# Sexual experiences in early childhood: 18-Year longitudinal data from the UCLA family lifestyles project

**ARTICLE** *in* THE JOURNAL OF SEX RESEARCH · JANUARY 1997

Impact Factor: 2.53 · DOI: 10.1080/00224499709551902



**3 AUTHORS**, INCLUDING:

Richard E Olmstead
University of California, Los Angeles
**109** PUBLICATIONS **3,274** CITATIONS

Sexual Experiences in Early Childhood: 18-Year Longitudinal Data from the UCLA Family Lifestyles Project

Author(s): Paul Okami, Richard Olmstead and Paul R. Abramson

Source: *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (1997), pp. 339-347
Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813476
Accessed: 21-04-2015 22:33 UTC

The Journal of Sex Research Vol. 34, No. 4, 1997 pp. 339-347

# Sexual Experiences in Early Childhood: 18-Year Longitudinal Data from the UCLA Family Lifestyles Project

Paul Okami, Richard Olmstead, and Paul R. Abramson
*University of California*

*We present results of the first longitudinal study of long-term outcome correlates of sexual experiences in early childhood ("sex play"). Two hundred children participated in the UCLA Family Lifestyles Project (FLS), beginning at birth to the current wave of data collection at ages 17-18. For most of the current analyses, data were complete for 96 of the young men and 88 of the young women. Participants were assessed on a wide range of adjustment variables devised for the FLS and the UCLA Adolescent Growth Study. Participation in early childhood sex play was determined by parent self-reports at child's age three and age six. Forty-eight percent of children were reported to have engaged in interactive sex play prior to age six. Using socioeconomic status, sex of participant, family attitudes toward sexuality, and family type (conventional two-parent versus nonconventional) as controls, no significant long-term associations were found between exposure to sex play and adjustment at ages 17-18. Sexual liberalism/conservativism in family of origin was significantly associated with sexual liberalism/conservativism at ages 17-18. These results converge on earlier cross-sectional retrospective work, suggesting that the experience of childhood sex play in itself is unrelated to long-term adjustment.*

A tension exists between the need for data on child sexuality and the absence of such data. For example, Martinson (1992) recently completed a detailed analysis of American and European popular guides to parents regarding the sexuality of their children. These guides were all authored by persons explicitly or implicitly claiming to be "experts" on child sexuality. However, the texts varied quite widely in content and conclusion and rarely gave credible rationales for the advice they offered. According to Martinson, this problem is unavoidable because the data do not exist in sufficient quantity to warrant authoritative pronouncements. Therefore, commentators are often tempted to make claims that cannot be supported by evidence.

Without doubt, work in this field has been hampered by a traditional reluctance—particularly in Anglo-American societies—to admit the existence of child sexuality, much less examine its nature (Money, 1986). Whereas the source of this reluctance may be debated, it has had its effect. Although some tentative research has been done in the United States (cf. Janus & Bess, 1981), most investigations have originated in Northern Europe (cf. Langfeldt, 1990), and the only nominally systematic look at sexual development in early childhood remains the work of Ernest Borneman, only one of whose many volumes has been translated from the original German (Borneman, 1994). This book reflects many years of research on a large number of young children. Nevertheless, his report remains problematic because Borneman drew conclusions without reference to any empirical procedures for data collection. It is therefore impossible to evaluate his many claims. Moreover, the entire volume reflects a strong psychoanalytic orientation, making the data still more difficult to appreciate for those outside psychoanalytic disciplines.

That the Borneman (1994) book, despite its disappointments, remains "the first comprehensive examination of sex in childhood development between conception and the end of the eighth year" (Bullough, 1994, p. 11) is testimony to historical resistance to the study of childhood sexuality. This resistance should not be underestimated. In a brief earlier summary of some of his work, Borneman (1990) described frequent arrests of his field interviewers as they attempted to tape record children's sexual rhyming games in playgrounds (they eventually trained children to do the tape recording). Similarly, Goldman and Goldman (1982) recounted how they almost abandoned plans to include a North American sample in their cross-national study of children's sexual thinking as a result of intense resistance from school administrators and parents.

To compound these problems, U.S. research ethics and cultural norms have generally precluded the collection of sexual data from children. Therefore, the few existing North American empirical investigations of normative childhood sexuality are limited to retrospective cross-sectional studies of adults (cf. Haugaard & Emery, 1989; Kilpatrick,

We thank Dr. Thomas S. Weisner, Director of the Family Lifestyles Project, for his patience and cooperation; Dr. Helen Garnier for her extensive assistance and support; and Laura Pendleton for research assistance.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul Okami, Ph.D., 935 S. Normandie Avenue, #7, Los Angeles, CA 90006. E-mail: birdlvs@netcom.com.

