

# 4 Not Innocent, but Vulnerable

An Approach to Childhood Innocence

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This chapter begins by examining the concept of childhood innocence, the critiques of the concept, and critiques about the political use of the concept. We go on to ask what about childhood innocence or similar concepts might be preserved in the area of sex education and childhood sexuality in general. We agree that using the concept of innocence to make claims on behalf of children has an insidious effect on discourse about children, not only because it positions children as helpless, incompetent, and entirely dependent on the will and decisions of adults but because it also supports political agendas harmful to children and other marginalized groups. The concept of innocence, as it is currently used across the globe with regard to sex and sexuality, also tends to be activated around certain (privileged) groups of children, while other kinds of children are neglected based on their race, class, ethnicity, or geopolitical location. We acknowledge, however, that the concept of innocence has historically also been closely connected with some policies and actions that were taken in order to make children's lives better. So, we argue that when critiquing the concept of childhood sexual innocence, scholars should be careful not to at the same time neglect the need for children's protection. We suggest replacing the concept of innocence with the concept of vulnerability and use an example to describe how this might happen. In the end, searching for how to make an argument for actual vulnerabilities of children, we turn to what has been referred to as the "new materialism," which asks us to consider children in body and in consciousness, constructed by discourse but material circumstances as well, shaped by their interaction with other bodies, things, and people. This idea is often integrated with the Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005; Renold & Ringrose, 2008), and the concept of assemblage protects but de-privileges human agency by seeing it as one of many parts of the assemblage where every component affects and is affected the others. We hope to show one need not romanticize children's voices and children's agency as true or authentic in order to hold on to the idea that children are important, valuable, and can make worthwhile contributions to society.

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## The Idea of Childhood Innocence

“What is it that is most appealing about children? Is it simply their physical beauty? Is it their openness to loving and being loved? Their playfulness, their innate humour? Beyond these things, in my view, children are beautiful because they possess something that we have all lost – the quality of innocence,” writes journalist Tim Lott in *The Guardian* (2013). Not always was a child seen as a bearer of such qualities. Phillipe Ariès shows that the discourse of the innocent child emerged with Romanticism (Ariès, 1962), and while others have argued against the depiction of this era as the dawning of childhood itself (Kinney, 1995; Orme, 2001), the notion of innocence was important for that period. Before the Romantic era, the Christian child was said to be born into sin, gradually learning to become righteous (Najafi & Higonet, 2003). The romantic child, on the other hand, was born innocent. Innocence was framed by purity, simplicity, sincerity, fragility, and lack of knowledge. As philosopher Joanne Faulkner puts it: “innocence is an empty trait, valued precisely as a deficit of experience, as if experience itself were corrosive of virtue” (2013). Those qualities make children lovable and in need of protection.

There are several explanations for this paradigmatic rupture that permitted these conceptualizations of innocence to flourish. The romantic period saw demographic changes and a decrease in infant mortality, secularization, and general changes in social organization of life with the rise of nuclear family and an emerging romantic worldview. Because romanticism admired the emotional, the mysterious, the unknown, the irrational, and the fantastic, and because it found nature and natural explanations superior to those associated with the grittiness of industry, the simplicity of an innocent child became a perfect counterpoise to complexities of turbulent industrial and social development of modern society. From the nineteenth century onward, the idea of children’s innocence was not only related to nature but strongly related to children’s sexuality. Their innocence became an argument for an absence of sexuality in children, and the lives of children, and the demand for such absence.

The idea of the innocent child who has to be shielded from the adult world encouraged a concern for their well-being and activism in favor of children’s rights. As Higonet (1998) notes, sweetly sentimental pictures of girls and boys contrasted with darker images of real children’s pain and suffering (1998) and sparked emotional responses that motivated adults to improve the children’s living conditions. A variety of laws protecting the well-being of children at work, at school, or in the home were enforced in the United Kingdom (Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802, Acts addressing working conditions of children in cotton mills 1819, 1825, and 1829, Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act 1889 and many others). In the United States and Britain, the social work movement used childhood innocence to argue for the foster care system.

### Three Critiques of the Idea of Childhood Innocence

Over the past two decades scholars have taken a closer look at the idea of childhood innocence and how this idea has been used strategically to advance political agendas as well as how it has been used unknowingly in a way that works against its initial aim to protect children (Egan & Hawkes, 2010; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Jenkins, 1998; Kincaid, 1998). One criticism focuses on the way children are positioned as unknowing and unable to advocate for themselves. As such, they are denied agency, rights, and subjectivity, and adults speak *for* them and on behalf of them. This branch of criticism takes issue with the presumption that children – because of their innocence – would not and could not need to know more about sex.

