

What's wrong with sex between adults and children?

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Although there is a widespread consensus that adult-child sex is wrong, there is widespread confusion about why it is wrong and why it requires intervention. For this discussion, sex is defined as activity involving the genitals which is engaged in for the gratification of one or both people. An adult is defined as someone at least 18 years old, and a child is defined as someone who has not reached puberty.

First, the author critiques what he considers to be three inadequate arguments against adult-child sex.

1. *Adult-child sex is intrinsically wrong because it is unnatural from a biological and psychological viewpoint.* This argument is inadequate because it is too categorical. Similar arguments have been made regarding other taboos, such as homosexuality, and these arguments have recently been called into question.
2. *Adult-child sex involves the premature sexualization of children; childhood should be free from the problematic aspects of life that sex involves.* For sex-negative adults, this argument seems attractive, but it defies reality. Children are sexual, and they explore sexually with each other. Trying to shield children from sex probably does more harm than good.
3. *Adult-child sex is damaging to children; they are frightened and disturbed by it, and later develop sexual problems.* While this is true in many cases, and some children are severely harmed, this argument is based on an empirical rather than a moral foundation, and an empirical foundation that is far from established. It is not known what percent of children are harmed. Clinical reports cannot answer this question, because large numbers

of cases never come to the attention of clinicians, and the majority of the children involved may not be harmed. The unreliability of this argument will become apparent as stories of positive experiences become publicized. Inevitably they will, since society has maintained the unrealistic assumption that such experiences do not exist.

Thus, the author sets out a moral argument based on the concept of consent. Society is moving toward a sexual ethic that holds that sex of all kinds between consenting people should be permitted, but sex should remain illegal and taboo when a person does not consent.

It is true that many children appear to consent passively or even appear to cooperate. But children by their nature are incapable of truly consenting to sex with adults.

For true consent to occur, the individual must know what he or she is consenting to, and must be free to say yes or no. For example, for a subject to give informed consent to participate in a study, the researcher must give him a complete description of the procedures and anticipate in detail possible dangers. The subject must not only understand this information, but also have true freedom to choose to participate or not. In the case of a prisoner, for example, this freedom does not exist.

Children are inexperienced and ignorant about sex and sexual relationships. Even though they may know they like the adults and the physical sensation, they are unaware of the social meanings of sexuality, the criteria for judging the acceptability of a partner, the course of relationships, and the reactions of others around them.

Furthermore, the child does not have true freedom to say yes or no in a legal or psychological sense. Legally, the child is under the adult's authority and has no free will. Psychologically, children have a hard time saying no to adults since adults control their needs—food, money, and freedom. In this regard, the child is like the prisoner in the example above. This is especially true when the adult is a parent, relative, or other important figure in his or her life.

Adult-child sex is similar to sex between a therapist and a patient. The-

re may be cases where the patient benefits, but it is still wrong due to the fundamental asymmetry of the relationship.

This argument against adult-child sex rests on a moral, rather than empirical footing. Wrongfulness does not depend on proof of harm.

Some objections to this argument might be raised. For example, many adult relationships may not meet this standard. This is true: many wives may be unable to refuse their husbands' advances, or the secretary the advances of her boss. And much pain and tragedy accompanies many adult relationships due to their ignorance of what they are agreeing to and of the possible consequences. Furthermore, this lack of knowledge on the part of children would seem to preclude children's sexual activity with their peers.

But the crucial difference in adult-child sex is the combination of the child's lack of knowledge and lack of power. With peers, there is no inherent power difference. With adults in subtly coercive relationships, adults have more knowledge or access to knowledge.

There are two reasons that this stronger argument against adult-child sex is needed. First, it is necessary to explain convincingly to victims and perpetrators why drastic interference is made into their private affairs. Secondly, it is needed to benefit a society whose sexual ethics are increasingly confused. As taboos fall by the wayside, new standards have not been established to replace the old ones. This moral confusion is partly responsible for the prevalence of child sexual abuse.