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KOINOS MAGAZINE #24 (1999/4)

Intimate relationships between young people and adults

Are there criteria for a positive experience?

Frank van Ree

Both sexual abuse of children and consensual love relationships between young people and adults are found in all cultures and in all periods of history. Although research statistics show otherwise, at present the notion has taken hold in many countries that a difference in age inevitably results in damaging consequences. Some time ago, an extensive exchange of ideas took place in the newsletter published by the National Workgroup JORis (Younger-Older Relationships, intimacy, sexuality) of the Dutch Association for Sexual Reform (NVSH), about the criteria which an intimate relationship with a young person must meet in order to preclude harm at a later age, based on positions which had been formulated earlier by the Danish Pedophile Association. Remedial educationalist Dr. Frans Gieles took the position in this discussion that in the present situation adults should act with restraint in pedophile and ephebophile relationships, because they bear the responsibility also for the damage which social rejection (whether or not after the fact) can bring about. We asked the retired Dutch psychiatrist Dr. Frank van Ree about his view of this. Dr. Van Ree has written many publications and doesn't shy away from taking an independent position. As this article shows, he has passed on this way of thinking to his children as well.

Child or adolescent

The concepts child and adolescent are commonly used without further characterization. Still one can recognize clear differences between ephebophilia and pedophilia. Ephebophilia can be described as an erotic and sexual preference by adult men for the budding young male person, that is, the young person shortly after puberty (ephebe = youth, half-adult). Before puberty we are still concerned with children. Ephebophilia is in the transitional area between homophile pedophilia and adult homosexuality. Although the one and the other may seem to be clearly defined, appearances are deceptive. Of course we are familiar

with signs of bodily maturation, such as beard growth, change of voice, ejaculation, etc. But the development of each of these characteristics takes place at a different pace for each individual. The age at which these developments is apparent is definitely much earlier for some boys than for others. It is impossible or very difficult to put limits on the concepts of emotional development and maturation. Moreover, not all psychic functions develop at the same rate. Still, we make use of these distinctions in spite of their fuzziness. Of central significance is the fact that the child is erotically attractive for the pedophile and because of this is sexually approachable; by maturation to a youth, the child loses this attractiveness.

Harmful actions and psychological maturation

In the current, often very intense discussions concerning sex between adults and young people, the question of possible harmfulness comes up again and again. It is obvious that physical abuse, threats, coercion, and similar transgressions are harmful and deserve to be punished. These matters, which in fact would fall under criminal law even if there were no specific morals laws, need no further discussion.

The question of harmfulness is complex. Cuddling, kissing, caressing, and masturbation belong to the normal erotic world of experience of babies and small children, and these behaviors retain their significance for young people and adults. In many publications, non-violent sexual behavior, considered to be inappropriate to the phase of psychic maturation, is also considered in principle to be harmful, even when the young person (or the child) consents to such behavior or invites it. To comment on this it is first necessary to answer three specifically related questions.

1) To what extent is the young person able to give or withhold consent? One tends to dismiss the idea that small children have any possibility of consenting or dissenting, because they have little or no verbal abilities. Even though this argument may seem to be very convincing, it is - even when it has to do with children - a misleading position. From the first moment, the newborn give clear signs of contentment and dissatisfaction. Crying, kicking, screaming - there's a whole repertoire of behaviors to express hunger, pain, or other frustrations. It goes without saying that the possibility of expressing consent or dissent is available to verbal children and adolescents. Provided there are no serious psychological deficiencies, consent is always possible in ephebophile contacts.

2) To what extent can the young person be overwhelmed by desires of the older partner which he or she is not yet ready for or for which he or she has not yet reached an appropriate degree of maturity? Is it for example imaginable that the inability to satisfy the desires of the adult may lead to feelings of having failed, and through these to feelings of inferiority or anxiety? That could be the case when pressure to display the desired behavior is reinforced by the older partner by increased

insistence or even coercion. But when the adult lets himself be guided by signs of consent or dissent from the younger partner, it is hard to imagine that harm will result from the situation itself. There are also no signs of harm resulting from sexual behavior as a result of frequent occurrences at present of sexual interaction between young people in the secondary schools.

3) Could there perhaps be an issue of premature sexual enlightenment? It is often claimed that harm could result from the child or adolescent becoming aware of affairs which are not yet appropriate for such a young person. He or she is not yet ready for it, one often hears. There is also the fear that one might be 'putting ideas into their heads'. I remember something which happened back in the 1960s with our oldest son, then five or six years old. I no longer remember exactly what led up to it, but in any case he had asked me a question having to do with where children come from. This was in the time that the so-called sexual revolution was taking place. As psychiatrist and 'modern' father I was of the opinion that a good and detailed answer to his question was needed. I therefore reacted with a very elaborate exposition, not only concerning the anatomical aspects of coitus, fertilization, and so forth, but also about the feelings which might accompany sexual acts, etc. For some time he followed my explanation with full attention, which spurred me on to further elaborations. I didn't notice that my 'neurotic' need to explain everything went far beyond his question and intention. This only became clear to me when he interrupted my verbal barrage with the question, 'Papa, are you going to make pancakes this evening?' He was apparently not yet ready for a large part of my tutorial, or in any case had no trace of interest in it. But my stories didn't cause him any suffering and he showed no signs of harm when I went beyond the boundaries of his need. To the contrary, he only showed a healthy appetite.

