

# John Holt a Libelous Meme

by Pat Farenga

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A cherry-picked, repurposed quote has been circulated in a meme which amounts to a libel against John Holt, possibly to unjustly discredit his work. This is a rebuttal of this foul meme.

John Holt never wrote that consensual sex between children and adults is okay, as some are claiming based on this meme. Particularly in this age of fake news, we should be more skeptical and read readily available documents to confirm such wild insinuations about a well-loved, deceased writer before spreading them.

Before getting into the details I am compelled to refute, let me note that this book, which came out in 1971, has always been controversial because of its subject matter—children’s rights—but no reviewer or reader until 2017 has made such an accusation about Holt and this book. This is, I think, because it is clear from reading the book that though Holt is discussing difficult topics that make us uncomfortable, he is doing so in a serious and humane way. When I republished the book in 2015 the people who provided blurbs for it and those who purchased the book understood Holt’s sincerity and purpose and I have not received a complaint about the book; though some disagree with Holt’s ideas in the book they never choose to twist his words and attack his character for writing about these issues—until this.

The first and last quotes were excerpted and published in MS. Magazine in an article:

“The Cuteness Syndrome, Kitchie-Kitchie Koo, and Other Problems.”

[\[http://johnholtgws.squarespace.com/escape-from-childhood/2013/1/24/escape-from-childhood-the-needs-and-rights-of-children\]](http://johnholtgws.squarespace.com/escape-from-childhood/2013/1/24/escape-from-childhood-the-needs-and-rights-of-children)

Other selections from *Escape from Childhood* were chosen by *Psychology Today* for publication, so these major magazines did not detect the prurience this meme claims. We also reprinted and sold those articles and the book through GWS magazine for decades without complaints from the public. This is an issue now because this meme deliberately creates a public issue with a terrible libel that uses carefully edited phrases to portray Holt as endorsing sex with children.

Let’s start with the first quote in the meme, which purposely takes Holt’s words about a 10-year-old girl out of context and sets the sexual tone for all the follows. The meme notes these are quotes from *Escape from Childhood* and starts, “Talking about a 10-year-old girl—” and the quote follows.

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The police-transcript tone of that introduction frames the quote as sexual yearning by Holt, which is the furthest thing from the truth. The quote is taken from the chapter “How Children Exploit Cuteness” which begins:

“A man once said to me, “I have two small children, and I think they’re cute, and I still don’t see what harm there is in it.” I said that perhaps, despite his thinking of them as cute, the way in which he lived, talked, and dealt with his children might in fact do no harm. Without seeing him and his children together, I could not tell. But this habit of seeing them as cute had great dangers in it.

“For one thing it tended to make him see them abstractly. This abstractness is the enemy of true understanding, sympathy, or love.

“When one person sees and deals with another not as a unique person but as an example of a type, whether Celebrity, Black, Sex Symbol, Great Genius, Artist, Saint, or whatever, he diminishes that person and makes it hard for any natural relationship to grow between them. This is what we do to children when we see them as Cute, Adorable, Innocent. . .”

That’s the proper context for the quote, not that creepy, curt introduction. At the end of this chapter, the first quote (in bold in the full quote below) in the meme appears (“Talking about a 10-year old-girl—”):

“This child in my class, when younger, had apparently been very pretty. All the teachers who had taught her in our school assured me that she was adorable and that I would just love her. She proved to be by all odds the most unhappy, angry, disagreeable, self-hating, and self-destructive child of that age I have ever known. Much of the time she tried to boss the other children around at the top of her voice. When they grew tired of this and would not stand for it any longer, refused to do what she ordered, or ignored her, she would pout, sulk, and usually cry. As I knew her better it seemed more and more clear that in all her life she had never known any relationships with people that were not mutually exploitative. While the adults, dance directors, parents, exploited her littleness and cuteness to get warm feelings and misty eyes, she used these same qualities to get out of the adults whatever she wanted. **She knew no way of dealing with other people except seduction, and when that failed, tears and rage. Now that she was no longer cute, but had become a sugar addict, fat, lazy, and inactive, seduction failed more and more. But she had nothing else. Seduction was all she knew.**

“What kind of adults will such children become? What kind of society will they make? What will they do to satisfy their insatiable craving for the approval of other people?

