

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## *The Normal Foreskin: Circumcision Debates in Puberty Books*

By Jonathan A. Allan, PhD



### **Why this research is important**

To circumcise or not to circumcise? Oftentimes, parents debate whether or not to circumcise their neonates, and one fear that parents repeatedly mention is that their child will be teased in the locker room. This project set out to study discussions of the foreskin and circumcision in puberty and sex ed manuals for teenagers. These books are important for sexual health and wellbeing and contribute to a greater understanding of self and the body, as well as ideas of what is “normal.”

### **What you need to know**

Puberty is a confusing time. There are lots of mixed messages, especially about what is or is not normal. Books about puberty provide young readers with information about their bodies and do so in a way that seeks to ensure that all bodies are normal bodies. While circumcision is being debated and scrutinized, these books assure readers that they—and their penises—are normal.

*The Normal Foreskin: Circumcision Debates in Puberty Books* is published Open Access by Boyhood Studies.

### **How the research was conducted**

This research was conducted by reviewing about a dozen puberty manuals, most of which were published in the United States of America, where routine neonatal circumcision is normative. However, in recent years, there has been a steady decline in circumcision, and there are growing concerns about what is normal. As such, this project studied how puberty manuals address the foreskin and circumcision. Analysis was both at a textual and a visual level.

## What the researcher found

Perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not, this study found that nearly all puberty manuals address the foreskin and circumcision. Moreover, the books all work to alleviate any worries the readers may have about their penis by assuring them that all penises are normal. Neither a circumcised nor an intact penis is better than the other. Some books provide reasons for why circumcision is performed, usually noting that it is cultural or religious, though some mention hygienic reasons for circumcision (such as smegma). Importantly, the location of the publisher often impacted the discussion. For example, American publications tend to privilege the circumcised penis, whereas publications in the UK and Canada will note, as *Growing Up for Boys* did, that “every boy is born with a foreskin.” This is a subtle, but important, difference.

Importantly, circumcision debates (or debates about the foreskin) are not limited to just scientific literature, but rather are found in books about sex education and puberty (in addition to other spaces, such as news media, letters to the editor, sex columns, etc.). These books are important for both young readers and adult readers alike as they provide information about the care of the penis, the foreskin, and circumcision.

## How this research can be used

The results of this research demonstrate the importance of accurate information about not only the penis, but also the foreskin and circumcision, particularly for pubescent readers. These books need to be collected and made available to young readers who may have questions about whether or not their genitals are “normal.” Importantly, these books also provide parents and educators with language about the foreskin and circumcision.

## About the researcher

Jonathan A. Allan is Canada Research Chair in Men and Masculinities and Professor of English, Drama, and Creative Writing at Brandon University.

He is the author of *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* (Routledge, 2022), *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* (Routledge, 2019) and *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* (University of Regina Press and Zed Books, 2016). His current projects include two books: *Uncut: A Cultural Analysis of the Foreskin* (University of Regina Press) and *Snip Snap: A Cultural Analysis of Vasectomy* (University of British Columbia Press).

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## Publication based on this research

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