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# *ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GIRLS AND HETERONORMATIVITY*

## *The Girl Project*

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*This article examines preadolescent girls in a group setting as they coconstructed heteronormativity. The authors contend that heteronormativity is not the product of a coming-of-age transformation but instead an everyday part of life, even for very young social actors. It emerges from the gender divide between boys and girls but is also reproduced by and for girls themselves. In the Girl Project, the authors sought to understand younger girls' interests, skills, and concerns. They conducted nine focus groups with 43 elementary school girls, most of whom were age nine or younger. They observed these girls as they defined "girls' interests" as boy centered and as they performed heteronormativity for other girls. This article contributes to filling the gap in research on gender and sexuality from children's own points of view.*

**Keywords:** *adolescents/children; sexuality; theory*

Children navigate a world already ordered by a gendered binary (Butler 2004), with masculinity opposing femininity, men opposing women, and boys opposing girls. The binary is a power dynamic reinforced through situated interactions among individuals (Foucault 1990) and makes sense only within a heterosexual framework (Butler 1999; Fausto-Sterling 2000;

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Ingraham 1994). Women are taught to be opposites of men, socially complementary, because they are expected to partner with these men sexually (Jackson 2009). For women to “do gender” properly (West and Zimmerman 1987), they adhere to heteronormative ideals. They compel each other to follow prescribed heterosexual scripts (Rich 1980), continually realigning gender performances with them. This pressure is managed by all social actors—even children.

We know that children as young as 1 year old “creatively appropriate” gender from the adult world to fit their own needs rather than passively accept adults’ versions of manhood and womanhood (Corsaro 2005, 40; see also Thorne 1993). We also know that children wrestle with sexuality and desire (Angelides 2004; Renold 2006; Thorne and Luria 1986). Most studies of heteronormativity among children focus on adolescent girls and boys (ages 12 to 18) or on those transitioning into adolescence (9- to 11-year-olds). It stands to reason that younger girls struggle with these pressures too. In this article, we examine girls only, most of whom were age 9 or younger, interacting in a small-group setting. We observed these girls coconstructing heterosexual ideals, reinforcing the larger binary in which girls are measured by their relationship to boys. In the Girl Project, participants defined “girls’ interests” as boy centered, and they performed heteronormativity with and for each other.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In American society, heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexual category, despite the complexity of human desires. Few people recognize the overwhelming pressure to be straight (Butler 1999). As Hyde and Jaffee (2000, 291) write, “Just as the fish does not know that it lives in a wet environment,” so too are we unable to recognize the pervasiveness and effects of heteronormative messages. Martin (2009, 190) defines heteronormativity as “the mundane, everyday ways that heterosexuality is privileged and taken for granted as normal and natural.” Gender and heterosexuality are also interconnected (Connell 1987; Ingraham 1994). Thorne and Luria (1986, 176) state, “In our culture, gender and sexuality are deeply intertwined, especially for adults; ‘woman/man,’ and especially ‘femininity/masculinity’ are categories loaded with heterosexual meanings.” Traditional gender arrangements—or heterogender (Ingraham 1994)—reinforce women’s sexual subordination to men. Jackson (2009, 152) explains, “What confirms masculinity is being (hetero)sexually *active*; what confirms femininity is being sexually *attractive* to men.”

Children are heterogendered, too, although this process is undertheorized and underresearched (Martin 2009). In her study of preschoolers, Martin (1998, 495) argued that “theories of the body need gendering, and feminist theories of gendered bodies need ‘childrening’ or accounts of development.” Here, we argue that theories of sexuality also need “childrening.” Being an appropriately heterosexual child is rife with contradiction. What “sexual scripts” (Gagnon and Simon 1973) exist that permit a child to perform desire? In contemporary Western society, sexual scripts are reserved for adulthood.

Yet from a very young age, children are pressed into a rigid heterosexual mold. Martin shows how heteronormativity is foisted on children by their mothers, who are themselves “enmeshed” (2009, 190) in a heteronormative culture. Mothers act both unwittingly and intentionally to reproduce the heteronormative order. Because mothers greatly influence children’s development (Corsaro 2005), children easily see heterosexual coupling, and ultimately marriage, as natural and necessary. Similarly, Hyde and Jaffee (2000) show how traditional gender norms and heterosexuality are coconstructed, influenced by four social forces: peer groups, parents, the media, and schools. Peers are “fundamentalists about gender conformity and view heterosexuality as a key component to the female role” (Hyde and Jaffee 2000, 289). Parents assume that their kids are straight, and they reward heteronormativity. Hyde and Jaffee say that media promote heterosexuality and demonize homosexuality. And schools affect kids through curricula, teacher-student interaction, and the formal structuring of activities (see also Wilkinson and Pearson 2009). Under these concerted heteronormative pressures, most children conform.

Several scholars have noted the absence of children’s own voices in the research on children’s sexuality (Angelides 2004; Casper and Moore 2009; Renold 2006). Much extant research has relied on adults’ interpretations of children’s behavior. This is problematic because adults often distort children’s perspectives. For example, Martin (2009) shows how mothers latch onto even the smallest indicator of heterosexuality in their own children. Mothers may overlook any counternormative behaviors because they view heterosexuality as fixed. Furthermore, Renold (2006, 495) explains, “there is a tendency to view children as just ‘playing at,’ ‘practicing,’ ‘trying on,’ or ‘mimicking’ older sexualities and thus conceptualizing such heterosexualising practices and cultures as preparatory.” When we see children as “becomings” rather than “beings and becomings” (Renold 2006, 495), we fail to take them seriously and to some extent negate their personhood (Angelides 2004; Butler 2004; Foucault 1990).

