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The Unfolding of Sexuality

by

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"The Friends" by Alexander Archipenko

The Unfolding of Sexuality

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Mathias Wais

The theme of sexuality has various aspects. First, let us consider the questions: What is normal sexuality from the perspective of child development? What is to be expected from sexuality? Then, we could consider, how do we deal with the so-called "doctor games" of childhood? And, finally, what is appropriate sexuality during the various phases of child development? This essay will cover the developmental span from infancy through adolescence.

The First Years of Life

In trying to understand the significance of sexuality, i.e. interest in sex, within the framework of the childhood developmental phases, we start first with the questions: What is the child's relationship to the world at various ages? In what developmental situations do questions pertaining to sexuality really play a role? In this regard we can conclude that the small child is intuitive and comes completely from a sense of feeling, connected to his/her immediate world, the people surrounding it, natural conditions, and living conditions within their house. They become almost one with their surroundings. The child stands in the middle of an elemental and trusting co-experiencing of all the goings-on in his world. This contains understanding but it goes deeper than understanding and remains below the threshold of consciousness; one could perhaps describe it as "going with the flow."

Seen from a spiritual perspective, that is, if we look at the characteristic ways in which the child approaches his world in the first seven years, then we see that both males and females are the same. That is, there are basically two ways in which a child approaches the world. He can purposefully and naïvely grab and touch whatever appears before him in a cavalier manner; we could call that the male gesture. And, he also has the marveling, opening-up, deeply accepting gesture which we could call the female gesture. So, a child, still completely connected to the world emotionally, has both the male and female gestures simultaneously. At this stage a child is given his/her own pre-eminence and repose in its relationship to the world, one that we adults perhaps attain only again in old age. Since a child approaches the world in a way that is both male and female, then we could say that the child is mentally "gender free."

The child is also "gender free" inasmuch as the reproductive organs become functional only after puberty. Finally, however, the child is also "gender free" because sexual desire directed at other persons does not exist at this stage. What appears in a child as sexual activity is actually on the order of naïve, loving and awed interest in the world. One part of this world is one's own body together with the sensations that can be experienced with it and which, naturally, must be investigated just like other parts of the world.

Next, let us simply consider the expressions of this devoted interest of a child for the part of its world that has to do with sexuality. Just as a child will thoroughly investigate and finger his or her little toe or its belly button, so will s/he also naturally investigate the vagina or penis. Preoccupation with the genitals is no different than games and investigations with any other part of the body. Joy in exhibition and disrobing is also normal and reasonable at this age. In this case parents can play along without reservation. Be happily surprised when your little boy holds up his shirt and shows you his "willy." It is often we adults who take away the harmlessness of these games by over-reacting or by promoting excessive attention-getting, scolding or even punishing. Awkward attempts to overlook such games

and scrutinies are also not advisable. Let us simply be happy, together with our child, that in this world there are such things as bodies and these bodies have a vagina or a penis. A child must be able to be at ease with his whole body.

Erections in infants and also slightly older children are reflexive and are, naturally, accompanied by pleasant sensations. One should just let them happen without paying any special attention. Let the infant play with his erect penis (but we adults should not touch him).

We should also not be concerned if a four or five-year-old has phases of seeming masturbation. It is harmless and we should just let it happen without magnifying it. The child's thoughtless playing with his/her own genitals is no more dramatic than picking the nose. If we do not dramatize it then it will stop again in a short time.

Characteristically, these phases of masturbation-like activity occur during developmental situations in which a child first experiences the removal of some of the direct connection to his world (in this case the surrounding people) that was referred to at the beginning of this article. At about five years of age, a child develops a consciousness of the principal differences between mother and father, and a first consciousness of male and female comes about. Until then, mother and father were two persons who formed a unit, a kind of archetypical shell. Now this unit becomes differentiated and the polarity of the two archetypical persons is experienced. Naturally, the child already knows that there are men and women. But this knowledge is not yet relevant to the child's interaction with concrete persons. So, a four-year-old can ask her grandmother: "Grandma, are you a boy or a girl?" As a six-year-old, the child will no longer ask that question.

