



Sexy TV shows tied to teen pregnancies

Exposure to high levels of sexual content can affect adolescents over time

By Laura T. Coffey, TODAYShow.com contributor

In the world of television programming, sex sells — perhaps a little too well with young viewers, a new study suggests.

The RAND Corp. study is the first of its kind to identify a link between teenagers' exposure to sexual content on TV and teen pregnancies. The study, released Monday and published in the November edition of the journal *Pediatrics*, found that teens exposed to high levels of sexual content on television were twice as likely to be involved in a pregnancy in the following three years as teens with limited exposure.

The study's authors are quick to point out that the factors leading to teen pregnancies are varied and complex — but they say it's important for parents, teachers and pediatricians to understand that TV can be one of them.

"We were surprised to find this link," said Anita Chandra, the study's lead author and a behavioral scientist at RAND, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization. "But teens spend a good amount of their time watching television — an average of three hours a day — and we don't know a lot about its impact on their health decisions ...

"We don't think that [TV] is necessarily more significant than some of the family and neighborhood factors that can lead to teen pregnancies. But even when we removed all the other factors, we still saw a compelling link between a high exposure to sexual content on television and teen pregnancies."

How the study worked

Researchers interviewed 2,003 12- to 17-year-olds over the phone in 2001, and then followed up with those same youths in an effort to interview them again in 2002 and 2004.

The interviews focused in detail on teens' TV viewing habits as well as their sexual attitudes, knowledge and behavior. Participants shared information about how frequently they watched 23 TV programs that were popular with teens at the time of the survey. The shows included a wide range of animated and live-action programs, reality shows, sitcoms and dramas that aired on broadcast networks and basic and

premium cable channels. The programs included "Sex and the City," "That '70s Show" and "Friends."

"This might surprise people, but sitcoms had the highest sexual content," Chandra said, noting that such content can include sexual dialogue in addition to actual sexual behavior.

By the third telephone interview, 744 of the youths said they had engaged in sexual intercourse, and 718 of them shared information about their pregnancy histories. Of that group, a total of 91 youths — 58 girls and 33 boys — said they had experienced a pregnancy or had gotten a girl pregnant.

In the final analysis, teens who had watched the most sexual content on television during the three-year study period were twice as likely to have been involved in a pregnancy as teens with the lowest levels of exposure.

Chandra said TV-watching was strongly connected with teen pregnancy even when other factors were considered, including grades, family structure and parents' education level.

But the study didn't adequately address other issues, such as self-esteem, family values and income, contends Elizabeth Schroeder, executive director of Answer, a teen sex education program based at Rutgers University.

"The media does have an impact, but we don't know the full extent of it because there are so many other factors," Schroeder said.

Bill Albert, chief program officer at the nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, praised the study and said it "catches up with common sense."

"Media helps shape the social script for teenagers. Most parents know that. This is just good research to confirm that," Albert said.

The study, paid for by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, followed a 2004 study by some of the same scientists that indicated watching sexual content on TV can make teens more likely to have sex at earlier ages.

Chandra said the new findings are significant given the intractable social and public health problems associated with teen pregnancies. While the teen pregnancy rate in the United States has dropped considerably since the early '90s, the U.S. rate remains one of the highest among the world's industrialized nations. Nearly 1 million young women between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant each year in the U.S., and they are more likely than other teens to drop out of high school and live in poverty.

The role of parents, others

So what's a parent to do under these circumstances? Lock up the television set for good and throw away the key?

On the contrary, the study's authors advise parents to become familiar with the shows their kids watch — and, whenever possible and practical, to watch TV with them.

“By taking the time to watch together, parents can turn these into teachable moments ... and opportunities for frank discussions about sex,” Chandra said.

“Parents [also] might want to limit some exposure. But realistically, this kind of content is everywhere. Our study only looks at TV. There's also the Internet, music, magazines.”

Chandra noted that many TV programs fail to give viewers realistic depictions of the potential consequences of sex, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

“If teens are getting any of their information about sex from TV, they're very rarely going to get a balanced portrayal,”

she said. “When there is a portrayal, how often is it coupled with a discussion of contraception use or safer sex or the consequences of what could happen?”

An ongoing controversy

Of course, parents, religious leaders and politicians have lambasted the broadcasting industry for years and called for curbs on content they consider objectionable. In response to the news of this new study, the National Association of Broadcasting released the following statement:

“Though NAB has not had a chance to review the report, it's worth noting that broadcasters encourage parents and caregivers to use the V-chip and other program blocking technologies that would screen out shows that are inappropriate for children. We would also point out that broadcast television is generally far less explicit than programming found on cable, satellite and on the Internet.”

The study's authors insist they aren't taking aim at any particular television show, channel or network. Instead, they're calling for more realistic plotlines and discussions of consequences — not a wholesale change in programming from, say, “Sex and the City” to “Sex and the Condom.”

“Right now the message teens are getting is that everything is great, and there really are no consequences to sex,” Chandra said.

“Since the time that we did our data collection, the amount of sexual content on TV has doubled ... It's important for kids to have the tools to understand what they're watching.”