

Teens Imitate TV Sleaze, Says Study

by Tim Drake

IOWA CITY, Iowa — Kathy Weiss keeps a watchful eye on the mainstream media's influence on her three teenagers. According to a recent study, she is right to be concerned. "My 15-year-old daughter lives for [the television show] 'OC', which features young adults who are engaged in promiscuous activity," said the Coralville, Iowa, mother. "We allow her to watch it, but with the understanding that this isn't our life." When her children were young, the Weiss family severely limited television viewing and screened movies for their appropriateness. They continue to do so. Weiss said that the fact that her children know that their parents are paying attention makes a significant impact on what their children choose to watch.

The study was reported in a *Journal of Pediatrics*. "The Impact of the Media on Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behavior," was conducted by S. Liliana Escobar-Chaves and the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston for The Medical Institute for Sexual Health. It reviewed all biomedical and social science research completed between 1983 and 2004 exploring the effects of mass media upon youth. According to the study, adolescents who are exposed to television with sexual content are more likely to overestimate the frequency of some sexual behaviors, have more permissive attitudes toward premarital sex, and initiate sexual behavior. The study also found that 22% of teen-oriented radio segments contained sexual content, that 41% of the top-selling CDs contained sexually "very explicit" or "pretty explicit" lyrics, and that 14% of children aged 9-17 have seen things on the Internet that "they wouldn't want their parents to know about."

"Every parent and healthcare provider should be very troubled by these Findings," said Dr. Gary Rose, president of The Medical Institute. "Our children are saturated in sexual imagery." Rose noted that the average teen spends three to four hours per day watching television, and that 83% of the programming most frequently watched by teens contains some sexual content. "We have never stopped to ask what effect all this sexual content in television, the Internet and music has on young people." Weiss is glad she has. "They aren't that interested in television," she said. "Recently our 18-year-old, Elliot, told his younger siblings that they shouldn't watch a certain movie if it has bad content."

Deep Impact

One example of teen-oriented sexual content recently shook the video gaming industry. On July 20, after significant public and political pressure, the Entertainment Software Rating Board, a self-regulatory organization that enforces video game ratings in the U.S., revoked the "M" (mature) rating for Take Two Interactive Software, Inc.'s best-selling video game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" after it was revealed that explicit sexual content could be unlocked with an Internet download. Take Two admitted that the sex scenes had been built into the retail version of the game. The game was last year's top-selling game, selling more than 5.1 million copies in the United States.

"There are pornography modules that can be activated in the game," said David Walsh, author of *Why Do they Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen*, and president of the Minneapolis-based National Institute on Media and the Family. "They're not just observing pornography, they are directing it. Video games are behavioral rehearsal machines." Walsh said that the Journal study is consistent with the research he has done on media and teenage brain development. "We used to think that brain development was done by age 10," said Walsh. "We now know that the prefrontal cortex enters the peak of its wiring in the teenage years and is not done until a boy or girl enters their 20s."

According to Walsh, the development of the brain's impulse control center and the awakening of sexual interest in teens combine to form a potent combination. "Proper guidance is needed to help teens learn how to responsibly manage those impulses," said Walsh. "When we don't do that we delegate sex education to the media." Walsh finds that dangerous. "The real impact of media is that it shapes norms and values," said Walsh. "Teens' interest is heightened and they are much more malleable to the messages they are being exposed to. If advertisers spend millions of dollars to influence behavior, why wouldn't we think that media promoting promiscuity would influence teens when their impulse control centers are developing?"

In commentary accompanying the Journal article, Dr. Michael Rich, a physician and researcher at Harvard Medical School, noted, "The leading causes of morbidity and mortality are no longer infections, congenital disorders, and cancer, but the outcome of acquired health risk behaviors, including risky sex."

What Can Parents Do?

Parents take different actions in controlling what their children see. Increasing numbers of parents simply do not have video games or televisions in their homes. Others, such as Weiss, oversee their children's purchases and decisions about what to watch. Hattiesburg, Miss., mother Deborah Flynt maintains control over her teenage son and daughter's viewing, listening and gaming habits. "They have to okay all movie and CD purchases," said Flynt. "They need to get formal approval for those things." She added that they make most of their purchases through Wal-Mart because of the company's decision to not carry offensive material. Flynt also blocks certain channels that they receive through satellite television. "They understand that it's not just me being a tyrant," said Flynt. "They understand that it's for their own good, and are free to explain their own point of view."

Weiss takes a similar approach. "Any game purchases are overseen by a parent," Weiss said. "I'll also offer options that might entice them away from TV like going to a water park or the mall. Vigilance is the key," said Weiss, who described her monitoring as "covert." "It's about being in control, but not acting that way," said Weiss. "You want to be aware and involved, but you don't want them to know it." Weiss noted that as much control as parents have, there comes a time when every parent must let go. "At some point," she said, "we parents have to release control of our children and pray that the values we have instilled will draw them away from evil influences and into the light."

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