1992; Lamb & Coakley, 1993; Leitenberg, Greenwald, & Tarran, 1989. See Janus & Bess, 1981, for an exception.) Because problems of retrospective recall and reportage of sexual data are prodigious and well documented (Berk, Abramson, & Okami, 1995), a pressing need exists for longitudinal data on outcome correlates of peer sexual experiences in childhood. The current study is the first attempt to provide such data.

*"Childhood Sexual Rehearsal Play"*

Childhood peer sexual interactions are usually referred to as *sex play* or *sexual rehearsal play*—phrases that to some degree beg explanation of the events as well as evaluating them. *Play* sets the stage for a nonpathological activity whose motivation might be similar to that for playing *Star Trek*, Monopoly, or hopscotch. This reflects the prevailing view in the social science community that sexual activity in childhood differs radically in quality and motivation from post-pubertal and adult sexual behavior. Although this view is predicated in part on assumptions firmly grounded in knowledge of developmental processes (Gagnon & Simon, 1973), it also reflects the more dubious notion that childhood sexuality is somehow not really "sexual"—a notion that in turn expresses the view that sex cannot be considered apart from reproduction (see Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995, for extensive discussion). Childhood sexuality is thus distinguished from adult sexuality, whereas theorizing about supposed child-specific functions and motivations of sexual behavior remains at a primitive stage largely because of the absence of relevant data (Lamb & Coakley, 1993).

On the issue of outcomes of sexual experiences in childhood, commentators tend to be polarized. On the one hand, warnings have been issued that sex play masks peer sexual abuse (Cantwell, 1988; Johnson, 1988), serves as a breeding ground for future pedophiles (Crewdson, 1988), or deters normal sexual adjustment in adolescence (Deutsch, 1987). On the other hand, *lack* of sex play has been indicted for delaying normal development (Gadpaille, 1981), causing sexual pathology in adulthood (Currier, 1981), or indirectly resulting in social violence, as some have concluded from the work of Prescott (1975, 1979). Unfortunately, data in support of any of these assertions are very scanty, and writers rarely specify the mechanisms by which supposed effects are mediated.

For this reason—and also because of the general scarcity of evidence supporting the notion that isolated events in childhood exert significant effects on adult behavior (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1990; Vaillant, 1977)—it is not clear why investigators have persisted in trying to find "main effects" of childhood peer sexual experiences. Indeed, even childhood sexual experiences with adults, which a priori are presumed damaging, have been shown to vary widely in effects (including no effects) as a consequence of ecological context variables such as duration and frequency, gender, family background variables, specific sexual behaviors, presence of coercion, SES, and so on (cf. Higgins & McCabe, 1994; Kilpatrick, 1992; Parker & Parker, 1991; Rind & Tromovitch, 1997).

The apparent futility of looking for long-term main effects of childhood sexual experience is expressed in the relatively few retrospective studies that do exist—for example, Greenwald and Leitenberg (1989), Leitenberg et al. (1989), and Kilpatrick (1992). These investigators uniformly reported conclusions that form a common sense proposition: Interactive peer sexual experiences in childhood, when viewed apart from the ecological context and phenomenology of the events, are not associated with any correlates of adult experience—be they beneficial or harmful. Indeed, in the Greenwald and Leitenberg (1989) and Leitenberg et al. (1989) studies, no differences between "experienced" and "nonexperienced" groups were found even under many potentially problematic contextual conditions. On the other hand, Kilpatrick (1992) found mixed positive, neutral, and negative adult correlates as a function of very specific ecological variables. Along similar lines, Haugaard and Tilly (1988) found that characteristics of the childhood sexual experience, rather than the experience itself, were related to positive or negative self-reported responses.

In the current exploratory investigation, 200 children from the UCLA Family Lifestyle Project (cf. Weisner & Gamier, 1992) were studied to determine long-term correlates of early childhood peer sexual experiences. These children were part of an ongoing multidisciplinary investigation that currently is in its 20th year. Because criterion variables in the few existing investigations of peer childhood sexual experiences have been focused primarily on sexual adjustment, in the current study we examined a wider range of adjustment correlates at ages 17-18. Control variables included sex of participant, family SES, "conventional" versus "nonconventional" family structure, and family values such as attitudes toward sexuality. We predicated this study on the assumption that retrospective recall of sexual data are unreliable (Berk et al., 1995) and that longitudinal data provide a better record of the occurrence or nonoccurrence of childhood sexual events.

No long-term non-interactive correlates of childhood sex play were expected in the current study. However, we considered it plausible that exposure to sex play might exert effects interactively, for example, with sex of participant. Although Leitenberg et al. (1989) reported no interactions by sex in their retrospective survey of childhood sexual experiences, sex of participant interactions were found among the Family Lifestyles Project children in a concurrent study of exposure to parental nudity and scenes of parental sexuality (Okami, Olmstead, Abramson, & Pendleton, 1996).