“Many people call such artful, affected, seductive behavior “babyish.” This is a terrible libel on babies. Babies are not “babyish.” Up to the age of a year, at least, they are intensely serious. They like to laugh but when not laughing they are on the whole solemn, frank, and direct. They are not connivers, seducers, tricksters. We might well say that, in spite of their littleness and helplessness, babies act more grown up, in the

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best sense, than they will a few years later. They have to learn to act “babyish.” Some learn it at home, some in school. A mother discussing this with me said, as many mothers have, that her child never picked up this sort of artificial, affected, silly behavior until she went to school. She saw the other children do it, saw that it worked with most teachers, and was often anxious enough to feel she needed to do it herself. A few children have the integrity and courage not to give in. They are often labeled stubborn, defiant, troublemakers. Most of them soon fall in line.”

The meme is hardly a reflection of the actual, complicated questions and concerns that Holt sees wrapped up in this young girl’s manipulative behavior.

The next and longest quote is a pastiche of sentences from one of the book’s shortest chapters, “The Law, The Young, And Sex.” The quote has extensive cuts made regarding the medical evidence about puberty and women’s reproductive rights. As you can read, doing this makes it seem like Holt is advocating to keep young sex objects from getting pregnant, rather than the real issue he makes about women’s reproductive rights and protecting young women from unwanted pregnancies. Again, the meme’s sentences are in bold so you can see the extent of cutting and pasting done to the original:

**“Another reason why we shrink from giving children control of their sex lives is that many of us, including many whose views on adult sex are quite liberal, still believe and need to believe that children are “innocent” and “pure,” that is, asexual, untainted by sexual thoughts, feelings, or urges. There is increasing evidence that this is not true even of very young children and it is certainly not true of children much past the age of ten or eleven. Many studies seem to show that young people are reaching puberty at even earlier ages. But we cling to this view of children for many reasons not the least of which is that pretending they have no sexual feeling makes it easier for us to ignore or deny the sexual part of their attraction for us. We feel free to use them as love objects partly because we can tell ourselves that, since it is impossible, it would never occur to us to use them, or them to use us, as sex objects.**

“Some say that since women must bear the consequences of sex — pregnancy and childbirth—the law must protect them against sex, above all if they are young, lest they become pregnant against their will. This makes some sense in a society that, like most today, has not yet allowed women to decide whether they will

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have children or not, or how many, but instead treats them in this respect as baby-producing machines controlled by men and the state. Right now many young women in increasing numbers, in spite of (or perhaps because of) the law, and at earlier and earlier ages, become pregnant without wanting to, and must bear children they do not want and don't know what to do with. This causes them, and certainly the children, many serious social and emotional problems, from which any humane person would want to spare them. Beyond this there is increasing evidence that early pregnancies, like very late ones, are much more likely to produce defective children.

**“We could easily avert these problems, dangers, and tragedies if we told children when they were young, or simply let them find out, about sex, procreation, birth, and contraception. If by the age of ten all young people knew how pregnancies occur and how they can be prevented, if birth control materials and advice were widely and cheaply available to any and all who asked for them, if beyond that we developed, as we probably could, a safer and easily available retroactive or after-the-event birth control pill, or an effective male contraceptive, there would be almost no unwanted pregnancies. If we also developed and made available safe, easy, and cheap ways to end such unwanted pregnancies as did occur, there would be very few unwanted children. Then at least this reason for thinking that we have to protect inexperienced young girls from the perils of sex would no longer have weight.**

**“Some people have voiced to me the fear that if it were legal for an adult to have sex with a consenting child, many young people would be exploited by unscrupulous older ones. The image here is of the innocent young girl and the dirty old man; few worry about the young boy having sex with an older woman. Here, too, we are caught with the remains of old myths—in this case, that only men were sexual, that women were pure and above it—from which it follows that any young girl having sex with an older man must necessarily be his victim.**

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“A mother of three daughters told me once that because she, speaking for society, was able to tell one of her daughters that she could not sleep with a young man who wanted to sleep with her and was using various kinds of blackmail in order to get her to do it, the daughter was protected. She did not have to say no for herself. She could even say things like, “I’d like to but my mother would kill me.” But this is all in the context of a society in which men exploit women as sex objects. In a society such as I propose, the dangers (to the daughter) of sex would be less. At the same time the pressure on the young man to make a conquest would also be much less. If sex were not seen as dangerous, romantic, and ecstatic, and at the same time dirty and disgusting, there would be less need to protect people from it, and they would be more able to protect themselves. Women who did not feel that their worth depended on their being sexually attractive to men would not be swayed by the kind of blackmail boys use on girls today—indeed, they would be turned away by it. A young man who tried it would soon be out of luck.

