

HEALTH

Media Exposure and Adolescent Sexual Well-Being

Rebecca Collins

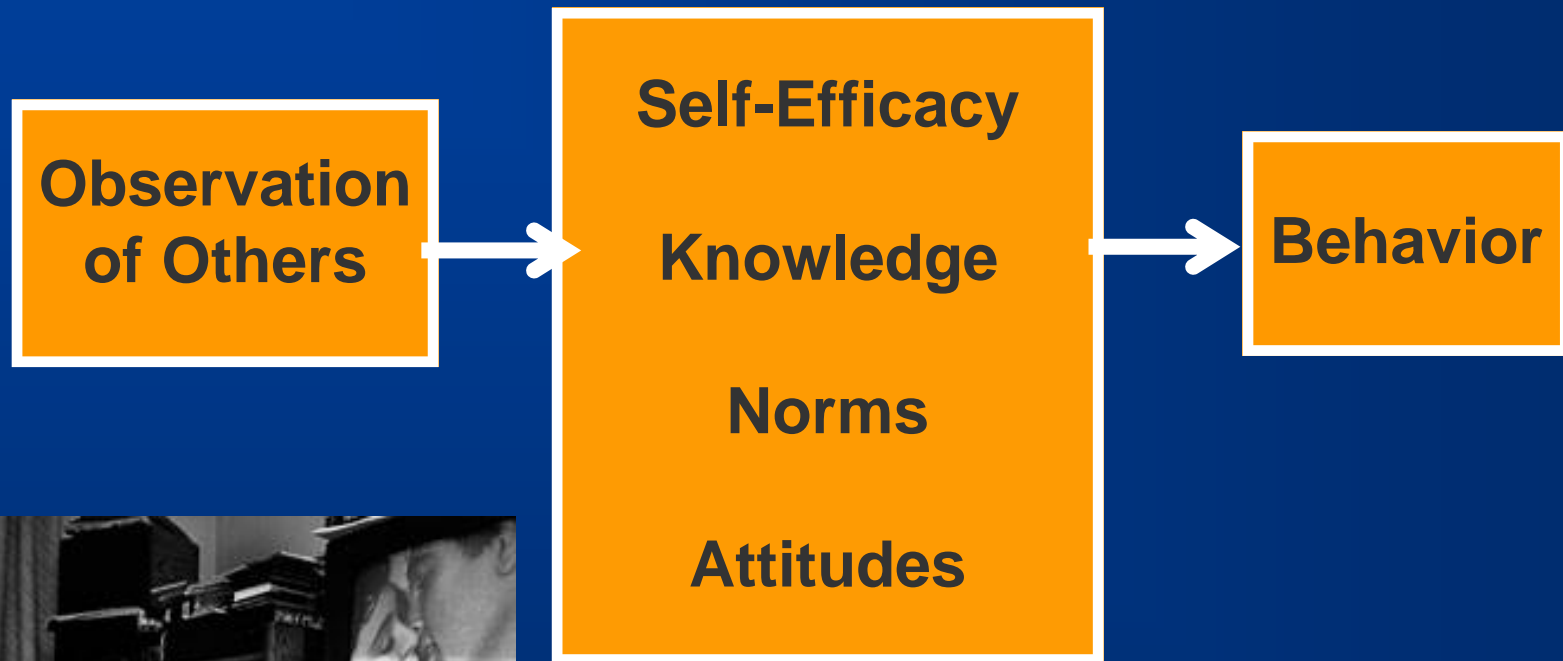
Establishing One's Sexuality is a Key Task of Adolescence

Sexual initiation during high school is normative. 48% have ever had sex, and 65% will have sex by the time they graduate

Age at first intercourse is similar across developed countries



Media Portrayals Provide Social Models or Scripts for Sexual Behavior



The “Media Monster”

- Youth in the U.S. spend more time with the media than they do in school or with their parents
- The average adolescent spends 6-7 hours per day hooked up to or plugged into some kind of media
- TV remains the medium most frequently used by adolescents, at 2-3 hrs of viewing per day



Portrayals on Sex on TV are Pervasive and Skewed

- **Sex is pervasive on TV**
 - 70% of shows contain sexual content
 - Shows with sexual content average 5 scenes with sex per hour
 - 90% of primetime comedies include sex; there are 9 such scenes per hour
- **Fewer than 1 in 20 shows portray responsible behavior or negative outcomes**
- **Most sex is casual and involves heterosexual stereotypes**

What Do We Mean by “Sex on TV”?