In general, these findings suggested that sexuality-related events might be experienced differently by boys and girls. Specifically, in the case of exposure to parental nudity, findings pointed toward potentially beneficial correlates of exposure both for boys and girls—for example, greater frequency of positive rather than negative sexual experiences in adolescence and fewer reports of abuse of certain recreational drugs—however, these benefits were attenuated for girls. In the case of exposure to primal scenes, findings pointed to neutral or beneficial correlates for boys—such as fewer instances of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or involvement in a woman's pregnancy—and neutral or problematic correlates for girls—such as increased frequency of STDs and pregnancy.

Sex differences in sexuality-related psychological response have also been found among prepubertal and peripubertal children (Gold & Gold, 1991; Sorensen, cited in Kirkendall & McBride, 1990; Knoth, Boyd, & Singer, 1988). In their study of adolescents aged 12-18 who were asked to recall their earliest sexual arousal and sexual feelings, Knoth et al. (1988) reported that girls, as compared with boys, reported arousal patterns congruent with the notion that human females typically experience less intense and frequent intrinsic sexual interest (Symons, 1979). Similarly, in the study by Gold and Gold (1991), men, relative to women, reported that their childhood fantasies were more explicit, more likely to have resulted in positive affect, and first experienced at an earlier age. Thus, some sex differences in sexuality-related psychological responses typically found among adult human populations (Buss, 1994; Ellis & Symons, 1990) also appear to be present during preadolescence. Therefore, we explored the possibility of gender differences in response to childhood sex play.

Another context variable that we thought might influence outcome interactively was the general family environment. The sample used for the current study was uniquely suited to examine outcomes of childhood exposure to sex play in "conventional" versus "nonconventional" families (see the following section). Because nonconventional families in our sample typically subscribed to values supportive of relaxed attitudes toward nudity and sexuality—and to "pronatural" postures toward child rearing generally (e.g., breast feeding, "natural foods," emotional expressiveness)—we hypothesized that sex-play experiences might generate less anxiety among the children of nonconventional families. We therefore expected an interaction such that the sexual activity of children of conventional families would be more problematic than the sexual activity of those from nonconventional families.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data from the UCLA Family Lifestyles Project (FLS) were used for the current study. The FLS is a longitudinal investigation founded in 1973 in an effort to examine and evaluate the emerging alternative lifestyles of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many dozens of publications have resulted over the past two decades from this ongoing database (cf. Eiduson, 1983; Weisner & Garnier, 1992; Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990).

At the start of the project, 154 "nonconventional" and 50 "conventional" families, matched for SES, were enrolled. In each family, the mother was in her third trimester of pregnancy. "Nonconventional" families adhered to a wide range of ideologies and lifestyles, but these lifestyles were typically influenced by what has been described as the "counterculture." Relational forms included intentional single mothers, social contract couples, and couples living in various types of communal or group living arrangements. These "nonconventional" families were recruited through alternative media announcements, physicians' referral, birthing office records, and other serendipitous procedures. "Conventional" families were referred by a randomly selected sample of obstetricians from major urban areas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and San Diego. These physicians were asked to refer an expectant mother who was in a "married couple relationship" (Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). All participants were living in California when recruited, and they fell between the 20th and 90th national percentile of SES and education status according to a composite four-factor measure (Hollingshead, 1975) taken when their child was six years of age. Child's age six was chosen for family SES assignment because of early changes in SES and the completeness of SES records by age six. All parents were of European-American origin and were between the ages of 18 and 32 years at first interview. These families were then followed after the birth of their child, who was designated as the "target child" for study (Weisner & Garnier, 1992; Weisner & Wilson-Mitchell, 1990). During the latest phase of data collection (1992-1994), these children were between the ages of 17 and 18 years. Attrition for the FLS sample has been exceedingly low, with outcome measures between 95-98% complete for the first 18 years. The precise numbers of girls and boys varied slightly with each wave of data collection and among variables, but most of the current analyses included valid data for 96 boys and 88 girls.

During the initial 6 years of data collection (1974-1980), parents were paid $5-10 for each interview or questionnaire session. They were also offered medical care for their child worth up to $80. During the 17- to 18-year wave of data collection, the adolescent men and women were given $25 for participation.

