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## Hatching Babies and Stork Deliveries: risk and regulation in the construction of children's sexual knowledge

CRISTYN DAVIES *Department of English, University of Sydney, Australia*

KERRY ROBINSON *School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Australia*

**ABSTRACT** Children's access to sexual knowledge has always been considered 'risky' and controversial due to the fraught relationship between childhood and sexuality. Based on focus groups with children and their parents, the authors explore the relationship between risk and regulation associated with providing children with accurate knowledge about sexuality. Two main issues are examined: parents' anxieties associated with educating their children about sexuality; and how children actively build narratives around relationships and sexual knowledge based on the fragments of information available to them. The authors argue that dominant constructions of childhood and childhood innocence negate the effective education of children around sexuality, gender and ethical relationships. Additionally, they examine the tensions that exist for many parents around the discourse of child protection and the ways in which this impacts on their education of young children about sexual matters.

Children's access to knowledge about sexuality and ethical relationships has crucial implications for their health and well-being, not just in the early years but also throughout their lives. This knowledge can build children's competencies and resilience, contributing to new cultural norms of non-violence in gendered and sexual relationships. It also develops children's capacity to understand their own sexual subjectivity, which is critical for fostering their literacy with regard to sexual knowledge and is essential to their rights as sexual citizens (Robinson, forthcoming). However, debates continue about whose role it is to provide children with sexual knowledge, at what age it is appropriate to impart certain information, and whether this education should take place in the home or in schools. This area of education has been generally considered parents' responsibility, but schools have increasingly become sites for the introduction of sexuality and relationships education. For many parents and educators, teaching children about these issues is fraught with difficulties and anxieties. These tensions can result in the family or schooling avoiding or not effectively addressing sex education with children (Robinson & Davies, 2008a; Goldman, 2010).

Based on focus groups with children and their parents, we explore the relationship between risk and regulation associated with providing children with accurate knowledge about sexuality. We address two critical areas: firstly, we examine parents' anxieties associated with educating their children about sexuality. Children's access to sexual knowledge has always been considered 'risky' and controversial due to the fraught relationship between childhood and sexuality. Some adults mistakenly reduce sexuality to sexual contact and sexual orientation, rather than conceptualising sexuality as a central component of our subjectivity. Reducing sexuality to sexual contact and sexual orientation often contributes to the moral panic that is associated with children and sexuality. In our research, parents' anxieties reflected broader socio-cultural concerns founded within hegemonic discourses of childhood. These anxieties were linked to the fear of breaching

childhood 'innocence', which has become a deeply entrenched value in hegemonic discourses of childhood – a value considered by many adults to be in need of protection. Within this context, children's access to sexual knowledge is viewed to be developmentally inappropriate and is considered to detrimentally impact on children, as well as compromise dominant constructions of childhood, and 'childhood innocence' more broadly. Consequently, adult participants in our research expressed fears of being judged as inappropriate parents by others if they were known to transgress the boundaries of good parenting articulated and regulated through broader dominant socio-cultural political values. Parents also raised concerns about having inadequate skills and strategies in place to speak with their children about sexual knowledge. We argue that dominant constructions of childhood and childhood innocence negate the effective education of children about sexuality, gender and ethical relationships. Additionally, we examine the tensions that exist for many parents around the discourse of child protection. This discourse contributed to parents' self-regulation because they had to negotiate their education of young children about sexual matters within this framework.

Secondly, we explore how children actively build narratives around relationships and sexual knowledge based on the fragments of information available to them. Our research indicates that there is a disjuncture between parents' perceptions of their children's knowledge of relationships, marriages, and aspects of sexuality and children's awareness and knowledge of these issues. We also investigate the ways in which children regulate the sexual knowledge of their peers. Significantly, parents did not express concern about their children's peers being the source of information about sexual knowledge and relationships. We argue that children are active participants in both seeking and regulating sexual knowledge amongst each other and it is frequently the child who is most dominant in peer groups and social situations whose (mis)information about sexuality prevails. Children mobilise discourses including age, size and heteronormativity to establish power and to regulate other children's knowledge of sexuality and relationships. Children have a right to understand that sexuality is a powerful signifying system that represents far more than sexual contact, so that they may have increased agency in this critical area of their lives.

