Investigating Cases of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse: Evaluating the Role of Positive Sexuality in Forensic Interviewing

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ABSTRACT

While a positive sexuality approach has been instrumental in fostering greater recognition and acceptance of diverse sexualities around the world, most legal and criminal justice systems have remained largely resistant to such an approach. This resistance is particularly acute in the United States, where sex-negative policies frequently clash with empirical science. Focusing on the U.S. sociolegal landscape as an example, this article evaluates the implications of this resistance for forensic interviewing in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse. We highlight critical deficiencies in current practices, including inadequate professional training, misunderstandings of adolescent development, and the failure to recognize gaps in sex education. We argue that integrating a positive sexuality approach allows forensic interviewers to distinguish between healthy, albeit stigmatized, exploration and genuine indicators of abuse. By prioritizing the assessment of consent over moral judgment of content, this approach enhances investigative accuracy and reduces false positives. These findings offer a necessary corrective for forensic practitioners and policymakers worldwide.

Keywords: *positive sexuality, forensic interviewing, sexual abuse, sex-negativity, criminology, sexual development, consent*

Introduction

A positive sexuality approach—characterized by its emphases on personal strengths and well-being, diversity, communication, and empowerment—provides a crucial framework for promoting sexual health and addressing sociosexual problems and issues (Williams, Thomas, Prior, et al., 2015; Williams & Thomas, 2023; World Health Organization, 2025). In recent years, such an approach has been instrumental in fostering greater recognition and acceptance of diverse sexualities, including LGBTQ+ identities (Alexander, 2019; Roach, 2021), non-monogamous relationships (Burnes et al., 2017; Sheff & Wolf, 2015), and BDSM practices and activities (Prior & Williams, 2025; Williams et al., 2020). Yet, despite these advancements, a pervasive social and political climate of sex-negativity persists around the world, threatening to undo this progress (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Prause & Williams, 2020). While this backlash is visible in many countries, it is particularly acute in the United States, where the American Civil Liberties Union (2025) is currently tracking over 600 anti-LGBTQ+ bills proposed by state and federal lawmakers.

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Though our analysis in this article focuses on the U.S. sociolegal landscape as an example, the conflict between entrenched sex-negativity and a positive sexuality approach is a transnational challenge, rendering the insights herein broadly relevant to practitioners and policymakers worldwide.

To counteract these trends, sexuality scholars and professionals have increasingly advocated for the application of a positive sexuality approach to a range of societal domains, including education (Laureano et al., 2025; Roach, 2024), religion (Weiss, 2022), technology (Döring & Poeschl, 2018, 2020), healthcare (Randall & Sprott, 2025), and especially mental and behavioral health (Anderson, 2013; Burnes et al., 2017). However, among societal domains, legal and criminal justice systems have remained largely resistant to such an approach, especially as seen within the United States (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015; Wodda & Panfil, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2025). In this article, we investigate the implications of this resistance for criminology and forensic science, focusing on how a positive sexuality approach could benefit forensic interviewing practices and outcomes in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse.

Resistance to Positive Sexuality within Criminology and Forensic Science

Undoubtedly, there is a pressing need for the application of a positive sexuality approach to criminology and forensic science. Indeed, research has consistently shown that sex-negative assumptions predominate within corresponding research, policy, and practice (Wodda & Panfil, 2018, 2021). For example, biases against and misunderstandings of sexual and gender minorities are well documented in policing (Goldberg et al., 2019; Owen et al., 2018), in judicial and sentencing processes (Mirabito & Lecci, 2021; Sheff, 2021; Silhan, 2011), and in carceral policies and procedures (Donohue et al., 2021; Rodgers et al., 2017).

