

Prudery and Children

by Francis Bennion

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Doc. No. 2002.023

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[The following letter was sent to *The Daily Telegraph* by FB on 8 May 2002. It was not published but the piece which follows it appeared in the paper's John Clare column on 22 May 2002. The present item ends with an extract from the relevant official guidance.]

FB's letter

'I was disappointed to read John Clare's remarks today on privacy in the showers. In my book *The Sex Code* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) I document the dangers of encouraging prudery in children. For example:

'Prudery was introduced at Harrow School in the second half of the twentieth century. Daphne Rae, wife of one of the Harrow masters of that period boasts in a book of reminiscences how she succeeded in effecting this change at Ducker (the open air bathing place) so that ladies such as herself would not be embarrassed by the hairy and spotty nudity of the school's complement of adolescent youths. Mrs Rae goes on to suggest that hiding the genitalia of their fellows might save some boys from homosexuality. The reverse is more likely to be the case. Evidently Mrs Rae is unaware of the corrosive power, within the sexual realm, of unsatisfied curiosity.'

I give one other extract from my book. Dr G B Barker, consultant psychiatrist, is quoted as saying:

'I would state dogmatically that if nudity was accepted completely from the earliest age, there would be far less neurotic unhappiness, and less need for vicarious enjoyments of alternatives to sexuality (e.g. pornography). It is likely also that there would be less promiscuity, because promiscuity is based upon the neurotic inability to find or to form an adult relationship.'

In my view the school privacy requirement John Clare quotes from the new National Boarding Standards is wrong and dangerous.'

John Clare column

The extract from the John Clare column is as follows.

'Well done the Dorset prep school who sees no reason why nudity should embarrass its pupils! Youngsters who use communal showers grow up with healthy attitudes. So wrote Peter Thompson though he cited no evidence. "Encouraging prudery in children" is dangerous, warned Francis Bennion, author of *The Sex Code*. Unsatisfied curiosity has a corrosive power, leading to neurotic unhappiness and the need for pornography. Arthur Roberts agreed. Being naked together was a "natural, healthy and honourable state". Simon Grove, another nudist, said it was plain I had never been to boarding school – I went to three and taught at a fourth – and accused me of "prurience and political correctness". As the Americans would say thank you for sharing those insights.'

Latest official guidance

The *National Minimum Standards for Boarding Schools* is described as 'A statement of national minimum standards published by the Secretary of State under section 87(1) of the Children Act 1989'. It is applicable to any school (within the meaning in the Education Act 1996) which provides accommodation but is not a special school, a children's home or a care

home. It is used by Ofsted in relation to the inspection of boarding schools to safeguard and promote the welfare of pupils. The latest statement dated September 2010 requires the following regarding privacy in bathing.

‘44.6 Each boarding house has at least one shower or bath for every 10 boarders, most of this provision comprising showers, and . . . all showers and baths used for personal washing in boarding houses are separated into individual rooms or cubicles, or where in the same area are capable of being individually separated by curtaining if boarders wish . . .’

This virtually marks the end of communal showering and the loss of a vital aspect of boarding education, namely learning in a practical way about the sexual anatomy of one’s fellows (particularly those who are a little older). This learning (in place of deliberate mystification) is important to mental and emotional health and development. Prudery is its enemy. The phrase ‘if boarders wish’ is pregnant with difficulty. What will be the fate of the child who asks for curtaining where the prevailing ethos is a robust openness?

References

None