### **Risk and Anxiety Associated with Childhood and Sexuality**

The tensions and perceived risks associated with young children's access to sexual knowledge were prevalent amongst the parents in this research. Risk operates as a powerful means of social control, maintaining the status quo and dominant relations of power (Giddens, 1991, 1999a, b; Douglas, 1992; Beck, 1992; Dean, 1999; Robinson, 2005a). Risk is culturally and temporally specific; that is, perceptions of risk change across time and cultures. The construction of risk is likely to differ in terms of age, sex, gender, class, ethnicity, disability, and across local, national and global contexts. Jackson & Scott (1999) argue that the sexualisation of risk reflects historically and culturally specific constructions of both childhood and sexuality; both are thought of as precious, but in need of careful nurturance and containment to promote 'happy, carefree' childhoods and healthy (adult) sexual fulfilment. They identify the hegemonic discourse around children and sexuality which suggests that a childhood free from the 'shadow' of sexuality is thought to keep children safe, secure and to promote future sexual health and happiness (1999). They also argue that risk anxiety helps 'construct childhood and maintain its boundaries – the specific risks from which children must be protected serve to define the characteristics of childhood and the "nature" of children themselves' (1999, pp. 86-87).

Consequently, risk anxiety associated with childhood and sexuality is culturally, politically, economically and historically specific. An increased sense of individual responsibility regarding the management of risk is assumed by the adult, who becomes the gatekeeper of 'childhood innocence', as well as adult-child relations of power (Gittins, 1998). Moral panic has often resulted from children's access to knowledge of sexuality, especially if it transgresses heteronormative values and practices (Kincaid, 1992; Bruhm & Hurley, 2004; Taylor, 2007; Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Davies, 2008a, b; Davies, 2008b; Surtees and Gunn, 2010). Technologies of governance that operate to regulate the sexual citizen, and to constitute the 'good

citizen' within discourses of heteronormativity, operate in children's lives to police what is considered an appropriate education of 'future' citizens.

We understand sexuality as a historically and culturally contingent category of subjectivity and a complex signifying system founded on individual and institutional relations of power. It encompasses much more than sexual practice, and describes a complex ideological position into which one is interpolated based partly on the culture's mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpolation (Somerville, 2000). Sexuality and access to sexual knowledge is relevant to children's awareness and understanding of their bodies and desires, impacting on their health and well-being. From the moment children are born, they are interpolated as both gendered (masculine for boys and feminine for girls) and heterosexual (Butler, 1990; Renold, 2005; McInnes & Davies, 2007; Robinson & Davies, 2007, 2010; Davies, 2008a; Blaise 2009, 2010). Children are automatically placed within a system of signifiers that assume and attempt to constitute heterosexuality and normative performances of gender.

The dominant discourse of childhood constitutes childhood as a natural, universal and biologically inherent period of human development, underpinning the way that the child has been understood. This reading of childhood has been critiqued as a social construction, wherein childhood is experienced in multiple ways across history, location, and socio-political climate and culture (James & Prout, 1990; Gittins, 1998). Within the dominant discourse of childhood, the child is defined in opposition to what it means to be an adult, and this dichotomy is linked to what is perceived as the natural order of things. Within this context, meanings of childhood are constituted and defined by adults, for adults, determining how a child should behave, what a child should know and how and when they should come to know it. Childhood innocence, the ultimate signifier of the child, has become the defining boundary between the adult and the child. It also defines the child's and adult's place in the world today.

Within the dominant discourse of childhood, sexuality is constituted as irrelevant to young children's lives, and yet, at the same time, a 'danger' to them. Sexuality is generally viewed to begin at puberty and mature in adulthood, correlating with developmentalist theories which reinforce biologically determined understandings of childhood and sexuality. Within this context, children's knowledge of sexuality is viewed as developmentally inappropriate (Jackson 1982; Corteen & Scraton 1997). The perceived relevance of sexuality to young people is generally associated with key physical changes, including puberty and the onset of the reproductive years. Despite the dominant perception that sexuality is irrelevant to children, social practices demonstrate a different narrative – one in which there is a fixation with keeping children's sexuality under control and their curiosity about sexual knowledge at a distance. Post-structuralist theorists have critiqued fixed biological understandings of sexuality, arguing instead that sexuality is a social construction, and a fluid, dynamic component of subjectivity (Foucault, 1977; Butler, 1990). The relationship between sexuality and childhood is a socio-cultural, historical and political construction, representing the values of the dominant cultures of the time.

The perception of sexuality as a danger to children is linked to fears of the consequences of exposing children to sexual knowledge 'too early' and to children's vulnerability to sexual abuse and exploitation. Both fears have resulted in increasing regulations concerning children's access to knowledge and have contributed to creating anxiety that has permeated all aspects of children's education in this area. Children have knowledge of sexuality, which is frequently gained from their families, peers, media, and educational settings. This knowledge is often constructed through heteronormative, gendered understandings based on stereotypes and myths, misinformation, or is partial in nature.