Yet, some of the clearest examples of sex-negativity within criminology and forensic science can be seen in relation to sexual offending. In 2004, Quinn et al.'s comprehensive review of the literature found that, contrary to empirical evidence, sexual offending laws are often predicated on widespread myths and misconceptions. More recent research (Harper et al., 2017; Zatkin et al., 2022) continues to validate these findings, revealing that such myths and misconceptions appear to be largely driven by moral panic and conservative political impulses (Fox, 2013), including the erroneous idea that sexual offenders constitute a homogeneous group of morally-depraved individuals, that virtually all offenders will inevitably reoffend, and that treatment is ineffective—even though a substantial body of scholarship indicates otherwise (Laws & Marshall, 2003; Marshall & Laws, 2003; Schmucker & Lösel, 2017; Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2015). In addition, it is frequently assumed that punitive policies are both necessary and effective in preventing sexual offending, even though research shows that such policies are often costly and ineffective (Cochran et al., 2021). Alternatively, a positive sexuality approach aligns much more closely with actual empirical findings (Wodda & Panfil, 2021).

Thus, while concurring with the broad societal consensus that sexual offending is problematic and certainly must be addressed, the core question for a positive sexuality approach is how should society *best* respond in order to most effectively prevent sexual offending? Accordingly, it is crucial to consider: are current sexual offending laws, which are often rooted in widespread myths and misconceptions, the most effective option? Or should legal and criminal

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justice systems prioritize policies and practices that are grounded in contemporary scientific understanding? A positive sexuality approach strongly advocates for the latter.

Along these lines, we now investigate how sex-positive policies and practices could benefit forensic interviewing practices and outcomes in cases of potential adolescent sexual abuse. Not only is this an unexplored area for positive sexuality, but we suggest it is especially important, as taking a more sex-positive approach to the topic could help mitigate mistakes and consequences that can have inordinately negative effects on the lives of both potential victims and perpetrators. In the text that follows, we begin by considering the current context of forensic interviewing, and we then show how a positive sexuality approach illuminates several areas of deficiency common among forensic interviewers. After this, we explore how a positive sexuality approach could help address these deficiencies, along with the positive outcomes that doing so might produce.

Forensic Interviewing of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse: The Current Context

Helping professionals whose work involves forensic interviewing typically receive specialized training for conducting interviews in cases of suspected childhood and adolescent sexual abuse. Such training has improved considerably since the 1970s, when the problem of childhood sexual abuse became widely recognized (for a thorough review, see Faller, 2015). At the time, fear and sensationalizing of such abuse frequently led to problematic practices—such as interviewing potential victims multiple times and asking leading questions—practices that were later challenged when concerns of false allegations and false positives were more widely recognized (Faller, 2015, 2020; O'Donohue et al., 2018). Unfortunately, in many false positive cases, justice could not be restored for those accused, and careers were destroyed and lives were ruined.

In recent decades, numerous research studies of forensic interviewing have been conducted, leading to many helpful insights that have been incorporated into formalized training programs and practice guidelines (APSAC, 2023; Newlin et al., 2015). For example, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Forensic Interview Protocol (NICD, 2021) was developed through strong international collaborations based on a rich dataset of several thousand cases (Faller, 2015).

To be admissible in U.S. federal court, forensic interview testimony must meet the broader standards for expert witnesses (O'Donohue & Fanetti, 2015; Vieth, 2020). Specifically, testimony must be based on valid information and result from reliable principles consistently applied to the facts of the case. Contemporary best practices therefore emphasize a multi-faceted approach. First, interviewers must gain a thorough understanding of the child's age, development, and cultural background through collecting a comprehensive individual and family history. The interview itself should then follow sequential stages—rapport-building, information gathering, and closure—and utilize open-ended questions that respond to the unique characteristics of each situation (Faller, 2020; Hodshon & Maltby, 2019; Newlin et al., 2015). Establishing rapport is particularly critical when interviewing adolescents (Foster et al., 2023; Magnusson et al., 2020; Sauerland et al., 2019). Further, interviewers must remain acutely aware of personal and cultural biases, which can significantly influence both the questioning process and the interpretation of responses (APSAC,

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2023; Melinder et al., 2020). Finally, while the issue remains debated, most modern reports favor a single interview over multiple sessions (Faller, 2020; Newlin et al., 2015).

Clearly, current forensic interviewing, rooted in decades of research, has become far more reliable and valid compared to its unscientific beginnings. That being said, there remains a strong need for current multidisciplinary research on basic sexuality to be incorporated into forensic interviewing best practices, specifically as pertaining to adolescent interviewees. In particular, we identify three key areas of deficiency common among forensic interviewers.

Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Human Sexuality Training and Education

Practitioners conducting forensic interviews typically emerge from helping disciplines such as psychology, social work, counseling, and nursing. While these fields provide robust training in general mental health and development, they frequently suffer from a significant pedagogical gap regarding human sexuality. Research indicates that graduate programs in these disciplines impose minimal, if any, requirements for coursework in sexuality (Allen & Williams, 2025; Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Sanabria & Murray, 2018; Zeglin et al., 2019). Without a foundation of empirically grounded sexual competency, practitioners may default to personal values, cultural upbringing, or media representations—sources that inherently lack scientific objectivity and increase the potential for bias.

This lack of scientific-based education regarding human sexuality has direct implications for the forensic context. In the absence of specialized training, interviewers may inadvertently project personal discomfort or embarrassment when addressing specific sexual acts or anatomies. Adolescents are particularly attuned to such non-verbal cues; if a professional exhibits hesitation or uses euphemisms during an interview, the interviewee is likely to mirror that shame, potentially leading to reticence or withdrawal (Sanabria & Murray, 2018).

Further, when human sexuality is addressed within academic curricula, it is almost always framed through a dominant discourse of pathology and risk (Dodd & Katz, 2020). Clinicians are trained primarily to identify trauma, disease, and dysfunction. While this diagnostic skill set is essential, it establishes a skewed baseline wherein professionals are conditioned to view robust sexual interests as potential symptoms of disorder rather than normative developmental features. This problem-focused orientation hinders the ability to validate the healthy, pleasure-oriented, and consensual aspects of sexuality that are central to the human experience (Burnes et al., 2017).

Consequently, forensic interviewing faces a compounded challenge. Experts often enter the field with educational backgrounds that have either ignored or pathologized sexuality, only to operate within a legal system that is historically sex-negative. Lacking a framework for positive sexuality, interviewers are ill-equipped to challenge the myths and stigmas prevalent in the justice system. Instead of normalizing an adolescent's natural curiosity, the interview process risks reinforcing the perception that such sexual interests are inherently dangerous or deviant.

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Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Understanding Sexual Development and Diversity

A fundamental barrier to effective forensic interviewing is the pervasive societal construct of childhood innocence, which frames children and younger adolescents as inherently asexual. Contrary to this idealized view, sexual development is a continuous process that begins in utero and spans the entire life course (Hegde et al., 2022). As defined by the World Health Organization (2025), sexuality is a multidimensional construct shaped by the intersection of biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. It encompasses not only behaviors but also fantasies, desires, values, and identity formation. When forensic interviewers operate without a grounding in this developmental reality, they risk viewing any sexual expression in youth as an anomaly rather than a normative aspect of human growth (van Anders, 2015).

Adolescence serves as a critical period for this development, characterized by significant hormonal, physical, and psychological shifts. It is during this stage that sexual curiosities crystallize and specific identities—including LGBTQ+ and BDSM/kink orientations—often emerge (Sprott, 2023). From a positive sexuality perspective, the emergence of diverse sexual interests is not inherently pathological; however, because these identities remain highly stigmatized, adolescents often explore them in secrecy. If a forensic interviewer lacks an understanding of this normative diversity, they may misinterpret healthy identity exploration as evidence of grooming, confusion, or victimization (Williams & Sprott, 2022).

This disconnect is perhaps most visible regarding adolescent consumption of pornography. In the digital age, access to sexually explicit material is ubiquitous; a recent large-scale study indicated that 80% of young adults had viewed pornography (Astle et al., 2020). While some legislative bodies and moral frameworks label pornography as a public health crisis, empirical data suggest a more nuanced reality where adolescents utilize these materials for diverse reasons, ranging from simple curiosity to sexual learning (Ley, 2018; Vertongen et al., 2022). Despite evidence that pornography is not inherently harmful to the majority of viewers, many adults—including legal and helping professionals—view it through a lens of moral panic.