Researchers more commonly study sexuality in adolescence—a period of physical and emotional changes during which “sexual awakenings” are expected and normalized (see, e.g., Cavanagh 2004; Hyde and Jaffee 2000; Welles 2005). Adolescence is described as a tumultuous transformation from innocent childhood to knowing adulthood. Adolescence has been shown to be particularly challenging for girls. For example, Thorne (1993) found that adolescent girls face “the fall,” when they begin to define themselves primarily through the eyes of boys. They lose confidence, start hating their bodies, and perform poorly in school (see also Evans 2006; Frost 2003; Garrett 2004; Hirschman, Impett, and Schooler 2006; McCabe, Riciardelli, and Ridge 2006).

Researchers have also tended to focus on the gender divide between boys and girls as generating heterosexual meanings. For example, Thorne and Luria (1986) showed that early adolescent boys and girls (ages 9 to 11) constructed heteronormativity differently. Girls in their study shared secrets to establish intimacy, making them “mutually vulnerable through self-disclosure” (p. 183). Boys expressed “contagious excitement” (p. 181) when they violated rules together. Contagious excitement was a sign that boys were “learning patterns of masculinity” (p. 182). Similarly, Renold (2006) found that 9- to 11-year-olds “practice heterosexuality” in ways that both subvert and maintain heteronormativity. Kids’ discussions of romance also revealed contradictory forces: Romance was feminized and shunned by boys yet embraced by girls.

In this article, we contend that heteronormativity is not only the product of a coming-of-age transformation; instead, it is an everyday part of life, even for very young social actors. It not only emerges from the gender divide but is also reproduced by and for girls themselves. Researchers have studied sex-segregated groups of boys for years, providing great insight into the interconnections of gender and sexuality (Connell 2001, 2005; Kimmel 2006; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Messner 1990; Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt 2000). For example, Connell (2005, 15) argues, “Heterosexuality is learnt, and the learning, for boys, is an important site of the construction of masculinity.” We argue that the same is true for femininity among girls. Girls are not a monolithic, monogendered group. They coconstruct heteronormative meanings in a situated context.

We follow Renold (2006) and Casper and Moore (2009), who urge us to study younger children from their own points of view. Here, we observed a group of elementary school-aged girls, most of whom were nine or younger, coconstructing heteronormativity. These girls performed heterosexual desire for each other, framing girls’ interests as boy centered.

## METHOD

To collect data, Kristen Myers recruited and trained three students (two undergraduates and one graduate student, Laura Raymond) who were interested in qualitative research and gender. The team approached a local elementary school, which was established as a “partnership school” with our university. One purpose of the partnership was to facilitate a relationship between educators and research practitioners. The school was in a rural, primarily white community (65 percent white, 12 percent Black, and 17 percent Hispanic). The school was whiter (75 percent) and less Hispanic (4 percent) than the larger community. The school was less poor than the community: 26 percent of the children were categorized as low income (receiving public aid), compared to 37 percent districtwide. About 250 children attended this school, approximately half of whom were girls.

Kristen’s two daughters attended this school, giving her access to the principal, faculty, and parents (Adler and Adler 1998). With consent from the school, we approached the parents of all girls in kindergarten through fifth grade. With parental consent and the girls’ assent, we collected data in several ways. First, we conducted age-appropriate focus groups with 43 girls to discover their interests, how they spent their time, and what they liked in school. Focus groups were intended to be exploratory, to be used in constructing a face-to-face interview schedule (Fern 2001; Morgan 1996). Although Kristen later conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 of the girls, these did not contradict what we observed in focus groups. This article relies on focus group data only because we are concerned with capturing participants’ coconstruction of reality.

### The Girls

We designed our sampling strategy to ensure that younger girls—ages 5 to 11—were included. Approximately 34 percent of the total population of girls participated. Table 1 describes the age and race composition of the sample, which roughly reflected that of the school.

There were 4 to 10 participants from each grade, most of whom were aged nine or younger. Although the site was a partnership school, only four of the children’s parents were professors. Mothers’ occupations were largely feminized, including homemakers, teachers, nurses, and office managers. Fathers’ occupations were largely masculinized, including carpenters/construction workers, salesmen, and military officers. The families were primarily lower middle class.

**TABLE 1: Demographics of Public School Focus Group Sample**

<i>Grade</i>	<i>White Girls</i>	<i>Black Girls</i>	<i>Latinas</i>	<i>Total per Grade (percentage)</i>
Kindergarten	2	2	1	5 (12)
First	7	0	0	7 (16)
Second	9	0	0	9 (21)
Third	6	1	1	8 (19)
Fourth	8	1	1	10 (23)
Fifth	4	0	0	4 (9)
Total (percentage)	36 (84)	4 (9)	3 (7)	43 (100)

Our sample was not racially diverse, although it reflected the racial makeup of the school. In the findings below, all of the girls quoted were white, except for Mia, a fourth grader. White girls dominated most of the conversations. This pattern likely signified the larger racial regime of the school. Previous research shows that white girls tend to dominate interracial interactions (Goar and Sell 2005).