### **Research Methodology**

The main aims of this pilot study were to examine the relationship between childhood and sexuality: to identify the socio-cultural discourses operating around children's access to sexual knowledge; to explore parents' approaches to speaking with their children about sexual knowledge; and to gain some understanding of children's knowledge of gender and aspects of sexuality. The study involved undertaking a discourse analysis of the New South Wales primary sex education curricula since the 1950s (Robinson & Davies, 2008a). The major focus of this pilot research was

undertaking focus groups with children aged 3-5 (a total of 10) and their parents (a total of 10 – nine mothers and one father). Families came from a range of socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. All the adult participants were self-selecting, identifying as heterosexual and were either in de facto or married partnerships. These parents consented to their children's participation in the research. Each focus group with children lasted about 20 minutes and 40-60 minutes with adults. Several long day care centres in New South Wales were invited to participate after receiving permission from the appropriate governing council body. An information/expression of interest package was sent out to centres interested in supporting the research. Information packages were also sent out to parents outlining the research and what their involvement and that of their children entailed. We held an additional information session for interested parents prior to the commencement of the research. The research was granted ethics approval by appropriate educational governing bodies.

Discussions with both children and adults were initiated through the use of four images from popular culture and media representations of gendered relations. The first image was a story book picture from *Anastasia* (Krulik, 1997) depicting the protagonist embracing with her suitor within an open garden; the second image was an advertisement for a coffee lounge, depicting a young girl and boy, around seven years of age, in what seems to be set up as a date; the third image was a common postcard found in gift shops depicting a boy and a girl, around seven years of age, arm-in-arm in wedding outfits; and the fourth image was a photograph appearing in a mainstream major Australian weekend newspaper, of a young boy and girl spontaneously embracing in an exaggerated Hollywood-style kiss. We used these images to prompt discussions with young children to gain an understanding of their current knowledge of gender, relationships, and aspects of sexuality. This approach was used with children to begin conversations, similar to a storytelling activity that young children experience daily in their educational lives. We used the same images with parents to prompt discussions around: representations of children's gender and sexuality in popular cultural texts; adult inscriptions of gender and sexuality aimed at young children, such as *Anastasia*; parents' own experiences of gaining knowledge of sexuality and gender; and parents' practices of talking to their children about these issues.

A critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2003) was undertaken of the education curricula and transcripts of focus groups. This method involves exploring the complex interrelationship between text, discursive practice and social practice, and demonstrates the extent to which the interrelationships between systems of signification (in particular, written and visual texts) and other social systems (for example, family and Education Departments) function in the constitution of subjectivities and the production of meaning. We utilised a feminist post-structural and queer theoretical framework to interpret the data gathered. Feminism provides important insights into the construction of gendered and sexualised subjects, while post-structuralism highlights the need to acknowledge the differences and heterogeneity that exist between individuals, groups and subject positions (Best & Kellner, 1991; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Queer theory stems largely from post-structural theoretical perspectives reinforcing the notion that identities are not fixed or stable, but rather are shifting, contradictory, dynamic and constructed. Within these theoretical frameworks, knowledge is also understood as being discursively constituted across history, geographical locations, socio-cultural, political and economic spheres.

### **Parents' Reflections, Practices and Perceived Risks around Sex Education with Children**

For many parents, conversations with children about sexual knowledge and intimate relationships are complex, contradictory and are perceived to pose risks of various kinds. This may result in some parents avoiding talking to their children about sex education. Parents may find these conversations difficult due to embarrassment, lack of confidence, and the perception that they do not have the necessary information and skills to effectively communicate the information (McGuire et al, 1996; Hughes et al, 1999). Similar to other research conducted in this area with heterosexual parents, we found that mothers are the main providers of sex education in the home (Holland et al, 1996; Walker, 2004; Dyson, 2010). Despite some changes in parenting practices across the sexes, mothers are still the primary caregivers of young children, largely responsible for their early education in the home and their health and well-being. Most of the mothers in this

research believed it was their role to address sexual matters with their children. Holland et al. (1996) suggest that mothers may, subconsciously, contribute in marginalising fathers' involvement in their children's health education, thus self-perpetuating mothers as the main carers and educators (Phoenix et al, 1991; Walker, 2004; Walker, 2004). Given this established role, children are more likely to address health and sexuality issues with their mothers (see also Dyson, 2010). However, in some instances mothers of boy children in this pilot research positioned their male partners to take up the responsibility of talking with their son/s about sexuality (Holland et al, 1996; Walker, 2004). Additionally, some fathers discussed with their female partners the kind of information they believed should be relayed to their child about sexual matters and relationships, but this information was to be relayed by the mother.