- TV portrayals are not typically explicit
- 1 in 10 programs portray intercourse
- Sex is most often...
 - Talk about sex (2 in 3 shows)
 - Passionate kissing or “physical flirting” (1 in 3 shows)



Research Questions

- Does exposure to sexual content on television predict earlier sexual activity?
- If so, what process accounts for any associations?
- Do associations extend to sexual health?
- Is exposure to sexual content related to other aspects of sexual well-being?
- Can parents moderate the impact of exposure to sex on television?

Study Design

- **National phone survey**
 - **Baseline (2001): 2,003 12 to 17 year olds**
 - **First follow-up (2002): 1,762 retained**
 - **Second follow-up (2004): 1,461 retained**
- **Factors assessed:**
 - **Sexual behavior**
 - **Hours of TV viewing**
 - **Frequency of viewing specific television programs**
 - **Background characteristics**

Participant Characteristics

Group	T1 (%)
Male	50.5
Female	49.5
White	78.2
Black	9.6
Latino	7.8
Other	4.4
12-14 years old at T1	45.7
15-17 years old at T1	54.3

Looking at Relationships Over Time Helps Establish the Direction of Association



Measures of Sexual Behavior

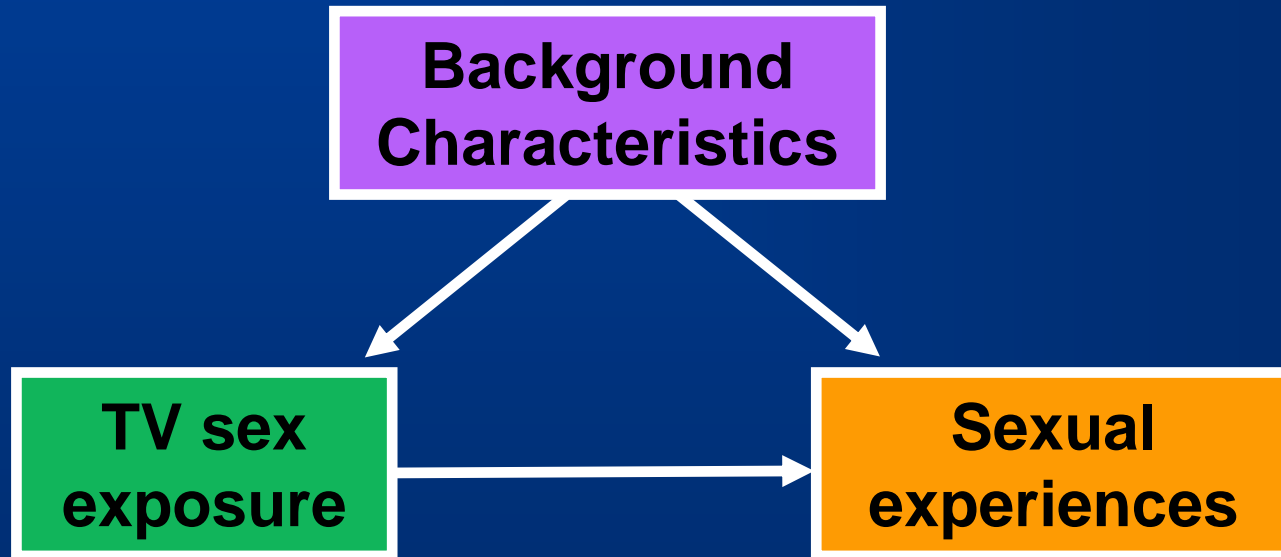
- Intercourse - “Have you ever had sex with a boy/girl? By sex we mean when a guy puts his penis in a girl’s vagina.”
- Noncoital activity
 - Nothing/Kissing
 - Making Out
 - Breast Touching
 - Genital Touching
 - Oral Sex