A second criticism of the use of childhood innocence examines the way it can fuel moral panics. Institutions and public policy makers that construct children as innocent position them as in danger of corruption and thus in need of state protection. The image of an innocent child is useful to various political power players (Irvine, 2004; Robinson, 2008) and central to an argument that could lead to expansions of laws in a way that leads to collateral damage, for example, to LGBT rights (Fischel, 2016).<sup>1</sup>

A third criticism of the way the idea of childhood innocence has been used strategically is that it positions some children as innocent and others as invisible or always already corrupted. Critics have shown that this construction of innocence reproduces inequalities because the portrayal of innocence is racialized and classed (Bernstein, 2011; Fields, 2008), as it almost always features white middle-class children (Walkerdine, 1997, 2001). This was a criticism Fields (2008) leveled at parents she studied who were in conflict over sex education in North Carolina. Black girls and boys were understood to be more “knowing” and less innocent, and when pictured thus, the sex education to be offered appeared to condition or constrain this knowingness. In the same vein, boys are rarely positioned as innocent in the sex education wars in the United States over abstinence-only-until-marriage education (Lamb et al., 2013). They, like the girls of color in North Carolina, are assumed already knowing, sexual, and in danger of becoming pregnant or impregnating, and this knowingness is naturalized.

Historically, universal education and child labor laws, although motivated by factors other than childhood innocence, have also used childhood innocence to procure arguably tremendously positive privileges to developing children and sometimes the critique of the idea of childhood innocence can lose sight of the needs of actual children. As in the earlier examples, activists and policy makers may have used the romantic idea of childhood innocence, and may have believed in it, but it may also be true that they showed genuine concern for actual conditions of poor and working-class children facing severe consequences of industrialization

<sup>1</sup> For examples of how the childhood innocence is used in politics see below the section Slovakian referendum: conservative uses of “childhood innocence” APA Report: Progressive uses of “childhood innocence.”

and fundamental societal change with rapid growth of cities, decline of community solidarity, decline of strong familial bonds, among others (Boone, 2005; Giroux, 1998). Later in this chapter we reconcile the critique of the childhood innocence concept with concerns about children that consider the pitfalls making the life of children difficult. Before we do so, we will examine the use of childhood innocence in conservative as well as progressive political projects.

### **Slovakian Referendum: Conservative Uses of “Childhood Innocence”**

Once childhood became framed by the idea of innocence, children have been used strategically in political arguments. The use of children make these arguments more emotional and therefore persuasive. The potential of the trope of an innocent child to trigger emotions of sympathy or fear is used in both liberal as well as conservative struggles. Both sides may employ it with the honest belief they fight for children’s well-being, or, more deceptively, to push through and legitimize other agendas.

Recently, images of endangered innocent children have been used by conservatives in movements that have been referred to in Europe as “anti-gender,” as well as anti-LGBT movements on transnational levels across Europe (Maďarová, 2015; Schmincke, 2015). After decades of steady progress in terms of women’s, transgender individuals, and LGBT rights, several parts of Europe are facing new waves of backlash, manifested in resistance to a so-called gender ideology or gender theory, and deteriorations of support for gender equality agenda (Paternotte, 2015). In many countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Germany, and others) conservative campaigns against various issues as gay marriage, sex education, or equality policies are carried out. These conservative campaigns are examples of how the concern about children turns into moral panic, and the focus is shifted away from the child who needs protection to a chase for presumed perpetrator and a crusade against demonized social evil. Rather than careful analysis of actual harm, moral panics use the defamation of certain social groups for political mobilization. Childhood and innocence are typically utilized as a means through which the “good heteronormative adult citizenship subject is constituted and governed in conservative campaigns” (Robinson, 2012).