A critical concern for parents in this research was *when, how* and *what* knowledge they should raise about sexual matters and relationships with their children. Parents had to negotiate their own experiences of sex education, many of which were based on stereotypes, myths, and avoidance when educating their own children about these matters. While many parents wanted to provide a more open experience in relation to sexual knowledge with their children, some parents felt that they lacked the necessary skills and knowledge to communicate the information effectively. Consequently, some parents often reverted to their own learning, perpetuating the avoidances and myths that they too experienced. All parents in our research suggested that they waited for their children to ask questions about sexuality and relationship matters, rather than approaching these issues with the child first. With sex education being primarily framed through the developmental paradigm, parents' anxieties about transgressing these ages and stages, perceived as central to hegemonic constructions of childhood, heightened their risk anxiety (Jackson & Scott, 1999). A common question raised by parents was: what age is 'too young' to address sexual matters with my children? Transgressing the boundaries of developmentalism was also related to the fear of 'bad parenting', or more specifically 'bad mothering', and being judged by others. Some women indicated that they also had to negotiate male partners with more conservative approaches to sex education with their children. The discourse of the 'good mother' positions women as being largely responsible for the successful moral, physical and intellectual development and well-being of their children (Phoenix et al, 1991; Richardson, 1993). Any women transgressing the normative values and practices considered good mothering/parenting places them under private and public scrutiny.

Child-centred pedagogy is frequently mobilised to address 'difficult knowledge' with children; that is, parents and educators wait for children to prompt conversations about issues such as sexual knowledge, death, poverty, and war rather than addressing these issues first. However, with other kinds of knowledge such as teaching children to read, write, count or cross the road, adults take an active role in bringing this knowledge to the child's attention. There is often an assumption that if children do not ask about controversial issues then they are not part of children's everyday concerns, and the issues are perceived as irrelevant to the child (Surtees, 2008). It is important that silences are critically reflected upon. In this process of adults' regulating children's knowledge, children can learn that there is a taboo around certain kinds of knowledge. Silence is not necessarily a reflection of irrelevance, but rather can signal the child's negotiation of a topic that they perceive to be taboo, and 'too risky' to address with parents. As one mother commented in relation to discussing sexual matters with her child:

I would probably only address it if it was raised. I would happily address it, but I just wouldn't think to talk to him about it unless he said, and I guess that is part of the thing, that somehow you just obtain your knowledge by osmosis. And unless he sort of asked a question or said something, or you know, prior to this, it just wouldn't have crossed my mind to even bring it up or talk about it in any way, shape or form.

In this research, parents assumed that they had more control over their children's sexual knowledge than their children indicated. Children actively negotiate the regulation of knowledge based on cues from adults, peers, and formal and informal sources of education, such as schooling, media, storybooks, and their own experiences. The perception of learning by osmosis suggests that heteronormative discourses of gender and sexuality are rendered invisible, and naturalised through everyday practices. This 'learning by osmosis' was also indicated by parents in relation to their own childhood learning about sexual matters and gendered relations, including marriage. As one parent indicated in relation to marriage: 'there is that assumption that it will all happen and there is no

question that it won't'. Cynthia, another mother, quickly added, 'it just seemed like it was part of life's steps that you know; you were going to get married and be the princess for the day'. These heteronormative discourses are rendered invisible through their naturalisation and are often unquestioned, as if we arrive at this knowledge by 'osmosis' (Foucault, 1974; Butler, 2004; Halberstam, 2005). Butler (1994) points out that through gender performativity dominant forms of doing masculinity and femininity are constituted, naturalised and normalised through the everyday repetition and recitation of the way that subjects take up masculinity and femininity. This process is rendered invisible through the unconscious everyday practices of subjects. However, gender performativity always operates within the socio-cultural context of what Butler (1990) terms the heterosexual matrix; that is, what is widely perceived in society as 'correct' performances of gender are constituted and naturalised as heterosexual. Getting the performance of gender 'right' becomes critical in terms of being perceived as an 'authentic' masculine and feminine subject by others.

It was acknowledged by several mothers that there is less risk anxiety around discussing births with children through the desexualised medical intervention of a caesarean, rather than addressing vaginal births, because it was perceived to be 'easier' and less challenging. Sean, a four-year-old boy, initiated the following conversation, which was relayed by his mother Rachel:

My husband and I were sitting down one night and he [Sean] goes 'I know where other babies can come out – the vagina'. And I am thinking, oh my God, where did he learn that from? So then I went to buy the *Where Do I Come From?* book because he has been reading that with my sister, and he made me read the book together with him which is great.

Sean had been told previously that he had been born through his 'mummy's tummy'. His mother was surprised, not just by his initiation of the topic of conversation, but that he had ascertained the correct information elsewhere. Demonstrating both his agency and knowledge in this area, Sean spurred his mother into action in order to both initiate and continue his learning with her.

