Complications, Consent, and Cognitions in Sex Between Children and Adults

Gene G. Abel,* Judith V. Becker,** and Jerry Cunningham-Rathner***

Introduction

Sexual activities between children and adults are relatively common occurrences. Approximately one in four college-aged females in the United States report having had a sexual experience with an adult while they were children (Finkelhor, 1979a). Child-adult sex offenses frequently come before the court and few crimes elicit such strong emotional reactions from all concerned (the child, the child’s family, the offender, the criminal justice system, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and defense and prosecuting attorneys). Part of this emotional reaction to child-adult sexual activities stems from the polarization of opinion as to the quality and quantity of harmful effects that such activities may have on the child. Some expert witnesses refer to severe complications while others suggest that complications to the child are infrequent and usually result from the responses of those around the child (parents, the criminal justice system, etc.). Often, in the heat of legal process, it is difficult to evaluate clearly the consequences of such activities on the child because of the polemic position of the opposing counsel.

There is also the issue of consent. Is it possible for a pre-pubertal or post-pubertal child to give consent to participate in sexual activities with an adult? Again, in the courtroom, polemic positions are taken by the opposing counsels that a child is or is not able to give informed consent for sexual activities with an adult. Unfortunately there is minimal discussion of what the criteria are for informed consent and whether a child can meet such criteria.

A final area of concern, for those who work with the offender, are the attitudes or beliefs held by the offender regarding his sexual activities with children. As members of the criminal justice system, legal system, psychiatric or psychological services interact with the offenders, they find that some have an entire set of beliefs that they feel justify sex between a child and an adult.

* Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, Columbia University & Director of the Sexual Behavior Clinic, New York State Psychiatric Institute, 722 W. 168 St., N.Y., N.Y. 10032.
** Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Columbia University & Co-director, Sexual Behavior Clinic.
*** Project Coordinator, Sexual Behavior Clinic.

This chapter was prepared under NIMH grant (MH33678) awarded to Dr. Abel. Reprint requests should be directed to Dr. Abel, Sexual Behavior Clinic, New York State Psychiatric Institute, 722 W. 168th Street, New York, N.Y. 10032. The authors wish to thank Carole Singleton for her help in preparation of this manuscript.
It is difficult to understand how or why these beliefs or cognitions develop, and how to deal with them.

This discussion will focus on (1) the factors making it more or less likely that negative consequences will result from sexual activities between a child and adult, (2) the requirements of children giving informed consent for participating in sexual activities with adults and (3) how the cognitions of offenders are often distorted by their participation in child-adult sexual experiences.

The Consequences of Child–Adult Sexual Interactions

Our culture, for the last few centuries, has attempted to suppress discussions of sexuality. The potential impact on children of sexual interactions with adults has been difficult to assess because of strong sanctions against discussions of sexuality and especially the sexual behavior of children. Research evaluating which factors make it more or less likely that negative consequences to the child follow sexual interactions with adults has been strongly influenced by the moral judgements of researchers and their methods of gathering information. Constantine (1981a) has demonstrated that information gathered through the court system or psychiatric-psychological clinics is very likely to report the highest instance of negative consequences for the child (since only those cases most likely to outrage the community or cause emotional repercussions reach these routes). He also reports that non-patients or individuals reached through the mass media are more likely to report fewer negative consequences for the child. How soon the data are gathered after the occurrence of the child-adult sexual interaction also influences the outcome. If children are questioned shortly after an occurrence, negative consequences are more likely to be recalled. If years have passed since the child-adult sexual interaction, negative consequences are less common, apparently blunted by the passage of time, by the child’s decreased recall of the event, by unconscious forgetting of the experience or by reappraisal of the event within the context of the child’s total maturation experiences.

Many studies have also inadvertently selected biased samples. If a newspaper advertisement requests information from participants who recall positive child-adult sexual experiences, the descriptions obtained will be predominately positive, while advertisements simply requesting replies from individuals involved in any type of child-adult sexual interaction will find more negative consequences.