Sex panics revolving around the protection of childhood sexual innocence are deployed for political gain through fueling homophobia. In 2015, a referendum on banning same-sex marriage, adoptions by gay couples, and rejection of compulsory sex education was held in Slovakia. The plebiscite was initiated by a conservative organization, Alliance for Family (Aliancia za rodinu). The conservative group produced banners and posters featuring supposed children’s voices – according to this campaign, children themselves are clear that they would vote against gay marriage, same-sex adoption, and compulsory sex education. A short video was produced by Alliance for Family and featured a gay couple who came to a family to

pick up the child they wanted to adopt. In the video, the little boy looks at the couple – his potential fathers – and asks, confused: “And where is mommy?” In another video, underscored by moving music, suggesting sadness and trauma, the same boy poses a resentful question to another little boy (in the role of a viewer): “You would want to grow up in this [meaning a gay family]?” The gay couple is pictured as taking the child away from a family and family life. The way they are pictured looking at him and each other, it could be argued, signals that they might abuse him. The trope is used to trigger an emotional reaction of protection in order to gain political capital and unity around an idea that brings in various constituents across the conservative political spectrum.

Interestingly, these advertisements employ an idea of childhood agency, arguing that children’s voices must be heard and if they are heard, they would fight for their right to remain innocent, that is, they would stay away from a world of sexual diversity and sexual rights. This agenda is symbolically linked to sex abuse and exploitation. This representation of an agentic child, although still innocent, is used to support a conservative agenda. As with the Romantic era, the child’s voice is positioned as natural and unsullied, thus not partisan.

Emotional appeals regarding the innocent child have positioned women in particular as important protectors of children, which has had mixed outcomes. Used in this way, these appeals support conservative attempts to keep women out of the work force by enhancing the “job” of caregiving, which has been undervalued as it is typically not paid or well-paid work. The more children are at risk, the more valuable stay-at-home mothers’ sacrifice is, in spite of the fact that stay at home mothers have less prestige, are poorer, and more at risk for future poverty because of divorce and lack of training to reenter the workforce. There exists a longstanding irony in the childhood innocence discourse that describes children as our most “precious asset,” without ever acknowledging that caring for them is undervalued.

### **Conflating Innocence with Sexual Innocence**

One of the reasons why the anti-LGBT propaganda can work when a moral panic is incited is because very real children are exploited, although less frequently by same-sex (LGBT) parents than mixed-sex (heterosexual) parents (Stevenson, 2000). Wouldn’t all adults want to protect children from exploitation? This idea is currently used in some nations to argue against child marriage (see Chapter 25). There are laws and social-service systems and campaigns against abuse across the globe that are meant to teach adults that children are not permissible sexual partners. And, given the continuation of sexual exploitation and the spread of child pornography (Dines & Levy, 2013), giving up entirely on a campaign of protection may not be the best approach to combating this problem.

Innocence, in its depictions and uses, is often connected to perceptions of sexuality. Where sexuality is constructed for adults as something that is not only private but also somewhat “dirty,” the immaculate innocence of childhood

sexuality stands in opposition to it. This is not a modern construction. Childhood served as the projection of Judeo-Christian paradise. In the Biblical narration, Adam and Eve were innocent because they were unknowing. When they tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, they became conscious of their nudity and experienced shame – and lost paradise forever. In Christianity, sexuality is related to sin and possible defilement, and that is why it has no place in the paradise.

Sexuality in Western culture occupies a unique position within the list of potential risks and harms to children. The sexual abuse of children can be considered the worst form of exploitation and the sex offender one of the most hated individuals in society. The emotional appeal with regard to sexually abused children has been documented (Whittier, 2009), and, in spite of the public moral sentiment about sexual abuse, sexual abuse continues. Porn sites about underage girls and boys are some of the most popular sites around the world (Dines & Levy, 2013). Those outraged by cases of sexual child abuse may often ignore less “sexy” cases of child neglect, abandonment, inadequate nutrition, or poor education (Kincaid, 1998).

When childhood sexual innocence is considered today by those who would warn against sexualization by the media, it is almost always considered in relation to girlhood. Renold (2005) writes that boys are less easily situated in a state of “innocent minority,” as masculinity is seen as already containing “the seeds” of sexual subjectivity. Duschinsky (2013a) writes that in some material written to address the problem of sexualization – for example, government reports – the warnings position boys and young men as harmed too but in a way that doesn’t evoke a fall from innocence. Instead, sexualization appears to contribute to their becoming indiscriminately and even pathologically sexual. They are also portrayed as a potential sexual threat to girls through sexting, a modern cause of alarm. The whole discussion of girls becoming more and more sexualized, and boys being seen as agents enacting their sexuality in problematic but agentic ways, smacks of projection of a dichotomy that slices human experience in two. Girls in general are seen as exclusively vulnerable in depictions of sexuality in childhood and as objects in need of protection (while this rarely holds true for girls of color); boys hold that which is desired, freedom, and agency, and are also depicted as predators, which includes and is pronounced when boys of color are discussed (Brown et al., 2009; Lamb, 2010). As we write later, where there is the abject, or as Duschinsky writes, the injured, there needs to be the injurer – which is never us.