This pilot study revealed that many parents are aware of the need to address sexuality issues with children early, but felt unskilled in conveying this information. Walker (2004, p. 240) points out that sex education 'provided both in schools and the home is a very challenging area for adults and demands a wide range of cognitive, affective and conative aspects'. In another instance around pregnancy, Cynthia relayed a different experience in which she avoids addressing sex education. Her first child was born by caesarean. She was extremely concerned how she would explain to her first child how the new baby had 'come out from between her legs' if her second child was a vaginal birth:

*Cynthia:* Because I'm pregnant my daughter keeps asking me, how did the baby get in my tummy, and my husband the other day said, maybe we should say the stork. How do you explain to a four-year-old? I didn't want that to happen at four. You know what I mean? I don't know what to say, other than, well, I'll explain it to you when you are five.

*Researcher:* What's the difference between four and five?

*Cynthia:* Oh they are so much more worldly at school I guess. It is me actually putting it off. She will be 27 before I will tell her. It is really hard.

Walker (2004, p. 242) argues that informal provision of sex education is dependent upon 'parents' perceptions of whether their child is ready to know about a particular issue and *whether they are ready to let their child know*' (our emphasis). A parent's readiness in some households is pivotal to opening communication about sexual matters. There is a prevalent myth that providing children with knowledge of sexual matters too early can be developmentally damaging and leads to premature engagement in sexual activities.

The importance of developing children's skill set around relationships and sexuality should be prioritised and incorporated into children's education so that they may become competent, ethical sexual citizens. A recent UNESCO (2009, p. 10) report argued that sexuality education rarely, if ever, leads to early sexual initiation. The report argued that sex education in the early years leads to more responsible behaviour in intimate relationships:

Sexuality education encompasses a range of relationships, not only sexual relationships. Children are aware of and recognise these relationships long before they act on their sexuality and therefore need the skills to understand their bodies, relationships and feelings from an early age.

As we have acknowledged elsewhere (Robinson & Davies, 2008a), throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, much of children's knowledge about sexuality has been constituted in misinformation often gained from peers or other unreliable sources or mythologies that children eventually consider absurd. This is demonstrated by Ritchie & Koller (1964, p. 244), who report:

One boy who was told that the stork brought him, his mother, and his grandmother, cried out in despair, 'We haven't had a natural birth in our family for three generations!'

This observation not only demonstrates the child's awareness of the adult myth of reproduction constructed for children, but also reveals that the myth is an object of satire for the child, who is concerned that natural birth has been outmoded in his family. Perpetuating myths such as this also erases, renders invisible, or substitutes women's labour for the magical appearance of the child through fantastical sources or other modes of delivery often attributed to men.

Discourses around child protection can have contradictory effects for parents, children and youth. While sexual knowledge is frequently positioned as an indicator of sexual abuse, providing children with the information and skills to develop their literacy around sexual knowledge is critical to building their competencies as sexual citizens. Parents in this research were particularly concerned about 'protecting' their children from sexual predators and other forms of abuse. 'Stranger danger' was parents' most common fear. This discourse arose in the child protection campaigns of the 1960s and still prevails despite the criticisms that it confuses children into believing that all people they *know* are safe. Jackson & Scott (1999, p. 93) acknowledge that 'while it is well documented that sexual risk to children is most likely to be posed by intimates, it is "stranger danger" that hits the headlines, captures the popular imagination and informs education campaigns'. Some parents experienced anxiety about their increasing concerns about providing enough appropriate knowledge to enable their children to become competent sexual citizens, without breaching normative moral, social and developmental values perceived within child protection discourses. Some parents were concerned that peers and educators would judge their parenting if their young children displayed more knowledge of sexuality than dominant socio-cultural discourses legitimate as 'appropriate'.

After one of the information sessions for parents associated with this research, a mother approached the researchers privately, acknowledging that she felt that she could not speak publicly about the sexual knowledge she provided for her daughters. She feared that other parents and educators would make judgements about her being a 'bad mother' for transgressing normative boundaries of 'appropriate sexual knowledge' assumed for children at certain ages. Foucault (1977) argues that surveillance as a form of governance or disciplinary power and social control is critical to an understanding of the ways in which some individuals or institutions self-regulate risk-taking behaviours, or stepping outside societal norms. In this case, this mother felt strongly that providing her girls with sexual knowledge early in their lives was critical for their safety and well-being. Processes of governing and of self-surveillance impacted on this mother's public performance of parenting, which was curtailed by the fear of being judged by other parents. Imparting sexual knowledge is perceived to be a private matter, but can also be regulated by public 'moral entrepreneurs' (Becker, 1973), governments and social institutions and religious discourses. The 'knowing child', the child who is perceived to 'know too much for its age' about sexuality, that is, the child who has the knowledge and language to speak about sexuality, is often perceived with suspicion (Kitzinger, 1990). Sexual knowledge for children is regularly constituted within the framework of sexual abuse and notions of danger, rather than knowledge that might contribute to an increase in children's competency. This anxiety is reinforced through official child protection documents in which knowledge about sexuality is constituted as a key indicator in determining the potential of a child having experienced sexual abuse.[1]