I still remember the day the same son turned twelve. At that time a photographic book had come out from the NVSH, in which a Swedish couple was depicted in a variety of positions. These were photographs which were no more pornographic than the Venus de Milo. I had bought this book for him. At his birthday celebration for which my in-laws were present, I presented him this little work. Grandpa and grandma fell silent, but gave no criticism. At that very moment our youngest son, eight years old at the time, came into the room. The older brother had the booklet open on his lap and was leafing through the pages. I thought, 'What now? How will the younger boy react to this?' The answer came soon enough. Watching along over his brother's shoulder, he took notice of a rather complicated position, and said, 'Jeez, now that looks hard to do.' And with that comment his interest in these circus acrobatics had passed.

The adult who is looking for signs of interest and desire on the part of the young person in intimate contacts will not pressure the partner psychologically. With the proper concern for the young partner, the older person will adapt himself to the desires of the child, just as adult

partners in fact (are supposed to) do with each other. It is entirely unclear to me which physically harmless bodily acts, provided they are not experienced as unpleasant, would be able to cause psychic harm. There seems to be a kind of superstition, much as there once was about masturbation, from which one could contract every imaginable serious and minor sickness. Of course that was never proven, but it was nevertheless a myth propagated even by doctors for years. 'Sex with young people', provided it is directed to their desires and capabilities, is in my opinion not only harmless, but can play an important role in the learning process which would lead to a good quality sex life later.

Discussion within the NVSH

Van der Vorst said in Nieuwsbrief (Newsletter) 44 of the National Workgroup JORis of the NVSH: 'Child sex with grownups is allowed; grownup sex with children is not allowed.' That is definitely a good position. One can apply the same statement to 'sex with young people'.

In our present-day society, legislation and public opinion assume another, predominantly disapproving point of view concerning sex between adults and young people or children. According to the law, one attains majority at the age of eighteen, or, if one marries sooner, at an earlier age. However, sexual majority is set legally in our land at sixteen years of age. Recently the Justice Committee of the Dutch Parliament approved a proposal for regulations in which the age of sexual majority would be changed from sixteen years to fourteen years. A boy or girl between fourteen and sixteen years of age would then be able to have sexual relations, on the condition however that the other person not be more than five years older. Even if the age of sexual majority were in fact to be set at fourteen years, a man of nineteen or older would still be subject to punishment for sex with a young adolescent. The 'older adult' seems in this respect to be seen unremittingly as a potential danger. Such an older person can, by abuse of power, become a sexual abuser. As E. Van Ree stated in 1997 in a contribution to the Dutch daily newspaper NRC-Handelsblad: 'There seems to be something remarkable taking place with the phenomenon of 'sexual abuse', or at least with society's feeling about it. In recent years (and since the Dutroux affair the pace has quickened) there seems to have formed almost a consensus which, although it is never explicitly mentioned, nevertheless can be formulated quite simply: every sexual relationship between two people who enjoy structurally unequal positions of power is equivalent to abuse. This proposition applies to physicians and patients, sports coaches and athletes, pastors and parishioners, and last but not least, of course: adults and minors. And the proposition has another consequence, namely that sexual abuse is also automatically the worst kind of abuse.' In a situation where the media and public opinion equate 'sex with young people and children' with 'sexual abuse', his comments also apply to the first concept.

It is alarming to realize what a stalemate this neo-Victorianism leads to.

After all, in this situation, the older person who has erotic feelings for a child and desires to express them sexually, has to suppress such feelings with possible consequences such as depression and anxiety, or to covertly act on these feelings and in doing so be in violation of the law. The frequent consequences of the latter choice are widely known. Horrible emotional conflict for the younger partner when legal investigations and procedures follow, possibly becoming an outcast in the eyes of one's agemates who avoid such a 'dirty sinner', feelings of guilt and self-condemnation because one was an accomplice in something that apparently was very wrong, etc. I don't bring into consideration the consequences for the adult of the assignment of punishment. It is equally well known that the adult, under threat of many negative reactions and giving in to panic, coerces the younger partner to remain silent or even compels silence in the most horrible manner. At this time even acts of violence by ordinary citizens are not unthinkable. Whatever the man or woman may do who is erotically and sexually attracted to a young person, the consequences are negative. As long as condemnation of all 'sex with young people and children' continues to be the guiding principle of the society, there will be a stalemate. If adults approach young people sexually in an appropriate manner, that could be beneficial from an educational point of view and could help to break down the unwholesome taboos. But at the same time, existence of these taboos means that such an approach within the present social context is potentially harmful. A decision not to act means depriving the child of part of his development, whereas deciding to act may later cause the child much suffering. Which leads to the question: where do we go now?