Only heterosexual experiences were measured

Television Exposure Measures

- **Sexual content exposure**
 - Frequency of viewing 23 programs at T1; 32 programs at T2) *multiplied by*
 - Average number of scenes with sexual content per program episode
- **Three additional measures**
 - Exposure to sexual risk and responsibility
 - Exposure to sexual behavior vs. talk
 - Average viewing hours

Controlling for Background Characteristics Reduced the Likelihood that Some Third Factor Explained Our Findings



Factors We Accounted For Statistically

Gender

Age

Race

Religiosity

Mental health

Grades in school

Peers' age

Peer approval of sex

Family structure

Parental monitoring

Parent education

Parents' sex attitudes

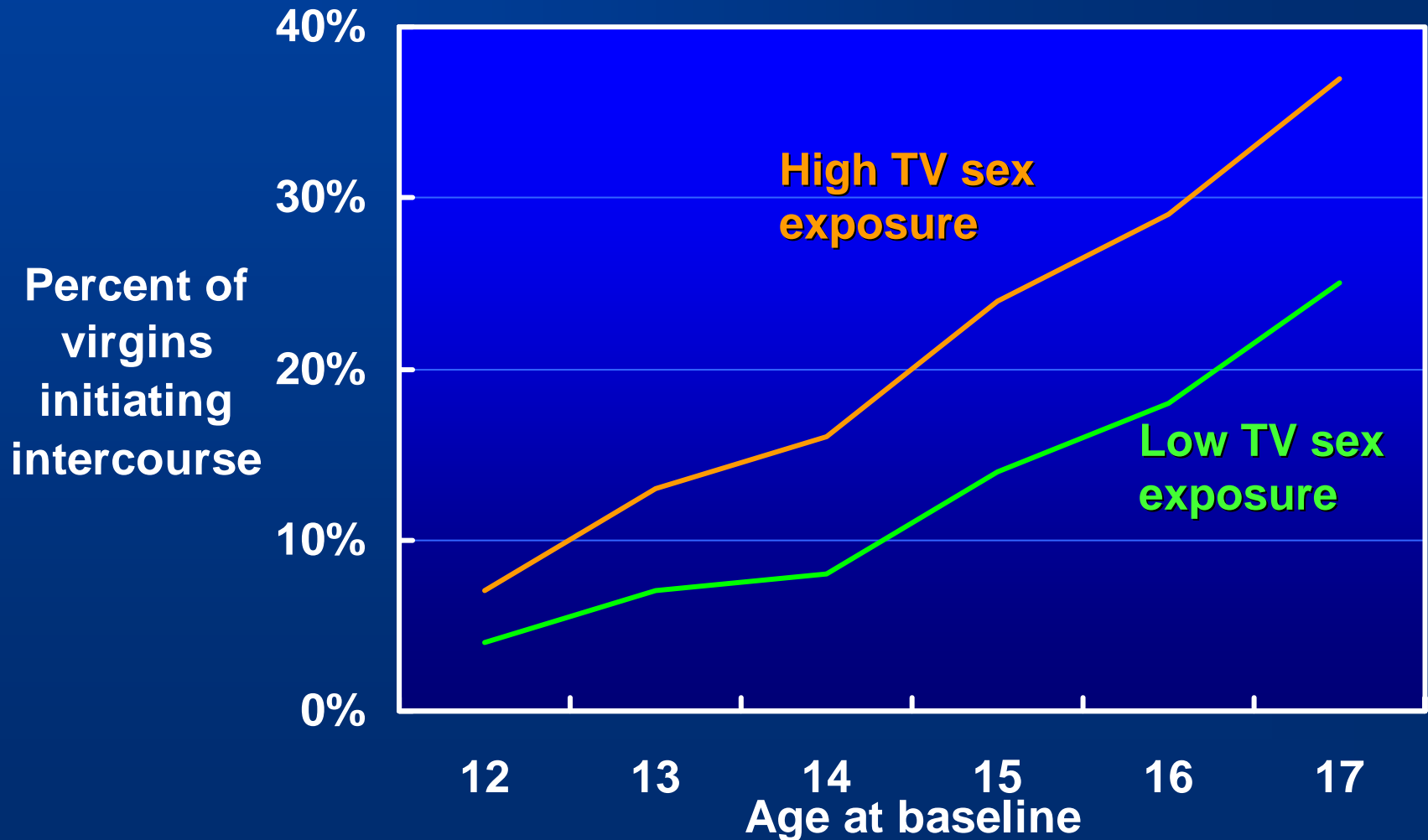
Sensation-seeking

Deviance

Research Questions

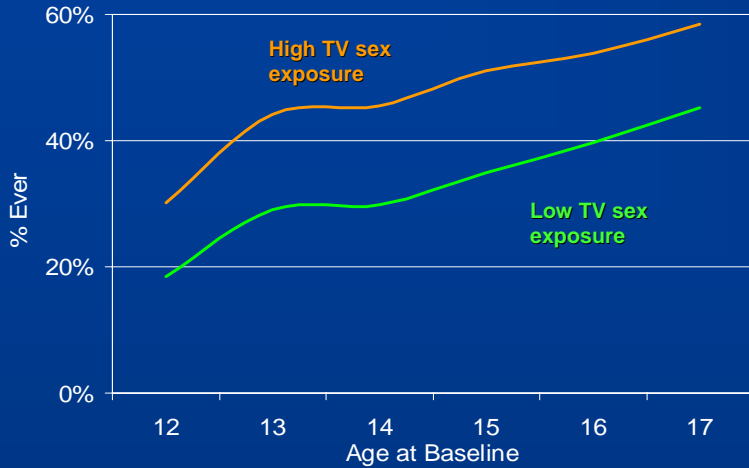
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Rates of Intercourse are Twice as High Among High TV Sex Exposure Youth

