CHAPTER THREE

Sexual Hygiene and the Habituation of Childhood Sexuality

Introduction

They must have both their own natures and the conditions of the environment explained and interpreted to them in the light of all that we have discovered of successful sex life in order that they, in turn, may use their sexual and other qualities to advantage. This adequate sex-social education is our best chance to help children solve from the inside the problems of their own lives as they arise.

Thomas W. Galloway (1924)

In his role as the director of the Sex Education Program for the American Social Hygiene Association, Thomas Galloway illuminated the gravity of sex instruction for teachers and other professionals in his 1924 text *Sex and Social Health*. An education in hygiene, due to its ability to shape and train the sexual impulse, supplied a threefold promise: perfection in the individual, the family, and the race. Distancing himself from earlier sexual reform movements, Galloway argued that science would provide a rational prophylaxis against the “misuses” of sex that resulted in “bodily disease and death, personal unhappiness and torture of the mind” as well as “disintegration of individual character, and in social distrust and decay” (126).¹ For Galloway, the aspirations of sexual hygiene could be realized through the body of the child trained in a frank and scientific “sex-social education,” because such instruction would create an “understanding of society” in the child, “so that certain favored forms of conduct and qualities [would] be strengthened...
and made habitual” (127). More generally, social hygiene transformed the locus of concern surrounding the child and its sexuality from a predominately individualistic, moral, and familial endeavor (as was the case in the social purity movement) to a “progressive” and public normalizing project. The concept of “normal” being deployed by this discourse was a definitively narrow and constricted one, as the movement sought to create and reproduce acceptable gender characteristics and reproductive monogamy in the child. This transition in approach was fostered through the legitimacy of medical expertise, the advancement of childhood as a “community” problem in need of a scientific cure, and their reliance on and contribution to the scientific examination of sexuality that took place at the turn of the century.

Sexual hygiene’s mission to “adjust” the child’s sexuality in order to ensure its healthy “relationship to [the] community” and its commitment to “the responsibilities and obligations” of adulthood has strong connections to the medico-moral project of social purity, albeit through different methods and in less overtly moral language (Gruenberg 1948, xi). Advocates working in the sexual hygiene movement attempted to shape the sexual instinct of the child in order to deliver socially beneficial results through rational medical means (ibid.). As a result, childhood sexuality was constructed as a site in need of precautionary intervention and as a justification for wider social reform. In his writings for the United States Public Health Service, Benjamin Gruenberg argued that “the individual has always had to adjust his desire to the needs of the group” as well as society at large (ibid.). The commitment for a hygienic solution was portrayed as part and parcel of a citizen’s social responsibility and affirmed their rational program as the most suitable means to attain this end. Hygiene reformers validated their entrée into this domain of knowledge through their training as “medical” and “scientific” experts that, ideally, provided both an accurate and objective lens. As we illustrate in the following chapters, in this respect, sexology, psychoanalysis, and theorists of child development employed similar claims of scientific legitimacy. Sexual hygiene furthered not only the normalization of the child’s sexuality (a project repeated in psychoanalysis and development, although through different means), but extended their aims beyond the other discourses explored in this book with their attempts to create a predictive and pronatalist model that could ensure heterosexual marriage and fit offspring for a more eugenic future.2

As we discussed in chapter two, social purity campaigns sought to curb sexual vice and moral turpitude more generally through the abolition of obscene materials and the teaching of proper child-rearing practices. In this regard, purity campaigners focused their energy on the