

The Corruption Claim Against Early Sex Education:

A Neo-Aristotelian Interpretation

The UK government recently announced plans to ban sex education for children under the age of nine (Evans, 2024). This (re)raises the question of *when* children should be taught about sex. One traditionalist argument against early sex education is that it “robs children of their innocence” (Archard, 2003). I will call this the “corruption” claim. In this paper, I will explore some interpretations of the corruption claim, including a novel neo-Aristotelian interpretation.

Someone is typically described as “innocent” if they are not guilty of a crime; if someone is not innocent, then they are a criminal. Does teaching children about sex turn them into criminals? Obviously not. However, while sex is not a crime, there is a legal age of consent. So, does teaching children about sex at an early age make them more likely to engage in sexual activity before the legal age of consent? On the contrary, when provided before sexual initiation, sex education may effectively reduce adolescent sexual risk behaviours (Mueller et al., 2008). Is the corruption claim patently false, then, or might there be another interpretation?

One way in which childhood might be considered a time of innocence concerns motivation. Many childhood behaviours are *intrinsically* motivated. Children play for the sake of playing, draw for the sake of drawing, etc. Even the earliest helping behaviours have been shown to be intrinsically motivated (Warneken & Tomasello, 2008). For Aristotle, intrinsic motivation is essential for virtue: an act is virtuous only if it is chosen for its *own* sake (Aristotle, 2004). This principle extends to his account of friendship: a relationship can count as a true friendship only if we value our friend for their *own* sake; if we value them only instrumentally – as a means to pleasure, say – then our relationship is not really one of friendship (Helm, 2023). Thus, insofar as childhood is a time of intrinsic motivation, where behaviours are chosen – and people valued – for their own sake, it might be considered a time of innocence, even a time of virtue.

Sex, on the other hand, is an instrumental act (Halwani, 2020). One does not engage in sex for its own sake, but rather as a means to procreation or gratification. Teaching a child about sex could encourage them to think in more instrumentalist terms. In extreme cases, one might even come to view oneself as a mere vehicle of genetic replication (Dawkins, 1976). Teaching a child about sex too soon could therefore burst their intrinsically motivated bubble, thus robbing them of their innocence.

This neo-Aristotelian interpretation of the corruption claim raises some thought-provoking questions:

1. Is childhood really a time of intrinsic motivation?
2. Is sex necessarily an instrumental act?
3. Does learning about an instrumental act really undermine intrinsic motivation?
4. Moreover, does this interpretation offer any insight into the question of *when* children should be taught about sex?

I would be delighted to discuss these questions at the conference.

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