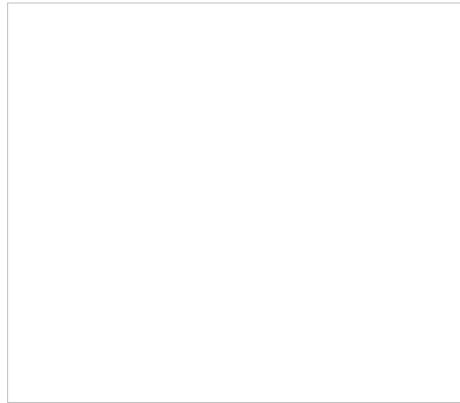


Harmful to minors: The perils of protecting children from sex.

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**Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children  
from Sex.**

By Judith Levine.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 299 pp., \$16.95.

Reviewed by Diarmuid Verrier, PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Judith Levine is a journalist and a self-proclaimed 'civil libertarian,' both of which become increasingly apparent as one reads this book. While I found the book to be on the whole an enjoyable one, I was continuously struck by her liberally partisan views, as well as her journalistic prose, peppered with short declarative sentences and a tendency towards sensationalism. Furthermore, her book is very much for an American audience. The issues she raises seem to be primarily, though not exclusively, relevant to the United States, with European countries mentioned only as a shining example of how things should be done.

Levine's general thesis is that sex education in the USA is in a remarkably poor state, and that society in general needs to 'lighten up' about the sexual experiences that children and teenagers might experience while growing up. She

suggests that increasingly wide-spread sex-abstinence programmes are worse than useless and are, in fact, actively dangerous. I think a large part of the value of her book comes from the fact that these issues are not very much talked about, if at all. It is almost taken for granted that children are asexual beings; she points out the absurdity of the idea that children abruptly change from this on the day they turn sixteen. There is also a lot of face validity to the idea that since certain dangers are associated with sex, the best way to deal with this at school is by focussing exclusively on the avoidance of sex. Questioning such assumptions is always important, and questioning these assumptions in particular is especially important because of the effect they can have on the psychological and physical well-being of children.

Levine attempts to legitimate her position (something that is critical when talking positively about sex and children in the same sentence) from the very beginning, with the introduction of her book. Written by Joycelyn Elders, Surgeon General of the US Public Health Service in the mid-90s, the foreword praises Levine for highlighting the influence of the religious right on discussions about sexuality in the US. Levine mentions the difficulties that she found in getting *Harmful to Minors* published at all, contrasting her experience with that of John Gray's saccharinely titled *Children are from Heaven*. Such difficulties are always going to arise in the current highly conservative political and moral climate.

Levine claims that the consensus regarding children's sexual experiences (i.e., it doesn't happen, and if it does happen, then it should be stopped) arose out of a growing fear during the 1970s and 80s. In a time of increasing social and economic anxiety, feminist concerns about pornography and child abuse meshed with the anti-sexual leanings of the Right. With scare-mongering stories about satanic sex-rings a frequent occurrence in the media, these two groups caused a move away from liberal sex education and towards unrealistic abstinence programmes. Children began to be instructed in 'good touch, bad touch' (a phrase which seems somehow to me to be unintentionally hilarious), and trained to think of harassment, rape, and abuse as the norm of sexual behaviour. In addition to the extreme fears mentioned above, there were also more plausible ones contributing to this growing trend, i.e. that teenagers today are having sex dangerously early and that sexual diseases (with AIDS at the vanguard) are becoming increasingly common. Of course sexual diseases are a risk; they always have been, and this is true for people of all ages. Where Levine draws issue, however, is the assumption that abstinence programmes are the best way of combating the problem. Such programmes, according to her, inevitably sacrifice information about safer sex for drills on just saying no. The data she presents show that such an approach is effective for only a short while, pushing back the date that people first have sex by less than a year. The problem then is that children in abstinence programmes are having sex the same amount as those in programmes which stress safer sex, but have no idea how to put on a condom. Nor do they learn about birth control in general, abortion, sexual orientation or how to access contraceptives or STD services. These programmes then, it becomes clear, are less about effectiveness

(they are not effective), and more about ideology. Levine strengthens her argument by looking at the policy makers behind this. They are invariably conservative and, along with supporting abstinence, also reject family planning programmes (i.e., abortion and subsidised contraception). She also dismisses the idea that people are having sex earlier and earlier, citing figures that show that the percentage of unmarried 15- to 19-year-old women who are sexually active has remained stable over the last twenty years at around 50%.

Levine is, as mentioned before, a journalist, which I was repeatedly reminded of as I read her book. While she is a consummate researcher, with no problem using well-placed statistics to support her arguments, she occasionally writes sensationalist or bathetic sentences, or uses slightly florid phrases (e.g. "the divine oblivion of sex", p. 217) that would be more at home in a magazine article. Whatever detriment to the book this style of writing may bring, however, is generally outweighed by the breadth and depth of her research. In addition to her use of the statistics of child sex and sex education, she has conducted lengthy interviews with a plethora of workers and experts in the field of sexuality and sexual health, and quotes from these interviews frequently and effectively. While discussing abstinence programmes, both these tactics work very well, but she is forced to rely more on anecdotal data when it comes to the second main argument in her book: children's sexuality should be accepted or even encouraged rather than ignored or quashed.

She maintains that children should be free to explore their own bodies and the bodies of their peers without particular censure, as long as everyone involved is doing so willingly, and as long as it takes place in a suitable environment. She suggests that such behaviour is statistically normal in the development of children, and that it is unnecessary and potentially dangerous to suppress it.

As well as championing this liberal view of children's proto-sexual behaviour, Levine also brings up the related issue of statutory rape laws. She draws upon specific cases where people who were legally underage engaged in mutually satisfying emotional and sexual relationships with people who were not. She sees such laws as being outmoded, and reliant on the negation of children's, especially female children's, sexuality, turning loving couples into victims and criminals.

In summary, *Harmful to Minors* is an interesting and very readable book that raises important issues that might otherwise be left to the side-lines. Although there are occasions of overly dramatic prose, it is, on the whole, well-written and well researched.

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