

Age and Gender Differences in the Appropriateness of Intimate Behaviour Between Parents and Children

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Previous research reported gender and age differences in the appropriateness of intimate touch between parents and children. In this study, the approval ratings for children sleeping and bathing with their parents have been investigated. Participants were anonymous visitors to the Monash University website, completing a survey to rate the appropriateness of different types of intimate behaviour between parents and children. The results showed an overall decrease in reported appropriateness with increased age, confirming previous research. Gender differences in appropriateness ratings were not found.

Following an increase in media coverage of sexual abuse of children by adults, there seems to be a lack of agreement regarding the appropriateness of intimate behaviour between children and adults. Seemingly natural behaviours, such as parents and children sleeping in the same bed and parents bathing with a child, have the potential to be interpreted as sexual. Some have proposed that these, and other similar behaviours, are characteristic of sexually abusive parent-child interactions or have questioned the parenting abilities of people who engage in these acts (Craig, Amato, Dillinger, Hodgins & Grignol, 2000). Many psychologists have found that the amount of intimacy in early childhood influences development (Gray, 2002). Intimacy between parents and children positively influences development and is an essential aspect of a healthy childhood. There is thus a tension between the sexual interpretation of intimacy between children and adults and the importance of intimacy in a child's development.

Determining the appropriateness of intimate behaviour between children and parents is important because judges and juries often have to decide on the appropriateness of particular parent-child interactions in sexual abuse cases. Research into the appropriateness of different types of touching between adults and children can help setting standards for

parents and professionals dealing with children and prevent ambiguous situations.

Attitudes to touch between parents and children are highly variable between cultures (Harrison-Speake & Willis, 1995) and within cultures. Craig et al. (2000) found a correlation between parents' political orientation and the amount of intimate behaviour and between parents' religiosity and the amount of intimate behaviour. Our culture is unusual in its expectation that young children should sleep alone. A survey of 90 other cultures showed that in almost all cases infants and small children slept in the same room as the mother or another close relative (Gray, 2002). Our attitude to co-sleeping of parents and children is also a historical construct. In the eighteenth century Netherlands, for example, co-sleeping of children and parents was common as most families lived in one-room houses (Boekhorst, Burke & Nijhof, 1992). Contemporary western culture places greater emphasis on independence of the individual, which is reflected in an increase in physical distance as children becomes older and more independent.

Touching among family members is also affected by age of the child, gender of the child and gender of the parent. It has been reported that mothers touch their girl babies more than boy babies and breastfeed them longer than boys, while fathers engage in more physically playful activities with their children than mothers do (Harrison-Speake & Willis, 1995). Salt (1991) found that both fathers and sons are less accepting of touch when boys are in preadolescence; the older the

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boys, the lower the amount of touch between father and son.

Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995) investigated the perceived appropriateness of four different types of intimate non-verbal behaviour for four different child ages. They found that the appropriateness of boys or girls bathing with either parent reduces between the ages of six and ten. They also found that the appropriateness of co-sleeping reduces as the age of the child increases. This is supported by research in which it was found that co-sleeping occurs more often with younger children (Craig et al., 2000).

Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995) also reported that opposite gender bathing by either parent is less approved of than same gender bathing, but found no gender differences for the appropriateness of boys or girls sleeping with their parents. Research on the appropriateness of cross gender intimate behaviour between parents and children is not conclusive. Johnson & Hooper (2003) found that for different forms of affectionate behaviour, lower appropriate ages were reported for mixed gender combinations than for same gender combinations. Major, Schmidlin and Williams (1990), however, found no evidence of gender asymmetry in touch between children and adults.

Intimate nonverbal behaviour is difficult to investigate because it predominantly takes place in a private setting. Furthermore, nonverbal behaviour is often not consciously controlled and making participants aware of what is being studied may change their behaviour. This reduces the usefulness of studying intimate behaviour in a laboratory setting. Disguised observation methods would be most suitable to study these behaviours, but ethical and legal problems prevent undertaking such research in a naturalistic setting. Willis & Rinck (1983) used a personal log method in which participants recorded all touching they experienced over a certain period. This method is very suitable to determine the type, frequency and duration and appropriateness of touching. The focus of this paper is the perceived appropriateness of intimate behaviour between parents and children. Survey methods, such as used by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995), can be used to determine the perceived appropriateness of different types of behaviour. This method can, however, not be used to determine the intrinsic appropriateness of intimate behaviour, as the reported values are personal opinions and can not be used as an ethical yardstick.

This paper is a partial replication of the work by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995), focussing on the reported appropriateness of parents sleeping and bathing with three and eight year-old children. Following Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995), it was hypothesised that the appropriateness of co-sleeping for three year-olds is lower than for eight year-olds and that there are no gender differences. For the bathing situation it was hypothesised that the appropriateness of bathing with either boys or girls, by either parent, is lower for eight year-old children than for three year-olds. Finally, it was predicted that the appropriateness of bathing with children of the opposite gender is rated lower than bathing with a same gender child.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted with anonymous visitors to the Monash University website.¹ A total of 105 questionnaires were submitted between October 2002 and March 2004, of which 96 were fully completed. The majority of completed surveys was submitted by women ($n = 68$). Most participants were students of the psychology course ($n = 75$).