To recruit participants, we sent home fliers with every girl in the school. The fliers, decorated with multiracial graphics of girls doing activities including reading, playing guitar, painting, and dancing, featured the question, "What's it like to be a young girl in today's society?" The fliers stated that many researchers have looked at middle school and high school girls to see what pressures they deal with, but few have looked at elementary school, preadolescent girls. They also stated that we wanted to find out about younger girls: their strengths and skills as well as their struggles and concerns. Parents of 50 girls indicated a desire to participate in the Girl Project. We sent a more detailed letter to interested parents, explaining that the first step was focus groups: general discussions about the girls' interests, hobbies, aspirations, likes, and dislikes. The girls would be grouped by age/grade so that each conversation would be as relevant as possible. We grouped kindergarteners and first graders, second and third graders, and fourth and fifth graders.

### **Focus Groups**

Both Eder and Fingerson (2002) and Morgan et al. (2002) argue that group interviews are the best method for exploring children's own interpretations of their lives. A total of 43 girls participated in focus groups. We held three sessions for each group because we could not get very far into the interview schedule in only one session (Krueger 1993). We also wanted each of these busy girls to be able to participate in at least one meeting. For



each age group, the third day of focus groups was less structured, allowing us to observe the girls playing together. We conducted nine focus groups altogether. Each one lasted about 75 minutes. The largest group had 11 girls, and the smallest had 5. The size of each group varied daily, depending on the girls' other commitments.

In facilitating focus groups, we used a semistandardized interview schedule (Lofland et al. 2005). We asked the girls to sit in a circle on the floor during our conversations. We opened by thanking them for participating and reminded them that our conversations were "just for us." We said, "We aren't going to talk about anything that might hurt someone's feelings or embarrass them. If anyone says anything today that they want to keep private, we will all agree to keep that person's words to ourselves once we leave the group." We repeated that we would discuss the kinds of things that girls were interested in these days. The interview schedule included questions about favorite television shows, actors, music, books, teachers, extracurricular activities, and friends. Following Thorne (1993), we asked about interactions between boys and girls in classes, at recess, and on television.

We decided against electronically recording the conversations because we believed audio/video recorders would have distracted the girls. Instead, we spread out among them and took notes as best we could. We shared our notes later, filling in gaps. Open note taking also allowed the girls to shape interactions. During moments of our preoccupation, girls in every age group took the opportunity to restructure our initial guidelines: They left the circle, danced, wrestled, dragged chairs around the room, and changed the subject. We repeatedly tried to reorganize the groups, but we were largely ineffective. Although we were adults—one of us a known parent—we were not truly "sanctioning adults" (Thorne 1993). As the children reorganized the structure, we were able to observe them coconstructing their own order (Hyden and Bulow 2003). We agree with Thorne (1993) that research methods for collecting data about children must be flexible given the physical, spontaneous character of kids' interactions.

We analyze the "group product," or the meanings produced by the group as a whole (Fern 2001). We refer to "these girls," in analyzing data so as to acknowledge the situational construction of reality in each session (Hyden and Bulow 2003). We note many similarities across age groups, underscoring our decision to treat the data as group driven rather than individual driven. We coded data in three stages: open, axial, and selective coding (Lofland et al. 2005). This grounded process led us to claim that these girls coconstructed and performed heteronormativity for each other in the group context.



## FINDINGS

We asked these girls about television, books, and music, and they answered through a heteronormative lens. Girls in each age group redirected the conversation to discuss heterosexual crushes, sex, and dating. Girls as young as first grade proclaimed themselves “boy crazy.” As we will show, these girls worked together to define girls’ interests as boy centered.

### Crushes

The girls came to the Girl Project focus groups knowing that we would be talking about girls’ interests. Our flier never mentioned boys in any way. Many girls, however, seemed to expect girls’ interests to include boys, and they were surprised when we did not ask about them. Ariana (third grade) introduced the subject within five minutes of our first second/third-grade meeting: Ariana said, “Are we going to talk about boys? Because if we do I’m going to freak out.” A couple of the girls shrieked, jumped up, and ran to the other side of the room. Ariana said, “No talking about crushes!” Kristen said, “No, we’re not going to talk about crushes.” The girls said, “Phew,” and came back to the circle. These girls defined crushes as exclusively boy-girl. For example, when the kindergarteners and first graders mentioned crushes, Laura asked them what it meant to have a crush. Caroline (first grade) said, “If a boy really likes you, they have a crush on you. If they like-like you, then they love you.” The rest of the girls giggled nervously. The term *like-like* was introduced and recognized by girls in every age group, indicating that these girls talked about crushes in their everyday lives. *Like-like* was part of their preexisting vocabulary, informed by peer culture (Adler and Adler 1998).