*Measures*

This project included multiple measures in an interdisciplinary venture. The predictor variable for our study was early childhood "sex play." During the six-year data-collection phase, mothers and fathers were asked separately on two occasions in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with FLS investigators a series of questions pertaining to nudity and sexuality in the home. One of these questions specifically asked whether the parent had any knowledge of "sex play" the child may have engaged in. Parents who responded affirmatively (parents were also given "don't know" and "no" options) described the nature of the sex play experience of their child. These affirmative answers were coded by FLS investigators in the following manner: (a) theme sex games such as "doctor," "house," or "mom and dad" (see Lamb & Coakley, 1993, for a taxonomy of such games); (b) masturbation only; (c) combination of sex play with masturbation; and (d) attempted intercourse. These answers were dichotomized for the current analysis to include "no" and "masturbation only" in the "no" category and all other sexual activities in the "yes" category. We consolidated in this manner because of the relatively small sample size, the exceedingly few positive responses to the "attempted intercourse" option, and the ubiquity of infantile masturbation. Data from fathers were frequently unavailable for this variable, with only 49 fathers providing responses. Although there was a significant agreement between the mother's and father's reports ($p < .05$), the overall magnitude was low (*phi* = .33, *phi* max = .92). Additionally, it appeared that mothers were more likely to report each type of sexual behavior (including masturbation only) than were fathers. In 27% of cases, mothers reported sexual behavior, but fathers did not; the opposite was in only 12% of cases. We therefore decided to use only the data from mothers' reports in the analyses. Questions pertaining to "sex play" were asked on entirely separate occasions from questions related to so-called "gender roles," "gender play," and "gender-identification," all of which were examined in extensive detail by the FLS and reported in a number of publications, particularly Weisner and Wilson-Mitchell (1990).

"Sexual liberalism/sexual conservatism" was assessed at child's age three by aggregate rating of mother's response to a series of (a) FLS-created face-valid "paper and pencil" questions regarding attitudes toward sexuality, measured by a four-point Likert scale anchored by "agree" and "disagree," (for example, "It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships" or "If two people really like each other it's all right for them to have sex even if they've known each other for only a very short time"); and (b) by responses to face-to-face questions from FLS interviewers (for example, "What is your attitude about childhood sex play?"). "Liberal" parents typically expressed greater tolerance of homosexuality, tolerance of childhood masturbation and sex play (independent of the actual presence of masturbation and sex play), permissive attitudes regarding nudity in the home, fewer unfavorable attitudes about children witnessing parental intercourse, a willingness to discuss sex and reproduction with children, and beliefs in gender equality. "Conservative" parents expressed lower tolerance and less permissive attitudes and beliefs.

Self-acceptance and relations with peers, parents, and other adults were measured using subscales created by Huba and Bentler (1982) and Newcomb, Huba, and Bentler (1983) for the UCLA Adolescent Growth study. Participants were given two columns of differential statements and a five-point Likert scale anchored by (1) "the answer on the left is true for sure" and (5) "the answer on the right is true for sure." The direction of responses was counterbalanced. Participants were asked to circle the number that best described "the way you are most of the time." Each subscale consisted of four items. Some sample items are "discouraged with myself/generally pleased with myself," "little sex appeal/sexy," "pretty satisfied with my friends/not very happy with my friends," and "parents don't think my ideas are worth much/parents usually respect my ideas."

Anti-social behavior and substance use were also measured by scales created for the UCLA Adolescent Growth Study (cf. Huba & Bentler, 1982; Newcomb et al., (1983). In the case of antisocial behavior, participants were asked how many times over the previous six months they had engaged in various specific instances of theft, fighting, assault, and vandalism. A specific time period (six months) was used to increase accuracy and consistency of reporting. Substance use was assessed using multiple measures. Participants were first asked how many times over the previous six months they had used a wide variety of nonprescription, prescription, and illicit substances, including tobacco in any form, alcohol in any form, marijuana and hashish, barbiturates and other sedatives, antidepressants, cocaine, amphetamines and other strong stimulants, heroin and other narcotics, LSD and other hallucinogenics, PCP, MDMA ("Ecstasy"), glue, amyl nitrate, and non-prescription sleeping pills, stimulants, cough syrups, and cold medications. They were also asked how many times over the previous six months they had been involved in accidents while using these substances.

After eliminating from the pool items pertaining to legally available substances and alcohol and tobacco (which were kept as separate measures), the remaining 16 items were subjected to principal components analysis with varimax rotation to reduce the overall level of redundancy.

Five factors met the eigenvalue > 1.0 rule (72% explained variance). Factor scores were derived for each participant to be used as outcome measures. The drug use factors were labeled Hard drugs—minor sedatives; Hard drugs—cannabis, LSD, psilocybin, "Ecstacy"; Hard drugs—(highest loading items) PCP, inhalants, tranquilizers, other psychedelics; Hard drugs—amyl nitrate, amphetamines, other narcotics; and Hard drugs—heroin, cocaine, barbiturates, inhalants.

Four antisocial behavior factors were yielded by principal components analyses (58% explained variance) from the 15 items of the subscale. These are referred to as Antisocial behavior—theft, Antisocial behavior—vandalism, Antisocial behavior—felonies, and Antisocial behavior—fighting.

Rates of pregnancy and STD transmission were addressed using face-valid, FLS self-report measures. The participants were asked whether the event happened in the past six months, and, if it occurred, whether it was experienced as positive or negative. Participants were also asked to rate the effect that the event had on their life using a four-point Likert format with points marked *no effect, some effect, moderate effect,* and *great effect*. The presence or absence of sexual activity over the previous six-months was measured in binary fashion by a single face-valid item asking whether the adolescent had been sexually active. Quality of sexual relationships was addressed by items asking whether the adolescent had fallen deeply in love, begun dating a new boyfriend/girlfriend, or broken up with a boyfriend/girlfriend. Suicidal ideation was measured in binary fashion by a single face-valid item asking whether the participant had contemplated suicide during the previous six months.

