

# I really know what I'm doing

## YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS EXAMINED

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### MY EXPERIENCES WITH A "CHILD-FRIEND"

About a year ago, through my son, I got to know a smart, goodlooking young man. From here on in this story I will refer to this 21 year old young man as our friend. I will not mention any names, not only to protect our friend.

It was during the Christmas holidays when our son, with a companion, first visited our friend. After hearing about him almost daily, my husband and I asked if he would like to join us for coffee. We wondered who he was and wanted to know who our son was seeing. After our son had delivered our invitation, an appointment was soon made.

One Saturday afternoon, the time had arrived, with both parties being somewhat nervous, as you never know what sort of person the other will be, or whether the contact will run smoothly. Our anxiety proved unnecessary. The young man was well brought up, open and honest. We visited him as well and can look back on that with pleasure.

I will now say more about the circumstances. Our friend lives alone and is able to combine home and work in an admirable way. He is clean in himself and neither his home, nor his pets are left wanting. He has an extensive group of friends, each of whom he can rely upon.

Our circumstances are that having both been divorced, we have now been married for ten years and our family consists of three children, one daughter (aged 14), who lives with her mother and two boys of twelve and sixteen, who live with us. The contact with our friend began through the youngest one.

Following my divorce, a number of problems resulted between myself and my ex-husband, which led to problems in our present family. From the time our son began to see our friend, gradually things began to improve for him. He could discuss his problems in a relaxed way with his friend, without either of the parties being present. This is unthreatening and has a calming influence on him. In this way, his development as a child has been set in motion again, I'm extremely grateful for this. We had already had counselling and also in other ways we had tried to do something about his problems.

This contact also allows the possibility of solving problems, which we cannot approach directly with our son, via our friend. Then my son is often prepared to do something about it, or to resolve the problem completely. This makes the atmosphere at home on both sides better and closer. I don't need to play the role of policeman so often, or use force to get things done. I would say that through our friend, the atmosphere at home has become much cosier. He has therefore become a person who we gladly wish to see and who we can look upon as a son. During the last year, our contact has become very intensive and he hasn't only been available for our son, but also has been able to help me with problems on many occasions. In turn I have been able to help him resolving his problems.

Through mutual respect and affection, this has become a very close friendship and of exceptional value to our whole family.

I would like to close with these words: it's great to have this friend and to have been able to meet him.

To all onlookers, I would recommend: do not condemn until you know the who's, the why's and the wherefore's. These child-friends also have a right to exist and are certainly no less worthy than anybody else. My experience is even that they think more carefully about life and are more able to face facts and find solutions.

If anybody would like to know more about my experiences than they can make contact with me by contacting: JORis in Zutphen. Please do this in writing.

A mother

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## **AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN**

JORis: In your profession you mix with children?

John: Yes, but at home I also take a big part in looking after the children.

JORis: Do you ever come across children who discover an adult who they are very enthusiastic about and how do you deal with that?

John: Of course, firstly, I don't panic. You sometimes hear of such things not being allowed. Listen in the beginning to what children have to say about it themselves. I don't condemn in advance and certainly not on the basis of supposed proclivities. I don't believe at all in the mentality of placing people into boxes. I like to talk with them about that as well. Sometimes I understand or even share the children's enthusiasm. Look, I can't always have the necessary time and attention available. I'm not at all premature with my enthusiasm.....as long as people keep within certain boundaries.

JORis: How do you mean? Can you give an example?

John: Yes, of course. A quite young child and a slightly older one went to play at the house of a grown up friend. He came back with the announcement that they would be eating and sleeping there and the next day they would be going out. Look, that's much too fast. The trip went ahead: swimming at a large lake. Yes, they went to the naturist beach and yes, there were also some photos taken. The man just doesn't know when to stop, I think.

I object to them getting spoiled, as well, when everything is allowed, given or loaned, without any trouble. Taking trouble makes things more valuable. People care about each other and give to each other, O.K. but within limits.

JORis: Do you have any difficulty about intimacy within these relationships?

John: Intimacy is alright, as far as I'm concerned. I do not have to know everything. Children have a right to their own private life too. In my profession I deal with the children of other parents and so I have to take account of that. The legal limits are enough for me to go on.

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## THE EXPERIENCES OF A FATHER

I have been asked to write a piece about the contacts between a young man and my son. I think it is a great honour to be allowed to do this. We are a couple who have been married for twenty years, aged 44 and 42. We have a son of twelve and a daughter of eight.

During our son's swimming lessons at the beginning of 1991, we met a very nice young man, aged 19, who was the swimming instructor. He asked my son if they could go swimming together; our son liked this idea very much and we were also happy to allow him to go. In order to get to know this young man better, we then invited him to visit us at home.

I did not have the feeling that Marco was about to try anything with my son, as others (fathers) are often afraid of. My son saw Marco simply as a friend, a companion to play with, so I decided it would be a good idea to explain to him how Marco enjoys the company of children and why.

Nowadays I get on very well with both Marco and his friends and there are no barriers to what we talk about, I hope that in years to come, he will still visit us, in good times as well as bad. Our circle of friends contains many different sexual preferences. Everyone can feel at home with us, certainly on birthdays, because this fact is known. We are both heterosexual and because of clear agreements which have been made, everything works perfectly. Getting on with people, for us means that the sexual preference is not relevant, only the human qualities.

[Page 5] A father

## EXPERIENCES OF A CHILD-FRIEND

I go downstairs for some milk. It's a warm July day and one of my friends has called. As I close the fridge door, my ears pick up a joyful sound from outside. Hypnotised, I go over to the window which looks out on a shallow canal. It's a small boy!