We initially avoided discussing crushes because we thought it would be too embarrassing for the girls, as this interaction in the fourth/fifth-grade group implied: Lila (fourth grade) said, “I’m going to hide in a bomb shelter over there while we talk about [crushes].” Kristen asked, “Why?” She said, “Because I don’t want to talk about this!” She was laughing and turning red. However, we learned quickly that many did want to talk about boys despite their initial protestations. For example, 15 minutes after Ariana’s (third grade) promise to “freak out,” she said, “I want to talk about crushes. I just want to talk about that now.” Kristen said, “We weren’t going to talk about that.” Ariana said, “But I want to now.” The other girls looked at us with anticipation. Maddie (third grade) said, “We can’t tell the boys though.” Kristen said, “OK, we can’t

tell the boys.” Kristen put her fist in the center of the circle. The others put theirs in. We promised to keep our comments to ourselves, and we all cheered, “Girl Project!” in assent. These girls expected to talk about heterosexual crushes, and they were stymied by our resistance. They claimed agency and reshaped the conversation. Before proceeding, these girls pledged to keep each other’s secrets, recognizing their vulnerability to teasing. They established intimacy, an important part of femininity (Thorne and Luria 1986).

### **Contagious Excitement: Affirming Crushes**

As the second and third graders shared their crushes, they showed their support for each other through oohs and aahs, heightening the drama. Thorne and Luria (1986, 186) say that “witnesses and kibitzers” are necessary for the construction of heteronormativity. Ariana (third grade) took the lead, explaining that girls should go around the circle, saying whom they liked, and whom they like-liked. She wanted to start: Ariana said, “I like-like Toby!” The girls around her started screaming. She said, “I have a big crush on him.” Alicia (third grade) said she like-liked Lewis. The girls screamed again. Jenna (third grade) said she like-liked Juan (more screaming). Alicia said, “That’s my brother! He is cute!” Morgan (second grade) said she “just likes” Clay. At this point, the noise level was a roar. The girls pressed in on each other, turning the circle into a knot of screaming, writhing bodies. We researchers stared blankly at each other for a beat and then began scribbling frantically. The girls played off of each other, feeding on the responses of their peers: Audrey (second grade) whispered to Kristen that she did not like anyone. Molly (second grade) said, “Ooh, Audrey likes Noah!” Audrey looked at her in confusion. Kristen said, “No, she doesn’t have a crush on anyone.” Molly said, “Well, I like-like Noah. He’s cute and he got his hair dyed blonde.” Ariana said, “Toby’s cuter.” Kaitlyn (third grade) said she liked Brian. Ava (second grade) like-liked Luke; she said, “I think he’s annoying actually. But he’s so cute.” Some girls seemed eager to participate, while others appeared reticent to claim a boy by name. As we went through the second/third-grade group, some girls asked to be skipped while they thought of a boy. Later, they often named someone whom a friend had also named. Eventually, almost every girl said that she “liked” a boy, if not “like-liked” one. Most conformed to the situated pressure to attach themselves romantically to boys. Claiming to have a crush on a boy conferred insider status to these girls, even if a crush might not have been genuine but instead, perhaps, an imitation of another girl’s crush.

One girl, a second grader named Brooke, said, "I want to go last." She stood up, looking down at her peers seated on the floor, and she waited until she had their attention. When it was quiet, she said, "I like-like Noah." The group began squealing, and Brooke held out her hands and yelled, "But that's not it!" She stood silently, grinning. The whole group started chanting, "Who else? Who else?" Brooke waited several seconds, and then announced, "Jesse." The girls rolled on the floor, howling. Alicia yelled, "Oh my gosh!" Morgan exclaimed, "I'm on fire!" Like Thorne and Luria's (1986) boys, these girls expressed "contagious excitement" when discussing crushes. Children are typically prohibited from sexualized discourse. These girls' contagious excitement may have signified a rebellion against that prohibition as they performed heteronormativity.

### **Hotties: Constructing Heteronormative Desire**

The girls' language accentuated their performance of heteronormativity, particularly when discussing "their hotties." *Hottie* was their term for celebrity adolescent and teenage boys, rather than boys they knew in everyday life. For example, Anastasia (first grade) screamed that *American Idol* contestant David Archuleta was "H.O.T.!" snapping her fingers after each letter, imitating racialized camp. The fourth and fifth graders got excited talking about the Naked Brothers Band, Zac Efron, and the Jonas Brothers.<sup>1</sup> The girls squealed and argued about who was the cutest among these. Megan (fifth grade) asked us, "Do you want me to go get my hotties out of my locker?" Unsure what this meant, we said, "Sure." Megan ran out of the room. Amber (fourth grade) ran out to get "hers" as well. Megan returned with a poster of one of the Jonas Brothers that she kept in her locker. She smiled and held it out for everyone to see. Lila (fourth grade) grabbed Megan's poster and flipped it over to show a picture of Zac Efron on the back. Lila said, "See. He's much cuter." Amber returned with a small scrap from a magazine and showed her picture of the Naked Brothers Band. She said, "Look, aren't they so cute?!"

Their term, *hottie*, had great cultural capital (Bourdieu 1999) among all groups of girls, and it was striking for several reasons. First, the girls argued among themselves about who was the hottest—it was contested terrain over which they competed by showing their loyalty to one boy over the others. Second, they used possessive language—"my" hotties—to mark these boys as their own. Third, the girls objectified the boys uncritically and with verve. Fourth, their hotties were celebrities rather than "real" boys—sex symbols created by Disney and Viacom and marketed expressly

for their consumption (Martin and Kazyak 2009).<sup>2</sup> Fifth, hotties were always boys. No one referred to a girl idol, like Mylie Cyrus, as “my hottie,” even though they obviously admired her. Last, *hot* is an implicitly sexualized term, despite its common usage. The girls understood the larger connotation, and they applied it correctly.