Other factors influencing conclusions about positive or negative consequences are: (1) the type of sexual activity engaged in, (2) the developmental maturity of the child and (3) the relationship between the child and the adult. If the child is flashed by an exhibitionist, the negative consequences to the child are fewer than if the child is brutally raped by a sadist. If the child involved is an emotionally mature 15-year-old, a sexual encounter with a 40-year-old may be seen as a more positive experience than if the child were eight years old and quite immature. Sexual interactions with a person unknown to the child appear to be much easier for the child to deal with than sexual encounters with members of the child’s family. Unfortunately, when the consequences of such encounters are described in court, these compounding factors are
frequently ignored since only the final conclusions of the research studies are summarized. Given these many cautions about interpreting any study of the consequences of child-adult sexual interactions, we will review what the majority of such studies have concluded.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the child-adult sexual interactions that make it more likely (+) or less likely (−) that negative consequences might develop for the child. References to the literature supporting these conclusions are included so the reader may examine the original sources (Finkelor, 1981; Gangon, 1965; Landis, 1956; Nelson, 1981; Reiss, 1960; Tsai, Feldman-Summers & Edgar, 1979.) The factors influencing the outcome for the child have been broken down by (1) the characteristics of the child, (2) the characteristics of the adult, (3) the characteristics of the child-adult sexual interaction and (4) the characteristics of others involved.

Negative consequences to the child are less likely to occur when the child sees the adult as a warm, compassionate and loving individual; the child believes he or she has control over the involvement (could end the relationship at any time he or she chooses); the child (rather than being passive) actively resists the adult’s advances during a forced sexual interaction; and when the child is able freely and easily to talk about the sexual interaction with others (rather than being told never to discuss or reveal it to others). Negative consequences for the child are more likely to occur when the child believes (prior to the actual interaction) that child-adult sexual activities are inappropriate; disclosure of the sexual interaction is delayed; the child is living in a troubled family situation at the time of the sexual interaction; the child has negative attitudes toward sexuality in general; the child is young (pre-pubertal); the child’s parents themselves have a history of a traumatic sexual experience with an adult when they were children; the child develops fears, anxieties, weight loss, nightmares or other psychologic symptoms following the interaction; and when the child holds herself or himself responsible for causing the sexual interaction (the adult says that the child made him do it).

What is impressive about this list is that a multitude of factors can influence how such interactions affect the child. If an adult wants to ensure that sexual interaction has no negative consequences on the child, he requires a fair degree of sophistication to appreciate all the factors that may contribute to the outcome. Secondly, many of these factors are not easily changed by the adult involved. For example, can the adult be assured that the child has been raised in a family where there are open discussions about sexuality and child sexual interactions? Can the adult be certain of how the child’s parents will view the interaction? Is the adult aware of the child’s parent’s earlier sexual experiences? Appreciating these many influences would not be impossible, but would require considerable knowledge and a fair amount of time to acquire the information.

Negative consequences to the child are more likely when the adult involved is two or more years older than the child, pressures the child to conceal the sexual interaction from others and is a trusted family member or close friend. The most perplexing of these issues appears to be concealment. The greater the pressure to conceal, the more likely negative consequences are to occur. Thus to ensure minimal negative consequences, the adult needs to discuss his child-adult sexual interactions with the child’s family and with others. In
### TABLE 1
**Characteristics of Child-Adult Sexual Interactions That Make Negative Consequences More or Less Likely for the Child**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consequences for Child’s Characteristics</th>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attitude that child/adult sex is bad</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sees adult as warm/compassionate/loving</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>delayed disclosure of child/adult sex</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child believed they could stop the sexual interaction</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>10, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>living in troubled family, at the time of sexual interaction</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general negative attitude towards sex</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>young age</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>17, 19, 31, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mother and/or father had negative sexual experience with adults when they were very young</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>actively resisted sexual interaction</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child develops symptoms (fears, anxiety, nightmares)</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>child able to talk easily about sex and sexual interaction</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>17, 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>holds self responsible for causing the sexual interaction</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>29, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult’s Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adult 2 or more years older than child</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>17, 27, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pressures child to conceal experience</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Interactions Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interaction continues over time</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>force/threat of force used</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10, 31, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>penetration occurs</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>31, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience only involves mutual exposure</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weapon used during interaction</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sexual interaction becomes socially visible</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other’s Characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negative reaction of family, friends, courts, institutions</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10, 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family able to talk about the child-adult sexual interaction</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family/friends/institution/courts to hold child responsible</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supportive parents</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>10, 31, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>judgemental parents</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>10, 31, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communicative parents</td>
<td>−</td>
<td>10, 31, 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family breakdown follows child/adult sexual interaction</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* + equals negative consequences more likely; − equals negative consequences less likely.
practice, however, concealment appears to be the rule, making negative consequences for the child more likely.

