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SARAH GOODE
Monday 7 January 2013

35

How can we prevent child abuse if we don't understand paedophilia?

If we want to keep children safe from sexual harm, then surely knowing what we're dealing with would be a good first step

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Paedophilia is one of those things that appear straightforward at first glance but get more and more confusing the closer one looks.

It is broadly defined as adult sexual attraction to children and young people below the legal age of sexual consent. That means a paedophile is someone who is primarily or exclusively sexually attracted to children (although they may also be sexually attracted to adults as well). That much is relatively simple, at least as long as we can agree on what a 'child' is and when a child turns into a sexually mature, self-determining adult; a transition we place, in this country, at the age of 16.

What gets a bit more complicated is distinguishing between paedophilia (the sexual attraction) and child sexual abuse (adult sexual contact with children below the legal age of consent). Paedophilia is, strictly speaking, in a separate conceptual category to child sexual abuse, although in everyday life the word 'paedophile' is typically taken to

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mean a person (usually a man) who has sexually offended against a child.

There are many basic questions about paedophiles to which we do not yet know the answers. We find it hard to pin down how to describe it - is it a sexual orientation? A medical diagnosis or a psychiatric condition, perhaps a paraphilia (a disorder of sexual function) or a fetish? We struggle to figure out where it might come from - is it an individual genetic fault in the 'wiring' of the brain? Does it come from trauma? Or is it merely a statistically inevitable part of the continuum of ordinary human sexuality, the tail of a bell curve that will always exist? Once someone has it, what can they do about it - is it in fact something that can be chosen? Or altered?

Perhaps most importantly, we do not know how many people there are out there who feel this attraction. It seems to me that if we want to keep children safe from sexual harm, then surely knowing what we're dealing with would be a good first step. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees.

A major UK child charity once informed me that they would not be involved in research to find out how many paedophiles there are, because to understand would be seen as empathising, and this might lose them funds. They preferred to keep working in an area about which they did not even know basic facts, rather than challenge ignorance. The result of such an attitude is of course that children continue to be abused. Now is the time to shift our attitudes and begin to explore. The journey is uncomfortable but the goal is better child protection, so any discomfort is worth tolerating.

The first step is to try and work out how many paedophiles there are. There seem to be only eight studies in total which have ever been conducted on this question, and clearly we need bigger studies to get a more accurate picture, but these are the best we have at present. They indicate how many paedophiles there may be, by looking at the responses of 'normal' men in the general adult male population (and one of the studies also included women in their study).

There are five lab-based studies and three questionnaire-based studies, all using volunteers. The laboratory studies took their data from direct self-report (what the research subjects themselves said about their sexual arousal to children), more general questionnaire responses (which included measurements such as 'sexual impulsivity' and self-esteem), and 'physical responses' which in this context means fitting a 'strain gauge' to the man's penis and using a machine called a 'penile plethysmograph' to measure how much his penis reacted, for example when images were shown or tapes narrating a sexual story were played.

These lab studies indicate that somewhere between 17 per cent and per cent of a 'normal' sample of men (who do not describe themselves as 'paedophile') seem to be capable of being sexually aroused by young children, under the age of twelve years old. In other words, roughly one in six to more than one in every two adult men may be capable of being sexually attracted to children.

The three questionnaire surveys also found surprisingly high rates. For example, the most recent study, conducted by Becker-Blease and colleagues and published in 2006, used a self-completion questionnaire study of 531 undergraduate men. This study found 7 per cent admitted sexual attraction to 'little children', but 18 per cent had sexual fantasies of children, with 8 per cent masturbating to those fantasies, and 4 per cent admitting that they would have sex with a child 'if no-one found out'.

Judging by this study, we would be therefore looking at around one in five of all the men we know having some degree of sexual attraction to children.

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Remembering that these survey rates relied on voluntary disclosures, it's not impossible that this is in fact a conservative figure. For women, the only study conducted so far (by Smiljanich and Briere, in 1996) suggested 3 per cent of sample of 180 women admitted to 'some attraction to little children' and 4 per cent used child pornography.

These are not figures I'd like to bet my shirt on - the earlier studies in particular are quite suspect, but what they do show is that, among men, sexual arousal to children is not rare and that there is a crying need to find out more.

