

Children, Social Nudity and Academic Research

Mark Storey

NEARLY EVERY MOTHER WILL attest to her toddler's readiness to scamper about the house and backyard naked. Children feel at ease in the nude until parents teach them that it's "wrong," "indecent," or "shameful." Children must also be taught that it is somehow inappropriate to see their family nude, for such ideas would not come to them naturally.

Popular authorities on child care, from Benjamin Spock to advice columnists Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren, have often warned of dangers to children should they see others naked. For Spock, this ill-formed message arose from his early reading of Freud. Advice columnists read Spock's

counsel in *Baby and Child Care* and accepted his word as academically reputable.¹ Other authorities in turn take those claims at face value and, without checking to see what researchers have actually said, pressure parents into blinkering their children from ever viewing the nude human form.

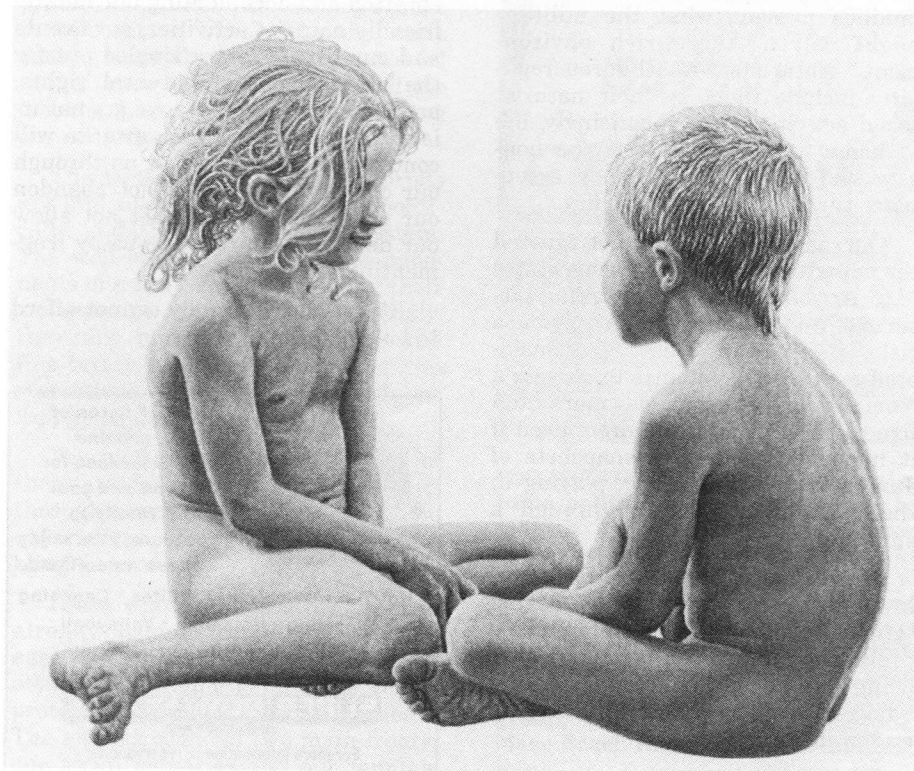
Nowadays legislators are among those who continue to spread the myth that nudity regardless of context is bad for children. Bob Morton, chair of the Naturist Action Committee, points to a trend in North America for proposing legislation banning family social nudity on the grounds that the "offending" adult may be "grooming" the child to be more receptive to sexual abuse in the home. According to Morton, the National District Attorneys Association now says that a potential child molester can be identi-

fied as one who "aims to get the child comfortable seeing nudity."²

The fear that seeing naked people in some way harms children is not supported, however, by academic research. The small number of studies on this topic in psychology and sociology have shown, instead, that children reared in an atmosphere containing family social nudity may benefit from the practice. If this is true, then laws prohibiting either social nudity in the home or children's presence in naturist settings are unjustified.

Naturist parents have long affirmed the value of raising their children in a home environment in which optional nonsexualized nudity is casual, informal, and nonthreatening. For five years, Dennis Craig Smith and William Sparks studied the effects of social nudity on children. Their 1986 book, *The Naked Child: Growing Up Without Shame*, was written in part from their personal experiences with naturism, and remains a solid piece of descriptive self-reporting on the effects of social nudity on children. They conclude that "the viewing of the unclothed body, far from being destructive to the psyche, seems to be either benign and totally harmless or to actually provide positive benefits to the individuals involved."³ Scholars publishing in academic journals have come to the same conclusion.

In 1995, UCLA psychology professor Paul Okami published a review of clinical and empirical studies of childhood exposure to parental nudity. In his review, Okami expresses concern over an increasing number of behaviors being redefined in terms of childhood sexual abuse. More and more social scientists are referring to parental nudity in front of children, for instance, as a form of "subtle sexual abuse."⁴ The problem as he sees it is that there is simply no clinical or empirical evidence to support this concern and the attendant desire to turn naked parents into outlaws.