Although the girls had no problem objectifying celebrity boys, the older girls mocked real-life boys who “hit on” girls they knew. The fourth- and fifth-grade girls described awkward moments between boys and girls in their classes: Marissa (fifth grade) said, “Parker and Jason love Kayla [fifth grade].” Megan said that Dustin asked Kayla, “Do you have a map? Because I get lost in those eyes.” Another boy told Kayla, “I could swim in those eyes.” Tyler told Marissa that she had pretty eyes. The next day, he told her she had pretty hair. The girls cracked up at these memories, recalling others as they shared them: Evie (fourth grade) said that a third grader told Jackie (fourth grade), “Do I smell fire? Because you’re smokin’ hot!” Kristen asked, “What does that mean?” Emma (fourth grade) said, “That you’re hot!” Kayla said, “Boys say I have big lake eyes.” Megan said, “But you have brown eyes!” Kristen said, “They’re muddy lakes.” We all laughed. Here, the girls were amused by fourth- and fifth-grade boys’ using cliché pick-up lines. Even though these girls ostensibly desired boys’ attention, they were not quite persuaded that these boys’ comments were valuable. They indicated that such interactions drew unwanted attention to them. For example, the fifth graders told us about their field trip to the middle school that they would be attending the next year, when the kids were divided into groups of boys and girls. As the girls separated, the boys yelled to Kayla, “We will miss you!” Tom asked if he could wear her hat. He put it on and declared, “I have a hot body!” Kayla was embarrassed by this spectacle, even though it was intended to celebrate her attractiveness: Kristen asked her how it felt to have boys treat her that way. Megan said, “Every boy is in love with Kayla, and they do it all the time.” Kayla said, “It’s weird.” Megan said, “She makes boys cry.” Kristen said, “You make boys cry?” Kayla shrugged and nodded. Megan said, “Because they love her so much.” The other girls found boys’ reaction to Kayla odd and a bit fascinating. Megan seemed to envy her. Kayla seemed simultaneously pleased and disconcerted by boys’ attention. Boys’ treatment of Kayla tested the fourth and fifth graders’ valorization of hotness. They discerned the difference between their highly romanticized ideal, pick-up lines were “sexy” and desirable, and their actual lives, in which wherein real boys embarrassed themselves as well as the girls they hit on. In discussing boys’ treatment of Kayla, these girls began to recognize beauty standards.

## Inappropriate Intimacies

Although these girls were passionate in their idealization of heterosexual romances, they agreed that some desires were “inappropriate.” The term *inappropriate* was often used by these girls in their discussions, across all age groups. Although a few girls fantasized openly about kissing boys (like Ariana [third grade] who wished aloud that her crush would French kiss her), most expressed concern about the appropriateness of physical interactions between girls and boys.

Kissing had a taboo quality to it, especially among the younger girls. When we asked the girls about favorite TV shows, we learned that many of the kindergarten/first-grade girls were not allowed to watch shows on which the characters kissed, but they all seemed to know about them. When asked about kissing on TV, the second and third graders squealed, “Eww! It’s gross!” Molly (second grade) said, “Kissing is gross!” Most said they were allowed to watch shows containing kissing, though. Ariana (third grade) said, “My dad makes me cover the TV when they’re kissing.” Some of these “kissing shows” were actually adult programming, as Brooke (second grade) explained: Brooke said, “I watch a show with my parents and sometimes by myself, but I can’t tell you what it’s called because you’ll be shocked.” Kristen said, “Just tell us.” Brooke said, “No” and put her hands over her mouth. Several girls yelled, “Tell us!” Brooke said that she watches *Sex and the City*. Alicia (third grade) shrugged and said, “It seems bad because of the X word, but it’s not about that. It’s about women talking about their problems and stuff.” Girls nodded. Brooke thought that she would shock the group, but based on many girls’ reactions, *Sex and the City* was common viewing. These girls defended it as not inappropriately sexual—the “X word”—but as gender appropriate—“women talking about their problems.” Thus, despite the programming’s being for adults, it was not “inappropriate” for them.

Most of the TV programs discussed were designed for young girls in particular. Martin and Kazyak (2009) have shown that G-rated media, although aimed specifically at young children, is actually riddled with heterosexual imagery. Even the kindergarteners and first graders recognized that imagery in kids’ TV shows, and some found it inappropriate: Mimi (first grade) said she likes *Hannah Montana*<sup>3</sup> because the characters Jake and Mylie kiss. Chloe (first grade) said, “That’s disgusting.” She kept muttering this to herself. Kristen asked, “What’s an OK age to be kissing?” Girls called out, “13!” “15!” and “11!” The most popular romantic programming discussed by these girls included Disney’s *Hannah Montana*, *The Suite Life of Zack & Cody*, and the *High School Musical* franchise,