The nature of the sexual interaction also influences the ultimate consequences to the child. When the sexual interaction involves only mutual exposure, negative consequences are less likely; however, simple mutual exposure is uncommon. If vaginal, oral or anal penetration occurs, the interaction continues over time, force or threat of force is used against the child to bring about the sexual interaction, a weapon is used to pressure the child or the sexual activity has social visibility (such as appearing in the news media), negative consequences are more likely to result. The most important aspect of sexual interaction that produces negative consequences is the degree of force being used by the adult. When the child is physically injured or a weapon is used, it is clear that force has been brought to bear. However, how is it possible to monitor interactions when coercion is less obvious? This is highly problematic because the interaction is usually concealed from others, or because the coercion comes from the power or control inherent in the relationship of adult to child.

Finally, the characteristics of others (not the child or the adult) involved are also powerful factors making it more or less likely that negative consequences will result. If the child’s parents are supportive (rather than blaming) and if the child has good communication with his or her parents, a negative outcome is less likely. Unfortunately, many parents find it quite difficult to talk about sexuality and extremely difficult to talk about their child’s sexual interaction with an adult. When family, friends, psychologic agents, social institutions and the courts have strong negative reactions to the child’s sexual contact with an adult, when these same individuals hold the child responsible, when parents are judgemental about their child’s sexual activity with an adult or when the family breaks down following a child-adult interaction, which frequently occurs with incest, negative consequences for the child are more likely. It is impressive that the consequences of child-adult sexual interactions are strongly influenced by individuals who interact with the child after the sexual interaction and not by the child and the adult involved. To ensure that all such individuals will react with acceptance is beyond the control of the offender. Some offenders respond to this dilemma by concluding that if it were not for these other individual’s reactions, negative consequences would be uncommon. The same argument might be made by bank robbers: If people were not upset by their money being stolen, there would be less negative attitudes about bank robbery.

In reviewing literature on the consequences to the child of child-adult sexual interactions, one is impressed by the tremendous variability recorded by various authors (Becker, Skinner, Abel and Tracey, 1982, Bender and Blau, 1937, Browning and Boatman, 1977, DeFrancis, 1965, Dixon, Arnold, Calestro, 1978, James and Meyerding, 1977, Lukianowicz, 1972, Meiselman, 1978, Nakashima and Zakus, 1977, Peters, 1976, and Rosenfeld, Nadelson and Kreiger, 1979). By examining Table 1 and the multiple factors that make a negative consequence more or less likely, one can identify the many interplaying factors that determine variability of outcome. The problem for an adult, anxious to interact sexually with a child, is that, like it or not, the opinions of others strongly influence the consequences of such interactions to the child and these
opinions or attitudes of others are outside the offender’s control. It is therefore not surprising that adults involved with children frequently attempt to bring pressure upon the child not to disclose the sexual interaction. This in itself, however, makes it more likely that the child will experience a negative consequence from the experience. Unless cultural beliefs of our society change so that others will not hold negative attitudes regarding child-adult sexual activities, it is highly likely that negative consequences will result from such interactions.

