In the United States and Western Europe, heterosexual sex within a marriage relationship has generally been approved, but other types of sexual relationships have often had a bumpy ride. Overall, since Victorian times, the movement has been towards sexual liberation, and by the end of the twentieth century cultural and legal restrictions on masturbation, homosexuality, consensual heterosexual sex outside of a marriage relationship, sexual images, and private S&M relationships between consenting partners, had decreased. Only in the area of youth sex (here defining youths as kids between 11 and 14 or 15) had the controls and restrictions increased. This was true for both behavior and representations of youthful bodies. Though “coming of age” novels and stories remain popular, and highly sensual advertising images of youths are allowed, even relatively bland images of nude youths are illegal child pornography. It is forbidden to make them, to sell or distribute them, or to possess them even if they were acquired for free. Unlike many moralistic laws, legislation in this area is enforced, and the penalties for possession of child pornography are severe. The Court has excluded most contemporary images from First Amendment protection, though images of murder, torture, and adult sex are protected. Even the pictures in this book, which are (of course) legal, will strike many as dangerous and obscene. The restrictions on pictures of nude youths are usually justified as a sign of moral progress, but that justification needs to be examined.

A range of explanations can be given for the fact that our attitudes towards children and the representation of their bodies has moved in a divergent direction from our attitudes towards representations of adult sexuality, and these will be examined in this book. The construction of a separate sphere for youth sexuality has been one of the landmark features of twentieth century sexual politics, and it is one that has rarely been examined. The regulations are almost always justified by claims of protecting kids from harm. Kids (at least when we are not castigating them for being disrespectful and disobedient) are believed to embody innocence and purity. “Is it good for the children?” has become a common and popular moral question. They are a relatively new moral focus. At the end of the nineteenth century, before the cult of the innocent child developed, they were not objects of special protection. Poor youths worked in factories or
mines. Methods of discipline were often harsh. Young virgins were considered sexually desirable. There were significant attempts to control youth sexuality, especially masturbation, but it wasn’t controlled by the law, but within the family. There was little government regulation of children as a special class, and little special protection of them. What protection of them there was usually came from women, and attempts to restrict children’s sexuality were a part of the general movement to restrict sexuality, not something that was especially directed at children.

Sexual behavior is often considered a private moral issue rather than a political one, and the politics of sex – attempts to make public policies controlling sexual activity and the types of sex that are legitimate or that can be discussed or portrayed – is often considered trivial and unworthy of serious study. Though sex has not yet had its Karl Marx, some important theorists, like Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, have argued that changes in sexual attitudes and behavior cause political change. There are important strands of American and European youth cultures that have echoed this belief. These arguments will be examined in this book, though the evidence for them is not overwhelming.

A second perspective is that sexual attitudes and behaviors do not control politics, but are legitimately controlled by laws and legal regulations. In the United States, for example, there are numerous laws regulating sexual behavior, and these laws and policies are at the center of important political conflicts. Marriage, youth sex, contraception, homosexuality, sex education, abortion, pornography and obscenity have all been objects of intense political conflicts. The government’s concern with sexual issues is part of the police power to protect the health, safety and morals of the people. The idea that the state should protect morality is grounded in ancient, theocratic theories, and has been carried over with a number of different justifications.

Hobbes, Locke, and the theorists of liberal democracy had a more restrictive view of the government’s role in morals issues, and generally grounded the government’s right to limit behavior in what became known as the “harm principle.” This principle has altered the way we argue about morals issues, though it often changed the rhetoric more than the substance of the regulation. The most famous formulation of the harm principle is John Stuart Mill’s. He wrote that:

...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or
collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right...The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

There were some restrictions on this principle: it applied only to adults who were free, competent to choose, and informed of the issues. Slowly, political control of adult sexual behavior has given way before birth control pills, increasing individualism, growing distrust in the morality of the political classes, gay rights movements, feminism, rock music and early puberty. Important regulations remain, and struggles over them lay at the heart of the various culture wars, but the harm principle often changed the justification for regulation. Until recently, issues were no longer argued in terms of morality, but in terms of social harm. With the rise of fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity arguments for an absolute morality, justified in moral terms rather than in terms of the harm principle, re-emerged into the political discourse. There is again a strong movement to restrict homosexuality, pre-marital sex and birth control because it is immoral, not only because it causes social harm. Whether this is just another bump along the path towards the privatization of moral issues, or is a significant change in direction, is still unclear.

When youths are considered, there is a paradigm shift. The most significant difference is that there is hardly any debate: there is a broad consensus that young people and sex or sensuality don’t mix, and the position is fiercely defended. When youth sex is discussed it is almost always framed as a problem, and when statistics indicate that teen sex has decreased it is almost always considered to be progress. Though many people in the culture consider sexual enjoyment a good thing, and go to sex therapists or take pills of different types if they are having trouble having sex, we don't try and socialize youths into our sexual value system, but rather try to protect them from it. Youths are neither supposed to desire sex nor
be sexually desirable. They need to be protected against viewing erotic images. Their education and behavior in this area is supposed to be tightly controlled, and we use our fear of youth sex and rebelliousness to justify attempts to control what they read and think. All in the name of their own good.

There is one outstanding exception to this movement. Policies affecting children and youths have become significantly more restrictive. These regulations are almost always justified by claims of protecting kids from harm. Kids (at least when we are not castigating them for being disrespectful and disobedient) are believed to embody innocence and purity. "Is it good for the children?" has become a common and popular moral question. They are a relatively new moral focus. At the end of the nineteenth century, before the cult of the innocent child developed, they were not objects of special protection. Poor youths worked in factories or mines. Methods of discipline were often harsh. Young virgins were considered sexually desirable. Youth sexuality, especially masturbation, was strictly controlled. But it wasn’t controlled by government policy or law, but within the family. There was little government regulation of children as a special class, and little special protection of them. What protection of them there was usually tied together with the protection of women. The concern to restrict children’s sexuality was a part of the general movement to restrict sexuality, not something that was especially directed at children.