### *Procedures*

Data were collected from parents and children several times over the first year, twice during the second year, yearly for the subsequent four years, and infrequently for the next six years. Data were collected through FLS staff home visit observation and evaluation; parent and child visit to FLS headquarters at UCLA, where they were interviewed by FLS staff using FLS measures, teacher reports; independent and school psychologists' observations and evaluations; and standard measures administered by school psychologists and independent psychologists, including objective and projective tests. No data were collected after 12 years until the current wave of data collection at year 17-18. For the current study only 17-18-year outcome data were analyzed.

At ages 17-18, participants were mailed booklets that contained the outcome measures. They completed the booklets and were paid $25. Parents completed a second booklet that was not used in the current analysis.

Because questions have been raised in the clinical literature about the saliency of sexual experiences in childhood, criterion variables included adjustment measures relevant to a number of clinical issues. Outcome measures at ages 17-18 included self-acceptance; relations with parents, peers, and other adults; drug use; anti-social behavior such as theft, vandalism, assault, and other crime; suicidal ideation; sex-related "problems" (getting or having gotten someone pregnant, getting or having gotten an STD); quality of sexual relationships; and sexual liberalism/conservatism. Control variables included sex of the child, SES, Sexual Liberalism/Sexual Conservatism, and "conventional" versus "nonconventional" status.

## Results

Seventy-seven percent of mothers reported that their child had engaged in sex play prior to age six. If masturbation-only experiences are discounted, this figure is reduced to 47.6%.

Each continuous outcome measure was subjected to a standard multiple regression analysis. The model included SES, gender, family conventionality (conventional versus nonconventional), and family sexual ideology (liberal versus conservative). The main effect for sex play was included with interaction terms for sex play X gender and sex play X family conventionality. Binary outcomes (been sexually active, been suicidal, been in an accident involving alcohol or drugs over the last six months) were analyzed with logistic regression.

Inflated Type I error rate was deemed a serious concern, given the overall number of analyses. A critical Â = .0025 was selected using the Bonferroni method as a guide. Coefficients significant with $p < .05$ are indicated in boldface in the tables but are treated as trends only. The correlations among the predictor variables appear in Table 1.

Standard regression results appear in Table 2. As can be seen, family sexual liberalness in early childhood predicted adolescent sexual liberalness at ages 17-18. There were a number of nonsignificant trends for variables

Table 1
*Correlations of Predictor Variables*

| | Demographics | | Family Climate | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SES | Gender | Traditional | Sexual liberalness |
| SES | | | | |
| Gender | .01 | | | |
| Traditional | **.37** | −.10 | | |
| Sexual liberalness | −.04 | −.02 | **−.41** | |
| Sex play | −.11 | .11 | **−.20** | **.27** |

*Note*: $N = 185$; Correlations in bold are significant, $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Table 2
*Standardized Regression Results for Age 18 Outcomes (N = 171 to 179)*

| | Demographics | | Family Climate | | Exposure | Sex Play Interactions** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SES | Gender* | Traditional | Sexual liberalness | Sex play | Gender | Traditional |
| Positive sexual experiences[a] | **.21** | –.32 | **–.75** | –.16 | .02 | .44 | .60 |
| Sexual liberalness | .14 | –.11 | –.00 | **.37** | –.06 | .28 | –.16 |
| Sex-related "problems" | –.07 | .03 | –.01 | –.00 | .04 | –.01 | .03 |
| Relations w/parents | **.19** | .02 | –.33 | .09 | .07 | .06 | .22 |
| Relations w/family | .15 | .04 | –.35 | .04 | .05 | –.04 | .22 |
| Relations w/other adults | .06 | .20 | –.24 | –.03 | .10 | –.14 | .10 |
| Relations w/peers | –.09 | .02 | –.31 | –.01 | .02 | .14 | .31 |
| Self-acceptance | –.10 | –.16 | .01 | –.07 | .23 | –.09 | –.09 |
| Antisocial behavior—theft | .00 | .05 | –.21 | .18 | –.00 | –.19 | .33 |
| Antisocial behavior—vandalism | .05 | –.12 | –.03 | –.03 | .10 | .06 | .09 |
| Antisocial behavior—felonies | –.05 | –.17 | .36 | .07 | –.01 | .06 | –.21 |
| Antisocial behavior—fighting | –.13 | –.17 | **.52** | –.09 | .14 | .14 | –.42 |
| Tobacco | –.08 | –.03 | –.19 | .05 | –.02 | .15 | .10 |
| Alcohol | .05 | .10 | .04 | **.19** | –.04 | .04 | –.04 |
| Hard drugs—minor sedatives | .07 | .26 | .25 | .09 | .16 | –.22 | –.26 |
| Hard drugs—cannabis, LSD psilocybin, "Ecstasy" | –.09 | –.08 | .36 | .16 | .17 | .10 | -.31 |
| Hard drugs—PCP, inhalants, tranquilizers, other psychedelics | .01 | –.13 | .29 | .11 | -.06 | .11 | –.16 |
| Hard drugs—amyl nitrate, amphetamines, other narcotics | .02 | –.18 | .24 | .09 | –.06 | .23 | .22 |
| Hard drugs—heroin, cocaine, barbiturates, inhalants | –.06 | –.26 | .04 | **–.22** | .07 | .33 | –.18 |

