Sexuality in Early Childhood:
The Observations and Opinions of Family Daycare Providers
by Susan Phipps-Yonas, Albert Yonas, Marian Turner, and Michael Kauper

We are all sexual creatures and sexual learning begins in early infancy. As many parents can tell us, older infants and toddlers, unless proscribed from doing so, seem to take great delight in displaying their bodies and in enjoying their capacity for physical pleasure. By age two or three children are generally aware of their gender and of the specialness of their genitals. Among preschoolers there is often considerable freedom regarding their bodies as well as touching of themselves, their peers, and family members. Children at this stage engage in games such as playing doctor or house which involve explorations through touch and sight of each others so-called private parts.

The study reported here found its impetus in 1988 when a family daycare provider had her license suspended because of a formal employee’s complaint that she had permitted the children she took care of to engage in activities of a sexual nature. The investigation by Hennepin County Child Protection cited as evidence against the woman her opinions about sex education, sexual development, and play activities which involve a sexual component. Although the daycare parents supported and had full knowledge of the program philosophy, the childcare protection investigation team concluded that the children were at risk for future abuse because of this “sexualizing,” and the daycare provider’s license was revoked.

To aid in her appeal, Marian Turner and Michael Kauper (who are also family daycare providers) conducted a very rushed opinion survey of a random sample of Minneapolis childcare providers. In preparing the survey, they consulted with the University's Minnesota Center for Survey Research. They wanted to collect reactions of
other daycare providers to the kind of sexual activities cited. Were these behaviors common? How did caregivers handle them? There existed, at the time, no professional standards, guidelines, curriculum, or behavioral data which could give a clear context to the case. The results of this early survey were brought to the appeal hearing.

What We Don’t Know

The question of what is normal, as opposed to evidence of abuse, is a difficult one to answer. The current scientific literature on children and sex is very limited. Over the past fifteen years many researchers and clinicians have turned their attention to child sexual abuse—an area of critically needed study—but the truth remains that we still lack information about what average children know and do in relation to their sexuality. We do not know what factors influence a child’s acquisition of sexual thoughts, feelings, and activities. Our ignorance may be attributed in large part to the fact that these topics are still taboo.

The 1980s saw a number of highly public cases involving allegations of sexual abuse within childcare settings. In an excellent volume, entitled Nursery Crimes, sociologists David Finkelhor and Linda Williams review data from centers across the country and conclude that while the preschoolers there are indeed at risk of being molested, they are no more at risk than if they remained home with mom or dad. While abuse by childcare providers is far from rampant, it is a significant problem for parents seeking safe places for their children while they are at work. It is also a problem for competent providers who are concerned about their liability and the risk of being falsely accused.

There were successful prosecutions in the Country Walk case in Florida and, more recently, in the Little Rascals case in North Carolina. But by far the most infamous case, involving the McMartin Nursery School in Manhattan Beach, California, generated findings that left both sides highly dissatisfied and cost the taxpayers in that county millions of dollars. Litigation there may go on for many years.

One of the persistent problems in cases of sexual abuse in childhood is that we have no normative standards against which to judge the actions in question. Minnesota is likely to be in the forefront of exploring normal sexuality in early childhood if the state’s Institute for Child and Adolescent Sexual Health, which was proposed and approved by the legislature in 1992, comes into existence (see sidebar). It is this very question of what is normal and what is abuse that led to the survey of family daycare providers reported on here.

Creating the Survey

After Ms. Turner and Mr. Kauper became involved in trying to help their colleague, they wanted to go further. Although their colleague was eventually cleared of wrong doing, her operation had been suspended for so long that she had lost her business and was struggling with a damaged reputation. They were concerned that this might happen again. They sought additional expertise from the University of Minnesota, in hope of expanding their first survey. They were put in touch with Albert Yonas, a professor at the Institute of Child Development, and Susan Phipps-Yonas, a clinical and forensic psychologist who specializes in sexual abuse cases.

During the summer of 1991 all four of us met several times to discuss our mutual interests and concerns. Ultimately, with assistance from William Craig and Rossana Armon of the Minnesota Center for Survey Research, we devised a questionnaire to assess the observations and opinions of family daycare providers about young children’s sexual knowledge and behavior and about appropriate interventions. We reasoned that this was an especially good place to start developing normative data since these adults often spend more waking time with children than their parents do. Furthermore, daycare providers have the opportunity to observe youngsters within small groups. Thus, they can watch children’s interactions with their peers, while parents more typically see their child one-on-one or with a single sibling. Daycare providers are also more likely to be neutral or objective observers because they have less emotional investment in the children than do parents.