Keith Mueller

CHILDREN ARE NATURAL NUDISTS, but the myth persists that children and nudity shouldn't mix.



Carl Flick

THIS IS SUBTLE SEX ABUSE? Sadly, some would say it is.

Okami cites the three studies of Robin Lewis and Louis Janda, M. S. Oleinick et al, and Marilyn Story as the sum total of empirical research addressing the consequences of childhood exposure to parental nudity. Other writings in academia consist of “experts’ relatively short commentaries nested in articles related to various other aspects of childhood development and experience.”⁶

Oleinick et al examined 160 psychiatric outpatient children and compared them to nonpsychiatric hospital inpatient children to determine if the two groups differed as to early socialization experiences. No significant difference was found between those children who had seen their parents naked and those who had not.⁶

Story hypothesized that early exposure to parental nudity would improve the body self-concept of preschool children. She examined 264 children and their parents or guardians, noting that some families were nudists while others were not. She found that the children from nudist households had a more positive body self-concept than the non-nudist children. She determined from her findings that coming from a nudist family played a more significant role in the children’s positive body image than their race, gender, or area of residence. Moreover, she

found that those children whose families practiced social nudity at home and at naturist camps scored higher in terms of body image than those who practiced social nudity only at home.⁷ The causal relationship between family social nudity and high body self-image was thus also supported by concomitant variation.

Lewis and Janda surveyed 210 male and female undergraduate college students to determine, in part, what effect childhood exposure to parental nudity had on them as young adults. The results of the study suggested that “childhood experiences with exposure to nudity and sleeping in the parental bed are not adversely related to adult sexual functioning and adjustment. In fact, there is modest support that these childhood experiences are positively related to indices of adjustment.” In their discussion, they conclude that “for boys, exposure to nudity in early childhood appears to be modestly related to greater comfort levels with regard to physical contact/affection.”⁸

Okami believes that clinicians, legislators, and social workers who automatically assume that parental nudity is harmful to children have little or no reason for their stand. “Surprisingly then—especially considering the vehemence with which these behaviors

have been condemned in much of the clinical literature—there is little evidence to support dire predictions [of harm to children]. In the case of exposure to parental nudity, the very scant available evidence points to generally neutral or perhaps even positive correlates, particularly for boys.... [N]o empirical evidence links such experiences with subsequent psychological harm.”⁹

In 1998, Okami published the results of his own study on early childhood exposure to parental nudity. Working with Richard Olmstead, Paul Abramson, and Laura Pendleton, Okami’s 18-year longitudinal study followed 200 male and female children from birth to age 17-18. Okami’s study was the first to use the longitudinal design in examining the long-term effects of parental nudity on children. The research team hypothesized that given the paucity of empirical counter evidence, children would experience no “deleterious main effects of early childhood exposure to either nudity or primal scenes.”¹⁰

The results of the study were clear: “Consistent with the cross-sectional retrospective literature (and with our expectations), no harmful main effects of these experiences were found at age 17-18.” Okami continued: “Exposure to parental nudity was associated with positive, rather than negative, sexual experiences in adolescence, but with reduced sexual experience overall. Boys exposed to parental nudity were less likely to have engaged in theft in adolescence or to have used various psychedelic drugs and marijuana.... Thus, results of this study add weight to the views of those who have opposed alarmist characterizations of childhood exposure...to nudity.”¹¹

Okami gives voice to what many naturist parents ask: “Why is it so widely believed in the United States and certain European nations that these practices are uniformly detrimental to the mental health of children?... Such notions, certainly where exposure to parental nudity is concerned, are perhaps better conceptualized as *myths*. Whereas any of these behaviors of course may be experienced in an abusive context—and may also occasion harm under certain circumstances for certain individuals—their appearance per se does not appear to constitute cause for alarm.”¹²

Okami’s study focuses on childhood exposure to parental nudity in the

home. Given the brouhaha over the press coverage last year of "youth camps" hosted by the American Association for Nude Recreation, many who are opposed to childhood exposure to nudity may be more concerned with such exposure taking place outside the home at nudist camps. Researchers have provided even less insight on the effects of nudist camp experience on children than they have on exposure to at-home parental nudity.

City College of New York professor Lawrence Casler, however, offered some interesting observations at the end of one of his studies on nudist camps. Casler wrote "Some Sociopsychological Observations in a Nudist Camp: A Preliminary Study" in 1964, when North America had more nudist camps than today. The study is based on interviews and questionnaires Casler conducted over six alternate weekends at a New York nudist club. The study was intended to provide a reliable and quantified description of the ages, backgrounds, occupations, marital status, and motivations of adult nudists.