The implications for forensic interviewing are significant. When interviewers fail to distinguish between normative sexual curiosity and genuine indicators of abuse, they risk compromising the integrity of the investigation. For example, an interviewer acting on sex-negative assumptions might interpret an adolescent's knowledge of specific sexual acts or their history of viewing pornography as definitive markers of abuse, rather than common behaviors for their age group. This interpretive bias can derail the fact-finding process. By contrast, a positive sexuality approach equips interviewers to understand that an adolescent could be both a victim of abuse and a person with independent, healthy sexual curiosities. Acknowledging this complexity is essential for building the rapport necessary to elicit honest, accurate narratives in difficult cases.

Deficiencies among Forensic Interviewers in Recognizing Gaps in Adolescent Sex Education

The landscape of sex education policy in the United States is characterized by extensive fragmentation and inconsistency. While 41 states mandate some form of sex or HIV education, only 26 require that this information be medically accurate (Guttmacher Institute, 2025). Further,

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many curricula remain heavily skewed toward abstinence-based models or strictly biological mechanics—focusing on reproduction and disease prevention while systematically neglecting critical topics such as sexual diversity, identity development, pleasure, and communication (Hall et al., 2016).

This pedagogical narrowness creates a profound disconnect between the classroom and the lived reality of adolescents. Research indicates that current programs are often "out of touch" with youth experiences, failing to address the complexities of modern relationships (Pound et al., 2016). For instance, students frequently harbor unanswered questions regarding diverse sexual practices, including BDSM and kink—topics that remain taboo in school settings yet appear in the anonymous inquiries of students as young as middle school (Hughes, 2025). Consequently, adolescents are left without a framework to process their own curiosities or to navigate the social dynamics of sexuality in a healthy manner.

In the absence of comprehensive, medically accurate guidance from trusted adults, adolescents inevitably turn to digital ecosystems to fill this informational void. The internet and social media have become primary sources of sexual socialization (Parry, 2017; van Clief & Anemaat, 2020). This digital migration extends to sexual expression as well: "sexting" has become a normative, albeit risky, method for exploring emerging sexual identities (Anastassiou, 2017). While often viewed by adults solely as a liability, for many adolescents the electronic sharing of images is a means for seeking validation and connection in an environment where open discussion is otherwise restricted.

For the forensic interviewer, recognizing these educational deficits is paramount. Interviewers often assume that adolescent interviewees possess a baseline vocabulary and conceptual understanding of sexuality, when in fact, the educational system has likely failed to provide either. A forensic interviewer who is unaware of these gaps may misinterpret an adolescent's reliance on internet-based sexual knowledge or their engagement in sexting as evidence of deviance or distinct knowledge of abuse. Instead, these behaviors should often be understood as adaptive responses to a structural lack of education. Recognizing this context allows the interviewer to better assess the adolescent's intent and understanding, distinguishing between normative (although unsupervised) exploration and actual victimization.

Applying a Positive Sexuality Approach to Forensic Interviewing of Potential Adolescent Sexual Abuse

Applying a positive sexuality approach does more than merely align forensic practices with contemporary best practices; it directly remediates the systemic deficiencies identified earlier in this article. By addressing the inadequacies of professional training, misunderstandings of adolescent development, and gaps in sex education, a positive sexuality approach significantly increases the integrity, accuracy, and justice of the forensic interview.

To begin, a positive sexuality approach serves as a necessary corrective for the inadequate professional training of interviewers. As previously noted, most practitioners conducting forensic interviews operate from a default position of discomfort or pathologized sex-negativity, creating a barrier of shame that inhibits accurate fact-finding. Adopting a positive sexuality stance allows the

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interviewer to project openness rather than judgment during the critical rapport-building phase, signaling to the adolescent that their thoughts and behaviors will not be met with moral judgment. This reduction of shame is vital for investigative accuracy, particularly in uncovering biases that might otherwise obscure the truth. For example, sex-negative assumptions regarding gender and heterosexuality often lead interviewers to overlook victimization due to implicit bias—such as in cases of female-on-male sexual violence or abuse within LGBTQ+ relationships. A positive sexuality lens removes these blinders, allowing the interviewer to assess power dynamics and consent objectively, rather than relying on stereotypes about who can or cannot be a victim.