Consent and Child-Adult Sexual Activity

The law has traditionally relied upon the age of majority as a dividing line between complete competency to make decisions, and incompetency (decision making is in someone else’s power). In recent years the concept of variable competence has been introduced, so that a child who has not reached majority may under certain circumstances make decisions regarding his or her life (Gaylin, 1982). The concept assumes that the child has a conscious mind (his or her mental functioning is not impaired), that the child is rational (not delusional), can accurately perceive the world and his or her place in it and that the child has enough intelligence and experience to determine what is in his or her best interest. The age of majority implies that by a certain age any individual has acquired the intelligence, reasoning, ability to perceive and experience in life to make decisions in his or her best interests. The concept of variable consent implies that under certain conditions a child might, if he or she has already achieved the necessary requisites, be able to give consent prior to reaching the age of majority.

When an adult uses force or threat of force to bring about the child’s compliance in sexual activities there is little doubt that consent is not given. Confusion arises when the adult and child participate in sexual activities in which no coercion is obvious. When these activities come to the attention of others, complex debates result as to whether such activities were morally right or wrong, whether prosecution should or should not occur and whether such experiences have negative consequences for the child. Finkelhor (1979) has brought clarity to this issue by suggesting that rather than focusing on the moral, legal or psychological arguments it is better to examine whether a child involved in such activities has given informed consent. The requirements for informed consent will be described with reference to interactions between children and adults, but apply to any negotiating of agreement between two parties.

Informed consent presents four major problems: (1) does the child understand what he or she consents to, (2) is the child aware of the accepted sexual standards in his or her community, (3) does the child appreciate the eventual, possible consequences of the decision and (4) are the child and the adult equally powerful so that no coercion influences the child’s decision.

First: Is the child aware of what he or she is giving consent to? If the child is not fully aware of what he or she is agreeing to participate in, he or she is not informed and therefore, cannot give consent. When an adult agrees to participate sexually with another adult, both parties, because of their prior
sexual experiences and their knowledge of sexual behavior in general, have a reasonable knowledge of what they are consenting to. One of the difficulties of children giving consent to sexual activities with adults is that children have limited knowledge of sexual behavior and also limited resources to find out about these activities. The child may ask a peer, but another child may also have limited knowledge of what to expect. The child may ask another adult, but the offender usually goes to great lengths to prevent the child from talking with other adults about the activities. The offender might explain that he or she wants the child to participate in cunnilingus, fellatio, vaginal or anal intercourse, but these words (or descriptions of the activities) will have limited meaning to a young boy or girl. Would a six-year-old girl know what is involved in sucking a 40 year-old man’s penis during oral intercourse until the man ejaculates? Does a 13 year-old boy know that as the recipient of anal intercourse he needs to carefully dilate his anus to allow penetration and to reduce pain or discomfort during penile-anal thrusting?

It is relatively easy to check whether children know about sex by simply asking them. The reader could ask twenty children (after obtaining appropriate consent from their parents) to describe what sexual activities occur between adults or between children and adults, and listen to the answers and decide if such answers reflect an adequate understanding. In our society there is no extensive training of children as to how to have sex. Without that knowledge a child does not know what he or she is being asked to participate in. Without knowing what they are making a decision about, children cannot give informed consent.

A second issue regarding children giving consent is that in making decisions about one’s social-sexual behavior, one needs to know the accepted societal standards. It is unlikely that an adult would agree to have intercourse with another adult in public near the side of the road of a busy highway, because in our current culture this would be considered inappropriate, and participation would be ridiculed. Intercourse with that same individual in the privacy of one’s home would be considered quite appropriate. In both cases, the acts of intercourse would be physically the same, but the former would be contrary to accepted social behavior.

In most cultures children have not yet had the opportunity to learn their cultural sexual standards. Children are even less knowledgeable about sexual activities between children and adults, since this information is rarely discussed with a child until he or she is older (if then). Consequently, it is extremely difficult for a child to make a judgement about participation in sexual activities with an adult. Children lack knowledge about the sexual standards of their culture and without that knowledge it is exceedingly difficult for them to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of child-adult sexual activity. Informed consent, therefore, is problematic for the child.

