

Anything Goes! Teenage Sex and the Media

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In the absence of effective sex education at home or at school, the media have become leading sex educators in Canada.¹ That is a statement that should send chills down the spine of any parent (or responsible adult, for that matter). Canadian parents would do well to learn from the mistakes of their American counterparts, who have let the government and religious fundamentalists run amok with “abstinence-only” sex education. Only in the US could the federal government set aside \$170 million for abstinence-only sex education programs at a time when Hollywood and the networks are producing the most suggestive and explicit programming in their history.²

Think about how we teach young people about sex in the new millennium—with suggestiveness, innuendo, increasing explicitness and pornography, and off-colour jokes. “Just the facts, Ma’am?” Joe Friday from *Dragnet* would blush these days. It’s more like this:

I’ve often wondered what it would be like if we taught young people swimming in the same way we teach sexuality. If we told them that swimming was an important adult activity, one that they will all have to be skilled at when they grow up, but we never talked with them about it. We never showed them the pool. We just allowed them to stand outside closed doors and listen to all the splashing. Occasionally, they might catch a glimpse of partially clothed people going in and out of the door to the pool and maybe they’d find a hidden book on the art of swimming, but when they asked a question about how swimming felt or what it was about they would be greeted with blank or embarrassed looks (or told they weren’t old enough to know.)

Suddenly, when they turned 18, we would fling open the doors to the pool and they would jump in.

Miraculously some might learn to tread water, but many would drown.³

Apparently, Canadian parents are no better than American parents at teaching about sex: a recent survey of nearly 2400 grade 10 and 12 students in Saskatchewan found that only one third of the teenagers felt that they could talk to their parents about sex.⁴ Nearly one half were already sexually active.⁴ At the same time, 94% of the 4200 parents surveyed in a New Brunswick study agreed that sex education should be provided in schools, often as early as elementary school.⁵ Although rates of sexual intercourse declined slightly among Canadian teenagers from 1988 to 2002, 40% of boys and 46% of girls in grade 11 reported having had sex, and 15% of boys and 9% of girls report having had six or more partners.⁶ As they get older, Canadian teenagers use condoms less frequently, and rates of Chlamydial infection are rising.⁷ Although the US has the highest teenage pregnancy and birth rates in the Western world (41.1 births per 1000 teenagers 15 to 19 years old in 2004), Canada’s rate of 14.5 ranks well above the rates for all Western European countries except for the UK (26.8).⁸

How do the media fit into this equation? The average Canadian child watches nearly 22 hours of television per week,⁹ the same as the average American child, and research shows that television viewing is merely the tip of the iceberg: young people spend an additional three hours per day with videos, videogames, computers, music, and other media.¹⁰ North American children and teenagers spend more time with media than they spend in any other activity except sleeping—more time than they spend in the classroom.¹¹ By the time today’s children reach age 70, they will have spent 7 to 10 years of their lives with screen media.¹² Hollywood executives admit that the media have an extraordinary power to teach, but what are they teaching and who is learning from them?

Until four years ago, the only research available about sex and the media attested to the power of the media to influence young people’s attitudes and beliefs about sex, but not their behaviour. Yet even this influence is highly significant. There are dozens of studies that show that the media

function essentially as a “super peer” group, making teenagers believe that everyone out there is having sex but them, that sex is without risks or consequences, and that birth control is completely unnecessary.^{13,14} Parents acknowledge—and often are afraid of—the influence that their teenage children’s peers may be exerting. They should fear the influence of the media much more.

Recently, three studies have found a cause-and-effect relationship between viewing sexual content in the media and earlier age at first sexual intercourse.^{15–17} On average, viewing a lot of sexual content at a young age decreases the age at first intercourse by one year. Eight studies have found *no* relationship between the availability of condoms in school-based clinics and earlier onset of sexual intercourse.¹³ The message should be clear by now: the media can be a powerful teacher about sex and sexuality, but availability of contraception does not influence teenagers’ sexual activity. The decision about when to have sex is complex and deeply influenced by family, religion, peers, and the media. The decision to use contraception is simple: if it is available, teenagers will use it; if it is unavailable, they will have unprotected sex.^{13,18}

So why don’t parents understand the extraordinary power of the media? For starters, parents may remember “gentler, kinder” media from when they were growing up. The media have become increasingly explicit in the past decade. On American television, for example, more than 75% of shows now have sexual content, yet less than 15% provide responsible sexual information about abstinence, birth control, or the risks of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.¹⁹ Or parents may not be aware of what their children and teens are viewing in the media. Most parents don’t watch television with their children or go with them to PG-13 or R-rated movies.¹¹ Parents seem to worry most about pornography on the Internet, but the number of sexual messages their children have been given on television and in movies by the time they reach adolescence is astounding: an estimated 14 000 references per year on television alone.¹³ Parents don’t want to fight with their children about media; it’s far easier to park them in front of the television set or drop them off at the mall to see a movie (even one with a rating that would indicate it is inappropriate for them). In short, many parents are clueless.²⁰

What can be done to fix this situation? The media *could* help teach sex education in a responsible way, showing abstinence at younger ages, the importance of sex within a committed relationship at older ages, and the need for contraception and protection from sexually transmitted infections at every age. Public health messages can easily be embedded within mainstream programming, to good effect. An episode of *ER* increased knowledge about emergency

contraception.²¹ An episode of *Friends* taught teenagers about condoms.²² This is what has been called “edutainment.”²² Hollywood executives need to understand that with their power and wealth comes an extraordinary public health responsibility. The television networks could help by airing *more* commercials for birth control and emergency contraceptives and *fewer* commercials for erectile dysfunction drugs and commercials that use suggestive sexuality to try to sell more product.²³ Canadians may rue the fact that the US/Canada border is porous to television airwaves, but a “US chip”—like a V-chip—that would block all American programming is not likely to be developed any time soon.

Media education would be useful as well, and Canada is far ahead of the US in providing such education to children.¹ The Media Awareness Network²⁴ is an important resource for Canadians. Nowadays, literacy means more than the ability to read and write; it means the ability to use a variety of different media and to decode a variety of different media messages. Studies show that media education can be protective against the harmful effects of media.²⁵

Finally, schools and parents need to recognize the need for sex education, both at home and in school. And such education *cannot* be abstinence-only. Young people need to be taught about birth control, as well as about other potentially controversial topics like masturbation, homosexuality, and abortion. These days, they hear about those topics in the media all the time. Why shouldn’t they be given the facts, and a chance to discuss them with their parents, teachers, and peers?

Thirty-five years ago, one of my mentors, Dr Adele Hofmann, who helped to found adolescent medicine as a specialty, wrote the following:

For an adolescent girl to have become pregnant because of ignorance about contraception, because she cannot bring herself to confide in parents, and because physicians have avoided their responsibility in taking the initiative in this area is indeed a harsh and cruel price for her and her consort to pay. It is time that all physicians and parents recognize the rights and needs of adolescents to receive health care for sensitive matters under the same terms as are afforded adults.²⁶

The media *could* be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. They *could* be an important access point for teenagers for accurate and useful information about health care for sensitive matters. They already are an important access point for teenagers for inaccurate and highly suggestive information about sex. But the entertainment community must accept its public health responsibility, and parents must recognize that they have to harness and exert control

over the extraordinary power of the media to teach their children and adolescents about sex and sexuality. Otherwise, it's "Anything Goes!"

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