Are boys ever depicted as vulnerable? Priest scandals in various countries have brought to public attention that boys can be damaged by early sexual contact. But this narrative does not seem to be the same narrative of lost innocence. Present is a subtle and sometimes not so subtle homophobia (Russell & Kelly, 2003) where the pedophile is conflated with homosexuality in the media, and boys’ sexual exploitation is seen as an initiation rather than abuse. As Cahill and Jones write (2002): when a man abuses a young girl, the problem is not heterosexuality. Few would characterize such abuse as a heterosexual act similar to consensual sex

between an adult man and woman. Similarly, when a priest sexually abuses a boy, the problem is not homosexuality. The problem is child abuse.

The lack of interest in exploitation of boys is telling, and perhaps revealing, with regard to what raises concerns for girls. Girls have the triple risk of being sexualized, being seen as sexual when they are not, and being potential victims of sexual exploitation. These risks may be accurate but the way the facts of these risks are represented to the public presumes a figure of a girl imbued with qualities that are lost through sexual knowledge.

### **American Psychological Association Report: Progressive Uses of "Childhood Innocence"**

Considerable writing and positioning of scholars occurred after the release of the 2007 American Psychological Association (APA) report on the sexualization of girls. The report introduced psychological and empirical research that together indicated that girls may be increasingly exposed to sexualized media and such exposure is harmful to their well-being. Although most of the research presented was on adolescent girls, anecdotal information was used to argue that when sexualized images and messages are omnipresent, younger girls get a message that they are valued primarily for their ability to become a good sexual object. Lamb and Brown (2006) began this argument in a book for parents that focuses on a qualitative thematic analysis of the objects, messaging, and marketing in girls' worlds. Their aim was to suggest that marketers and producers of media use standard stereotypes to influence girls to become consumers of girlhood, some of which are aimed at presenting girls as innocent, frail, and silly, and some of which presents girls' development as aiming toward a sexualized adolescence.

Critics responded to the APA report in full form, presenting criticism that it was not inclusive enough, and that the discourse in the report made sexualization appear to be just one more moral panic against sex. The latter critique was most likely connected to the overwhelming reliance on research on adolescent girls in the report, and the use of research literature that showed exposure to media was correlated with earlier and more frequent sexual activity, which, of course, begs the question, what is problematic about earlier sex?

One critique was that the girl to be saved from media in the report was pictured as White and middle class, although that argument was more of a hunch by critics regarding what images the report would elicit in its readers than supported by a close examination of the research, which did indeed include research on racialized and poor and working-class girls. While there were no pictures, except on the cover, and these were diverse images, the language used by researchers and the popular media that promoted the report, when subjected to a discourse analysis, betrayed for these critics class-based concerns connected to the idea of "respectability" (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Skeggs, 2004). For example use of the word "prostitut" to describe what little girls looked like when

dressed in sexualized clothing was said to evoke a class distinction to British critics, whereas, in the US context, it would be difficult to see that language as classed. Some of these arguments seemed more directly related to how the report, and any report, becomes popularized in the press, than the report itself.

A second argument is that media was taken in the report to be a monolithic big M force that only contributed problems to girls, ignoring the fact that girls make their own media and that there is much in the media that they use to resist overarching sexualized, heterosexist, and sexist messages (Gill, 2012; Hamilton, 2009). This argument goes on to say that looking at media as only a problem for girls rather than that which gives them power and a path toward participation denies them agency, subjectivity, and the capacity to think critically about what they are receiving (Gill, 2012).