A third area which complicates the notion of consent is that in order to give consent the child must know what the consequences of his or her decision is likely to be. If one were consenting to have surgery where the mortality rate was one in one million, the decision might be different than if one knew the mortality rate was one in three. Knowing the possible consequences of one’s decisions strongly influences one’s decision.
Does the child who gets involved sexually with an adult know that (1) his parents may become upset and in some cases enraged about such interactions (especially if it is incest), (2) that he/she will be questioned and interviewed by the police or child protective agents, (3) that he/she may become embroiled in legal testimony in which the details of his or her sexual activities with the adult are made public?

Equally complicated are the potential consequences to the child when he or she gets older. A number of studies have reported a high incidence of homosexual pedophilia in adults who were molested while they were children (Knopp, 1982). Who informs children who become sexually involved with adults, that they themselves may develop arousal to children when they become adults? Is the offender likely to explain this to the child? Is it ever possible for anyone to explain the consequences of being a child molester? If it cannot be explained to a child that these consequences might occur, then the child cannot be informed and consent becomes impossible.

We now know that in some cases the consequences of sexual activities between a child and an adult do not become apparent until the child becomes an adult (Becker et al., 1982). Three to twenty years after such experiences, the child involved can become quite angry and mistrusting of others (as he or she begins to see these early experiences as misuse by an adult). These negative reactions by the child are not always apparent at the time of the initial sexual interaction. To be able accurately to predict whether a child will undergo negative consequences in the future is exceedingly difficult, even for individuals who are experts in psychiatry and psychology. Although not all children have negative reactions to child-adult sexual interactions, the problem is how to predict which children will or will not. How a child can give informed consent when the consequences of that consent cannot be predicted?

A fourth consent issue relates to the power structure between the individuals involved. Consent requires that both parties who agree to participate are equally powerful. If a beggar on the street asks for money, the power base between the beggar and the potential giver of that money is relatively equal, since the potential giver is guided by conscience to decide whether to donate or not. If the beggar draws a gun and then asks for money, the power base has shifted in favor of the beggar; it is exceedingly likely that money would be given. The giving of the money, assuming this unequal power base, would not be by mutual consent.

When adults ask children to participate in sexual activities with them the power base is nearly always unequal and in favor of the adult. Adults are physically larger and if they chose to, could easily overpower the child, a fact difficult for a child to ignore. Children also spend their early years being taught to comply with the wishes of adults: in school, with the adult teacher’s wishes, and at home with the wishes of their parents. In both situations failure to comply frequently leads to disciplinary action. Therefore, when an adult requests that a child remove his or her clothes, that request is made from an unequal power base, since children have learned to comply with adult’s requests. Thus again, children cannot give informed consent. There is a more obvious consent problem when the sexual activity occurs between a family member and a child. When a child has lived in a home where everyone has complied
with the requests of the parent and that same parent then requests the child to participate in sexual activities, it is more likely that the child will agree to such participation. Since the power base is different in incestuous sexual interactions, consent is once again problematic.

Those who support sexual interactions between children and adults focus on consent in a simplistic fashion. Their position is usually that children can give consent, but there is no detailed discussion of how one determines whether informed consent has been obtained. A detailed examination would have to take into account the four issues discussed above which make informed consent between children and adults problematic.

The Cognitions of Adults Involved Sexually with Children

Men seek out sexual encounters with children primarily because they are sexually attracted to children. This is a strange concept for most adults to understand because the majority of adults are attracted to other adults, not children. The exact mechanism of how arousal to children persists in adult males has not been completely researched but the theory of its acquisition and its maintenance during adulthood is most easily understood from a social learning model of behavior (Bandura, 1973) and the psychological and psychiatric literature related to the development of deviant sexual arousal (Abel and Blanchard, 1974).