In 1996/97 an extensive interchange of ideas took place in the National Workgroup JORis of the NVSH. An important theme was the possibility of harm as a result of pedophile and/or ephebophile contacts. In Nieuwsbrief 45 Gieles wrote an important contribution on this subject. He was motivated by having received letters in which men commented on sexual contacts which they had experienced years earlier as adolescents. Among other things they wrote that, in spite of the voluntary nature of the contact and the proper manner of action on the part of the adult who was involved, negative feeling later developed about the contact. Noteworthy is that this was also the case when the experiences at the time that they happened were at least for a part positive. The writer analyzed a series of letters which he had received concerning the negative retrospective evaluations of these experiences, looking for common themes. He found nine of them. Of these nine there were three which indicated that feelings of shame and guilt had developed later, which could have to do with the prevailing taboo (and in fact probably did): 'I have the feeling that something happened which wasn't right', 'I was ashamed and felt guilty', 'I couldn't talk with anyone about it, the secret came between me and my parents and friends'. Another theme actually had nothing specifically to do with issues of pedophilia or ephebophilia: 'It went too quickly, I would rather have discovered these things slowly on my own'. I have also heard this

complaint many times in my psychiatric practice concerning contacts between heterosexual adults. Young women as well can experience their (first) male partner as being too impatient and pushy or dominant. The rest of the complaints were chiefly reactions such as those which occur following all possible situations (traumatic as well as others) of a strictly non-sexual nature: loss of spontaneity, loss of self-confidence, disturbing nocturnal fantasies, school problems and concentration disturbances, drug use, anger, etc. Some of these symptoms fit depressive conditions as well. To put it another way: the development of most of these symptoms seems to be not at all specific to the preceding sexual experiences and doesn't necessarily have to have any direct connection with them. The link seems more likely to be found in the 'sense of sin' and feeling of guilt, both from the environment beforehand and brought on after the fact. As Gieles put it: 'The sources of these experiences of course don't lie only in the thing which happened itself. That thing becomes interpreted after the fact. The frame of reference for this interpretation is encountered in the environment or is presented by it.' Incidentally, Gieles is somewhat unclear here when he states that the source is also 'the own inner self - or the young person's own upbringing'. He goes on to add: 'How modern the family may be, the association 'sex=dirty' is deeply embedded in our entire culture.' This means that Gieles couples the 'own' inner self directly to that which is brought in by upbringing and culture, through which it is partly not one's own.

Of special importance here are the four criteria which pedophile relationships should satisfy, listed in Nieuwsbrief 45, as Gieles summarizes them, and given here in abbreviated form:

1. Who is in charge?: the child should always be in charge of his or her own sexuality.
2. Initiative: the initiative for sexuality should always come from the child him- or herself.
3. Freedom: the child should be able at any given moment to remove himself or herself from the situation.
4. Openness: the child may not be burdened with a secret.

This is not the place to discuss all four criteria, but in closing I will give some attention to the fourth, concerning openness. The necessity for this is clear enough. But, as Gieles himself indicates: 'there is no place where these matters can be discussed. (...) I find,' continues the writer, 'that this fourth criterion now, in this time and this society cannot be met (any longer).' And he closes, 'This implies that I do not allow myself to have sexual contacts with young people.' An extremely conscientious conclusion and one worthy of respect, based on a realistic analysis of the present reality. But... this conclusion means in fact respecting and maintaining an unwanted taboo!

If the (sub)cultural context, through the absurd taboo, stands in the way of the sexual upbringing and development of the child, then it must be done away with. That means that one can not make do with simple abstinence, but than one also must put up a fight against that taboo, if possible through providing information, publications and lectures, as Gieles does through his contribution to the newsletter. For those pedophiles and ephebophiles who want to actualize their desires, the only possibility seems to be moving to another culture where such a taboo doesn't exist, or at least not to the same degree. And by this I do not mean becoming a periodic client of child prostitution in poor third world countries. That is not loving involvement with children, but sexual exploitation.

To close, I would like to support Gieles' criticism of many of the helping professions, which in their views and procedures in fact show that they stand behind the taboo. He puts this into words as follows: 'At present, members of the helping professions routinely ask about sexual experiences. If these existed in the youthful years, and were shared with an adult, then the standard conclusion follows that this must be the cause of all miseries. This 'solution' is accepted willingly, for now one doesn't have to look at oneself any more, nor to take a critical look at the parents and the schools, nor even to look critically at the society as a whole, which offers both violence and sex on a mass scale. The problem is now considerably simplified: the scapegoat has been found. The routine solution is now to file a complaint with the police, 'to get done with it'. And then, now almost routine, on to Victim Assistance for damage claims...'

It is thus more necessary than ever that the helping professionals join in guarding against further intensification of the witchhunt and reconsider the origin of their theoretical insights.

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