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Editorial: Sex, sex and more sex. Got your attention?

Popular media's role in promulgating the fiction that sex is without consequence has clear consequences: Early sex for teenagers.

"Being a mom is the best feeling in the world."

It's a quote most moms, even after changing a diaper or getting up for a 3 a.m. feeding, might readily accept as true; and the rest of us might regard as cutely benign.

But this quote comes from the country's most famous teen mom - the celebrated Jamie Lynn Spears. And featured on the cover of a national magazine, *OK!*, it's neither cute nor benign. Instead, it's just another beat of the drum from popular media:

Sex? No big deal, even when teenagers are involved.

The jury has been in for awhile - adolescents saturated with media offerings heavily laden with sex are more prone to be sexually active early. The solution: Giving teens the skills to ignore the blandishments, of which this national magazine cover constitutes a perfect example.

Pregnant at 16 and a mom at 17, Spears is also the star of Nickelodeon's "Zoey 101" and baby sister of that other famous Spears, Britney. She is, in other words, a teen icon. And here she is decked out on a magazine cover with beaming smile, holding baby Maddie, proclaiming the virtues of motherhood.

And then there's the recent hit movie, "Juno," about a 16-year-old's pregnancy by a guy pal and the ensuing adoption.

If only all teen pregnancies had such endings. Most, however, contribute to a cycle that has made Milwaukee No. 7 in the nation in births to teen moms.

Though many a teen will delight in Jamie Lynn Spears' comments on motherhood, most teen moms couldn't be more different. There is a clear link between poverty and teen pregnancy, another way of saying that most teen moms aren't wealthy. Most teen moms, in fact, contribute to a \$6.9 billion yearly bill that includes hefty welfare and Medicaid payments.

The link between use of media heavily saturated with sexual messages and early teen sex is also clear.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill surveyed black and white teens when they were 12 and 14 and then checked in with them two years later. White teens who had experienced a heavy diet of sexual content in their media experiences were twice as likely to have sex two years later.

Jane Brown, a professor at the University of North Carolina and principal investigator in the study, told us that black teens were also

heavily influenced by early exposure to sexually-laden programming and music but, two years later, other factors also intruded to more potently add to the mix.

In Milwaukee, the 10-year average teen birth rate for black females between 15 and 17 was, in 2004, 92.6 per 1,000 births, 74 per thousand for Latinas and 26.9 for white girls, according to the report by the United Way of Greater Milwaukee, "If Truth Be Told."

About now we're sounding to many of you like snooty, straight-laced prudes. No, we're not arguing for censorship, though personal responsibility exerted by media outlets would be just fine. But consumers can also stop consuming what is clearly slop.

Parents are consumers and they can influence the consumption of their kids or teach them to make sense of what they are buying. That "Another View" column on the right is generally reserved for folks who disagree with us. Not this time. After all, who's for teen pregnancy? And few, we're guessing, doubt the media's role in early teen sex.

Sexually loaded media is, unfortunately, a fact of life. The solution then is to inculcate teens with the knowledge they need to protect themselves. We agree with Sarah Brown, CEO of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in [her column on this page](#): Parents are key to accomplishing this.

But not all parents, well, parent. So schools are equally important. And Wisconsin schools are not doing nearly enough, as a story Wednesday in the Journal Sentinel by Erin Richards demonstrated (www.jsonline.com/780200).

School districts differ significantly in how they teach sex education - resulting in an inability to say with any certainty that Wisconsin students are getting the information they need about avoiding sex or protecting themselves if they don't. We believe they are not.

And, as we've noted in earlier editorials, though Milwaukee Public Schools are trying to get teachers trained to teach its curriculum, it still has a ways to go.

By statute, age-appropriate human growth and development instruction is encouraged but not required.

This needs to change. It has to become mandatory and the state Legislature needs to get over its hesitancy to take on this issue.

Yes, media plays a major role. But the solution is giving the state's teens the information they need to fully appreciate that reel life bears no resemblance to the travail that usually accompanies teen pregnancies in real life.