

Young and old together

For lesbian and gay youth, having sexual relationships with older people creates an inherent power imbalance while providing support and positive role models

by Roxann McGlumphy

Jim and Rick have been seeing each other for a couple of months. They're sleeping together now. Jim's in his late thirties, Rick just celebrated his 21st birthday.

Or maybe it was his 19th. Or his 17th. 16th. 15th? At which point does this relationship become unacceptable? At what point does it stop being a relationship and become pedophilia?

This is a question many gays and lesbians are beginning to deal with. The OCA's depiction of gay people as child molesters makes many gay people sensitive to this issue. So does the presence of controversial groups, such as the North American Man-Boy Love Association. How does one draw boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable relationships with minors without restricting the freedom to choose one's own lifestyle, and without being patronizing and sex-negative to young gays and lesbians?

One might look to legal definitions and regulations to provide some basic guidelines to approaching this issue, but many people find the law problematic at best. The legal age of consent in Oregon is 18. This means a relationship between a 17 year old and a 20 year old would be in violation of the law. Some states also have different ages of consent for heterosexual and homosexual activity. Some people argue that age of consent should be done away with, that it is basically an arbitrary decision that discriminates against young people by taking away their right to make decisions about their own bodies and actions. They point out that there are many people who are below the age of consent who are better able to make sexual decisions than people 10 and 20 years their senior. But while many people may believe that age of consent laws are not effective, the idea of eliminating age of consent laws entirely makes most people uncomfortable.

Perhaps this is because consent, especially where young people are concerned, is not as simple as "yes" or "no." Consent means a choice between different options, the ability to exercise personal power, which to some degree in this society is a function of age. People who are young and gay live in a situation of being personally disadvantaged in ways that are specific to being young and gay, just as racism creates a situation of disadvantage specific to people of color. Adults are given power over young people in general in this society. "Just do as you're told!" or "Because I said so!" are not generally used between adults, but routinely used with minors. This creates a power imbalance in adult and minor relationships of any sort. With gay and lesbian youth, this is aggravated by the additional problems many young gays and lesbians face. They cannot go to parents or friends for advice if they are closeted. They may not know any other lesbian and gay people with whom to discuss their feelings, or to act as role models. Finding a gay or lesbian person their own age to date is very difficult. And if something does go wrong, disclosure of their sexuality could mean the loss of everything: friends, family, support, shelter, food. By contrast, most adults are self-supporting and relatively independent in their lifestyles. A young lesbian or gay person may be in a situation where he or she thinks, "Well, this is all I can get, so I might as well take it." An older person has the ability to provide the role modelling, support, and acceptance that a young gay or lesbian person may not be able to find anywhere else.

For example, Tony was 17 years old when he had his first sexual experience, with a man he estimates was somewhere in his 40's. Tony was extremely lonely and depressed. He said he was ready to do just about anything "just to be with someone." So he picked up this man and went to

a hotel with him. Tony said he was sure the man knew that he was a minor, although Tony did not specifically state his age. While he admits that he initiated the incident, he is still hurt and resentful. He feels that he was taken advantage of, and he wishes the man would have respected his youth.

This is not to say that people of the same age don't use and take advantage of one another, but there is an additional leverage that age and experience carry which needs to be taken into consideration, especially for a young person who may have no other role model. Tony said that the fact that the man was so much older and more experienced made the situation more painful than it would have been with a person his own age, because he looked up to this man as an authority figure, and he felt that his trust was betrayed. "I mean, I wanted someone to talk to. I told him afterwards that it was my first experience. I mean, he had to help me through the whole thing, and he seemed really proud of it. It was like he was the teacher or something. It wasn't equal at all, and to me that's just not a good thing."

To further complicate the issue of consent between a minor and an adult, there is the issue of child sexual abuse. With the abuse statistics running between 25 percent and 40 percent for girls, and between 10 percent and 20 percent for boys, it is an issue that must be dealt with. While an adult in a relationship with a minor may have no intent to abuse, the authority that comes with age may combine with a history of abuse to produce very damaging results.

When L- was 15, he met a gay man who he looked up to as a friend and mentor. One day the man took him for a drive and propositioned him. L-froze up. He didn't refuse; he couldn't. The man took this for consent, L- went along with it, and they had sex. L- was very upset. He felt as

though he had been raped. He later realized, during rape awareness week at his college, that he had been sexually abused as a little boy. He had not been able to say no to that man just as he had not been able to say no as a child.

Society engineers a built-in power imbalance in any relationship between an adult and a minor. This puts gay and lesbian youth in a position of having less leverage to exercise power in a relationship with an older person. This does not necessarily mean that adult/minor relationships are doomed to oppression and abuse. In *One Teenager in Ten*, a collection of coming out stories by lesbian and gay youth, there are a number of very positive stories about relationships with much older lovers. One young woman wrote that she couldn't find another lover who treated her with the same respect as her first lover, her dance teacher, had.

In the end, the solution to this problem will begin with respect. This issue will only become more pressing as more and more young gay and lesbian people come out. If the issue is ignored or passed over lightly, young people will be hurt. Age of consent laws are awkward, band-aid measures at best. Eighteen is not a magic number, and there is a wide difference between legal majority and emotional maturity. Young people are not immature, weak-minded fools who need to be protected from evil adult marauders. On the other hand, lesbian and gay youth are in a uniquely vulnerable situation that needs to be handled with great care. They don't need to be patronized and condescended to. What they need are more than a few poor options, especially in meeting other gay and lesbian people, and the real power to choose. They need respect for both their intelligence and their youth.

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