At an early age, boys are exceedingly responsive to physical and emotional stimulation. When a young boy’s diapers are changed he may get an erection. As maturation continues boys develop erections to other stimuli, some of which appear to have no sexual significance (crossing one’s legs, climbing poles, etc.) and some identified by the culture as appropriately erotic. Social learning theory indicates that during the socialization process a boy (or girl) learns which sexual arousal patterns are considered appropriate by his society and which are not. The boy learns not to fantasize about stimuli considered inappropriate by his society (nuns, his sister, etc.) and begins to inhibit his attention and his arousal to these stimuli. This process of inhibiting one’s sexual arousal continues throughout adolescence and early adulthood so that by the time the average male reaches adulthood he no longer is aroused by stimuli that his culture considers inappropriate, but he maintains his arousal to stimuli considered appropriate.

The process of learning to inhibit one’s sexual arousal to specific stimuli is not always perfect. This is especially the case during a child’s early years when his sexual behavior (primarily masturbation) is hidden from others and the stimuli that the child attends to during masturbation is secret. The critical issue in the development of arousal patterns inconsistent with an individual’s culture appears to be the child’s use, during adolescence, of inappropriate stimuli during masturbation and subsequent orgasm (Abel and Blanchard, 1974). When stimuli inappropriate to the culture are fantasized during masturbation and orgasm, the pleasure and enjoyment from masturbatory activity and orgasm become associated with this inappropriate material, the fantasy material becomes erotic and eventually provokes sexual arousal in the child. In this fashion, early inappropriate experiences and activities might be fantasized
hundreds of times by the boy and repeatedly associated with the sexual pleasure of masturbation and orgasm until inappropriate sexual stimuli produce erection responses and arousal in the individual. When there are no negative consequences for the use of such fantasies, from parents or others (if they knew), there is no inhibition of that arousal pattern and as a consequence, the child reaches adulthood with arousal to inappropriate stimuli (young children).

As the adolescent or young adult becomes aware of the discrepancy between his sexual arousal and the social mores of his culture, he begins to adjust by developing very individualized belief systems or cognitions. An individual’s cognitions are the statements he makes to himself that evaluate his behavior (i.e. is my sexual interest in children normal or inappropriate?) If he concludes that it is normal then he must develop cognitions to support this belief. For example, a boy 10 years of age begins to steal. Most children are taught by their parents or teachers that stealing is inappropriate. The 10-year-old, however, may watch his friends steal candy from drug stores and when no negative consequences result may conclude that there are no negative consequences to stealing and (modeling after his peers) he begins to steal. His initial cognitions may have been that it is inappropriate to steal, based upon the attitudes of family and his teachers. As he watches his friends steal he begins to modify his cognitions. He concludes that stealing is not as dangerous as others believe, or that stealing is fairly common, since his friends do it. As time progresses and the boy steals more, he begins to spend time with peers with similar cognitions. As a consequence, his cognitions about stealing being common and arrest unlikely are strengthened. The more this boy steals the more he becomes reinforced for that behavior. He soon learns that stealing can be very rewarding. He can acquire not only candy, but food, cars and money from others while exerting minimal effort. If this pattern continues without significant negative consequences, by the time he reaches early adulthood his cognitive beliefs may lead him to belief that stealing is a legitimate way of making a living. In this manner the thief can continue to steal with minimal anxiety, since his cognitive beliefs rationalize that behavior.

Adults aroused to children can develop a similar set of cognitive beliefs that support sexual involvement with children. The process of modeling sexual involvement with young children, having no negative consequences resulting from such behavior (such as arrest), and seeing no negative consequences to the child (since the offender leaves the site of sexual involvement with a child) all support the adult’s continued involvement with children. As lawyers, the police, social workers, psychiatrists and psychologists begin to interact with such adults they come upon these cognitions or belief systems and must be confused about how such ideas develop and are sustained. Cognitive distortions occur in adults involved in rape, sexual activities with children, exhibitionism, frottage (rubbing women in subways and buses), window peeping and virtually all other sex offenses (Abel, Rouleau, Cunningham-Rathner, in press). The following are a few of the common cognitive distortions held by adults who involve themselves with children along with an explanation of why they are distortions.