*Positive betas indicate females score higher.
**Positive betas indicate that the exposure relationship for females/traditional familes is closer to +1.0 (i.e., more positive or less negative).
[a]Of those reporting sexual experiences; $N = 97$
Significant beta: bold and underlined, $p < .0025$, two-tailed; Trends: bold, $p < .05$ two-tailed.

other than exposure to sex play.

Table 3 displays the results for binary outcome variables. There were no significant results, although there was a trend for family sexual liberalness to be associated with reduced use of certain drugs.

## Discussion

In this article, we have reported results of the first longitudinal study of long-term correlates of early childhood peer sexual experiences. Outcome variables were examined for 200 children from "conventional" and "nonconventional" homes at ages 17-18. After controlling for family SES, status as "conventional" versus "nonconventional" family, sex of participant, and family attitudes toward sexuality, no significant associations were found between childhood sex play and long-term adjustment. There were no interactions according to family "traditionality."

Thus, our prediction of no significant main effects was supported, whereas predictions of interactions involving family type were not. In this regard, whereas the nonconventional families no doubt differed from the conventional families, a great deal of heterogeneity also existed among the sample.

One strong association emerged that should be of interest to human sexuality professionals: Children from sexually liberal homes were significantly more likely than those from conservative homes to become sexually liberal themselves in young adulthood. Thus, for this sample at least, we did not see a "rebellion" effect, where children of the counterculture develop "puritanical" attitudes as young adults.

Almost half of this sample had engaged in interactive sex play prior to age six (that is, sexual activity apart from solitary masturbation). It is probable that were sex play prevalence to have been measured at puberty, this figure would be quite a bit higher. Prevalence estimates for childhood sex play have varied con-

Table 3
*Logistic Regression Results for Age 18 Outcomes* (N = *175)*

| | Demographics | | Family Climate | | Exposure | Sex Play Interactions** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | SES | Gender* | Traditional | Sexual liberalness | Sex play | Gender | Traditional |
| Sexually active? | –.10 | –.59 | –.28 | –.28 | –.25 | .47 | –.21 |
| Suicidal thoughts? | –.24 | –1.73 | –.20 | .21 | –.86 | 1.18 | .02 |
| Accident alc/drug | –.24 | –2.13 | 1.96 | .54 | .13 | 1.54 | .65 |

*Positive coefficients indicate females score higher.
**Positive coefficients indicate that exposure relationship is more positive (or less negative) for females/traditional families.
All coefficients are nonsignificant.

siderably, and results of the current study add weight to higher-end estimates.

Findings of no "main effect" correlates of sex play do not demonstrate conclusively that no such correlates exist. Any investigation may fail to detect some potentially demonstrable effect for the sample under study, or the sample under study may not adequately represent the population from which it was drawn. Nevertheless, the results of this first longitudinal investigation are in accord with virtually all previous cross-sectional retrospective research in failing to detect "main effect" correlates of childhood peer sexual experiences. At least some of these correlations ought to have been apparent for sex play if these experiences exert the pernicious influence hypothesized by some commentators. However, no such correlations were apparent. In fact, none of the estimated effect sizes for the sex play variable exceeded 5%.

No significant differences in the responses of boys and girls were found. Lack of findings of sex differences may be attributable to a number of factors. The most parsimonious explanation is that, whereas boys and girls may well differ in psychological mechanisms mediating sexual behavior, the experience of childhood sex play lacks the requisite valence to trigger differential long-term effects. A second explanation is that sex-differential response is a function of variables too subtle for the current analysis to have isolated. Finally, it may be that most experiences under study were one- or two-time events (although we cannot be certain of this because frequency measures were not taken). If this were the case, and in accord with previous research on isolated events of childhood (cf. Scarr et al., 1990; Vaillant, 1977), no long-term correlates should have been expected.