Further, this framework corrects the interpretive errors caused by a lack of understanding of normative sexual development. Without this knowledge, interviewers frequently conflate deviant interests with criminal risk. A positive sexuality approach resolves this by operationalizing the critical distinction between internal fantasy and behavioral violation. As Miner (2007) has elucidated, traditional forensic models often view deviant sexual fantasies as precursors to offending that must be eliminated; in contrast, a positive sexuality approach recognizes that while fantasies may be non-normative, they are not inherently problematic. Rather, it is the non-consensual acting out of those fantasies that constitutes harm.

This distinction is vital for accuracy in complex cases. Consider a scenario where an adolescent engages in consensual breath play ("choking"), resulting in bruising—a not uncommon event or outcome (Herbenick, Fu, et al., 2023; Herbenick, Patterson, et al., 2023). An interviewer operating from a traditional forensic stance might interpret the deviant nature of the act itself as evidence of pathology or abuse. However, an interviewer operating from a positive sexuality framework, who understands that kink interests are a growing component of adolescent identity, can look past the deviance of the act to focus squarely on the relevant legal question: Was there consent? By separating the content of the fantasy from the reality of the violation, the interviewer avoids false positives and centers the investigation on actual harm rather than moral judgment.

Finally, a positive sexuality approach is indispensable for navigating gaps in sex education. Because adolescents often rely on the internet for sexual socialization, their understanding of consent is frequently unrefined and context-dependent. Interviewers who ignore this educational void risk misclassifying behaviors as predatory or as distinct evidence of abuse when they are often adaptive attempts at connection. This is particularly relevant in the digital age: in cases involving the distribution of explicit images, a nuanced interview can distinguish between eager, peer-pressured, and coerced media sharing. Rather than applying a blanket punitive label to all sexting, the interviewer can assess the specific intent and understanding of the adolescent. When forensic professionals capture these distinctions accurately, the resulting evidence allows the judicial system to tailor its response more effectively, ensuring that legal outcomes scale appropriately to the offense rather than punishing an adolescent for navigating an educational void.

Conclusion

The field of forensic interviewing stands at a critical juncture. While rigorous protocols and best practices have significantly improved the technical reliability of interviews over the past few decades, the field remains hindered by a pervasive culture of sex-negativity and a systemic lack of professional education regarding human sexuality. As this article has demonstrated,

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forensic interviewers are frequently tasked with navigating complex cases involving adolescent development, digital socialization, and diverse sexual interests, yet they often lack the foundational knowledge required to interpret these factors accurately. Continued reliance on a deficit-based model—one that views non-normative sexual expression as inherently pathological—risks compromising the integrity of investigations and, by extension, the administration of justice.

By integrating a positive sexuality approach, the field can effectively address these long-standing deficiencies. Moving beyond the limited scope of traditional forensic training, a positive sexuality approach equips professionals with the competence to distinguish between healthy, albeit stigmatized, adolescent exploration and genuine indicators of abuse. Whether navigating the nuances of digital consent or evaluating the context of BDSM-related curiosities, this perspective replaces moral panic with empirical understanding. It allows the interviewer to build a deeper rapport based on trust and openness, thereby reducing the shame that so often silences adolescent victims or coerces false confessions from the confused.

Crucially, this paradigm shift does not compromise the rigor of the forensic process; rather, it enhances it. As argued throughout this article, the integration of human sexuality scholarship allows the legal system to operationalize the vital distinction between content and consent. By understanding that deviant fantasy and curiosity are often normative aspects of development, interviewers can stop policing thoughts and start rigorously assessing behavioral violations. This prevents the costly and damaging error of pathologizing normal development, ensuring that legal resources are focused squarely on preventing and responding to actual harm.

Ultimately, the pursuit of justice demands that investigative tools evolve alongside our scientific understanding of the human experience. As this analysis of the U.S. context illustrates, when forensic practices are isolated from a positive sexuality approach, they become vulnerable to the distorting effects of cultural bias and moral panic. This vulnerability, however, is not unique to any single country. Consequently, worldwide, it is no longer sufficient for forensic professionals to be experts solely in legal protocols; they must also become literate in the complexities of human sexuality. By embracing a positive sexuality approach, credentialing bodies, educational institutions, and individual practitioners can ensure that the forensic interview becomes a valid instrument of truth—one that protects the innocent, validates the victim, and upholds the dignity of adolescents across all legal systems.

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