Given that it is possible judging by the study that maybe one in every five men is capable of being sexually aroused to children, and that there is an unknown number of men out there who are primarily or exclusively sexually attracted to children, how do we keep children safe - or at least safer than we are currently managing to do?

I believe that attitudes like that of the major children's charity I spoke to must change. We must have the courage to look hard and to listen to those paedophiles who want to tell us their experiences so we can learn how to prevent child abuse. Some people experience such sexual desires but don't act upon them. Perhaps, for them, in a sex-saturated society, that's quite an achievement. We need to be able to acknowledge and understand their self-control.

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9 January 2013 Go

**TOMOCARROLL** 10 hours ago

Sarah Goode is right that there is a crying need for more study, but let's not ignore and suppress existing but politically inconvenient peer-reviewed research which shows that many children are not harmed by non-coercive sexual contacts with adults and that a substantial number later report positive memories of their early experiences. Embarrassed by such findings, the older literature used to speak of "participant victims", defining the willingly participating child as a victim regardless of the child's view. These days society has gone totally into denial over such participation in the wake of decades of false ideological insistence of childhood "innocence". This denial has sometimes been explicitly built into research methods that deliberately exclude positive experiences by defining them out of existence. Diana Russell, for instance, in an influential victimological book, insisted a priori that children could not possibly ever take the initiative in a sexual relationship. To avoid "propagating the myth" that such a thing was possible, her interviewing technique deliberately avoided asking who took the initiative. As psychologist Paul Okami noted, "rather than reflecting a desire to avoid propagating a myth", Russell's statement "reflects a general disinclination to collect data that might contradict a political or moral position". Russell was committed to political correctness, in other words, not science. See Okami p.101 in Feierman's book, which is cited as an authoritative source by Goode herself. A truly scientific approach would be to collect data in an unbiased way that reveals the full range of childhood experience. At present we hear only from victims who felt traumatised. Their voices are understandably angry and strident, and they should be heard, but an unfortunate side-effect is that a militant anti-abuse focus has led to academic censorship: researchers are afraid to ask for, and grant awarding bodies terrified of giving, funds for unbiased research. That is why we generally hear only one side of the story. Other, more positive, accounts are out there, though, to be found in scattered fashion in autobiographies and personal memoirs. See also IPCE database of 138 positively experienced child-adult sexual encounters in distinct gender combinations: Boy-Man (61), Boy-Woman (10), Girl-Man (34), Girl-Woman (9) plus "loose contacts" (20) and Platonic relationships (4).

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**NUMBER 6** 12 hours ago

More knowledge and understanding would be good, but the necessary open-mindedness will come hard. That unnamed charity's reaction is almost universal: new knowledge or understanding can only be contemplated, if consonant with the idea of paedophilia as ultimate evil. Consider the US Congress's condemnation of a scientific meta-analysis on the level and likelihood of harm from sexual contacts with adults in childhood. The problem of course being that any attempt to measure the harm, or its frequency, would relativise it, contrary to the absolute and ultimate nature that today's dogma attributes to it. Not one congressperson dared consider the hubris of setting themselves up as arbiters of science making Bruce Rind and his co-authors the closest modern day counterparts to Galileo. Paedophilia must, by definition, be a sexuality, or sexual orientation. That could only not be the case is if children were not people, suddenly springing into personhood on their 16th or 18th or whatever birthday. Sure, some paedophiles have a more fetishistic approach to their sexuality than others, as do some adultophiles. Most people's sexuality has some slight fetishistic element to it, and if paedophilia is therefore a fetish, not a sexuality, then so are adult heterosexuality and homosexuality.

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**WRONG DAWN** 13 hours ago

Understanding what it does to the victim is also critical I have written a first hand account of being raised in this environment does to a child. Please find my book at <http://facebook.com/pages/Broken-Shards-An-American-Tale/341912845869089> Until we change how these crimes are punished nothing will change. I believe a 25 year sentence for first time offenders is a good start. Follow this by a mandatory life sentence for a second offence. My book includes the stories of four of my siblings as well and what occurs when people do nothing to stop it. There is no cure, there is no rehabilitation, just more victims. Also shown is the escalation that occurs when nothing is done. Thanks for letting me post my opinion.

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