plus Nickelodeon's *Drake & Josh* and *Life with Derrick*.<sup>4</sup> In describing these shows, these girls dissected not just the characters' romances on the shows, but the actors' real-life sexual and romantic activities. They often confused the actors' and characters' names in doing so, showing how the two worlds melded in their perceptions. The second and third graders in particular critiqued the actors' sexual engagements: Maddie (third grade) said that Troy (Zac Efron) took naked pictures of Gabriella (Vanessa Hudgens) and put them on the Internet. Ariana (third grade) said, "They are still on the Internet, and I saw them. I saw her naked breasts and her privates." Girls said, "Eww!" Ariana said, "Troy cheats on Vanessa with Ashley Tisdale, and he kisses her." Jordan (third grade) said that Vanessa cheats on Troy with Drake Bell. Some of this is true: Teenage actress Vanessa Hudgens did take photos of herself in the nude; these ended up on the Internet after she sent them to would-be boyfriend Drake Bell. But a lot of this was a free-form construction wherein fact blended with fiction, just as fictional characters' stories blended with real actors' biographies.<sup>5</sup> Despite their inaccuracy, they served as cautionary tales: Too much kissing can have polluting effects.

We asked the second and third graders where they learned these stories. Most of them read about them on the Internet. A couple of them learned these and other stories from youth-focused magazines such as *Teen Beat* and *Nickelodeon Magazine*. Several others found their information in tabloid magazines: Alicia (third grade) said that she reads magazines in her mom's bathroom that say that Vanessa is with Drake or Zac and that they are always kissing. Brooke (second grade) said that she was in the doctor's office and was reading a magazine and read the same thing. Tabloids offer detailed information about the sexual goings-on between celebrities, which these girls then share with each other: Brooke said that there was a picture of Zac and Vanessa with "a caption" that said that they were coming home "from lunch" (she used finger quotes). Kristen asked, "Why did you use finger quotes when you said they were coming home 'from lunch?'" She said, "Because they were probably coming home from kissing naked in bed." Alicia said, "Vanessa was walking home wearing only a bra and panties." This revelation triggered an eruption in the group. Girls began talking all at once. We could not capture everything said in this period, but we heard them say "French kissing," "making out," and "sex." Audrey (second grade) said that French kissing is when you put your tongues in each other's mouths. Molly (second grade) agreed. The content of this conversation was rather graphic and titillating yet discomfiting to some. Trinity (second grade) turned to Laura and said, "I don't think we should talk about making out." Laura asked her why. Trinity said, "Because it is about the three letter word [sex]."



In coconstructing heteronormativity, the second and third graders defined sex as illicit. Sex—"kissing naked in bed"—was gross yet provocative. Despite its allure, these girls implied that sex was inappropriate for them. They also declared it inappropriate for the teenage celebrities who they believed were actually having sex. Most kindergarteners and first to third graders argued that moderate kissing was for adolescents 11 and older. The second and third graders insinuated that sex was for adults only. They seemed to have internalized adult taboos about children's sexuality (Angelides 2004), reinscribing these rules for themselves. Together, they regulated their sexual imaginings.

### Dating

Girls reported that a handful of kids began dating as early as second grade. They called their relationships "dating," and some even went on "dates," with their parents as chaperones. Each class had at least one recognized couple in it, and the fifth graders reported three to four couples. The fourth and fifth graders were the most vocal about dating. What did appropriate dating relationships for kids look like if sexualized interactions were problematized?

As with romance, dating ideals did not match dating realities. Ideally, these girls favored traditional dating arrangements. Mia (fourth grade) said, "I would never ask a boy on a date. I would wait for the boy to ask me. I would expect to go to a restaurant and to a movie." Girls around her nodded. These ideal arrangements applied to older boys and girls, who could drive and had their own money to spend. "Real" dating for elementary school kids did not match these traditional ideals. As Mia said, "In 'kid world' dating is just an idea."

Marissa and Megan explained that a fifth-grade date means that you stand in line together, eat lunch together, and partner together in gym. Marissa said, "And you move your chairs closer together in class." Kristen asked, "How do you know people are boyfriend/girlfriend?" Kayla (fifth grade) said, "Winter and Travis are in love because they are always with each other." Simply spending time together could mark kids as dating. But they also had to confirm it themselves: "We are dating."

This was clearly new territory for most of the girls. Lila (fourth grade) asked the fifth graders, "Do you really go on dates?" Marissa said, "No. You ask the teacher to move your chairs closer to each other. You play on the playground." Marissa agreed: "You just sit by each other."

These girls mocked dating relationships as not even being real relationships. Mia said that kids do not even talk to each other when they are "dating."



Megan said that she knows a guy whose friends had to force him to talk to his girlfriend. Mia said, "That's retarded. Dude, go say hi to your girlfriend."

Megan said, "I think dating is stupid." Marissa said, "When I am asked on a date, I say I'm too busy." Lila said, "When I was in the third grade, someone asked me out, and I said no." Kayla said, "The teachers know all about it, and they get involved." Kristen asked how they get involved. Marissa said, "They ask us who's together and broken up." Evie said, "They say it's inappropriate because they think dating is about kissing." Mia said, "Exactly!" Marissa said, "But it's not. The closest it comes to that is, 'Uh, hi.'" Mia said, "That's why I like Courtney and Nick [as a couple], because they at least talk to each other."