We decided on a mail survey. During the process of developing the questionnaire, we invited comments and criticisms from state and county regulatory agencies. We met with representatives from the Ramsey County Family Day Care Licensing Agency, Hennepin County Child Protection, and the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Their comments were incorporated into the questionnaire. In October 1991, a pretest was conducted, with a mailing to 100 randomly selected licensed family daycare providers from around the state. Seventy-two were returned. Based on the pilot data, we refined several questions and dropped the distinctions between boys and girls since there were no differences based on gender.

The final questionnaire tapped adult observations of children’s behavior and apparent sexual knowledge, as well as opinions about how to respond or intervene in various situations. The survey was mailed in late January 1992 to 1,000 randomly selected licensed daycare providers throughout Minnesota. Names came from the Minnesota Department of Human Resource’s current listing of all providers.
Daycare providers consistently reported differences in the behavior of children aged one to three and children aged four to six.

(approximately 16,000). Sixty-one percent of the surveys were completed and returned. It bears noting that while the pool of our respondents was licensed or relicensed daycare providers in 1992, 6 percent of our sample were no longer providing family childcare. This suggests that there is substantial turnover in the field.

Who Replied

The data which we report here are based on the responses of 564 adults. This group is overwhelmingly female (554 out of 556). Ninety-five percent were self-identified as Caucasian, a rate which is comparable to the 94 percent of Caucasians living in the state as a whole. Thirteen percent were college graduates, while 40 percent reported some post-secondary education and 40 percent had high school diplomas. Rural providers were somewhat more likely to respond than their urban colleagues; 59 percent of the sample were from outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area even though only 47 percent of the state's population lives outside this area.

While a larger return-rate would have been desirable, we were appreciative of the fact that those who did respond clearly took their task very seriously. This was evident from the numerous comments they wrote, qualifying specific answers, and their responses to the open-ended questions.

Furthermore, it is significant that, for the most part, our sample was a very experienced group of adults in terms of their knowledge of young children. Collectively, they had provided 3,500 years of childcare (not including their history with their own offspring); the median figure for years in the business was five, and from their responses, we extrapolated that their observations involve more than 20,000 youngsters.

Observations about Children

We asked people to answer how children aged one to three behave and how children aged four to six behave. The most consistent result was about differences in the two age groups. The younger group, for example, was judged to be more comfortable with their own nudity, both with peers and adults, than was the older group. On the other hand, although there were few changes in expressed curiosity or awareness of anatomical variation between boys and girls, older children were viewed as much more curious than the younger ones regarding the mechanics of sexual activities and reproduction. They were also much more likely to engage in exploratory "sexual" games such as "I'll show you mine, if you show me yours" or doctor or house.

It is clear that from the perspective of their daycare providers, most children, especially those who are four to six years old, interact spontaneously, at least occasionally, in sensual or sexual ways and that they imitate sexual behaviors that they have seen or heard about. Developmental differences are notable. For example, while 18 percent of the providers reported that children under age four only rarely or sometimes act out sexual activities with dolls or stuffed animals, 34 percent stated this was true of four to six year olds. The figures are similar for the frequency with which providers rated apparent knowledge of sexual intercourse. Perhaps in a corresponding vein, 90 percent said children under age four never draw genitals on their pictures of people, yet this drops to 74 percent for children who are older.

While a majority of both age groups were characterized as never masturbating, approximately 30 percent in each range do occasionally during naptime. It is significant, however, to note that there was less certainty (more "I don't know" responses) here than for the other behaviors; approximately 10 percent of the providers indicated that they were unable to rate this item. The adult providers also expressed somewhat more uncertainty about whether children try to "tease, bully, or trick" their peers into sexual activities. Nevertheless,
30 percent believe that four to six year olds do so at least occasionally.

As other investigators have reported, touching of other children's genitals is relatively common; more than one-third of the providers describe the older group as doing this and just less than a third report it among the younger children. Smaller percentages of each age group were characterized as pinching or hitting others' "private parts" at times (22 percent for the older group and 14 percent for the younger) or as trying to touch adults' genitals (about 12 percent for each age group).

Certain behaviors were reported as having a very low probability by the daycare providers, especially for children under age four. These include: efforts to engage in pretend sexual intercourse; French-kissing; requests to have another suck, lick, or kiss their genitals; and attempts to insert objects into their own or another's buttocks or vaginas. The wording of the question does not let us know whether these behaviors, when they do happen, occur only with a few youngsters or whether they happen "rarely or sometimes" with all of the children.

As we have seen, most of the behaviors that we asked about appear to increase in frequency with age. The sole exception is touching women's breasts. While almost 60 percent indicated that young children do so on occasion, this was true of less than 40 percent for the older group. This may indicate that breasts are not viewed as sexual objects by children three and younger.

While we did not ask the providers to differentiate between girls and boys on specific items, there was an opportunity for them to identify gender-specific patterns on an open-ended question. Interestingly, none emerged; indeed, for every daycare provider who suggested that boys are more sexual than girls, there was another provider who claimed the reverse.