What makes Casler's study of interest to the discussion of childhood experience is found at the conclusion of his article. In the process of interviewing the adults, he also encountered and talked with many children. Many of them, he reported, were members of "a children's nudist camp, purportedly the only one in the United States, which was then located within the confines of Sunshine Village" [Casler's fictitious name for the New York camp serving as the basis for his study].¹³ Since Casler was not himself a nudist, his description of the nudist youth camp and the reactions the children had to attending it should be of interest to those who are trying to ban all such activities for children.

"The members of the camp—all children of Sunshine Village—would spend the entire three- or four-week session living in tents, swimming, doing arts and crafts, and performing other typical children's-camp activities—except that the members usually did these things unclad. (Boys and girls slept in separate tents.) The age range was approximately 5 to 16. For the older children, there were occasional lectures and discussion groups on the nudist way of life. When the children's parents came to Sunshine Village on weekends, family activities partially supplanted camp activities,

but the children still ate and slept in their own camp area.

"I was able to interview several of these children, in addition to a number of older children who visited Sunshine Village with their parents but were not involved in the children's camp. For the younger children, nudism chiefly meant nude swimming, having fun without getting one's clothes dirty, being with friends, etc.

"For the older children, nudism seemed also to have a more serious meaning. These adolescent boys and girls seemed unusually alert and aware of the impact nudism had on their lives. With only one exception, they stated that they would like to be nudists even if their parents were not. In addition to the usual 'fun' reasons, many of the teen-agers referred to the benefits in mental health and emotional stability. Many of them recognized that nudism was giving them a more 'realistic' outlook toward sex than their nonnudist friends possessed. When with these friends, or out on dates, they could only feel sorry for people whose attitude toward the human body was not as healthy as their own.

"Unlike the responses of some adult camp members, these seemed completely genuine and spontaneous. Furthermore, the impression was inescapable that these children, taken as a group, were extraordinarily well-adjusted, happy, and thoughtful."¹⁴

What Casler wrote about childhood experience with naturism in 1964 applies just as well to children 40 years later. There is nothing harmful with either being human or appearing fully human. Children's welfare must be safeguarded, but so too must children be given the chance to learn to respect their own bodies and those of others. There is no evidence that children are harmed by nonsexualized social nudity, and there is good reason to believe they benefit from it. Laws banning children from the innocent experience of being human, appearing human, and seeing others as such are unwarranted, unfounded, and have no scholarly basis.

This article was originally written for Naturisme Québec magazine, and will be translated by Michel Vaïs into French.

References

1. See Mark Storey, "Dr. Spock and Family Nudity," *Nude and Natural* 18.3 (1999): 69-70; and Benjamin Spock, *Baby and Child Care* 4th ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 420-21.
2. Bob Morton, "NAC Legislative Update," *Nude and Natural* 23.3 (2004): 16-17.
3. Dennis Craig Smith and William Sparks, *The Naked Child: Growing Up Without Shame* (Los Angeles: Elysium Growth, 1986), 183.
4. Paul Okami, "Childhood Exposure to Parental Nudity, Parent-Child Co-sleeping, and 'Primal Scenes': A Review of Clinical Opinion and Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Sex Research* 32.1 (1995): 51-52.
5. *Ibid.*, 54.
6. *Ibid.*, 55. See also, M. S. Oleinick, A. K. Bahn, L. Eisenberg, and A. M. Lilienfeld, "Early Socialization Experiences and Intrafamilial Environment: A Study of Psychiatric Outpatient and Control Group Children," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 15.4 (1966): 344-53.
7. Marilyn D. Story, "Factors Associated with More Positive Body Self-Concepts in Preschool Children," *Journal of Social Psychology* 108.1 (1979): 53.
8. Robert J. Lewis and Louis H. Janda, "The Relationship Between Adult Sexual Adjustment and Childhood Experiences Regarding Exposure to Nudity, Sleeping in the Parental Bed, and Parental Attitudes Toward Sexuality," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 17.4 (1988): 349, 357.
9. Okami, pp. 59-60.
10. Paul Okami, Richard Olmstead, Paul R. Abramson, and Laura Pendleton, "Early Childhood Exposure to Parental Nudity and Scenes of Parental Sexuality ('Primal Scenes'): An 18-Year Longitudinal Study of Outcome," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 27.4 (1998): 365.
11. *Ibid.*, 376, 377.
12. *Ibid.*, 379.
13. Lawrence Casler, "Some Sociopsychological Observations in a Nudist Camp: A Preliminary Study," *Journal of Social Psychology* 64 (1964): 321.
14. *Ibid.*, 321-22.