Dating was paradoxical for the fourth and fifth graders. On one hand, attracting a boyfriend conferred status. Fifth graders made fun of girls (who were not part of the Girl Project) like Angelina (fourth grade), who "could never get a boyfriend." Evie concurred: "She has hair on her arms this long!" They mocked Emma (fourth grade), who they claimed went to every boy in the class and asked, "Will you be my boyfriend? No. Will you be my boyfriend? No. It was ridiculous!" They measured each other by the potential to get a boyfriend. Girls who were pretty, funny, nice, and smart—traits that the girls thought would attract boys—had status, even though few of them actually had or even wanted boyfriends (see also Hyde and Jaffee 2000). On the other hand, "kid-world dating" engendered awkward interactions with boys. It exposed girls to the scrutiny of the class and the teachers. Most of these girls did not relish that position.

One night, Kristen drove Autumn and Evie home after a fourth/fifth-grade group meeting. Kristen said, "I still don't understand this dating thing." Evie said,

I think I know what it is about. When boys and girls play together, they get teased. Everyone says, "Ooh, you're boyfriend and girlfriend!" So you don't want to play together because you're embarrassed, because you're not boyfriend and girlfriend. You're just friends. But if boys and girls decide to be boyfriend/girlfriend, then no one teases you anymore.

Evie, although only nine years old, recognized the ways that heteronormativity constrained cross-sex friendships; being a girl meant playing with girls. Kristen probed, "So you have to decide whether you should be dating so that you can be friends? Or else you can't be friends?" Evie said, "Yes." Kristen said, "That's sad." Autumn said, "I know. I don't want a boyfriend unless I really like him. So I can't be friends with Jason because I don't like him that way."

Some fourth and fifth graders managed these contradictory pressures by forming heterosexualized, boyfriend/girlfriend relationships. Once these relationships were established, these girls could feel comfortable talking to and playing with boys, or “scooting their chairs closer to one another,” just to share space legitimately. They used heterosexualized terminology—*dating*—to validate their nonsexualized interactions: standing in line with one another, playing on the playground, and sitting together at lunch. Girls did not have to construct parallel scenarios to justify their relationships with other girls. Therefore, even though these boy-girl friendships may not have been entirely romantically motivated, they were shaped overtly by heteronormative pressures.

### Gay Desire

We have shown how the free-form nature of the focus groups allowed these girls to express themselves spontaneously. So too did their views on gay desire emerge, organically. Take this excerpt from a second/third-grade conversation: Audrey (second grade) said, “Kissing is gross.” Jordan (third grade) said, “Joe from the Jonas Brothers is cute.” Maddie (third grade) said, “Troy (Zac Efron) from *High School Musical* is cute.” Most girls agreed. Brooke (second grade) said, “He’s gross and he eats boogers.” Jenna (third grade) said, “He’s gay.” Kristen asked, “What is gay?” Ariana stood up, snapped her fingers, and said, “It’s when a boy wants to marry another boy.” Kristen asked, “How do you know he’s gay?” Kaitlyn (third grade) said, “My mom told me.” Maddie said, “It’s on Web sites.” Kristen said, “Are the Web sites true?” The girls all yelled, “Yes!” Girls sneered, squinching their faces as they discussed homosexuality. They used *gay* pejoratively—like *eating boogers*—and they also seemed to know that it involved same-sex desire. Interestingly, these same girls discussed Zac Efron’s heterosexual exploits at length. Yet here, they seemed to agree that he was gay.

Their discussion of Zac Efron’s sexuality could imply a queer conceptualization of sexuality. That is, rather than reifying dominant sexual categories—gay and straight—as mutually exclusive, the girls seemed to treat sexuality as fluid, evolving with each sexual encounter. We rather doubt that the girls were queering sexuality, though. Instead, the second and third graders seemed to be saying that no matter how many girlfriends a boy has, he is gay if he kisses even one boy: Brooke said, “Zac’s gay.” Jordan said, “No he isn’t.” Brooke said that there is a picture of Zac kissing a boy online. All the girls responded with “Eww!” Alicia said that

gay people who were kissing were breaking the law. These girls seemed repulsed by the thought of boys kissing, even though this was only a rumor. This rumor was discussed in the kindergarten/first-grade group too. Anastasia (first grade) said that her brother (fourth grade) refused to watch *High School Musical III* because Zac Efron was gay. Other girls nodded. Anastasia's brother seemed to fear that merely watching Zac on screen could impeach his own sexuality, and Anastasia's peers seemed to concur.

The mere rumor of homoerotic behavior threatened to contaminate the purity of heterosexuality. Just as "one drop" of "black blood" could contaminate racial purity in the eyes of a racist (Myers 2005), one homosexual kiss could spoil a sex symbol (Nielson, Walden, and Kunkel 2000). The second and third graders searched for ways to make sense of Zac's (rumored) behavior. Alicia (third grade) mused, "Maybe he's kissing his dad. I kiss my mom [and I'm not gay]." They seemed to agree, nodding and mumbling assent. No one said, "Who cares if he is gay?" Instead, as a group, they reconstructed the rumor to deny any possibility of gayness, justifying their adoration of him.