Also the "doctor games" that appear at this age are harmless because the way in which a child investigates the world is also the way he or she investigates the bodies of his/her playmates; this is the way it is. If one discreetly and exactly observes these "doctor games," then one sees that they are seldom limited to the genitals, but rather the child is trying to understand the place of the genitals within the order of the whole body. In this case, the child should be left to play peacefully.



"Couple in the Street" by Pablo Picasso



HAP Grieshaber—Couple

All of this has nothing to do with sexuality because these activities are never accompanied by sexual desire, i.e., a compelling need to experience carnal appetite or release of tension with another person. These “sexual” activities of a child are never directed at someone, not even in fantasy. A masturbating child does not imagine a sexual act with another person. “Doctor games” are harmless. They are not directed to specific persons, nor to playmates, but rather to the human body itself.

A normally developed child does not look for sexual stimulation. This is what distinguishes adult sexuality. A child is not approachable through magazines with pictures of naked breasts at a kiosk. When a child grabs

his mother’s breasts or pulls her pubic hair, it is not a sign of the beginning of his career as a sex-criminal. It is an expression of the rightful interest that a child has for his world.

On the other hand the sexuality of an adult is always directed at another person; even though it is possible that it is played out only in the imagination. All of this, however, has no relationship to a child’s touching and investigating its genitals.

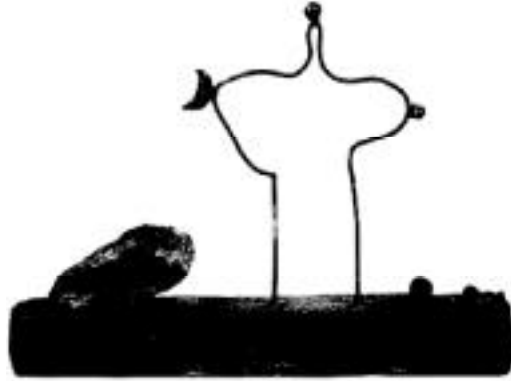
To recapitulate, in a normal developing child, there is really no such thing as child sexuality. There is only investigation of its own body and the bodies of parents and playmates. Of course, there are bodily experiences that are later incorporated into sexual life and, it goes without saying, that a child has a great need for devotion, love, tenderness, and cuddling. But all of this does not represent a sexual need.

The problem here before us is obviously and simply a misunderstanding between adult and child. The adult is relating to his or her own world instead of the world of the child. The adult assumes something to be sexual that was not intended to be sexual.

Feelings of shame appear by themselves at the latest by age seven and begin at age four or five. Little girls will now want to put on underpants and will not run around naked in front of strangers. It is unnecessary to train a child to have a sense of shame. It will certainly come by itself. Calmly allow this to happen. Be patient. Training to have a sense of shame is misplaced.

Kindergarten Age

The rule for the first seven years, until kindergarten age, is: Questions asked by the child should be answered as a matter of course and with the utmost seriousness. However, parents should not bring up the subject on their own. The rule for answering questions is: The questions should not be immediately answered in a scientific way, but rather “soul pictures” should be given. An example is the question about where one comes from. It is a matter of accurately listening to what the child is really asking. The question: “Where did I come from?” or “Where do children come from?” is not meant in a sexual-physical way, but rather in a more encompassing soul-spiritual way. An answer that only presents the bodily processes would disappoint and confuse the child. The child much more wants to know: Where does my “I” come from? In other words: Where was I before? This is a question about the spiritual



Joan Miro—*Man and Woman*

beginning of human beings about which the child still has intuitive knowledge. Therefore, the right answer is a soul-picture, a picture that contains spiritual food for the soul and one which confirms what the child senses. An example would be: “High up in the clouds there is a big meadow where you lived together with many other people. One day, God called you and sent you into Mother’s womb so that you could be warm and protected as you grew inside because Mother and Father wanted very much to have a baby. One day you were so big that there was no more room for you inside Mother’s tummy, so you wanted to come out. So, Mother let you out, wrapped you in a warm blanket, gave you warm milk to drink and laid you in the cradle.” Such an answer, or something similar, is not a lie, as one could perhaps charge; rather the child is taken very seriously with such an answer because with it, I am putting myself into the child’s world, the child’s way of thinking and experiencing. It would be pointless if I were to answer the question of one’s origins with something scientific like: “Father’s penis became hard, he stuck it into Mother’s vagina and gave her a fluid that connected itself to a small egg in Mother’s womb and from that you were formed.” Such an answer comes from the adult world, and a very materialistically-inclined adult world at that.