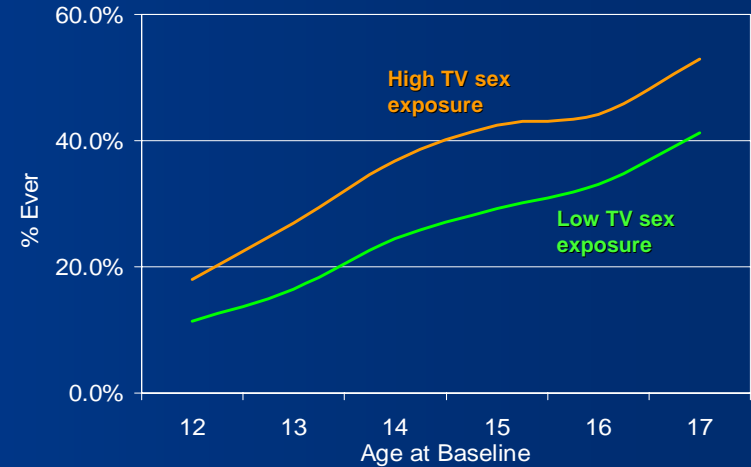


Rates of Noncoital Activity are 50 to 100% Higher Among High Exposure Youth

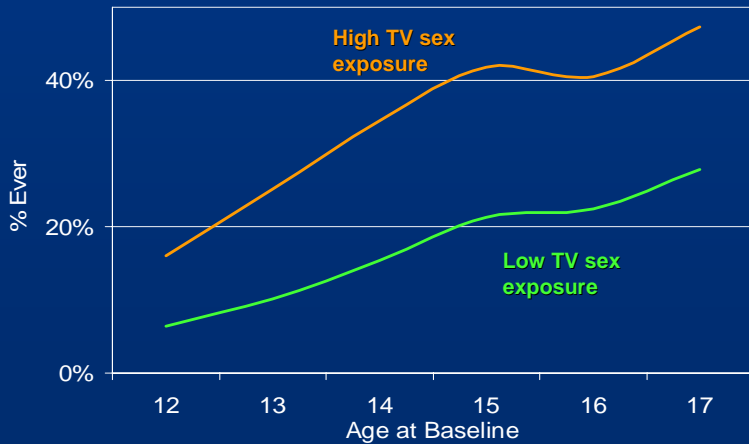
Made Out



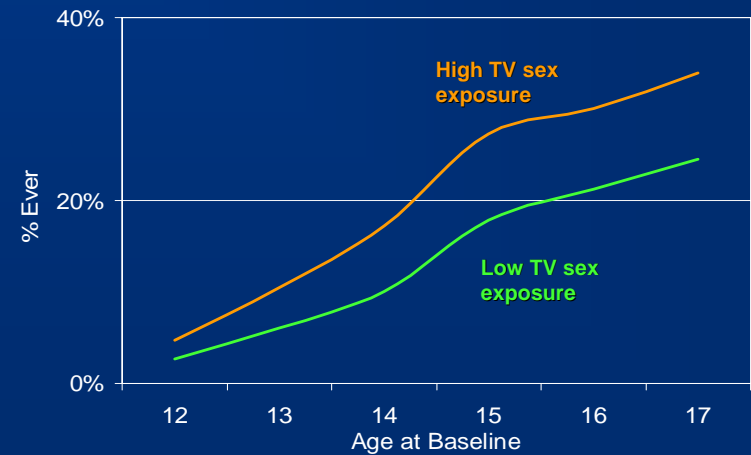
Breast Touching



