

Sexuality in Modern Media: How Is It Affecting Our Children?

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When parents think about environmental exposures during childhood, they might think of lead, pesticides, or grass pollens. In fact the greatest environmental exposure for most children is television: they spend more time watching it than they do in any other wakeful activity, and it has significant effects on their health and well-being.

For too long parents and even pediatricians have asked regarding television: "Is it good or bad?" Television is inherently neither; it's time to move beyond such black or white thinking. Television is a tool: whether it is good or bad for children depends on what they watch and how they watch it.

Used carefully for children over the age of two years, television need not have untoward effects at all, and according to recent studies can even exert a positive influence. By and large, however, it is not being used carefully. By and large, parents are clueless about the content and consequences of the media-saturated world their children inhabit.

Content is the critical mediator in the effects of TV on children. Watching *Sesame Street* or *Discovery Channel* is not the same as watching *Grey's Anatomy* or *Desperate Housewives*. That 95 percent of American children watch programs that are produced for more mature audiences is concerning when you consider that children, who use media to learn about culture, typically lack the knowledge and experience to recognize what is unrealistic.

Today's parents should recognize and acknowledge that the media represent a powerful teacher of children and adolescents. The media cut across virtually every concern that parents and pediatricians have about young people: sex, violence, homicide, suicide, obesity, eating disorders, school problems, and drug use. Permitted to view a weekly average of 30 hours of television largely absent adult consideration of the developmental fitness of the programming, it should not seem remarkable that today's children and adolescents are more overweight, inattentive, violent and sexual than any previous generation.

American teens, especially, are adrift in one of the most crude, brutal, and explicitly sexualized popular cultures in the history of the world. Through television, music videos, and the Internet, teens have unprecedented access to an astounding array of both real and virtual sexual experiences. With schools and parents not always eager to tackle the subject adequately, the media have arguably become the leading sex educator in America today. And that's not particularly good news.

The sexual content in much of the media today's teens attend to is frequent, glamorized, and consequence free. "Everyone does it" on television and in the movies, or so it seems, yet the need for birth control, the risks of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections, or the need for responsibility are rarely discussed.

Too often children and teens are permitted to view late evening programming these days hypersexualized at times to the degree that many adults feel uncomfortable watching. And too often shows targeting adolescents seem like "Happy Days With Hormones", with sexual intercourse appearing a normative and casual activity even for teens. In these ways the media function as a kind of sexual "super peer", providing role models of attractive adults and older adolescents engaging in risky behavior, and putting additional pressure on young people to have sex at a young age.

Given our societal reticence to talk in a timely and comprehensive way with children and teens about sex and contraception, the media today represent the only easily accessible form of sex education left to teenagers. Adolescents themselves consistently cite the mass media as important sources of sexual information. With recent surveys showing that adolescents in the U.S. spend on average 5 to 6 hours a day with some form of media, we should not be surprised the significant influence of all this media exposure on teens' sexual attitudes and behaviors.

A growing number of studies are indeed revealing that exposure to sexual content in television as well as in movies, music and magazines accelerates white adolescents' sexual activity and increases their risk of engaging in early sexual intercourse. White teens who watched the most sexual content had a twofold increased risk of initiating intercourse the following year, or of significantly advancing in non-intercourse sexual activity. Black teens, however, appear more influenced by perceptions of their parents' expectations and their friends' sexual behavior than by what they see and hear in the media.

With early initiation of sexual intercourse comes increased risk for teenage pregnancy and for sexually transmitted infections. Both male and female adolescents who are younger at first intercourse are less likely to use a contraceptive method, a national concern considering that despite recent declines the teenage pregnancy rate in the U.S. is still 3 to 10 times as high as those in other industrialized countries, none besides our own in which schools are limited to promoting only abstinence until marriage and to discussing the exaggerated failure rates of contraception.

The corruption of childhood is now pretty much a fact of modern life. The adult world, through films, music, fashion, magazines and newspapers, has elected to share with rather than shield from the young its various sexual obsessions so that, while the age of consent has remained the same, the age of knowledge has been hurtling down through the ages.

While hypersexualized media content is by no means certain to convert an otherwise innocent child into a sexually reckless adolescent, just as every pack of cigarettes smoked increases by some small amount the likelihood of lung cancer, every media portrait viewed of sex as fun and risk free increases by some small amount the likelihood of early sexual experimentation.

Apologists argue that today's parents are simply overwhelmed battling with thousands of competing media images and ideas over which they have little direct control, and that the responsibility for healthier media lies with the producers of media. While indeed the major television networks need to recognize that with their free use of the airwaves comes a certain responsibility to public health, parents indeed still hold a large measure of control over the media habits of their children. It's time parents retook that remote.