Or, when a child notices that the mother regularly throws away bloody menstrual pads, one should not give a scientific answer if the child asks about the blood, but rather something like the following: “Mommy’s womb cleans itself with the warm blood because the place where you were growing should always be clean and soft.”

Other particulars such as ejaculation, erection of nipples, and so forth, should also not be explained with detailed information. Children cannot do anything with

such so-called “knowledge.” It does not belong in their world. In a deeper sense, they would not even understand such fact-filled explanations. They would try to work through it by doing something like imitative play and then the adults would have the impression that the child was engaging in sexual activity.

So that there is no misunderstanding here, I am not of the opinion that a child of kindergarten age should have decisive knowledge about the process of reproduction and the possibilities of sexuality. But if a child asks because s/he has, for instance, experienced how a sibling arrived, then we should explain in an age-appropriate manner and that means in pictures during the first seven years. On the other hand, I believe that a kindergarten-age child should be given correct names for the sexual organs and grow up in an atmosphere where such things can be openly discussed with parents.

The Middle Years of Childhood

When asking for explanations a child around the age of nine should be answered in a totally different way than the kindergarten-age child. At this time, once again, a gentle distancing occurs in the child’s relationship to its environment: Parents and teachers and the rest of the world are now sometimes found to be strange and puzzling. The child no longer stands unquestioningly in the middle of all that is happening around him, but rather on the outside regarding things with a critical eye. The possibility that his care-free childhood could sometime come to an end occurs to him.

Misgivings about the natural authority of parents and teachers are experienced. Some children will, for a short time, occupy themselves with thoughts about trying to understand death. Characteristically, this fissure is also accompanied by renewed interest in things sexual. At this age, essentially, it has to do with the question of origin, but with a completely different emphasis: At this stage of life a child may have orphan fantasies. (I was not really born to my parents, I came from gypsies or royalty or knights. I was left on a doorstep and my parents found me.) These orphan fantasies often come disguised as sexual questions: “How does a baby get inside its mother’s womb?”

The explanation at this age should not be so much a one-time conversation as a fostering of the consciousness of growth, of decay and renewed growth in nature. Coming from this background, one can absolutely give a realistic presentation of the reproductive process. However, it should always reference and be in harmony with the origin of the soul-spirit core of being which comes from a supernatural realm. An example: “When we were allowed to have the job of forming your body and letting it grow, we were so happy. We hugged and kissed each other. Father let his penis glide into Mother’s vagina and by this very intimate togetherness, his sperm streamed into Mother’s womb. One sperm connected there with a small egg and your body was formed from that.”

One will experience that the child is not really so very interested in the actual sexual part of the explanation, as we adults understand it. Around age nine, the child is really searching for a solution to the contradiction that, on the one hand, he feels himself to be a unique human being and, on the other hand, his body comes from his parents; he is a kind of continuation of his parents. In answering one should also not take this tension and suspense away from the child. Sometimes, out of this suspense, “doctor games” once again surface for a short period. And, something distancing and lightly antipathetic towards the opposite sex now remains. From now on the child wishes that only friends of the same sex are invited to birthday parties: “The boys are all silly,” says the young girl.

We see here that the child’s interest in the sexual arises anew in conjunction with a further distancing from fellow human beings to whom he or she was previously taken for granted that the child was connected. After this phase, interest in the sexual declines until shortly before puberty.

Preadolescence

Around the age of ten or eleven, the child senses that he is gradually growing out of his childish state of being protected and nourished. A premonition arises that someday childhood will come to an end, that someday one will have to stand in the world alone. The child increasingly experiences that inner things and outer things are separate, that one can no longer experience internal things from the external. It is a task of development during this span of years (between ages ten and thirteen) to differentiate between the inner world and the outer world. Now, dealing with the subject of sexuality, exactly at this point, takes on an important function. Children sense that the subject of sexuality contains this tension between the internal and the external and for this reason they eagerly grab onto sexual “material,” not, however, to satisfy their own lust. Children engage with this material in a partly provocative manner, partly secretive, partly impertinent, and partly coy. At this age one experiments with the tension between the internal and the external, that which is hidden and that which is seen, private or public. Verbal sexual provocations draw something outside that belongs in



"Departure" by HAP Grieshaber

the sphere of intimacy. It is fun, but it also brings with it experiences of shame and guilt because one knows that it really belongs in an internal domain. Shame and guilt can now be felt because one experiences that one can inwardly do something different from what one does outwardly.