Procedure

Participants completed a 30 question online questionnaire, based on the survey developed by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995). The appropriateness of a child sitting on parent's lap, parent kissing child on the lips, child and parents sleeping in the same bed and parent and child having a bath together were rated. These situations were selected by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995) because of their frequent discussion in literature about child sexual abuse. The different types of touch were rated on a five-point interval scale:

1. Very inappropriate touch
2. Fairly inappropriate touch
3. Neutral
4. Fairly appropriate touch
5. Very appropriate touch

Also gender, age and affiliation (Student, Recruited or Other) of participants were recorded. Other information collected

¹ <http://www.med.monash.edu.au/psych/ol/labs.html>, visited 3 January 2006.

by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995), such as marital status and family income, did not form part of this study.

For each situation, separate ratings were given for three year-old and eight year-old children. Only the replies regarding attitudes towards children sleeping with parents, parents bathing with children, gender of the participant and age of the participant were used for this study. Incomplete entries were ignored.

To control for gender effects, an equal number of women and men were used for the analyses. The ten most recent submissions by women and the ten most recent submissions by men were analysed. The age of participants ranged between 22 and 57 and women were of similar age ($M = 35.0$, $SD = 5.5$) than men ($M = 35.9$, $SD = 12.0$). The data was not controlled for age as analysis revealed no correlation between age of participants and appropriateness ratings. The data was also not controlled for affiliation of participants as there was no reason to believe that this influences the appropriateness ratings.

Independent variables were the different touch conditions for which the ratings were obtained: age of the child (three year-old and eight year-old), gender of the child and gender of the parent. Dependent variables were the appropriateness ratings reported by participants for each condition. The raw data was analysed by using related samples t -tests, detailed statistical workings are in the Appendix. Co-sleeping was tested for age and gender of the child. Bathing was tested for eight parent-child combinations.

Results

Sleeping

Participants were overall found to rate co-sleeping as 'fairly appropriate' ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.99$). Approval ratings for girls or boys sleeping with parents were almost identical for both ages. The difference was not significant. The average approval rating for parents sleeping with three year-old girls and boys was higher than for eight year-old children. The average difference was identical for both genders ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.83$) and was found to be significant: $t(19) = 6.44$, $p = 4 \cdot 10^{-6}$.

Table 1

Mean approval ratings for sleeping with parents by child gender and child age

Age	Daughter		Son	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3	4.55	0.69	4.50	0.76
8	3.35	0.88	3.30	0.86

Bathing

Participants were overall found to rate parents bathing children as 'fairly appropriate' ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.93$). For all parent-child combinations, approval ratings for eight year-old children bathing with their parents were lower for than for three year-olds

The average approval rating for fathers bathing their eight year-old daughter was lower than for bathing a three year-old daughter ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 0.93$). The difference was found to be statistically significant, $t(19) = 6.47$, $p = 3 \cdot 10^{-6}$. The average approval rating for fathers bathing their eight year-old son was lower than for bathing a three year-old son ($M = 1.05$, $SD = 0.94$). This difference was also found to be statistically significant, $t(19) = 4.97$, $p = 85 \cdot 10^{-6}$.

The average approval rating for mothers bathing their eight year-old daughter was lower than for bathing a three year-old daughter ($M = 0.85$, $SD = 0.81$). The difference was found to be statistically significant, $t(19) = 4.68$, $p = 164 \cdot 10^{-6}$. The average approval rating for mothers bathing their eight year-old son was lower than for bathing a three year-old son ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.95$). This difference was also found to be statistically significant, $t(19) = 5.64$, $p = 19 \cdot 10^{-6}$.

Average approval of fathers bathing with their eight year old daughter was lower than for fathers bathing with their eight year-old son ($M = 0.35$, $SD = 0.75$). Mothers bathing with their eight year old son was considered less appropriate than a mother bathing with an eight year old daughter ($M = 0.35$, $SD = 0.59$). For three year old children the different gender bathing appropriateness ratings were almost identical. The gender asymmetry for eight year-olds was found not to be significant.

Table 2
 Mean approval ratings for bathing by parent gender, child gender and child age

Age	Father				Mother			
	Daughter		Son		Daughter		Son	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
3	4.70	0.47	4.75	0.44	4.80	0.41	4.80	0.41
8	3.35	0.93	3.70	0.98	3.95	0.89	3.60	0.99

Discussion

Sleeping

The reported appropriateness for children sleeping with their parents are similar to the findings by Harrison-Speake & Willis (1995). There is a significant reduction in appropriateness for eight year-old children compared to three year-olds and the gender of the child was found not to affect the appropriateness rating, confirming both hypotheses for this part of the study.

Bathing

For bathing, appropriateness ratings for eight year-old children were significantly lower than for three year-olds, for all child-parent gender combinations, confirming the hypotheses. The prediction that the appropriateness for different gender bathing would be lower than for same gender bathing did not follow from the results.

The age difference in the measured appropriateness supports the theory that the distance between children and parents increases with age (Gray, 2002; Salt, 1001). The predicted gender differences for bathing were not found. This is in line with previous research, in which contradiction results were obtained (Johnson & Hooper, 2003; Major et al., 1990). The contradictory results can be explained by the fading gender differences in contemporary western cultures or cultural differences between the studies.

Conclusion

The results show clear norms for parents and children co-sleeping and bathing. These norms are, however, culturally dependent. The results of this study can, however, not be generalised to norms because the research was not controlled for cultural and sociological factors. Future research should include parameters such as country of birth, marital status

and family income, to be able to control for cultural and sociological factors. This would also enable testing the cross gender bathing results for cultural influences.

Research into the appropriateness of intimate behaviour can play an important role in developing standards to prevent unnecessary cases of alleged child abuse. Further detailed research, underpinned with theories from developmental psychology and supported by ethical theory can reduce the tension between the appropriateness of intimate behaviour and its sexual interpretations.

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