

Remarks on Aggression and Sexuality, Using the Example of Child Sexual Abuse

Reinhart Lempp

Since child maltreatment and especially child sexual abuse have moved into public view and garnered increasing attention, I have been confronted more and more with statements I made and things I wrote back in the 1970's. At that time I held the view, based on studies of my own conducted at various locations, that non-violent sexual acts upon children do not, in and of themselves, cause any lasting psychological harm. When, however, harm did occur, this was due to the reactions of those in the child's environment. (Lempp 1968, 1970, 1978)

I still hold these assessments to be true today, admittedly with a more rigorous and differentiated grasp of the idea of non-violence, and moreover feel myself confirmed in this by the research of Ursula Kruck (1989). Of course, one cannot speak of non-violence when the child has become involved in the act against his/her will, whereby the child's dependency on adults, particularly the parents, is attributed special weight. But it would also be painting with too broad of a brush to characterize every sexual act by an adult against or with a child as being based on violence or force. The decisive factor is probably whether the child -- regardless how old he/she is -- is free of any inner opposition to the adult's actions, and personally wants the act to occur. Here, an ambivalent attitude on the child's part should be regarded as opposition to it.

Children are normally reserved when confronted with sexual approaches by strangers, whereby almost every such sexual act against children is associated with force. It is, however, with the father, who interacts with the child physically, where the transition from tenderness to compulsion can be a fluid one. The child could easily find him/herself in quite a bind here, given his/her own need for love from the father, the duty to love him in return, a desire to please [243] him, and the fear of punishment and reprisals. The ambivalence towards the father resulting from the sexual act itself would then be amplified when the child was not allowed to mention "it" to the mother; even if the child learned that the mother did know and disapproved, without her actually doing something about it, the child would feel abandoned.

There are also fluid transitions in the child's -- as a rule the daughter's -- attitude toward the father's actions and wishes when the child enters puberty and increasingly develops a need to self-differentiate as well as a sense of shame. This change in attitude is often not considered by adults, or even noticed.

Obviously, only a portion of child sexual abuse cases involve this subliminal form of psychological compulsion. In any event, "only" 9.0% of those reported to have used sexual coercion against a child are fathers, with 4.1% step- or foster-fathers; however over 60% are persons familiar to them, relatives, or other authority figures, with another 12.3% being strangers. (Nixdorf 1982) It is certain that the proportion of family members would be considerably higher if the 'dark number' of unreported cases were included.

There is also no doubt that cases involving sexual acts by fathers require more sensitivity and

differentiation than earlier attitudes have permitted. And yet, it would be bad for children if we were to regard all affectionate approaches by fathers toward their small children -- and their contacts with them - as akin to sexual abuse, or even identify them explicitly as such. The experience of physicality, including with the father, is important for a child's healthy, natural development. But physicality always has a sexual component, provided that aggression does not stand in the foreground. However, when the father is no longer able to take his two-year-old daughter into bed with him or put her in the bathtub without raising suspicions of sexual abuse, the children are deprived of important, positive experiences.

Figures concerning the 'dark number' vary widely. When in a book recently published in the United States (Wyatt & Powell 1988) compiling the newest research results regarding this problem there were 200,000 annually in the nineteen U.S. states surveyed, with incidence rates ranging between 6% and 62% for girls and 3% and 31% for boys, as well as when Remschmidt (1987) talks about 300,000 cases of sexual violence against children annually in the former West Germany, it becomes clear that, at the very least, the definition of what constitutes sexual abuse or an incestuous act is still quite vague. Moreover what is also overlooked is that the greater the number of cases there are, the less likely it is that each and every sexual act resulted in life-long psychological damage. But of course the number of psychologically disturbed people in the world is not that large, and indeed, there are yet other reasons for the development of neuroses.

This is not to deny or even minimize the many problems faced by those effected, but rather to put the former into proper proportion, so that one kind of harm is not simply replaced with another. Exaggeration leads, that is, inexorably to a stunted sexual adjustment, and back [244] to sexual taboos such as those of Queen Victoria's time, which are neurogenic in and of themselves.

What is required, in my opinion, is a clear separation between sexuality on the one hand and violence on the other, hard as that is to make. It is violence that children, women, and indeed people in general should be protected from, not sexuality. When this distinction is not made, the in fact all-too-common connection between sexuality and violence -- which leads to such misery -- is unable to be severed. Heinrichs (1986) sees in every rape the sexual expression of aggression rather than the aggressive expression of sexuality. This one can agree with. But it then becomes precisely a matter of exposing and combating aggression, not rendering it harmless.

Our criminal law assesses sexual acts -- even non-violent one -- much more severely than, for example, bodily harm, which is also why scarcely anything happens to a male teacher who boxes the ears of a female pupil. But if he were to Kiss her, he would lose his job. This actually corresponds to how physical aggression is assessed generally; i.e., that it is still viewed as a manly, and therefore for male youths and adults, positive attribute. Correspondingly, its criminal forms are evaluated less negatively than other types of criminal acts.

It is really here that education for overcoming this traditionally male sexual aggression and aggressive behavior must begin. When Schorsch (1987) says that without an aggressive dynamic love can be neither conceived of nor experienced, I would agree only insofar as we are talking about an aggressive sexuality in the sense meant by Heinrichs, i.e., that is consented to, wanted,

and accepted by both partners. Without consent there can be no love, because love is only ever conceivable in relation to the partner. When aggression takes control, the intention to do harm moves to the foreground; this is not compatible with love.

The content of our upbringing of, and consequently the content of our example for our children - which is in fact what this discussion is all about -- must be the inviolability of every person's physical as well as psychological integrity. But this also includes making every child conscious early on of the inviolability of his/her own physical and psychological integrity in other areas. Admittedly this is an even harder, but probably necessary road, even when our traditional ideas about upbringing make it a difficult one. The first step would be a prohibition on all forms of corporal punishment, including even within the family. From where is the grown-up son or daughter supposed to learn that love has something to do with sexuality when the parents, to whose sexuality they owe their very existence, still behave with nothing but aggression towards one another, even if only verbally? But then the parents would no longer trust themselves to be affectionate even with their own children, for fear of being suspected of incestuous acts.

There is a certain basis for supposing that the increasing suspicion surrounding all men -- especially fathers -- in connection with the up until now undoubtedly underestimated and taboo-laden sexual abuse [245] of children could be, in part, a struggle between husband and wife over the child. As an expert witness in child psychiatry in custody and related proceedings, I have been accused by father's groups of being biased in favor of mothers. This is true to the extent that based on actual circumstances I do hold that, "as a rule," the small, pre-school child would be better looked-after by the mother, which is not to exclude the father becoming the caregiver in individual cases. But so long as only 1% of fathers are children's primary caregivers (Baden-Wurtemberg Ministry of Work, Health, and Social Order, 1983) -- the figure may be somewhat higher today -- and so long as -- when one considers only the actual rearing father or mother exclusive of girlfriends, boyfriends, or grandmothers in the household - only one in ten children raised by a single parent is brought up by the father (Docker and Knob1 1987), this rule will continue to correspond to our social and psychological reality. And yet, in family court proceedings, fathers are fighting for their children with increasing intensity.

Could it not be that, with the wide dissemination of the concept of child sexual abuse the mother, in her fight with the father over the children, misinterprets his close contact with them, either consciously or unconsciously? One should take care, lest the very justifiable and necessary fight against child sexual abuse not be used for wrongful ends.

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Professor Emeritus Reinhart Lempp, M.D., Hauptmannsreute 65, 7000 Stuttgart 1