Through shame and guilt, through a bad conscience, a child experiences itself as differentiated—as an intimate “I.” By dealing with “shame,” a child playfully secures for itself a sphere that is “secret,” that is inside. Some will lie and steal at this age and form secret pacts. But it always has to do with active experimentation with the polarity of displaying and hiding, provocation and concealment, the internal and the external. It has nothing to do with acting out sexual fantasies or needs. A child doesn’t even have inner sexuality yet. The whole subject can be seen much more as material for play. An appropriately easy-going parental attitude is advisable.

Puberty

During puberty, the gruffest distancing and, along with it, the most painful reprehension towards oneself appears. It is the third separation to come about in one’s relationship to the world. And here, for the first time, not only does a renewed interest in the sexual surface again, but also in one’s own sexuality. Only after puberty can a child experience itself sexually in the adult sense of the word.

Shortly before the onset of puberty, at around age eleven or twelve, boys especially sense what is coming and begin to copiously masturbate. At this point in time at the latest and preferably before, boys should be informed about the possibility of ejaculation in the night with the indication that this is a joyful sign that they will soon be men and could someday become fathers. Before their first period girls should be informed about menstruation and what that means. It is especially important here to avoid describing menstruation as a necessary (or even agonizing) evil. It should be presented so that a girl realizes it is a sign that her body now has the ability, and is preparing for, motherhood. However, one should not deny the possibility that it there could be pain involved. Boys should also be instructed about the girls’ periods because they will otherwise imagine all sorts of absurd possibilities.

Further explanations before and during puberty about sexual intercourse or birth should only be given when specifically asked.

Such explanations should take place before puberty in order to pre-empt information gleaned “from the streets.” So-called street information will happen anyway. Then it is important that a child is not confronted with it unprepared. What really sinks into the child is the attitude of the parents towards this subject that they have been informed about at home. Ignoble things, which children today often get from the street or from older siblings, will be imitated but not accepted internally if children have been shown a straightforward attitude towards the sexual at home.

As for masturbation, which can frequently occur during puberty, one should not, under any circumstances, react with punishment or moralizing. It is a needed

remedy, an initial becoming acquainted with one's own sexual organs and the sensations that can be experienced. The youth experiences for him or herself the very temporary nature of this sexual activity.

In general, one can spare all the moralizing about sexuality when in conversation with pubescent youths. It is much more helpful to young people when we, as parents, casually share our sexual attempts and experiences when we were their age. For instance, a mother could tell her daughter, who is emphasizing her growing breasts by putting on a tight sweater, that she was also very proud of her breasts

at that time, but, on the other hand, felt a little helpless because she did not know exactly what she was supposed to make of them.

You also do not need to panic if you discover your son with a pornographic magazine. Emphasize that, for you, sexuality is an enrichment of human encounters and that you would also wish this for your son and photographs of sexual acts cannot possibly portray the essential nature of sexuality which is, namely, a basic deepening of human encounters.



"Lovers" by Otto Karl Mueller

In Conversation with Young People

Wondering if one should explain when one has not been asked is an ongoing problem. There is no generalized answer to this dilemma. It depends on the age of the child and especially on his or her psychological characteristics. Personally, I think it is important to educate early-on because, in my work, I have a lot to do with victims of sexual abuse. Early and accurate education, that does not go into implications, but rather calls things by their names in a child-appropriate fashion, is an essential preventative measure against sexual abuse.

If nothing is ever asked of you about sexual things, then you could try suggesting appropriate questions. For instance, if a child is to be born within the family or circle of friends, that would be a good opportunity to bring up the subject.

Or, perhaps, at some quiet moment, when you really have time to spend with your child, you could directly ask: "Do you actually know how you came into the

world?” or “Now, I’d like to tell you how it was when you came into the world.” And one would not begin with the conception but rather with the birth and then talk about what happened before: “And now I want to tell you how you came to be in Mother’s womb.” Make it very personal and use language that takes the child’s age into consideration; tell about your own personal mental and physical experiences.

