



National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Child Sexual Abuse and Homosexuality

The Long History of the “Gays as Pedophiles” Fallacy

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Periodically, as with the Catholic priest sex scandal currently raging, homosexuality—the attraction to adults of the same sex—has been conflated with pedophilia—the sexual attraction to children. In 1977 Anita Bryant named her anti-gay group “Save Our Children,” and warned that “a particularly deviant-minded [gay] teacher could sexually molest our children.” More recently, anti-gay activists have warned that efforts to make schools safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth are nothing more than attempts to “recruit” youth into “the homosexual lifestyle.” GLBT people are often constructed as a threat to youth, and some argue that gay people should not be allowed to teach, parent, or serve as Boy Scout troop leaders. Conservatives from New York Catholic Monsignor Eugene Clark to William F. Buckley have suggested that sexual orientation nondiscrimination laws and increased tolerance of gay people lead to an increase in pedophilic acts, i.e. sexual molestation of children. Most recently, some in the Catholic Church hierarchy have blamed homosexuality for the widespread pattern of sexual abuse of children, teens and young seminarians by priests.

Below are some talking points that clarify the issues:

The Problem is Sexual Abuse, Not Homosexuality.

- When a man abuses a young girl, the problem is not heterosexuality. Few would characterize such abuse as a heterosexual act similar to consensual sex between an adult man and woman. Similarly, when a priest sexually abuses a boy or under-age teen, the problem is not homosexuality. The problem is child abuse.
- If a male boss sexually harasses a female employee, again, the problem is not heterosexuality, but sexual harassment. In instances where priests abuse male seminarians who are legally above the age of consent, the problem is sexual harassment and sexual abuse—not homosexuality.

Homosexuals Are No More Likely to Sexually Abuse Children Than Heterosexuals.

- In fact, gays and lesbians may be *less* likely than heterosexuals to sexually abuse children. Two studies that examined the sexual orientation of child molesters found that less than one percent, in one study, and zero percent, in the other, were lesbian or gay.
- About four of every five cases of child sexual abuse reported to child protection authorities involve a girl who is abused. But because sexual abuse of boys is less likely to be reported, it is estimated that 1/4 to 1/3 of all sexually abused children are boys, while 2/3 to 3/4 are girls.¹ Because most child molesters are men, (90 percent²), some have argued that “homosexual” child abuse is widespread and that homosexuals abuse children at a rate higher than their proportion of the general population, which is somewhere around 3 to 8 percent of the population. Such claims are based on the false belief that men who sexually abuse boys are homosexual. In fact, the overwhelming majority of men who sexually abuse children live their lives as heterosexual men.

¹ Finkelhor, 1994, pp. 46-47; Stevenson, 2000, p. 8.

² Finkelhor, p. 31.

- Very little empirical data exist on child sexual abuse and sexual orientation. Stevenson (2000) reviewed the existing social science literature on the relationship between sexuality and child sexual abuse and found that “a gay man is no more likely than a straight man to perpetrate sexual activity with children.”³ Further, “cases of perpetration of sexual behavior with a pre-pubescent child by an adult lesbian are virtually nonexistent.”⁴
- In a review of 352 medical records of children evaluated for sexual abuse during a 12-month period at a Denver children’s hospital, Dr. Carole Jenny (1994) found that less than one percent of the abused children in her study were abused by a gay man or a lesbian. Of 269 adult perpetrators of child abuse identified among the 352 cases of abuse, only two (or 0.07 percent) were gay or lesbian. Jenny noted that the vast majority of the children in the sample, or 82 percent, “were suspected of being abused by a man or a woman who was, or had been, in a heterosexual relationship with a relative of the child.” Jenny concluded that in this sample, “a child’s risk of being molested by his or her relative’s heterosexual partner is over 100 times greater than by someone who might be identifiable as being homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual.”⁵
- In an earlier study of convicted male child molesters in Massachusetts, Groth and Birnbaum (1978) found none of the 175 men in the study to have an exclusively homosexual adult sexual orientation. Groth and Birnbaum distinguished two kinds of child molesters—those who are “fixated” exclusively on children, and those who were or are sexually active with other adults but who have a “regressed” sexual orientation. Fixated molesters never fully develop an adult sexual orientation, whereas the regressed molesters do develop an adult sexual orientation. Studies suggest that “fixated” pedophiles are attracted to “the child’s immature body type or lack of secondary sex characteristics rather than the child’s gender.”⁶ Almost half (47%) of the men in the Massachusetts study were classified as “fixated,” 40% as “regressed adult heterosexuals,” and the other 13% as “regressed adult bisexuals.”

The men classified as regressed adult bisexuals had primary sexual attractions to women. In this last group, Groth and Birnbaum observed that “in their adult relationships they engaged in sex on occasion with men as well as with women. However, in no case did this attraction to men *exceed* their preference for women...there were no men who were primarily sexually attracted to other adult males.”⁷

Conclusion

Social science research does not support the claim that gay men and lesbians are more likely, or even as likely, than straight men or women to sexually abuse children. Child sexual abuse has little to do with sexual orientation.

NGLTF’s Position on Child Sexual Abuse and Age of Consent Laws

NGLTF supports reasonable age of consent laws that treat homosexual and heterosexual sex equitably, and opposes sex between adults and children. It calls for flexibility and reasonableness in the application of age of consent laws in instances involving one teenager who is under age and another teen or young adult who is above the age of legal consent. This position reflects the consensus within the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

³ Stevenson, 2000, p. 8.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jenny, 1994, pp. 41 ff.

⁶ Stevenson, p. 8.

⁷ Groth and Birnbaum, 1978, p. 180.

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