### *Limitations of the Data*

A number of issues need to be raised in considering the validity of these results. The Family Lifestyles Project is a unique longitudinal data set with exceedingly low attrition. However, the FLS was not designed to look at the question of effects of childhood peer sexual experiences in particular. Data on peer sexual experiences were collected among literally thousands of variables intended to be descriptive in an ethnographic sense. The presence or absence of peer sexual experiences was determined by questions posed to mothers and fathers separately (although only mothers' data were used for the current analysis). Whereas the type of sexual event was described in a general way (playing "doctor"- or "house"-type games, games plus masturbation, attempted intercourse), important information on partner (e.g., age difference, partner relation) duration and frequency (e.g., one time only vs. frequent) and quality of the event (e.g., forced vs. voluntary, happy vs. sad) are absent. Thus, we are left only with a general idea of the type and complexity of the sexual experience, and, given the low frequency of reports of attempted intercourse, this study cannot be said to address the question of consequences of intense sexual experiences, nor can it address the question of aggressive or unwanted experiences.

Additionally, the occurrence of peer sexual experiences was determined from parent self-report. Although Okami (1994) argued that parent self-reports should not be construed as accurate indicators of child sexual behavior, his objections centered on problems of reliability in the reporting of the behaviors of latency- and puberty-aged children. Because we were concerned with exposure in early childhood, we presumed parent reports to be fairly reliable (Friedrich, Grambsch, Broughton, Kuiper, & Beilke, 1991). However, there is no way to ascertain reliability. United States research ethics and the general social climate preclude the use of more direct measures of childhood sexual behavior. Therefore, in the interim, parent reports and adult retrospective reports are the only options available.

Finally, although the control variables were chosen because of their potential relevance, any number of unknown variables—particularly distal variables (Scarr, 1985)—may have had an effect on the criterion measures. Children exposed to peer sexual experiences may have been exposed differentially to other, causative variables. Additionally, several potentially interesting control variables were not chosen—for example, quality of mother-child attachment. This variable was not included because it failed to account for substantive variance in pilot analyses of outcomes of exposure to sexuality-related variables.

Despite these limitations, the current study is an advance over previous attempts to examine outcome correlates of childhood peer sexual experiences. In particular, the sample, although not representative of the general population, includes a cross-section of "conventional middle class" families, as well as nonconventional families. Parents of the FLS children subscribed to a very wide range of beliefs and attitudes. The sample is also unusually complete for a longitudinal study spanning two decades.

Whereas negative results for data sets need to be treated with caution until they are replicated repeatedly, and this study is a long way from being definitive, the current results converge on earlier, cross-sectional retrospective studies and thus add weight to the view that childhood sexual experiences with peers lack the global, long-term pathogenic power commonly attributed to them.

## References


Abramson, P. R., & Pinkerton, S. D. (1995). *With pleasure*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Berk, R. A., Abramson, P. R., & Okami, P. (1995). Sexual activity as told in surveys. In P. R. Abramson & S. D. Pinkerton (Eds.), *Sexual nature, sexual culture* (pp. 371-386). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Borneman, E. (1990). Progress in empirical research on children's sexuality. In M. E. Perry (Ed.), *Handbook of sexology, vol. 7: Childhood and adolescent sexology* (pp. 201-207). Amsterdam: Elsevier (Biomedical Division).

Borneman, E. (1994). *Childhood phases of maturity*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Bullough, V. L. (1994). Foreword. In E. Borneman, *Childhood phases of maturity* (pp. 11-12). Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Buss, D. M. (1994). *The evolution of desire*. New York: Basic Books.

Cantwell, H. (1988). Child sexual abuse: Very young perpetrators. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 12*, 579-582.

Crewdson, J. (1988). *By silence betrayed*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Currier, R. L. (1981). Juvenile sexuality in global perspective. In L. L. Constantine & F. M. Martinson (Eds.), *Children and sex* (pp. 9-19). Boston: Little, Brown.

Deutsch, H. (1987). *Selected problems of adolescence*. New York: International Universities Press.

Eiduson, B. T. (1983). Conflict and stress in nontraditional families: Impact on children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 53*, 526-535.

Ellis, B., & Symons, D. (1990). Sex differences in sexual fantasy: An evolutionary psychological approach. *The Journal of Sex Research, 27*, 527-555.

Friedrich, W. N., Grambsch, P., Broughton, D., Kuiper, J., & Beilke, R. L. (1991). Normative sexual behavior in children. *Pediatrics, 88*, 456-464.

Gadpaille, W. J. (1981). The delay of normal psychosexual development. In L. L. Constantine & F. M. Martinson (Eds.), *Children and sex* (pp. 95-110). Boston: Little, Brown.

Gagnon, J. H., & Simon, W. (1973). *Sexual conduct: The sources of human sexuality*. Chicago: Aldine.

Gold, S. R., & Gold, R. G. (1991). Gender differences in first sexual fantasies. *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy, 17,* 207-216.

Goldman, R. J., & Goldman, J. G. D. (1982). *Children's sexual thinking*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Greenwald, E., & Leitenberg, H. (1989). Long-term effects of sexual experiences with siblings and nonsiblings during childhood. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 18*, 389-399.