Most of this discussion addressed male homosexuality. The girls implied that you could not kiss girls unless they were family members, but they did not seem as repelled by the notion. Take, for example, this conversation in the kindergarten/first-grade group: Fiona (first grade) said, "Chloe [first grade] keeps kissing me in school! She kissed me on the back of the neck in line today." Chloe said, "I did, like this," and she crawled over to Fiona and kissed her on the back of her neck. Fiona said, "See!" Fiona was exasperated by these kisses, but she was also amused. Chloe was her best friend. And the kissing clearly entertained the whole group. Everyone laughed out loud, and Chloe basked in the group members' amusement. This girl-on-girl kissing was problematized, but it did not have the contaminating effect of boy-on-boy kissing, at least within this younger group of girls. We thought that, perhaps, these girls were more tolerant of intimacy between girls.

An incident several months later revealed that while intimacy between girls might be acceptable, the concept of lesbianism was not. A group of fifth-grade girls were engaged in a battle of loyalties during recess. Casie was mad that Lila was playing with Paige and Evie instead of with her and Joanna. Casie told Joanna, "Lila is a lesbian." Joanna told several girls, and by the middle of the afternoon, Lila heard about it. She dissolved into tears. Both of the fifth-grade classes were disrupted. The principal called Lila's mother to come to school to pick her up. Casie received a week of detention.

This incident may have triggered such outrage because the girls were older—closer to adolescence and sexual awakening. Had they been younger, the use of *lesbian* may have been more quickly dismissed. We cannot know. What is clear is that Casie used *lesbian* in an injurious manner, underscoring her anger at Lila by harnessing its discursive power to cause harm. The adults' reactions to this incident were complex and contradictory. On one hand, they sent a strong message to the children that teasing someone about his or her sexuality would not be tolerated. They attempted to decrease the likelihood that others would use *lesbian* in this way. Given how many children are tormented at school because of their sexuality (Poteat 2007), zero tolerance of taunting is a good thing. On the other hand, these adults treated lesbianism as something so awful that teachers, the principal, and parents altered their daily routines to make sure that Lila was protected from the heinous label. Chances are that at least some of these fifth-grade girls may be/become lesbians. What did all of these girls learn about the value of lesbianism in society? They all were reminded of what they already knew: that the mere rumor of homosexuality could taint an otherwise "appropriate" girl identity.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Casper and Moore (2009) and Renold (2006) have called for more research on children and sexuality from the perspective of children themselves. Although we did not set out to do either of these things, the flexible format of the focus group allowed these girls to both take charge of the content and take charge of the form of the conversations. We were fortunate that they did so. They turned the tables on the interviews, reframing girls' interests as heteronormatively boy centered. These girls performed heterosexual desire long before adolescence: It was an everyday issue for them. Girls as young as first grade brought their preexisting boy-centered language to focus groups: "hotties," "crushes," and "dating." These girls measured themselves and each other according to their perceptions of boys' interests, even when no boys were present. All three groups of girls did this, with the second/third graders—seven- and eight-year-olds—being the most expressive.

Girls are not a monolithic group with a single, unified approach to heteronormativity. Some girls called themselves "boy crazy" and openly fantasized about French kissing. Other girls muttered objections to sexualized discourse. Still others sat silently, sometimes nodding, sometimes scowling. Discourse about sexuality involves multiple viewpoints, including dissent. Here, through lively and often loud discourse, these girls

negotiated what was appropriate for them, integrating perspectives that were both more and less sexual. In effect, these girls engaged in their own “girl project,” coconstructing knowledge about sexuality.

These girls coproduced a fantasy world of romance and sex but decided that world was closed to them. Romance and sex were fun to talk about but inappropriate for actual kids their age. As they performed desire, these girls regulated their sexual imaginings in tune with adults’ expectations for them, indicating their internalization of adult taboos.

Observing girl-guided group processes reveals how gender and heterosexuality are interconnected. It is unlikely that these girls had ever had any intimate contact with boys. Some of these girls might actually be/become lesbians. Yet through their group interactions, they learned that to be an “appropriate” girl, they should perform heteronormativity for other girls (Connell 2005; Ingraham 1994). In so doing, they reinforced the gender binary in which girls are measured—and measure themselves—by their relationship to boys.

Although these girls grappled with heteronormativity before adolescence, they had not yet begun the adolescent “fall” (Thorne 1993). Clearly, these girls coconstructed fantasies in which hypothetical romances played out to their advantage. Perhaps adolescent girls fall when their fantasies confront reality and the consequences are disempowering. Future research might examine the process—not just the consequences—through which girls begin to fall. Perhaps then we could help reempower them, fostering girl-centered girls and minimizing heteronormative boy centeredness.

## NOTES

1. The Naked Brothers Band are two adolescent brothers who have a TV show on Nickelodeon. Zac Efron, a teenager, starred in the *High School Musical* movies, *Hairspray*, and *17 Again*. The Jonas Brothers are three adolescent brothers. They are a band and have their own Disney channel TV show.

2. Cable television is more influential and pervasive than ever before, with 24-hour programming on several networks created just for children. Its importance is discussed in depth in another article.

3. *Hannah Montana* is a very popular show with Mylie and Billy Ray Cyrus in which Mylie plays a pop star masquerading as a “normal” girl.

4. Except for the *High School Musical* movies, these are all sitcoms with adolescents and teenagers in various romantic situations.

5. Other such conversations addressed Jamie Lynn Spears’s pregnancy, Britney Spears’s parenting, and Mylie Cyrus’s photo spread in *Vanity Fair*.

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