Genital Touching



Oral Sex



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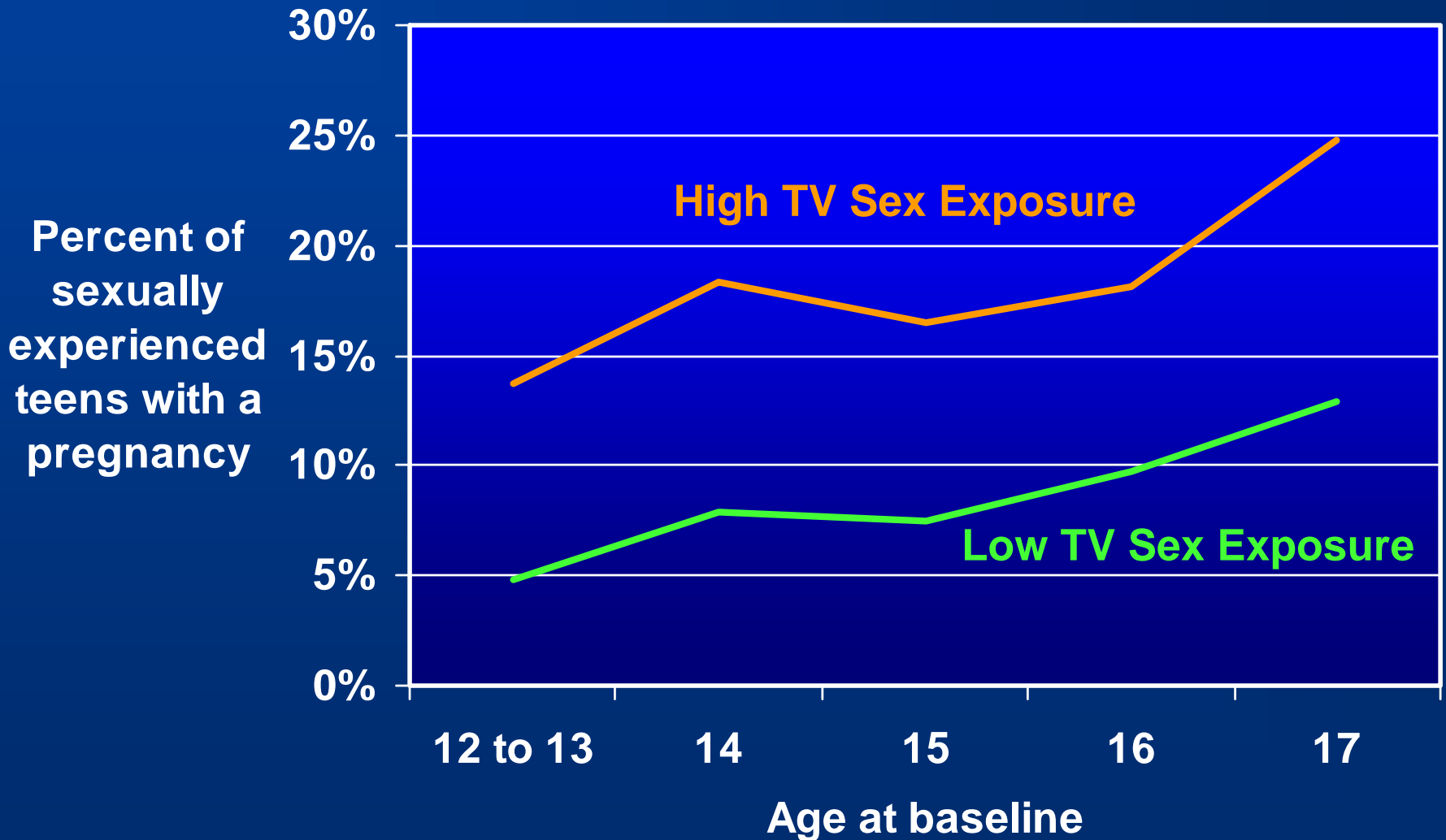
Three Processes Account for The Relationship Between Sexual Content and Sexual Behavior Change