Haugaard, J. J., & Emery R. E. (1989). Methodological issues in child sexual abuse research. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 13*, 89-100.

Haugaard, J. J., & Tilly, C. (1988). Characteristics predicting children's responses to sexual encounters with other children. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 12*, 209-218.

Higgins, D. J., & McCabe, M. P. (1994). The relationship of child sexual abuse and family violence to adult adjustment: Toward an integrated risk-sequelae model. *The Journal of Sex Research, 4*, 255-266.

Hollingshead, A. B. (1975). *Four factor index of social position*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Huba, G. J., & Bentler, P. M. (1982). A developmental theory of drug use: Derivation and assessment of a causal modeling approach. In P. B. Baltes & O. G. Brim, Jr. (Eds.), *Lifespan development and behavior, vol. 4* (pp. 147-203). New York: Academic Press.

Janus, S. S., & Bess, B. E. (1981). Latency: Fact or fiction. In L. L. Constantine & F. M. Martinson (Eds.), *Children and sex* (pp. 75-82). Boston: Little, Brown.

Johnson, T. C. (1988). Child perpetrators—children who molest other children: Preliminary findings. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 12*, 219-229.

Kilpatrick, A. C. (1992). *Long-range effects of child and adolescent sexual experiences: Myths, mores, and menaces*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Kirkendall, L. A., & McBride, L. G. (1990). Preadolescent and adolescent imagery and sexual fantasies: Beliefs and experiences. In M. E. Perry (Ed.), *Handbook of sexology, vol. 7: Childhood and adolescent sexology* (pp. 263-286). New York: Elsevier (Biomedical Division).

Knoth, R., Boyd, K., & Singer, B. (1988). Empirical tests of sexual selection theory: Predictions of sex differences in onset, intensity, and time course of sexual arousal. *The Journal of Sex Research, 24*, 73-79.

Lamb, S., & Coakley, M. (1993). "Normal" childhood sexual play and games: Differentiating play from abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 17*, 515-526.

Langfeldt, T. (1990). Early childhood and juvenile sexuality, development and problems. In M. E. Perry (Ed.), *Handbook of sexology, vol. 7: Childhood and adolescent sexology* (pp. 179-200). New York: Elsevier.

Leitenberg, H., Greenwald, E., & Tarran, M. (1989). The relationship between sexual activity among children during preadolescence and/or early adolescence and sexual behavior and sexual adjustment in young adulthood. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 18,* 299-313.

Martinson, F. M. (1992, November). *Child sexual development and experience: What the experts are telling parents.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, San Diego, CA.

Money, J. (1986). *Venuses, penuses*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus.

Newcomb, M. D., Huba, G. J., & Bentler, P. M. (1983). Mother's influence on the drug use of their children: Confirmatory tests of direct modeling and mediational theories. *Developmental Psychology, 19*, 714-726.

Okami, P. (1994). "Slippage" in research on child sexual abuse: Science as social advocacy. ln J. J. Krivacska & J. Money (Eds.), *The handbook of forensic sexology: Biomedical and criminological perspectives* (pp. 559-576). Amherst, NY: Prometheus.

Okami, P., Olmstead, R., Abramson, P. R., & Pendleton, L. (1996). *Early childhood exposure to parental nudity and scenes of parental sexuality ("primal scenes"): An 18-year longitudinal study of outcome.* Under review, *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry.*

Parker, S., & Parker, H. (1991). Female victims of child sexual abuse: Adult adjustment. *Journal of Family Violence, 6,* 183-197.

Prescott, J. W. (1975, April). Body pleasure and the origins of violence. *The Futurist*, pp. 64-74.

Prescott, J. W. (1979). Deprivation of physical affection as a primary process in the development of physical violence: A comparative and cross-cultural perspective.

In D. G. Gil (Ed.), *Child abuse and violence* (pp. 66-137). New York: AMS Press.

Rind, B., & Tromovitch, P. (1997). A meta-analytic review of findings from national samples on psychological correlates of child sexual abuse. *The Journal of Sex Research, 34*, 237-255.

Scarr, S. (1985). Constructing psychology. Making facts and fables for our times. *American Psychologist, 5*, 499-512.

Scarr, S., Phillips, D., & McCartney, K. (1990). Facts, fantasies, and the future of child care in the United States. *Psychological Science, 1*, 26-33.

Symons, D. (1979). *The evolution of human sexuality.* New York: Oxford.

Vaillant, G. E. (1977). *Adaptation to life.* Boston: Little, Brown.

Weisner, T. S., & Garnier, H. (1992). Nonconventional family lifestyles and school achievement: A 12-year longitudinal study. *American Education Review Journal, 29*, 605-632.

Weisner, T. S., & Wilson-Mitchell, J. E. (1990). Nonconventional family life-styles and sex typing in six-year-olds. *Child Development, 61*, 1915-1933.

Manuscript accepted January 31, 1997