

Part 2: Healthy Sexuality

Chapter 6: Childhood Sexual Development: Erotic Friendships and the Socialization of Eros (synopsis)

This chapter focuses on psychosexual development during infancy and childhood, and it introduces what for many people may be a new concept—erotic friendship—which epitomizes the kind of experience children need for healthy sexual development. Our society offers only two models for legitimate sexual relationships—marriage and romantic love—and imposes shame on any sexual activity outside of these relationships. Erotic friendship is a third model that legitimizes the kind of preparatory emotional, sensual, and sexual exploration and learning that makes romance and marriage much more likely to be successful.

Eros is understood here in the broad sense of physical relatedness and pleasure. The socialization of eros is discussed in terms of young children's erotic bonding with their parents, and their gradual separation from the parents and transfer of their erotic attraction and bonding to other children. The findings of pediatric sexologists are cited to describe the phases of childhood sexual development in detail (including the socialization of the oral, anal, phallic, and genital phases). The early years, from birth to age eight or nine, are the most important years for the psychological and social development of sexuality. Puberty is actually the end, not the beginning, of sexual development. The negative consequences of blocking or interfering with children's sexual development may range from sexual dysfunctions and perversions to difficulties in establishing loving relationships. For example, childhood sex play is the precursor of tender, loving foreplay in adulthood; prevention of childhood sex play may result in adult sex that is cold, loveless, and unsatisfying.

Erotic friendship is a model for a relationship in which children (or adults) can explore and enjoy their bodies and their feelings, learning how to give and receive physical and emotional pleasure in a nurturing and respectful relationship, without first having to fall in love or be married. The non-sexual physical intimacy available in erotic friendship can satisfy many of the emotional needs that drive teenagers (and sometimes adults) into sexual activity that they're not ready for. Erotic friendship can also include lighthearted sexual play and experimentation, without the emotional pressure of romance.

Erotic friendships lay the groundwork for romance and marriage; they provide opportunities to learn what the perpetrators of sexual abuse don't know: how to satisfy their sexual needs in consensual and mutually satisfying ways. In short, erotic friendships are the primary means through which sexuality is socialized.