Research Questions

- Does exposure to sexual content on television predict earlier sexual activity?
- If so, what process accounts for any associations?
- Do associations extend to sexual health?
 - Pregnancies by third survey
 - Among those who ever had sex by third survey
- Is exposure to sexual content related to other aspects of sexual well-being?
- Can parents moderate the impact of exposure to sex on television?

Rates of Pregnancy were Twice as High Among High Exposure Youth

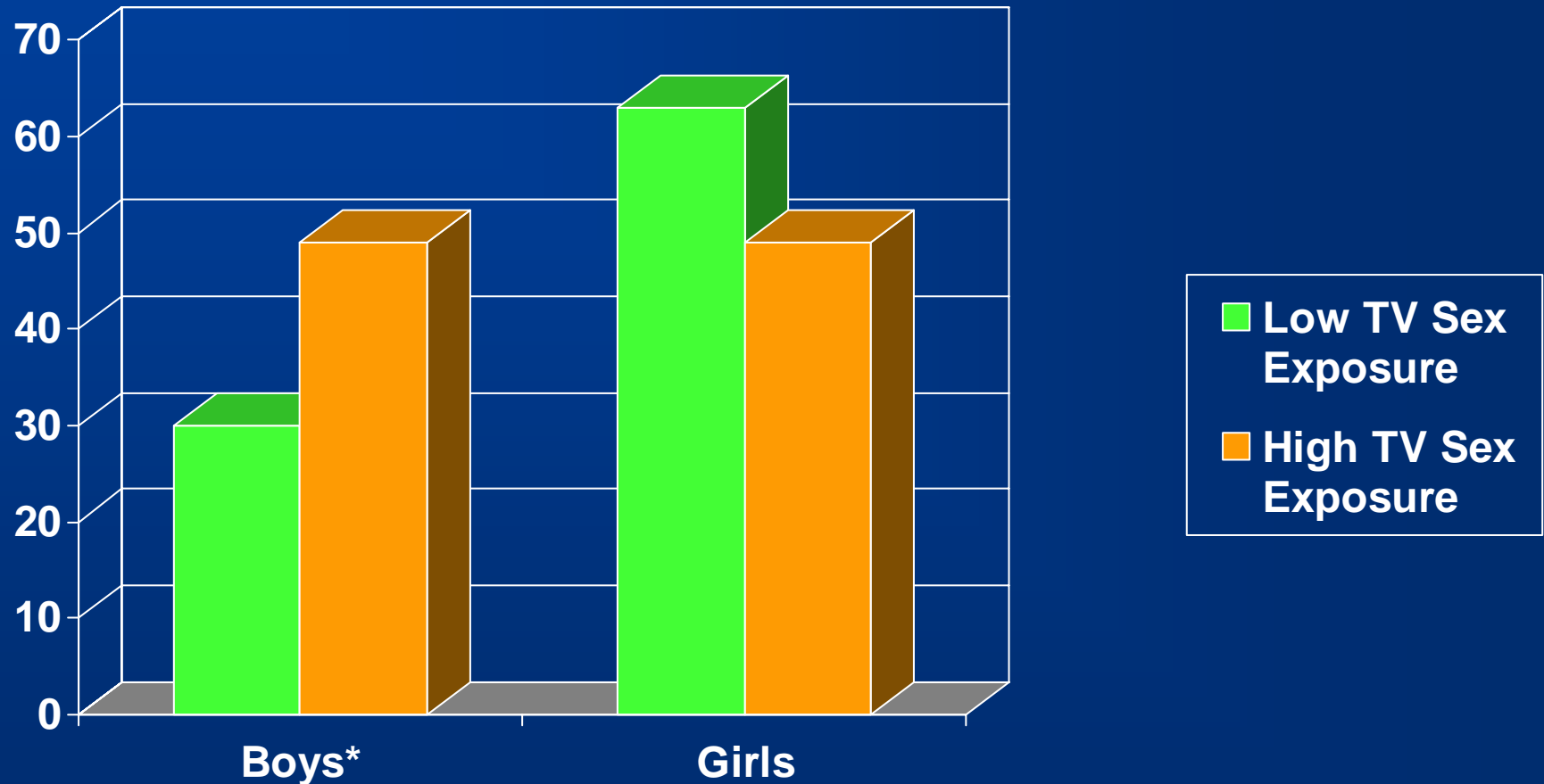


Chandra et al, Pediatrics, 2008

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 - Sexual regret “wish you had waited longer to have sex”
 - Among those who had ever had sex by third survey
- Can parents moderate the impact of exposure to sex on television?

