

The emergence of the new interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies offers a window for queer-engaged classicists to contribute their perspectives on Greek pederasty to critical thinking about modern constructions of childhood sexual innocence and pedophilic predation. From the other side, contemporary social science debates over Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) can inform our judgments of the Greek practice and the active debates that surrounded it even in antiquity (cf. Plato’s *Phaedrus*). Moreover, a Childhood Studies perspective teaches us to embed our consideration of pederasty/CSA within a broader view of how cultures create and construct “childhood,” “adolescence,” and “adulthood” as distinct stages of life.

My paper will discuss an interdisciplinary Freshman Seminar on “Child Sexuality” I offered in Fall 2008 at the flagship public university in a very conservative US state, and the subsequent suppression of that course by faculty and administrators. My course began with the study of child and adolescent sexuality in historical context, focussing on three distinct cultures: classical Athens, Renaissance Italy, and Imperial China. Equal consideration was given to heterosexual and homosexual relations. The second third of the course shifted to a social science perspective, moving from comparative ethnography and primate zoology to social and developmental psychology. In the last third, we used the techniques of contemporary media studies to examine representations of sexually alluring or active children (and/or the putative dangers awaiting them) in advertising, film, and mass-market journalism. Finally, students were challenged to relate the various disciplinary perspectives they gained in the course to public policy debates on issues such as statutory rape laws, sex offender registries, virtual and real child pornography, “sexting,” sex education in public schools, access to contraception, and U.S. law compared to international human rights law. The course was all the more interesting in that the students were themselves all first-semester freshmen, 17-18 years old.

Although care was taken throughout to emphasize the delicate balance between child protection and recognition of children’s need for personal autonomy, some faculty and administrators at the institution were concerned that any attention to this subject might encourage a subversive apologetics for “molestation.” My paper will conclude with some thoughts on the implications for academic freedom and open inquiry, and the role classicists have to play in these ethical debates.