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Encounters with the Adolescent: Sex Education and the Problem of Forgetting

Adult anxieties about adolescent sexuality suggest a particularly virulent form of forgetting. Having survived their own adolescence, adults cast their own survival as the grounds for authority over the lives of adolescents. While adolescents, working hard at their own survival, must fight against the adult's authority. And it is in this psychical context that adults and adolescents attempt to have conversations with each other about the meanings of sexuality in adolescent life. Focusing on the meanings of "abstinence" in sex education, this paper investigates two difficulties that structure the field of sex education. Drawing upon the work of Klein and Bion, and focusing specifically on theories of splitting and projective identification, I consider how adults understand the concept of "abstinence" as the absence of an activity, a prohibition and a non-relation. While for youth who have come of age in an era of abstinence-only sex education abstinence is what we do with each other, sexually, when we are not "having sex." In thinking through these relations I ask, can we understand the split between adult and adolescent, prohibition and license, sex and abstinence, survival and murder as, in part, the adult's defense against the persistence of their own adolescence? What must the adult forget in order to "promote" abstinence? And how then, might encounters with the adolescent be read as an archive of the adult's development?

Jen Gilbert is an Associate Professor of Education at York University in Toronto. Her research interests include theories of adolescent development, sexual health education and the uses of film and literature in teaching. Her current projects include a study of the meanings of abstinence in the lives of youth and a book in progress titled, "Between Curiosity and Human Rights: Sexuality, Education and Human Development."