Among Boys, Rates of Sexual Regret Were 60% Higher With High TV Sex Exposure



There was no difference in regret among girls with high versus low exposure

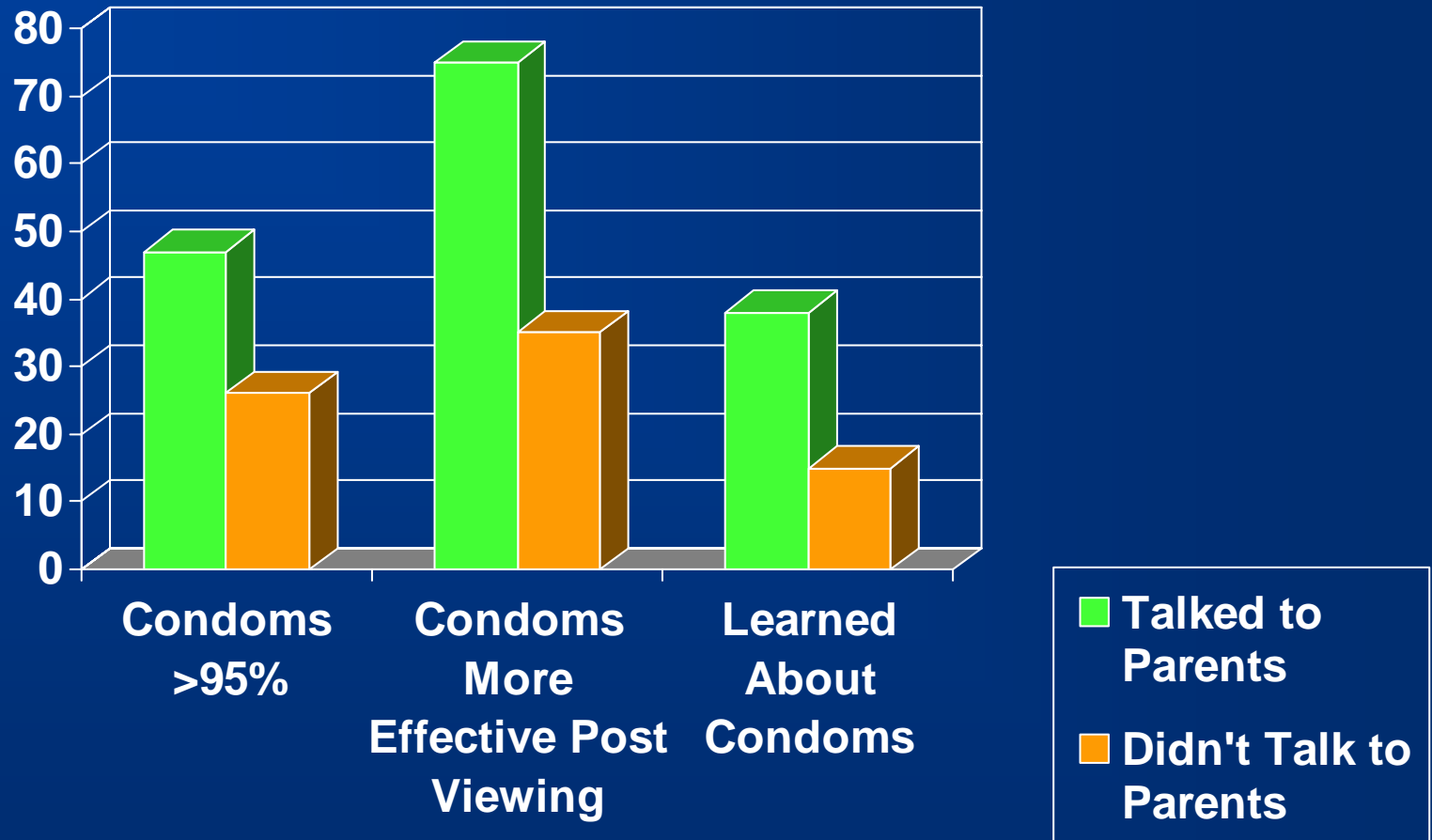
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 - Sexual regret “wish you had waited longer to have sex”
 - Among those who had ever had sex by third survey
- Can parents influence the impact of exposure to sex on television?
 - Condom efficacy message in an episode of “Friends”
 - Viewers who discussed with a parent vs those who did not

The Message was Ambiguous, But Led To Interactions With Parents

- **Half of viewers thought the main message was “lots of times condoms don’t prevent pregnancy”**
- **The other half thought it was “condoms almost always prevent pregnancy”**
- **10% of viewers talked to a parent about condom efficacy as a result of the show**

Those Who Talked With A Parent Took Away A Different Sexual Health Lesson



Conclusions

- **There are strong associations between exposure to sex in media and adolescent sexual behavior**
- **These associations extend to the psychological and health consequences of sex**
- **Substantial decreases in exposure to sexual content and increased parental involvement might significantly reduce rates of adolescent sex, sexual regret, and pregnancy**

How to Respond?

- **Encourage producers, distributors, and advertisers to reduce sexual content portrayals**
- **Encourage parents to discuss TV's messages with their children and offer more balanced perspectives**
- **Media literacy -- educate teens about the ways in which sex is depicted, and perhaps distorted, on TV**
- **Provide teens with with accurate and practical information about sex**

Collaborators

Steven Martino, Marc Elliott, Anita Chandra,
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