Another example of the daily challenges of child protection discourses for parents with young children included negotiating this knowledge beyond the discourse of 'stranger danger' to within the context of family relationships. Rachel relayed an account in which she had educated her young son, Sean, about his personal rights around his body:

I told Sean if someone touches your penis area, that you know, you've got to let us know and it is not okay to do that. Just very simple, so now whenever we go to nona's house my dad might go, how is Sean today, and he goes, you are not allowed to touch my penis! And my dad freaked

out the other night when it happened. Because it is like you know, the Italian grandfather you know ... And my dad is like, what have you taught him? And I said dad, there is a reason why, and he goes all right, I think that is a good idea, but I am his nona. And my dad, like for the first time freaked out, he was really offended. And I thought no, no. And I felt like a bitch as a daughter but I thought no, and for the first time ... I felt actually quite good as a mum ... I actually worked at that.

Addressing children's education about child protection and supporting children's rights over their bodies in the home can raise challenges for parents and some family members. It disrupts the hegemonic discourse of the family being the safe haven for children and the central place where children can trust implicitly the practices of adults close to them to have children's best interests at heart. In the situation outlined by Rachel, Sean's vocal assertion of his body rights in such an explicit manner perceived for a five-year-old was an affront to his grandfather's understandings of childhood and adult-child power relations. However, more alarming for Rachel's father was the inherent accusation that he would breach his grandfatherly role and potentially touch his grandson in an inappropriate way. It was also a risky situation in which Rachel challenged the power relations between her and her father, which were grounded within generational and cultural values. Rachel also considered this challenge and the establishment of these regulations through her child's agency to be critical to good mothering. The location of children's sexual abuse outside the home and the distancing of it from family relations through the discourse of 'stranger danger' is a more comfortable and less confronting position for many (Breckenridge & Carmody, 1992; Calvert et al, 1992; Eastal, 1994).

### **Collaboration, Power Play, and Regulation: children's construction of sexual knowledge**

Beginning sex education in the early years has multiple benefits for both children and parents (see also Goldman & Goldman, 1988; Aggleton et al, 1998; Bickmore, 1999; Haydon, 2002; Walker, 2004; Robinson, 2005b, forthcoming; Robinson & Davies 2008a; Carmody 2009; UNESCO, 2009). There are additional benefits of building the foundations of sexual literacy early in children's lives, including making potentially challenging conversations easier to approach. Children get frustrated when they do not get information or find a meaning through which they can come to terms with and understand their sexuality. It is critical for adults to discuss sexuality in an honest manner with children in order to deconstruct and reconstruct children's understandings of sexuality and relationships (Goldman & Goldman, 1988; Schwartz & Cappello, 2000). If educating children about sexual knowledge does not occur early, children tend to complete the picture of sex differences, sexual relations, and other sexuality information from their imagination or by shared ignorance with friends (Plummer, 1990; Krivacska, 1992). Based on their extensive research with children, Goldman & Goldman (1988) argue that from age seven onwards children's notions of sexuality begin to change, making it one of the more difficult issues to introduce. Adolescents have reported that they wished sex education had been raised earlier so they could have avoided the bewilderment surrounding their sexuality, especially due to changes during puberty (Goldman & Goldman 1988; Carmody, 2009). Our research indicates that children at young ages constitute their own narratives about gender, relationships and sexuality from various sources. Children also use their knowledge about these issues collaboratively with their peers, to fill in their knowledge gaps, with dominant children often regulating which knowledge is accepted by the group.

The relationship between knowledge and power amongst children in our research was evident through children's interactions with each other. Children mobilised discourses of age, heteronormativity and social agency to increase their power and positioning amongst siblings and peers. Discourses operate through language and constitute the different knowledge that we have available to us; often these discourses appear invisible, or are not a part of our everyday conscious awareness (Foucault, 1974; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). In the early years children's knowledge is frequently constructed through the framework of a 'procedure'. This might include learning to cross the road, toilet training, or helping to bake a cake, where children follow the set stages to reach their goal. We found young children often engaged this mode of learning to process information of which they have limited knowledge.