A third criticism about the report found that it left little room to celebrate or even take notice of sexual development in childhood and adolescence. This criticism of the report and the public discourse around sexualization, in short, centered on how a concern for sexualization of girls appears to be combined with a concern for girls being sexual at all (Duschinsky, 2013a, 2013b). When this happens, the concerns for sexualization can sound like slut-shaming (Ringrose & Reynold, 2012) and that any form of childhood sexuality represented in girlhood is suspicious (Egan & Hawkes, 2010). This critique builds on the idea that what is really raising societal concerns is not that girls are being seen as sexual objects for grown men at too early an age, or that girls are being robbed of their opportunity to develop into whole human beings with many interests and attributes including their sexuality, but that there is something improper going on with the girls themselves. Sexualization discussions thus become discussions of girls and propriety, rather than girls and sexuality (Duschinsky, 2013a, 2013b). And the attention then is drawn to the girls themselves, for not acting respectably, or for being dupes of the media, rather than on media or marketers who spend billions of dollars promoting narrow views of girlhood that include sexualized views but other stereotypes as well that promote a neoliberal consumerism, for example, that of attractiveness. This again may have been an outcome of the report rather than a reflection of the report itself. As Duschinsky describes the process, it is both/and, the child is deployed as an unsavvy and vulnerable consumer and then redeployed by critics as a neoliberal subject:

WHO but child is deployed as a consumer . . . a not yet savvy consumer . . .

However, the child is re-deployed in “neo-liberal” discourses on sexualization in the subjectivation of responsible consumers and entrepreneurs, coding cultural and material inequalities as individual pathology and irresponsibility (2013a, p. 362).

Thus in Duschinsky’s thinking, the Task Force report problematically pictured children as dupes, whereas the critics who mean to save childhood agency, set them up as neoliberal subjects, shoppers in the sexualized culture, making their own choices and, thus, in the end, responsible for them.

As noted earlier, critics of childhood innocence, while sometimes decrying the rise of sexist sexual messaging in societies, also recognize the slogan of “too sexy too soon” as imposing normative and regulatory messaging on girls regarding the timing of sexuality, the appropriateness of it, and the place for it, insinuating that there is a sexual purity, often written as sexual “health,” that opposes a “dirty” sexuality, which must be preserved until an imaginary gate is opened. Boys are positioned as the salesmen of this “dirtier” sexuality, themselves no longer subjects but influenced and positioned by larger forces promoting patriarchy, pornography, and domination. The fallout from the kind of popularity this message received was that it was taken up within a larger discourse of middle-class parenting (where are the parents?) and “girls gone wild” (girls are different these days and doing most of the sexualizing to themselves). That is, the discussion was taken up into a neoliberal push toward individual choice and responsibility. The focus was no longer on institutions and ideologies but on individual families and girls, once again, as gatekeepers of innocence.

These various criticisms are important in that they show how quickly discourses can be taken up to be used against their ends, in this case feminist ends, how feminism can be co-opted, and how well-meaning scholars and researchers that focus on social-justice problems in relation to girls and boys can themselves fall into the trappings of using childhood innocence to their own ends. In this particular case, the report was undertaken from a feminist perspective to examine what could be considered an internalized sexism in which girls, who were developing sexually, were taken up and shaped by forces that would promote the patriarchal culture’s status quo. The popular media turned the attention to shaping girls rather than reshaping the larger institutions of patriarchy and media control.

### **From Innocence to Vulnerability: Why Children Are Vulnerable**

We thus agree that when the idea of “innocence” is brought into social or political discourse, we should be wary of two things: first, that the child may be co-opted to represent either damaged innocence or a conservative voice that cries out for its innocence; and, second, that positioned behind an innocent child is an adult corrupter who must be contained, whether LGBT or potential sex offender. But we propose that there is a third less nefarious risk when childhood innocence is introduced, and that is we can forget that children, in general, need protection.

Tropes of innocence work because of a shared understanding that children need protection. One can protect a child from numerous things, not only – or even most importantly – adult sexual exploitation. If innocence becomes the primary reason for protection and if sexual activity (even unwanted) becomes the primary way that innocence is corrupted, children who need the most may be ignored. As Robinson and Davies write (Chapter 3), real children are actively engaged in building knowledge around gender and sexuality and are more capable of critical thinking than adults believe. But the idea of childhood innocence will prevent adults from seeing

children's agency, capacities, and understandings, and will lead to adults policing the boundaries around which children seek knowledge about sex and gender. Adult ideas of children's innocence set up taboos around which the children's curiosity and interests are silenced.

While Robinson and Davies introduce aspects of childhood that are ignored by those who would preserve an idealized notion of innocence, we should beware that discussion of such does not create a straw child, teeming with agency, choice, and adult cognitive and emotional capabilities. Such a version of the child would lead to a politics that supports doing away with the few resources that remain that help adults to care for children and protect their lives.