Cognitive Distortion 1. A child who does not physically resist my sexual advances really wants to have sex with me. This cognition assumes that a
child has learned how to effectively express themselves with adults about things they do not want. It also assumes that harm can only result when physical force is used to commit such acts. Research literature has documented that non-physical force used to commit sex crimes can produce nearly as many symptoms for the victim as crimes in which physical force was used (Becker, Skinner, Abel, 1983). In addition, children are taught to obey the requests of adults, especially when that adult is a family member and therefore, the child is less likely to object when the offender is a relative. Finally, it is a common misbelief that anyone sexually offended would physically resist. In actuality resistance is only one type of response to sexual assault. Some individuals respond by compliance and muteness (because of fear) and the offender may interpret this as acceptance of the behavior.

**Cognitive Distortion 2.** Having sex with a child is a good way for an adult to teach the child about sex. Some adults attracted to children attempt to justify their behavior with children on the basis of its positive advantages for the child. A frequent misperception is that sexual activity with the child is educational and will teach the child to be a better sexual partner when he or she becomes an adult. The offender, while using this faulty belief will attempt to conceal this "sex education" from other adults. If this belief were correct, why would they not want other adults to learn of the positive teaching value of sexual behavior between adults and children? If a child is unable to give informed consent to participate in sexual activities with an adult, what is the child learning during sexual encounters with an adult? Adults are frequently astounded to hear what children actually feel about their sexual activities with an adult. Unfortunately, when adults involve themselves with young children they usually do not remain in the area to get feedback on how the child felt about the activity. Without such information the adult cannot correct his misperception about the impact of his behavior on the child.

**Cognitive Distortion 3.** Children do not tell others about having sex with a parent because they really enjoy the sexual activity and want it to continue. In actuality, adults involved with children, especially over time, go to great extremes to conceal that activity from others. One step in this process is to tell the child about the catastrophes that would befall the child should others find out. Children involved with their fathers are often told that their mother would be emotionally injured, the child would be removed from the home, their parent’s marriage would break up, the father would be jailed and/or the family would become destitute should others learn of their behavior. Given these repercussions (some of which might actually occur) it is not difficult to appreciate why children are reluctant to reveal the sexual interaction. Unfortunately, when the child does not reveal, the adult misinterprets that action as evidence that the child wants the sexual activity to continue, so the adult continues his involvement. In this situation the child is harmed irrespective of his/her choice.

**Cognitive Distortion 4.** Sometime in the future our society will realize that sex between a child and an adult is alright (a corollary is that, in the past, previous cultures have found sex between children and adults acceptable).
Adults who are currently involved with children frequently do not want to discuss their present realities. To avoid talking about it, they focus on something else – the future or the past. It is true that in the past, sexual activity between children and adults was very acceptable in some cultures; however, the offender is not living in those cultures, nor will he ever live in those cultures. It may be that some time in the future, our culture will change and sexual activities between adults and children will be acceptable. However, the adult before the courts is not living in a culture of the future, but in the present, and it is current law that he must be responsive to.

**Cognitive Distortion 5.** An adult who only feels a child’s body or feels the child’s genitals is not really being sexual with the child so no harm is being done. This cognition assumes that the child will not perceive a sexual assault of his or her body unless penetration has occurred. One could verify this assumption by asking other adults to describe how they would feel if someone were to touch their bodies and feel their genitals. Almost all adults would feel that they were violated if their bodies were used without permission. Children have similar feelings, irrespective of whether penetration has occurred.