Children's understandings of relationships, marriage, and sexuality followed *procedures* that were located in moral and heteronormative discourses, even if their own reality was different. Children often make assumptions about sexuality based on gendered relations represented in popular culture and in their everyday lives. Our research demonstrates that heteronormative marriage is a key signifier for young children in defining, determining, and regulating their gendered and sexualised relationships. As Rachel commented, her son Sean wanted to get married to a girl in his early childhood setting so he could kiss her. Another mother, Deirdre, relayed an incident in which her five-year-old daughter started crying in the shopping centre because she was so distressed by a young boy who looked at her as they passed each other, which her daughter interpreted as him wanting to marry her. Deirdre could not ascertain from her daughter what the 'look' of wanting to marry her entailed. Clearly, as Deirdre acknowledged, it was a representation of a process in which her daughter had no wish to be involved.

Children in our research not only articulated that marriage represented the beginning of the process for accessing intimate relationships, but also for having children. We asked a group of children about their interpretation of a postcard featuring a young boy and girl dressed in wedding outfits:

*Researcher:* What is happening in this picture?

*Belinda:* Getting married

*Researcher:* Can kids get married?

*Rita:* No way.

*Researcher:* Why not?

*Rita:* Because they won't get children.

*Belinda:* They are children.

*Belinda:* Children can't get married, yeah because the Dad has the stuff that makes the kids.

*Sophie:* I know what it is called: sperm.

*Belinda:* And the wife has the egg.

*Sophie:* When the sperm meets the egg that turns it to an egg; the egg hatches and then the baby comes out.

These children were not asked about how babies were born; however, they perceived that marriage was the beginning of a procedure in which having a baby was considered the logical outcome. Children's knowledge of human sexuality is often framed through their educational and everyday experiences observing animals. In this case, the understanding these four-year-old children had of reproduction was framed through watching chickens hatch. Their perception of an egg, carried by the 'wife', was a chicken egg, so it logically followed for these children that the baby would hatch like a chick. Their understanding of childbirth was a narrative that was collaboratively assembled based on their combined knowledge and experience.

In other instances children will use their imagination to build a narrative around those issues that they are clearly thinking about but have limited knowledge of, as demonstrated in the following interaction raised by Penny. Her five-year-old son Timothy, much to her surprise, had constructed an understanding of his testicles and scrotum:

Timothy explained carefully and very seriously, that 'you know that bag thing that my balls are in, I think maybe it is for storing oxygen'. Without laughing, I managed an 'oh' at which he said, 'well what else would it be for then? What are my balls for then?'

Without correct information children continue to build narratives around sexuality and their bodies based on the fragments of knowledge available to them and what they consider potentially possible.

Heteronormative discourses that underpin the process of marriage and having children are so powerful that they can eclipse children's own personal experiences:

*Researcher:* How do you know about marriage?

*Sophie:* My Mum and Dad are not married. But [pauses to think] – they are not married.

*Rita:* But they have kids!

*Sophie:* Yeah. But they are not married.

*Belinda:* Really!

*Sophie:* Hmmm [pauses to think] ... You don't need to be married!

*Researcher* (to Sophie): You said earlier that you get married to have children. Why else might someone get married?

*Sophie*: Mmm, because if they are lonely they want someone to live with.

The fact that Sophie's parents were not married challenged the normative discourse in which the children were located and disrupted the linear process they had constructed around marriage and having children. Rita was quick to point out that something was amiss in Sophie's proclamation of her parents' de facto relationship – which was also met with surprise by Belinda. The situation resulted in a moment of critical reflection for Sophie, who realised that marriage was not necessarily a requirement for having children. This realisation opened up a space for Sophie in which she could perceive other explanations for one to marry. This demonstration of a young child's critical thinking about an issue that could be perceived by some as beyond the cognitive abilities of a four-year-old highlights the potential for children to discursively negotiate other knowledges.

In another discussion related to the postcard of the boy and girl dressed in wedding outfits the following interaction arose between a young boy and girl. Rita, a four-year-old, quickly commented that the children were getting married. Toby, a three-year-old, eagerly responded that he had also been married to his best friend, Patrick. Rita rebuked Toby's experience, stating that children could not get married, and that two boys could not get married. Her critique of Toby's experience was largely based on her own experience of never having seen two children or two boys get married. Rita eventually mobilises her age, size, and discourses of heteronormativity to make her point:

*Researcher*: What is happening in the picture?

*Rita*: Getting married ... um, the girl dresses up pretty and the man he dresses up a bit like a boy.

*Researcher*: Can children get married?

*Rita*: No.

*Researcher*: Do you think children can get married Toby?

*Toby*: Yeah ... I already got married.

*Researcher*: Did you? Whereabouts did you get married?

*Toby*: ... we were wearing dress-ups.

*Researcher*: Who did you marry?

*Toby*: Patrick.

*Researcher*: Do you think that two boys can get married?