What is the harm from early sexuality? From too much knowing? And why should we be emotionally invested in protecting children from this? The harm clearly is not in losing their innocence as much as it is their vulnerability to exploitation from adults. And a second potential harm is that too much information can reproduce a kind of sexuality that overemphasizes performing sex for others' pleasure, or exploiting other people, and interfere with developing a healthy attitude toward sexuality and an ethical approach to other people.

We suggest that we need to maintain the concept of vulnerability that is tied to the idea of universal childhood development. Children have limited ways to exercise power or resist manipulation from adults who are stronger in their experience as well as physical power. Children have no other choice than to live in the world run by adults – they are subjected to laws, exposed to educational programs, and treated by a medical system all designed by adults. We need to recognize their minority position. However, this does not mean we deny children's voices. On the contrary, we support platforms that recognize children's voices and value their experience, while remaining wary of adult uses of these.

This call to remember the vulnerability of children could be compared with the calls for strategic essentialism for those who are considered the "other" in society, a call issued by Spivak in the 1980s (Spivak, 1990). Its use is justified when the aim is toward a "scrupulously visible political interest" (Fuss, 1995), in our case, the rights of children. It permits a group to be advocated for as one, based on some similarities that are historical, and in this case, developmental, while those who advocate need to take special care to not erase important differences based on class, culture, or race, nor reduce childhood to one overarching image (Grillo, 2013). In this way, what we are reminding the public of is NOT that children are not innocent, but that children are indeed in danger of many harms that come from policies that affect their lives as they live them in families, legal systems, amid global conflicts, and as they face various forms of prejudices that legitimate and rationalize a broad continuum of acts that are objectionable to children (Young-Bruehl, 2012).

And it is important to not erase children's own voices. When critics talk about children's voices, their agency, and the valuing of their experiences, what exactly is meant with regard to sex and sexuality? Do they cleverly conjure up 14- or 15-year-olds? Save for Robinson and colleagues' research in Australia, when do they use

the example of a 6- or 7-year-old's experience and right to knowledge (Chapter 3)? It may be easier to do this when it comes to the area of LGBT rights and children's feelings and identification with gender and sexuality in a society that will make them feel "other" and question their thoughts and feelings. Some adults are beginning to offer protections to children with regard to these identities, whereas others continue to promote discrimination.

There is some romanticized projection that if we include children's voices, simply because they have been ignored in the past, we will discover what they need and what a healthy sexuality is. This viewpoint reproduces the same old belief in childhood innocence, purity, and authenticity. But, as Art Linkletter once said on a 1960s television hour, "Kids say the darndest things," and those voices, like adult voices, are tied to institutions and ideologies that may be harmful to their needs and existence. This is not to say that adults always know better and should ignore children's points of view, but adults have a special responsibility toward children's development, health, well-being, and fulfillment. And to the extent there are cultural and ethical guidelines for a "good" sexual life in adulthood, we have a responsibility to provide foundations for it through structures that we design for youth.

The other way children are "agents" isn't just as choosers but as responders to whatever adults put forth. This can be a problem in the sexualization literature – sometimes, in correlational or causal research, or in psychology research in general, individuals are positioned as "influenced" rather than mutually influencing. Hence Gill's (2012) important reminder that, while media is influencing adolescent girls, adolescent girls are influencing the media. Still, one must be wary of imposing the idea of the neoliberal chooser on these individual girls (Duschinsky, 2013a). To recognize children's agency and to protect them does not need to be contradictory. Protecting children does not have to position them as passive recipients, nor weak, unknowing, or even innocent. They are vulnerable to certain harms that need to be addressed. Their harms may be particular to childhood and development as there are harms particular to various groups of people of different ages, abilities, backgrounds, and ethnicities.

## Children's Vulnerability: An Example

### Sam's Story

Sam was a third grader (around 9 years old). One day his mom found him in a strange mood. He did not want to talk to her, he seemed startled. His mom tried to talk to him, but he hid in his room. She did not know why, but he did not talk to her as much as before and seemed distant. She thought that maybe he was going through puberty. Later that month there was a parent's conference and Sam's class teacher told parents that, while working with tablets, some kids opened some porn websites. She was not sure if this happened accidentally or because

another child from the class searched for them on purpose. She apologized because there had obviously been a failure in the system that was supposed to block such websites on the school network. She asked parents to talk about this with their kids at home. Sam's mom opened the topic and Sam started to sob. He admitted he was looking at those pages. While he did not say that he felt guilty, it seemed clear that he did. He had looked at the pages with interest, was laughing at them with his schoolmates, and that what he felt the worst about was that he felt aroused and had an erection. When talking with his mom he broke into tears: "I was scared that I shouldn't hug you anymore." They then hugged each other and talked more.