Perhaps just 12, he lies there in shorts, shrieking with laughter, in a yellow rubber boat. He sprawls in the water with his muscular arms. The fabulous folds of the brown skin on his waist make a deep impression on me. I feel a slow warmth reaching downwards from my chest. Deeper and deeper..... I'm in love.

Gradually I came to realise that I am attracted to children. Maybe, even from when I was nine, doing my swimming test and unable to keep my eyes away from a gorgeous kid. The erotic experiences which I had with one of my cousins (at age 17), also spring to mind. I start work at a local community centre. There I am able to make some very nice contacts with parents and their children. I am able to build up a more close relationship with Jopie (12). Frequently he will come and lie on top of me on the settee. He lays his head on mine, his brown eyes glance tenderly at me and he asks "Do you love me?"

He introduces some of his friends to me at my home, but I will never have such a deep understanding with them, as I do with Jopie. A couple of years later, the friendship between Jopie and me appears to be over. He has begun to see more people of his own age group.

Although I felt rejected in this situation, I let the boy go, because it was his choice. We had a perfect time together!

In the meantime I go on, with children visiting me practically every day. Before they get to me, they are always greeted kindly by the neighbours. I also feel at home with my neighbours; we get on very well together. In this way I have been able to develop excellent friendships with most children. I am able to offer them somewhere to play, outings and the chance for personal talks. In this way, I provide them with positive and often educational experiences, which they will never forget.

Jacob

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## **SPEAKING OF UPBRINGING**

This is not something which occurs in a vacuum; raising children takes place in a relationship and in society. The outside world has certain opinions, for example, that adults and children should maintain a distance between each other and that friendship between them is not even possible. According to society, there is always an inherent power imbalance favouring adults.

Reality teaches something else: in most families, classes and groups it is possible to achieve a *balance* of power. Otherwise, it's not possible to function, learn and develop. Education based on a continual power *imbalance* does not deserve the name; that is no more than instruction.

Most parents and educators try to be good and kind, to be close and form valuable contacts with children. Even so,

parents can be concerned when it appears that their child has a friendship with an adult, if there is any suggestion of intimacy, eroticism, or sexuality.

In this last case, a sort of moral panic can quickly result in accusations of "child sexual abuse". How should we deal with this?

- Forced erotic contacts can lead to years of suffering a poor self-image, resistance to intimacy, despair and anxiety.
- Voluntary erotic and sexual contacts, however, have never been shown to be harmful. In a study carried out in the Netherlands they were shown to be beneficial, or in any case, consistent with a positive experience of sexuality in adulthood.
- Suppressing erotic and sexual desires, ignoring and denying them is damaging. It leads to frustrated, surly and even aggressive people, who can't cope with relationships, but desperately long for them. The NVSH calls this "the hunger-strike mentality".
- The distinction lies not in whether there is intimacy, eroticism, or sex, but the existence and use of power and coercion; also, the presence (or lack) of openness in these relations.

I would not automatically reject a friendly relationship involving intimacy, eroticism and sexuality. First, I would look at the quality of that relationship, the power balance and openness of contacts.

Above all, I would be ready to look at the reality for the child. By being open, in this way, I have learned to distinguish between objectionable contacts and enriching friendships, both of which I have encountered during my life.

Dr. Frans E.J. Gieles,  
special educationalist

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## THE LEGAL SIDE OF THE QUESTION

The care taken by the Dutch legal system has international recognition. In the Constitution and the European Convention, privacy enjoys good protection. Children themselves have very few rights; it is above all the parents who have them.

As far as intimacy is concerned, neither children or adults are forbidden in law from loving each other, spending time together, or sharing intimacy or eroticism. Only parents can stop this. What is forbidden in law are sexual acts with children under 16, or with children placed in somebody's care.

Recently a large majority in parliament voted to allow extra space to 12 to 16 year olds: only when there is an official complaint by the young person, or his/her parents, can there be a prosecution for a sexual act; for unwanted contacts therefore. The legislature thereby offers space for desired intimacy in friendships which occur outside of formal care/educational relationships.

Not all servants of the law are quite so broad-minded, however. Sometimes interviews and investigations are carried out as though the law had never been changed. There is the phenomenon of interviews which are so overbearing and suggestive, also by parents and "carers", that eventually more is put on paper than actually occurred. In the atmosphere of the interview, the young person is given no space to express his/her own will, or to offer any positive experiences; negative aspects and an account of being forced are put into the words of the child. In time, however, lawyers and judges have become aware of this and continue, in the Netherlands, to work carefully. The verdict, however, may already have been reached; by parents or friends, employers, committees, landlords or neighbours. Even though libel and slander are illegal, people are not always as broad-minded and careful as the law makers.

## Quotes

p.2 I'm thirteen now. I know what I'm doing.

p.3 Anybody who loves children should not attack adults. They are both people.

p.4 You know, it's funny, but actually I think you're my best friend. I reckon.

Isn't that a person who thinks young boys are very nice?

p.5 My mum keeps asking what you do with me..... Well, I told her: the same as dads and mums do with their children. Sometimes cuddling and kisses as well.

p.6 Hey, this is great. I feel at home already. I don't mean the same as at home, but like being at your place.

Child: Are you healthy?

Me: Yes, Why?

Child: Good, then I'll be able to know you for a very long time.

You're really nice.

p.8 Not your parents, nor I, but only you can be boss over your own body, nobody else.

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