Shy children will probably not ask or say much. That is also not important. The important thing is the experience and that one can talk about it.



“Jupiter and Semele” by Pablo Picasso

As far as sex education goes, we have another situation entirely after puberty. Young people themselves now have knowledge (even if it’s only rudimentary) of what is really being discussed when the subject is sexuality. Parents can now become discussion partners. They can become open to conversations about birth control, AIDS, homosexuality, and so forth. However, they can no longer “educate” in the narrow sense of the word. In my opinion, young people should be encouraged to find their own way in this and, in fact, be left in peace while they pursue their own course. Neither moral pressure from home, nor pressure for success from the street is helpful to a

young person who is trying to find out for him or herself what it means to be a sexually active human being. Parents can only offer themselves as discussion partners. Whether this offer will be accepted is another question. At any rate, it will definitely not be accepted if parents try to force young people towards anything or come off as moralizing. In the end, when children reach the age of sixteen or seventeen, parents can only let go. At that age, pedagogy in this field consists of holding oneself somewhat in check. Young people communicate with each other about these things; that is what stands out the most at this age. If you, as parents, can trust in the sexual education that you have given your children over the previous two seven-year phases of their development, then your children have been helped in the best way possible.

The goal of all the previous education about sexuality was that young people become increasingly independent, by that I mean able to deal with this area of their lives without their parents. After age fifteen, teenagers begin to do that. And, actually, when is one finished? Is it really important to be “finished” with it? Are we adults finished? Let us admit to young people concerning this matter that there is an unfinished quality about it. That is how we can best take them seriously. Let us not act as though we know everything. Tell the young people that sexuality is a life-long learning process for adults. That helps them to take us seriously; that we even allow them to have a say. You now have a discussion partner in front of you, no longer a child. The question now arises: How can we talk to young people about sexuality?

First, it seems important to me that we adults do not encounter such questions in the role of an advisor or someone giving tips; rather we encourage young people to have an interested attitude vis-à-vis such experiences. Sexuality is an on-going learning experience. It is not something about which there is a clear consensus, something that someone just “obtains” at some point in life. What sexuality means to us and how we deal with it changes in the course of our lives; we are always searching. This searching quality has to do with the fact that sexuality no longer merely serves the purpose of reproduction. Sexuality is a part of our loving interest in another human being. Its “value” lies in the fact that it can be individualized which is further dependent upon the acceptance of the dissimilitude of individuals. Men and women experience sexuality differently; that is the source vantage point we have supporting the idea that sexuality stands before us as an area of learning.

This leads to an initial assertion: female sexuality is something different from male sexuality. What does this mean? It seems that this new area of life known as sexuality comes about sharper and more physically urgent in boys than in girls. And, at first, it remains that way. Sexual need is also more urgently present in the consciousness of men than in women. When two people sleep together, the sexual desire itself and also the sexual experience is initially more clearly delineated and also more sharply concentrated on the sexual organs of men. An aroused male sex organ can demand its satisfaction with power. It appears to be a totally different case with many girls and women. In their case, sexual desire seems to be spread out over the entire body. The purposeful, urgent need for satisfaction in that one place, as is the case with men, is apparently not in the forefront of female sexual desire. Instead, girls and women turn their desires toward tenderness, snuggling, caressing, and the merging of the two souls. This basic difference is also connected to the fact that apparently boys and men think considerably more often about sex and are more often internally engaged with sexual notions than is the case with women and girls. Obviously this is a source of many misunderstandings. The need felt at one place on the body by men and boys is often so urgently brought into their carnal encounters that it can be experienced by a female sexual partner as pressing, intrusive or sometimes frightening or even violating.

From here another concept bears exploration, one that every man is exposed to over and over again and that is, to carry out an act of possession with sex, to want to beset another with his sexuality, yes, perhaps even to intimidate another person. During sexual intercourse itself, the male



"Lovers in Green" by Marc Chagall

appetite is directed toward having a lustful release of tension through orgasm. That is what nature, pure biology, brings to the male. On the other hand, a woman's drive during sexual intercourse appears to be directed toward something totally different; a stirring vibration affecting her entire body and a giving-in to her partner. That is probably connected to the fact that many women report, especially after their first experience, that male behavior during intercourse seems somehow strange to them; yes, sometimes even frightening. And, conversely, the often hesitant style of a man's female partner or her need for extended foreplay can be perceived by him as hesitation or "not really wanting to."

