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Study First to Link TV Sex To Real Teen Pregnancies

By Rob Stein, Washington Post Staff Writer

Teenagers who watch a lot of television featuring flirting, necking, discussion of sex and sex scenes are much more likely than their peers to get pregnant or get a partner pregnant, according to the first study to directly link steamy programming to teen pregnancy.

The study, which tracked more than 700 12-to-17-year-olds for three years, found that those who viewed the most sexual content on TV were about twice as likely to be involved in a pregnancy as those who saw the least.

“Watching this kind of sexual content on television is a powerful factor in increasing the likelihood of a teen pregnancy,” said lead researcher Anita Chandra. “We found a strong association.” The study is being published today in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

There is rising concern about teen pregnancy rates, which after decades of decline may have started inching up again, fueling an intense debate about what factors are to blame. Although TV viewing is unlikely to entirely explain the possible uptick in teen pregnancies, Chandra and others said, the study provides the first direct evidence that it could be playing a significant role.

“Sexual content on television has doubled in the last few years, especially during the period of our research,” said Chandra, a researcher at the nonpartisan Rand Corp.

Studies have found a link between watching television shows with sexual content and becoming sexually active earlier, and between sexually explicit music videos and an increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases. And many studies have shown that TV violence seems to make children more aggressive. But the new research is the first to show an association between TV watching and pregnancy among teens.

The study did not examine how different approaches to sex education factor into the effects of TV viewing on sexual behavior and pregnancy rates. Proponents of comprehensive sex education as well as programs that focus on abstinence said the findings illustrate the need to educate children better

about the risks of sex and about how to protect themselves, although they disagree about which approach works best.

“We have a highly sexualized culture that glamorizes sex,” said Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association. “We really need to encourage schools to make abstinence-centered programs a priority.”

But others said there is no evidence that abstinence-centered programs work.

“This finding underscores the importance of evidence-based sex education that helps young people delay sex and use prevention when they become sexually active,” said James Wagoner of Advocates for Youth. “The absolutely last thing we should do in response is bury our heads in the sand and promote failed abstinence-only programs.”

Chandra and her colleagues surveyed more than 2,000 adolescents ages 12 to 17 three times by telephone from 2001 to 2004 to gather information about a variety of behavioral and demographic factors, including television viewing habits. Based on a detailed analysis of the sexual content of 23 shows in the 2000-2001 TV season, the researchers calculated how often the teens saw characters kissing, touching, having sex, and discussing past or future sexual activity.

Among the 718 youths who reported being sexually active during the study, the likelihood of getting pregnant or getting someone else pregnant increased steadily with the amount of sexual content they watched on TV, the researchers found. About 25 percent of those who watched the most were involved in a pregnancy, compared with about 12 percent of those who watched the least. The researchers took into account other factors such as having only one parent, wanting to have a baby and engaging in other risky behaviors.

Fifty-eight girls reported getting pregnant and 33 boys reported being responsible for getting a girl pregnant during the study period. The increased risk emerged regardless of whether teens watched only one or two shows that were explicit or surfed many shows that had occasional sexual content, Chandra said.

“It could be a child wasn’t watching that much TV per week but was watching shows that got a pretty high rating on sexual content, or it could be a kid who was watching a lot of hours but on average was getting just moderate amounts of sexual content from each show,” Chandra said.

Among the shows the teens watched were “Sex and the City,” “Friends” and “That ‘70s Show.” Chandra would not identify the others but stressed that they included dramas, comedies, reality shows and even animated programs on broadcast and cable networks.

“We don’t want to single out any individual programs,” Chandra said.

The researchers recommended that parents spend more time monitoring what their children watch and discussing what they see, including pointing out the possible negative consequences of early sexual activity. Programmers should also include more-realistic portrayals of the risks of sex, such as sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy, the researchers said.

“Unfortunately, that continues to be relatively rare compared to the portrayals of the positive aspects,” Chandra said.

Critics of television programming and experts on teen pregnancy said the research provided powerful new evidence about the role of TV in youth behavior.

“This is very significant,” said Melissa Henson of the Parents Television Council, a watchdog group. “It gives us plenty of reason for concern.”

Kelleen Kaye of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy praised the study but stressed that the causes of teen pregnancy are complex.

“We need to be cautious about overreaching in our expectations about the role the media can play in our effort to prevent teen pregnancy,” she said. “We don’t want to assume this is the whole story.”

Several experts questioned whether the study had established a causal relationship.

“It may be the kids who have an interest in sex watch shows with sexual content,” said Laura Lindberg of the Guttmacher Institute. “I’m concerned this makes it seem like if we just shut off the TV we’d dramatically reduce the teen pregnancy rate.”

Chandra acknowledged that other factors might play a role but said the findings are compelling because the researchers were able to track the teens over time and found such a striking relationship.

“The magnitude of the association we did see was very strong,” she said.