*Toby*: Yeah.

*Rita*: They can't. I've never seen that.

*Researcher*: You don't think two boys can get married?

*Rita*: No ... because I am bigger than him [referring to Toby].

*Researcher* (to Rita): Can you tell me why you don't think children can get married?

*Rita*: Because I have seen grownups get married.

*Rita*: [Pausing and to think] Kids can.

*Researcher*: Kids can too? Can you tell me why kids can?

*Rita*: Cause they can have little dress-ups.

Rita distinguishes between children who can get married through play (dress-ups) and adults whose marriage is perceived as real. Cultural power relations are constituted in and maintained through binary relationships, based on hierarchies of power, in which one side of the binary has the power to define and subordinate the Other (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Drawing on her experience of heteronormative conventions of marriage, Rita regulates Toby's experience by insisting that two boys cannot get married. In this case, Rita mobilises her substantial size difference to try to make her point of view prevail over that of Toby's, who remains silent after Rita's challenge. It is frequently the child who is most dominant in peer groups and social situations whose (mis)information prevails. In addition, the misinformation that many children vocalise in the presence of adults is often perceived to be 'cute' and is left uncorrected. However, in other areas of children's early education, incorrect knowledge would not be viewed in a similar manner and children would be guided through a learning process to gain a more appropriate and informed answer.

## Conclusion

In order to contribute to children's confidence, competence and resilience it is critical that parents are supported and educated about how best to communicate information about sexual matters to their children. This becomes difficult when the relationship between childhood and sexuality is one that is considered a private matter and is so regulated that there are few opportunities for parents and educators to have frank and honest discussions about these issues. In addition, western socio-cultural values often contribute to the silencing of such conversations whether they are between adults, or adults and children. Educating children about sexuality was considered risky business by parents in our research. Parents' practices in this area were heavily influenced by dominant discourses of childhood and childhood innocence. Parents were often acutely aware that it was critical to begin educating their children early about sexual matters to build their critical literacy in order to counteract popular cultural representations of gender and sexuality. However, many parents were concerned that they do not have the skills to teach their children about sexuality.

We have demonstrated that there is a disjuncture between parents' perceptions of their children's awareness and knowledge of sexuality and relationships, and the knowledge many children already have around these issues. Parents can underestimate their children's capacity to understand information about sexuality and relationships. They were often unaware that their children actively pieced together fragments of information available to them to assemble what children perceived as coherent narratives around relationships and sexual knowledge. Children are a key source of information for each other about sexual knowledge and relationships. The information that children share is often constructed in secret and based on partial truth or myths. Of particular concern is that this information is often left uncorrected by adults when voiced by children. While we are aware of the factors that contribute to this process, such pedagogical practices are unhelpful to children.

Despite the perceived risks that we have outlined that often prevail for parents with regard to children's sexual knowledge and children's early education in this area, there are important socio-political, cultural, economic, and individual benefits in effectively communicating this information to children. Knowledge about sexuality and ethical relationships has crucial implications for children's health and well-being, and has critical benefits associated with sexual health that is carried into adolescence and adulthood. Building a society that is more critically reflective about gendered and sexual ethical relationships, in order to contribute to new cultural norms of non-violence and ethical relationships, needs to begin in early childhood.

## Note

- [1] Key examples include: A Child's Knowledge of Sexual Behaviour Inappropriate to their Age (Department of Child Protection, Government of Western Australia); Sexual Knowledge or Behaviour Inappropriate for the Child's Age (Department of Community Services NSW); An Inappropriate Sexual Behaviour or Explicit Sexual Knowledge, Sexualised Behaviours (Department for Families and Communities).

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**CRISTYN DAVIES** is an experienced researcher, writer, editor, and tertiary educator. Her current research interests include the culture wars; literature and new media; and the intersections between gendered and sexual subjectivities and citizenship, childhood and youth studies, and mediated environments. Cristyn has collaborated with academics, writers, performance artists, and digital and new media artists on a range of projects. *Correspondence:* Cristyn Davies, c/o Kerry Robinson, School of Education, Bankstown Campus, University of Western Sydney, PO Box 1797, Penrith South DC, NSW 1797, Australia ([c.m.davies@uws.edu.au](mailto:c.m.davies@uws.edu.au)).

**KERRY ROBINSON** is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and the Centre for Educational Research at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. Her research interests include constructions of gendered and sexualised identities, gendered and sexualised violence, constructions of childhood and sexuality, and sociology of knowledge. *Correspondence:* Kerry Robinson, School of Education, University of Western Sydney, Bankstown Campus, PO Box 1797, South Penrith DC, NSW 1797, Australia ([k.robinson@uws.edu.au](mailto:k.robinson@uws.edu.au)).