guilt. Many parents in this study felt that if their children came to them for information it would be beneficial to provide open and honest answers which could serve in protecting their child, for example, from potential negative outcomes or abuse.

The findings of this study show, however, that parents are employing various strategies to protect childhood innocence which were in direct conflict with their desire for openness. These include, shrouding children from potentially difficult, upsetting or harmful knowledge through the use of fiction and make-believe, and withholding information or offering children false accounts (for example, of where babies come from and how babies are born). Such positions are clearly incompatible with each other as withholding knowledge in order to prolong a desirable state of childhood “innocence” could in fact increase the risk of harm for children (Elliott *et al.*, 1995; Robinson, 2012b).

There was clear parental uncertainty about how to define childhood innocence and how to conceptualise the difference between innocence and non-innocence, as well as whether – and how - sexual knowledge *per se* meant that that their child was no longer regarded as innocent. Parents found it particularly challenging to articulate what they

perceived as non-innocence which, in turn, blurred the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and knowledge.

From this study it is apparent that parents are reiterating the popular, but falsely held, understanding of what the term innocence literally means; they are explaining "innocence" as "not knowing" rather than "a lack of guilt". If one takes the true meaning of the word, the opposite of innocence would be guilt yet the risk here is that sexual behaviours and feelings become associated with an ill-defined floating guilt which is known to be threatening to safer sex practices (Fisher *et al.*, 1988). However, it is not evident that these parents did intend (or even want) to overtly associate sex with guilt in this way, but the effects of their ambiguity and uncertainties may have unwittingly done so. With many parents clearly concerned about the loss of childhood innocence in a context where there is confusion about the circumstances which might lead them to decide that a child had potentially lost their innocence, this seeming contradiction would evidently benefit from further research.

Furthermore, the concept of boundaries also appeared to be used in two ways in relation to innocence/non-innocence - from a parent perspective and a child perspective (at least as perceived by the parent). There were confusions about where the boundaries of sexual knowledge appropriateness are and, given that parents are unclear, this raises issues concerning how a parent would actually know if the boundary (their own or the child's) had been crossed.

Parents who limit communication and withhold (what they perceive as) unacceptable and/or unnecessary information in order to preserve and protect the innocence of children are (possibly naively) positioning their children, as argued by Mitchell and colleagues, " … as un-knowledgeable about sexuality, sexual practice and their own bodies…" (Mitchell *et al.*, 2004, p36). Yet, if children are innocently non-sexual (until sexualised by society and the adults around them) then talking about genitalia and sexual matters should be no different

from talking about any other part of the body or any other issue that arises, since “sexual meaning” itself does not exist for young children. Furthermore, many parents reported concerns that “too much” sexual knowledge would lead to early maturity and experimentation, although it was very unclear amongst parents as to precisely what “too much” knowledge actually would be (or is). Indeed, the research evidence examining the behavioural effects of talking to children and young people about sexual matters offers no support for the argument that it accelerates the onset of sexual activity or increases sexual risk taking (Diiorio *et al.*, 2003; Family Health International, 2002; Kirby, 1997; Kirby, 2001; Miller, 1998; Miller *et al.*, 2001; Noar *et al.*, 2006).

This study provides support for previous work Davies and Robinson (2010) and Robinson (2012a, 2012b) in a different cultural context (Australia). Overall, the desire to maintain innocence certainly did appear to strongly influence parents’ reactions and behaviour in situations relating to their sexual communication with their children. Parents attempted to regulate knowledge and behaviour in children; albeit many faced real dilemmas when doing so. Parents were often not approaching the topic of sexuality honestly with their young children for fear of damaging their child’s innocence.

A key dilemma here, of course, is that the ensuing regulation of knowledge and behaviour creates challenges for parents; they are fully aware that it is impossible to completely regulate what children are exposed to. Confusion is also created for children as well, of course; they are likely to end up with pieces of information from different sources (the media, friends, older siblings, etc.) and it is probable that this information is sometimes contradictory and inaccurate. Parents in this study were aware that their children were picking up sexuality-related information (including images, discourses, etc.) from numerous sources from a very young age and, for this reason, building a foundation for open communication

from this young age would appear to be important to encourage confidence and competence (see Hogarth and Ingham, 2009).

Although this particular study did not address the effectiveness of different parenting approaches to communication (or how that may vary by social class, ethnicity, gender of parents or children, and so on; the focus of our extended analysis of the data collected), the paper identifies some of the dilemmas which exist in relation to the concept of childhood innocence and the influence this has on parental ability to engage in sexually-relevant communication in the UK context. It also indicates areas in which support may be required for parents who have decided that they wish to provide their child/children with improved sexual knowledge. On a practical level, findings could be used to assistant in the development of appropriate early sexuality awareness, communication, training and skills programmes for parents. Furthermore, they could be used to inform Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) carers and primary school teachers and heads of parental attitudes and beliefs regarding early sexuality education. This could help support the development, presentation and communication of school-based sex and relationships education and move towards greater parental acceptance.

Future research should explore the extent to which children are regarded as innocent and in need of protection is found in other country contexts, especially those known for their openness regarding sexuality education for children and young people, as well as their superior levels of sexual health (see, for example, Schalet, 2011, for a discussion of the USA and the Netherlands). Similarly, comparative research within countries could explore more closely the impact of different sexuality parenting and communication approaches at these early ages on subsequent sexual literacy, awareness and risk taking.

Notes

All names are pseudonyms.

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