It is easy to deconstruct simple stories like this one as a cautionary tale that positions children as vulnerable, parents as protectors, and pornography as bad. And one story can't encompass all the different stories that emerge as children have access to pornography. But without claiming this is a quintessential story, or even a typical one, an analysis of this simple story can help us have some sympathy for real families grappling with issues relating to pornography and vulnerability, and also to have an understanding of childhood sexuality through the lens of assemblages that we referred to in our introduction.

The concept of assemblages developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2005) emphasizes fluidity, exchangeability, connectivity, and multiple functionalities through entities, here the child. Assemblages can be imagined as relational networks, mixtures of the animate and inanimate that produce the world, and as discourse was argued to have constructed the child, assemblages that include discourse and ideologies as part of a relational network now do. This perspective de-privileges human agency, which does not mean that agency is not important. Instead, agency is seen as a part of the assemblage where every component affects and is affected by the others. Thus, agency is present but also affected by passivity, vulnerability, stasis, and constructed by ideology as well as material connections and the limits and affordances offered by the material world. We consider this approach as a way to protect against romanticizing children's voices and agency as true and authentic, acts we associate with the liberal response to conservative protectionism.

Childhood sexuality can be seen as an assemblage, an assemblage of discourses about childhood, technology that is part of their lives and extensions of their beings, schools that encase and transform children, parent-child (mother-son) relationships, ideas of sexuality and innocence, and bodies with their physical responsiveness. All of these parts of the assemblage are shaped by both culture and materiality. To apply this to our example, Sam has probably heard about where babies come from, he probably has heard about the fact that people make love for pleasure, but these pictures went beyond this. Sam was vulnerable to images that he saw on the Internet. And not just that, maybe if he hit those web pages in privacy he would quickly close them or he would take a look, but he would not face the pressure to engage actively and publically in an act of masculine performativity. By seeing the pictures that he was not looking for and especially by playing the tough-guy role among peers and experiencing the pleasure triggered by something that consciously he would not approve as good, he himself felt awkward. He was

trapped in cultural dichotomy of pure and dirty and its relation to sexuality and physicality, and hugging his mom, the person he loved so much and who was so affectionate with him, suddenly felt just not right. A certain kind of representation of sexuality built a wall preventing Sam from being tender with his mother. His mother did not panic and was able to lead a meaningful talk with him about what happened, what it meant, and to reassure him that their relationship cannot be destroyed by such happenings. She was able to tell him that many people have the same excited feelings about those photos and they also feel a little or a lot guilty because they don't know the people in the photos and they don't know if there was some troubling experience connected to those photos for the people in them. She could emphasize her own values of privacy and sexuality, or talk about objectification, or share her feelings about intimacy, and at the same time say that looking at sex can be fun. She can also discuss how boys can bond together over looking at girls and women, or that there are different images that may be exciting to gay boys, opening up sexual identity as a topic of discussion.

This story is not suggesting that children should not watch pornography – although there are fine arguments that support this view. By retelling this story, we do not make a plea for an anti-porn campaign, which we fear will overextend in conservative ways that we have shown earlier. Instead, we try to understand the complexity of issues of childhood and sexuality in a contemporary world and show how children can be both confident subjects and vulnerable at the same time. Attempts to protect children are usually of a restrictive character – ban pornography, ban sex education, ban sexually explicit content in media and advertising, and ban the use of certain words. Adults are responsible for attending to children's vulnerabilities. Whatever the vulnerabilities, children need to know there are adults and sometimes other children who are older or more mature whom they can turn to for help, who will not judge them or condemn them for not being innocent or see them as ruined, in part, by their acts or viewings.