“But if young people living as independent and responsible citizens have the same rights as any other citizens in matters of sex, should those still living as dependents have the right to control their own sex lives? Should their guardians have any say in the matter? If they disagree, should the law step in, and if so, how?

“I find myself in a number of tensions or internal conflicts here. I don’t want the state to have any more power over the private lives of people, including young people, than it now has. By the same token, I don’t want anyone, young or old, to have less control of his sex life than he has now. In short, I don’t want the law to say that young people should not have the right to do what in fact a great many of them do right now. But it is not easy to know what power the state now has and, therefore, what rights the young now have.”

When you read the seven paragraphs as Holt intended, I think it is clear that he is questioning and examining the confusions and double standards we have about age and sex in our society and he is not endorsing consensual sex as the meme insinuates.

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The final quote is, as noted, from an earlier chapter, “How Children Exploit Cuteness” and deliberately placed out of order so the sentence that ends the meme has a creepy connotation: “He may seek in children the ideal lover of his dreams.” Let’s look at the four sentences in the meme in their proper context:

“When we think that children are cute we tend to use their cuteness to arouse in ourselves feelings which give us pleasure and which make us feel proud for having them. This alone would be bad enough. But this exploitation of the child becomes mutual. As we exploit him, we teach him to exploit us. We exploit his cuteness; he exploits our need to have him behave cutely. He learns when very young that when he behaves towards us in certain ways we are pleased and when he does not we are hurt or angry. If this were only a matter of such behavior as eating his food or not breaking things or pulling the kitten’s tail, there would be no harm in it. Usually it is not that simple. The child senses that we want something from him but he is not sure what it is. If he is very strong and independent, he may not give the matter much more thought. Otherwise he will begin to try to find out how to play this game the adults want him to join in playing.

**“What the adult wants, of course, is to use this child as love object, to have him act out the part of Ideal Cute Child. Often he may want even more. The person who says how much he loves children may only and really be saying how much he needs to be loved by children, may want from them the kind of uncritical, undemanding, unconditional, total love a baby wants from its mother. He may want to reverse the roles, make himself the child and the children his parents, have them give him what no one else has ever given him. He may seek in children the ideal lover of his dreams.**

“A subtle power struggle may then begin: As he figures out what the adult wants, the child may decide to give it to him then and there and get his reward. Or he may decide to hold out, to refuse to give the adult what he wants, in order to see what happens next. He begins to tease and coquette. More often than not, the adult, if his need to use the cute child as love object is great, will begin to plead, cajole, tempt, bargain, and even threaten. The child soon learns that the longer he holds out, the greater his rewards will be, at least up to the point where the now disappointed and angry adult refuses to play any longer. How far can he push this point? How long can he hold out on the adult who wants him to smile at him, play games with him, sit on his lap, give him a kiss? Much of this calculating and game-playing is unconscious, goes on at various emotional or gut levels. But if it goes on very long, if the child cannot escape from these games, these mutual exploitations of need, they will surely destroy his character.”

The fact that Holt is trying to explain how we might protect a child from being exploited by emotionally needy adults is ignored—in fact, turned upside down—by this meme.

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Two last points: first, more on context: Children's rights were easier to talk about in the 1970s than today; liberation of all sorts was very much in the air in the early 1970s and you can find books and films about children's rights, such as the collection Ron and Bea Gross edited, *The Children's Rights Movement*, to learn more about it. Holt didn't write *Escape From Childhood* in a social vacuum.

Second, Holt ends the chapter "The Law, The Young, And Sex" by supporting parental rights over their dependents' rights, which undercuts the libertine image the meme attempts to plant about Holt.

Still another tension. On the one hand, it seems only right and fair that as long as a young person has chosen to remain a child, dependent on his parents or other guardians, his sex life, at least in their house, should be their business. If they approve of, or at least don't mind, his having sexual relations with others, there is no problem. But if they dislike it or disapprove of it, there is no reason why they should have to allow it to go on under their noses.

Holt and *Escape From Childhood* challenge many contemporary beliefs and attitudes about children in our society, but I never thought it would be so misrepresented that I would need to write an explanation like this. Please stop spreading this mean-spirited, misinformed meme.