**Cognitive Distortion 6.** When a child asks an adult a question about sex it means that the child wants to see the adult’s sex organs or have sex with the adult (a similar distortion is that children are sexual beings, and therefore they should have sex with adults). A number of adults attracted to children report that they would never have participated in the sexual encounter had the child not initiated the activity by asking questions about sex. Some investigators have demonstrated that cultures attempt to restrict the sexual rights of minors using the same oppressive techniques used against women and racial minorities (Farson, 1974 and Foster and Freed, 1972). Calderone (1977) has championed this cause and identified that the rights of children include the right to know about sexuality, to be sexual and to have access to educational and literary sexual material. Adults aroused to children have attempted to interpret these statements as meaning that sex between children and adults is the child’s right. It is true that children are sexual beings and are curious about sexuality; however, the issues surrounding informed consent remain. In the process of attempting to learn about sexuality children will ask those around them about sex. The adult aroused to children, however, assumes that to inform the child means having sex with the child. This is not the accepted standard of education of children in our society, and is simply a cognitive distortion used by adults to justify their sexual behavior with children.

**Cognitive Distortion 7.** My relationship with my daughter or son or other child is enhanced by my having sex with them. Closeness and intimacy with others is a goal sought by most of us, and sexual intimacy is one of the greatest opportunities to experience that closeness. The intimacy sought by one member of a pair, however, may not be sought or felt by the other member. When an adult male, attracted sexually to children is able to hold, fondle and have intercourse with a child, the adult feels a sense of intimacy and closeness. The problem is to determine objectively what is felt by the child. It is not
surprising that an adult involved with a child, reports that the child experiences
the same feelings since to say otherwise would mean that he is involved with
the child against his or her will. The offender is making decisions for the
child regarding the adult’s feelings and his or her desire to participate. When
children are asked about their feelings during child-adult sex, many report
not feeling a close, intimate relationship.

The seven cognitive distortions discussed above are only a sample of the
various beliefs or attitudes held by adults as they involve themselves with
children. One issue which is common to all these cognitive distortions is that
the adult never attempts to validate his beliefs with other adults. A simple
means of validation would be for the offender to question people unknown
to him (members of the business community, lawyers, psychologists, priests,
rabbis, physicians, or parents) about his beliefs about his sexual behavior
with children. Failure to evaluate one’s cognitions suggests that the adult does
not want feedback from others.

Conclusion

Sexual activities between children and adults is far from a simple issue,
especially when such tremendous variability in sexual behavior exists from
one society to another. The morality of sex between children and adults is a
major focus because we all have strong moral opinions about sex, one way
or the other. Moral decisions frequently arise from the perceived emotional,
legal and social consequences to the child. Many times, however, the perception
of such consequences is strongly influenced by the source of that information
which makes interpretation of the information problematic. The issue of in-
formed consent appears to transcend much of the confusion produced by moral
issues and brings clarity to whether or not a child can participate in sexual
activities with adults. Based upon our analysis of the issues of informed consent,
it appears to be extremely difficult for a child to give such consent.

A perplexing world still remains for the adult who is attracted to children.
What is he to do, given his arousal pattern and society’s disapproval of his
sexual behavior with children? At present it appears that he changes the inner
world in which he lives by developing cognitions and beliefs that support his
behavior. He conceals from others so as to justify his sexual interactions with
children. At present the offender has four alternatives to his dilemma. First,
he can attempt to change his culture’s beliefs about sex between children and
adults so that they are consistent with his own. This seems possible but not
very probable. Second, he might do nothing and continue to live in a society
which is offended by his behavior with children. Unfortunately, for the reasons
described above, concealment of his behavior heightens the likelihood of neg-
ative consequences for the child he involves himself with (he is likely to hurt
the very child he reports caring so much about). A third alternative is to seek
out a culture that supports child-adult sexual activities. Many report, however,
that this is a high price to pay for attraction to children. A final alternative
would be to change his arousal pattern so he is no longer attracted to children.
Many believe this is impossible to do because they have not been able to do
it themselves. Newer treatment strategies suggest that eliminating arousal to
children is a reasonable alternative that can be successful. Whichever choice the offender makes, the solution will not be simple.

References