But how does a parent protect? If we take seriously that technology is a part of children's sexual "posthuman subjectivity," that the line where child ends and technology begins is blurred, both affecting the other in interaction, then the child's viewing of pornography, the images he remembers, and the potential to view pornography again become who he is, offering affordances, possibilities, and limitations. His relationship with his mother already exists but becomes newly a part of this assemblage of the technology/image-seen boy. Deleuze wrote about the ability to affect and be affected, to emerge in relation to various components of who one is and what one has experienced (1988). One might say that the assemblage of boy/technology/pornography has met the assemblage of boy/son-of-mother/part of family to be integrated in what Deleuze called a consistency. Two assemblages become a new assemblage, a unit. While Deleuze wrote about the wasp and the orchid becoming some symbiotic emergent unit, in this case, the mother reasserts the part she plays in the unit mother/son, which now is integrated into the assemblage of screen/boy.

It is important to remember that technologies are not only a part of children's sexual "posthuman subjectivities" (see Barad, 2003; Braidotti, 2013; Haraway, 1991) but a tool of global capital as well. For example, in marketing to children, the child consumer, an assemblage of imagined and actual capabilities of children, connected to technology and families, can mask the various vulnerabilities of children of particular ages, races, genders, and material conditions. Children are located in particular geopolitical spaces where some might personally have little power but the idea of who they are and their innocence becomes one component in an assemblage of conservative laws/bodies/policies in action. Politics, technology, media, and laws regarding privacy and criminalization, shape the emergent child cast as innocent or knowing depending on their nationality, skin color, and placement in the world.

That said, adults in most situations, cultures, and countries have more resources and ability to shape the institutions that frame their own and their children's lives. This brings with it the responsibility to guide and protect, to insert adult power into assemblages of emerging childhood. In Sam's case, we have shown an alternative to repression and panic around sex that has not proved as efficient in prevention. As assemblages look at individuals in relation to other individuals, institutions, structures, and objects, parents and responsible adults insert or reassert their position in children's lives. This is not an effort to protect against an essential vulnerability but to protect against potential vulnerabilities.

## Conclusion

In the end, how do we protect the vulnerability of childhood without using the problematic trope of innocence and overemphasizing sexual knowledge as the example of loss of innocence? How do we take into consideration both that children are critical thinkers and making sense of the world as they grow, and that they are indeed also growing and developing and depend on adults in this work?

## Children Develop

First we need to pay attention to needs at various developmental points. Adults would not conspire with first graders to not have any books in the classroom if that was their request, nor candy for lunch instead of something more healthy. And when providing sex education to tenth graders, while they may want to focus on the "how tos" of sex, it is responsible to include discussions of contraception and ethical training against coercion, because adults have some investment with regard to what will matter in their future, at this particular time in history and in this society. If the classroom decided, "We don't need to learn about coercion because we are all ethical beings," we would still want to teach about coercion.

## **Children Are Vulnerable**

Second, we need to understand vulnerability intersectionally. Not all children are equally vulnerable. Different children have different vulnerability to being positioned as knowing and not knowing, and within certain geopolitical systems, some bodies are shaped and seen as in need of greater protection than others. In the United States, children of color are seen as less vulnerable. Globally, children in countries with fewer resources can surprisingly be seen as less in need of protection. This contextual and intersectional view needs to be a part of sex education and policy around sex education globally.

## **Children Can't Be Sexual Criminals**

A recognition of childhood sexual rights would mean decriminalizing and depathologizing children who act out sexually. The notion of childhood innocence has a reverse side when children act out on other children in bullying ways. These acts need to be treated not as special sexual and corrupting acts, but within the realm of bullying.

## **Abandon the Trope of Innocence**

Make it suspect to use photos of “innocent” children for causes such as trafficking and sexual abuse. Point out that innocence is used problematically and politically. Ferret out assumptions of “purity” and “respectability.”

Understand Children’s Capabilities for their Developmental Level (but do not glamorize or overrepresent agency)

We are not ready to give up the responsibility of adults toward children and are suspect of the glamorization of the agentic child – the neoliberal chooser who knows what is best for her or himself. The cry to listen to the voices of children/adolescents is a confirmation of a different kind of innocence, that they are all too knowing (the image of the wise child) and also that they know what is best so should be trusted. In this view, our adult protection can itself be corrupting. Liberals and scholars need to check ourselves with counter notions to childhood innocence, and reclaim an idea of development that focuses on vulnerability. The notion of vulnerability doesn’t trade on sexual innocence and purity but leads us to fight for protections that children well deserve.

We hope this chapter has indicated that actual children may get lost in the process of progressives and conservatives use and critique of childhood innocence. Actual children aren’t one age, they develop. And there’s a materiality about development that is shaped by discourse but also stimulated and limited by what bodies and minds of developing children can do.

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