Along with the changes in behavior that have been noted, the adults reported an increase with age in children's apparent tendency to react with shame and guilt when the subject of sex comes up. Almost half said that four to six year olds reacted this way on occasion. This may be an indication that as they mature, youngsters internalize the conservative views of their daycare providers or that they come to appreciate the taboos associated with sex in our culture.

Opinions about How to Respond

We asked the daycare providers to agree or disagree with a series of statements about their personal opinions. Eighty-seven percent agreed with the statement that they should restrict children's sexual activities with one another. Forty-four percent believe that masturbation should be prohibited during naptime even when the child is discrete. An additional 26 percent of the providers reported uncertainty about this item.

There was a large shift with children's age in the attitudes of providers regarding nudity and privacy. Seventy-eight percent of these adults believe that children under age four need not be prevented from seeing each other undress while only 33 percent endorsed such an opinion for the older group. Should the bathroom door be kept open? Sixty percent say yes for children under age four, but only 13 percent say yes for the older group. In a related vein, the providers were more likely to prohibit older

Daycare providers were more likely to prohibit older children from playing together under blankets or in private places than they were their younger charges.
Only 7 percent of the providers, concerned about sexual abuse, felt that men should not be permitted to work in childcare homes, though 20 percent felt teenage boys should be excluded.

children from playing together under blankets or in private places, than they were their younger charges.

Our findings strongly suggest that family daycare providers in Minnesota believe that young children’s sexual activities need to be monitored and controlled. While most young children demonstrate at least interest and curiosity, if not overt sexual behaviors, their care providers prescribe vigilance. In part, this may reflect the adults’ sense of their own liability as well as their concern about the high incidence of child sexual abuse in this country. It is significant, in our opinion, that 26 percent of the providers indicated that they felt vulnerable to false accusations. This figure should be considered in light of their belief that children in both age groups sometimes or often report to other adults events that never took place. Weill over half reported this. Close to 40 percent of the providers also indicated that children complain on occasion that their genitals or buttocks hurt. It is apparent from their responses to an open-ended question that the providers are generally familiar with what experts identify as the “red flags” of sexual victimization. In fact, approximately 20 percent reported that they have been concerned that at least one child in their home has been abused.

One recent study of sexual abuse by non-related caregivers found that many sexual offenses occur during babysitting. Age and gender were determined to be risk factors in that younger caregivers were more likely to abuse than older caregivers and that men were five times more likely to abuse than women. It is interesting, in this regard, that in our study 20 percent of the daycare providers believed that teenage boys should not be permitted to work in childcare homes and 7 percent felt that men should not be permitted.

A multi-variable analysis of our results showed that daycare providers who were more conservative about sexuality tended to report that children engage in less “sexual” activity than did providers who were more progressive in their views about sexuality. Furthermore, our data suggested that the longer a provider was in the business, the more likely she was to believe that children are sexually knowledgeable and active.

Where Can We Go From Here?
The findings from this study are intriguing in several regards. The numbers themselves provide a significant contribution, as a beginning effort to develop normative data regarding childhood sexuality. Beyond that, however, they imply important policy considerations.

First, it is clear that many family daycare providers feel at risk of being falsely accused of sexual abuse. Educators and mental health professionals need to attend to this perception and to take corrective action since the welfare of an increasing number of American children depends upon the quality of the childcare that they receive from non-parental figures. If the adults in charge of so many youngsters are anxious or ambivalent about what they are doing, much will be lost. The childcare field will see an even higher rate of turnover as it is less able to retain the long-term commitment of experienced providers. Furthermore, those who remain in the field may abstain from physical contact with their young charges or prohibit normal play among boys and girls out of their perceived need to avoid false accusations. In each of these regards, it is possible that the care may be compromised, which, of course, means that our future is too.

Related closely to this first consideration is our second conclusion that many providers are confused about what happens among the youngsters in their care, as well as about how, if at all, they should intervene. Clearly, these adults need information, support, and direction which, by their report, they are not now receiving.

Third, our data point to the need for mental health and child protection professionals to proceed with caution in evaluating the meaning of children’s sexual activities. Since many “red-flags” occur with fair frequency in the population of daycare children at large, one must not over-interpret their significance with the premature conclusions that abuse has taken place.

As is so often the case, this study generates many questions as it answers. We are left with the overriding view that to study childhood sexuality best, developmental researchers need to talk to kids directly; to listen to what they have to tell us about their knowledge, feelings, and activities; and to observe them unobtrusively in natural settings. Only then are we likely to obtain a more accurate perspective on what really goes on.

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For readers interested in more details about this study, a technical report (Children and Sexuality: The Observations and Opinions of Family Daycare Providers) is available from the Minnesota Center for Survey Research, 2122 Riverside Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55454 (612/627-4282).