Guardian Editor

11 May 2022

Dear Sir,

We fundamentally disagree with Josie Dale-Jones that *The Family Sex Show* was cancelled due to children being taught ‘*shame and fear, of structural and societal attitudes towards relationships and sex education*’ ([Josie Dale-Jones](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/josie-dale-jones), Cancel culture? My play was shut down by rightwing activists before it even opened, 10 May 2022).

Josie Dale-Jones says the ‘*NSPCC also suggests that children under five show curiosity about naked bodies*’. This is different to encouraging young children to masturbate. The NSPCC also says that a sign of sexual abuse is ‘*knowledge of adult issues inappropriate for their age*’. The promoters of *The Family Sex Show* state the following:

*In the show we mention masturbation. All kinds of animals masturbate-not just humans. Use the internet to find some examples of other animals that masturbate. Why don’t you draw the animals you’ve found?*

Children were also encouraged to make their own ‘playdoh genitals’.

One does not need to be a ‘hard right Christian’ to believe that such an activity might not be age-appropriate for a child as young a five.

Early sexualisation of children and the normalisation of underage sex can lead to children being sexually abused. We have seen it time and time again, with local authorities turning a blind eye. The Family Education Trust’s 2017 report *Unprotected* drew on the evidence from seven serious case reviews and an independent inquiry into how sexual abuse had been handled by local authorities. These reports concluded that one of the biggest problems was treating children as if they were sexually mature adults and therefore allowing the abuse to continue. For example, the Oxfordshire serious case review found:

*The law around consent was not properly understood, and the Review finds confusion related to a national culture where children are sexualised at an ever younger age and deemed able to consent to, say, contraception long before they are able legally to have sex. A professional tolerance to knowing young teenagers were having sex with adults seems to have developed.’*

The *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham* found that:

*Children as young as 11 were deemed to be having consensual sexual intercourse when in fact they were being raped and abused by adults.*

The Bristol serious case review detected ‘*an underlying confusion for practitioners in distinguishing between underage but consensual sexual activity between peers and child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.*’

The *Unprotected* report was sent to politicians, police chiefs and heads of children’s safeguarding boards, yet it is hard to believe that five years later we are still fighting to protect children from being sexualised and exposed to abuse from predatory adults. Inclusion must never come at the cost of safeguarding children.

Labelling concerned parents and those working to protect children as ‘extremist right wing’ religious groups is not only untruthful but offensive. Jodie Dale-Jones denounces those worried about safeguarding as bigots saying:

*The outcry on social media and the subsequent petition used words and ideologies that are rooted in queerphobia, racism, fatphobia, ableism, misogyny and transphobia.*

Labelling anyone raising concerns about safeguarding children as a bigot is wrong. Would Jodie Dale-Jones label the authors of the safeguarding reports including distinguished academic Professor Alexis Jay who chaired the Independent Inquiry into Child Abuse as ‘extremist right wing’, racist, transphobic etc? Yet the parents and others who complained about *The Family Sex Show* were motivated by these same concerns about the premature sexualisation of children.

Rather than promoting this show, we suggest that Jodie Dale-Jones studies the evidence. For example, an inquiry by a committee of the Australian parliament into sexualisation of children in contemporary media found that:

*...we are...seeing with primary school children in relation to the sexualisation of children...increasing pressure to present themselves in a sexual way without the mature understanding that goes with that...[More] and more girls [are] feeling that they have to present themselves in a sexually attractive way, finding themselves in situations that they are not mature enough to handle and failing to develop those other aspects of themselves that childhood should allow them to develop normally…*

Amanda Gordon of the Australian Psychological Society further told the inquiry:

*Developmental psychologists have done a lot of research in this area and one of the problems is that many children can understand at a cognitive level, but it is very confusing at an emotional level because they are not yet ready to be sexual, to have those sexual messages.*

Given the evidence above we do not believe that exposing children to sex and nudity at the age of five is something likely to have a positive impact on children. Millions of people, regardless of their ethnic, religious or political background, think the same.

Yours sincerely



Piers Shepherd

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