Girls often experience that intercourse is really not very pleasant the first time or the first few times. It can be physically painful or rather unromantic when her partner is aggressive or awkward. Often a boy will be "finished" just as the girl is becoming aroused. Both boys and girls experience that it is very difficult to talk to each other about misunderstandings that sometime occur in the beginning.

A further difference in male and female perceptions lies in the fact that many women complain that their partners consider sexual contact to be at an end when he has been satisfied. A woman may even perceive this abrupt ending as cruel. Girls are mentally very alert after sexual intercourse, very open and receptive. Men often internally close themselves off; some simply fall asleep. I believe that the first attempts young people make together are beautiful when afterwards, together, they can allow the energy to calmly fade away. The beauty of an erotic experience does not depend upon how quickly or impressively a youth or a man becomes aroused, but rather, afterward, how serenely the couple can end their shared experience. More togetherness can be found in this "allowing to fade away" than in all that has gone before.



"The Kiss" by Gustav Klimt

For boys, sexuality enters more sharply into their consciousness, but is, through that, more isolated from other experiences and events of life. For a young man, his sexuality often has something abrupt and sudden about it and is, if he does not pay special attention, much less embedded in his interpersonal feelings than appears to be the case with girls for whom the quality of the encounter stands in the foreground. Her priority is the beauty of the encounter. And within a beautiful and increasingly intimate encounter, sexual desire also arises. That is why girls usually do not make a distinction between sex and love; while for a man it evidently does not need to be the same. Male sexual feelings can occur without love, while women usually do not have sexual feelings if intercourse does not at least take place within an atmosphere of positive feelings.



"The Waltz" by Camille Claudel

Because of this the girls have somewhat of an advantage over the boys, which brings me to a second assertion: Sexuality derives its meaning from interest in another person. The beautiful and interesting and relationship-building part of sexuality is not the actual sex, but rather the sexuality of the partner. What do I mean by that?

As long as one is only chasing after one's own erotic satisfaction within sexuality, then bad feelings linger afterwards. One has done something only for oneself. But what has one really done for the encounter? One has really only enjoyed one's own company, and the other has been put out of mind while chasing one's own gratification. At this point, we see that in order for sex to become a carnal encounter with another human being, something creative must come into the process that is more than mere instinctual behavior and a satisfaction of the sex drive. The essential part of sexuality is the sexuality of the partner. To engage with the whole body of your sexual partner, to tenderly investigate your partner's entire body out of a sense of loving interest, his or her likes, reactions and idiosyncrasies, are what make sex something social and relationship-building. Everything that is possible in the area of bodily contact outside of and before and after actual sexual intercourse, and also those things not involving intercourse, done in mutual freedom and respect, allows for the creation of carnal encounters. Every form of tenderness, kissing, touching, caressing, and cuddling of the whole body in conjunction with respect for the freedom of the other and his or her right of self-determination, leads us to more closely connect with the other person. To feel for the soul of another through their body, gently and inquiringly brings us together internally.

So, what conclusion can be drawn from these reflections? We can meet each other as sexual fellow-seekers when both people are more concerned with their partner than themselves. If young people, act out of respect for the other's freedom, mutually experiment and relate to each other as though both are not yet masterfully skilled and not act as if they already know everything there is to know about the subject and if they use their sexuality to search out the other person as a complete human being with loving interest instead of only his or her genitals, and if they really live this quality of searching, experimenting, and learning together when they have sexual encounters, then this will lead to the experience that they are, when it comes to their sexuality, free and confident on the one hand and responsible human beings on the other.

One is never finished with this field of study known as sexuality. Adults must also reevaluate their stance time and again and evaluate the significance of their sexuality within their own existing relationship. Therefore, sexuality can change with every encounter. For that reason, young people do not need to push themselves to become sexual experts as soon and as extensively as possible. After all, we adults are not experts either.