

Does Media Affect Teen Sexual Behavior? – Video Transcript

(Highlights from Michael Rich's Presentation at the "Taming the Media Monster" Conference,
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Michael: This is based on national data the average twenty-four hour time use of eight to eighteen year olds in the U.S. and if you look at it, it looks pretty varied until you break it down by type of behavior and you see that media has the largest chunk of their day. Kids today are using media for six and a half hours of every day on average, six and a half hours actively using media, but what's hidden in that is that essentially a quarter of them are multitasking with media. So during the same time as they are actively using media, they're not just watching TV. They have everything going and as a result their cumulative exposure to media...cumulative exposure to media content is over eight and a half hours. ...this is in one way or another a foreground background experience. What you're paying attention and what's going on around there and what we don't know is, is this what we're paying attention to that we're most effected by or is it that other stuff that comes in without having the filter of our critical faculties. Seventy-one percent of TV, movies uh, or TV programs contain sex; about six point one sexual episodes per hour. Uh, teen-directed shows in particular have a great deal of sexual talk behavior and even implied or portrayed intercourse. ...And movies, I love this movie I have to say uh, but, you know, it was relatively glib about teen pregnancy in many ways. Uh, over two-thirds of all movie dramas portray sex uh, usually initiated by the male as uh, over the following decade there's been a sexual, an increase in sexual content basically every year. You just see an uprising trend.

...So and we, as we think about media we have to also think about if we believe or want to know whether they're changing because of media, we have to have some kind, sort of theoretical construct, which I'm using as a sort of a foundation for what Becky and Sarah are going to say later. And there are three good theories, all of which speak to this. The first is, our old favorite, the social learning theory. Uh, this is the one that was used with a lot of the violence research, but basically it says that you see something; you imitate it; you make it your own...Uh, the second is cultivation. The idea that what we see in media becomes a super peer, becomes a way of telling us what the world is like. And when you see a lot of sex on TV and it's portrayed as risk-free, inconsequential and fun, you're going to believe that that's normative and that's what everybody's doing. And finally, the media practice model which is Jane Brown's wonderful idea which I think is absolutely right, which is in some ways that media had become one of the key areas where kids individuate. Adolescence is a time where you develop your individuality and you go from being very homogeneous and everybody's watching the Simpson's at age ten or eleven and by the time they're eighteen, you know, they're punk rockers and goths and jocks and...and folkees and stoners. So let's look at the Internet... Uh, adolescents are most likely to use the web to seek a soc...a social connection and they do it because of what's on her card, including Jane, maybe Jane started it, the three A's; uh, accessibility, affordability and perceived anonymity. Uh, on the web adol, over half of adolescents will acknowledge that they misrepresent themselves as older and more sexually experienced than they really are.

...and the Internet is very heavily used by young people, forty-four million users, two years ago. Uh, forty-seven percent went online everyday, averaging about an hour, some ten or twelve or fourteen hours a day. Forty-two percent ended up on porn sites and four percent, one in twenty-five kids were asked for sexual pictures of themselves by someone that they didn't know. ...It is

obviously for kids a huge opportunity for exercising their narcissism, which we all know adolescents do really well. Uh, but the other thing that it does is it is a great place to exercise their sense of social justice and putting things together and kind of creating a cyber flash model around an issue or moving things half, forward.

And here is perhaps the latest of many areas of hysteria really for the public about uh, the issue of media and sex, sexting...Let's think about sexting a little bit beyond where we've gone as a society. Where we've gone as a society is we have a number of states in which young people, twelve, thirteen, fourteen year old people send pictures of themselves nude or seminude...but what's really going on? Let's think about it. We've got kids at the peak of their sexual urge and curiosity. They are incredibly facile with this technology and even more importantly, the parents are clueless with this technology. So it's an area that they have essentially private to themselves to do what they would do and work it out away from parents, which is what their developmental drive is to do, is to figure out who they are. And so in some ways this is between the biology and the technology, the perfect storm.

...this is my only slide on a...on effects, but I want to tell you a couple of things because we had on one study that just came out at the recent Pediatric Academic Society that looked at the effect of, looking at adult-themed television as in stuff like Friends uh, on young kids...And what we found is those kids who saw adult-themed TV in that six to eight age group, had a significantly increased risk of having early sexual initiations, early sexual debut ...that's huge. Uh, and this is a (unclear) issue of what is normative. It's, you know, they're not thinking about that...that's not right or that's not, you know, the way it is. This is what, how we set the norms.

...Uh, and Adhealth uh, which is a national survey, multiple waves of interviews with kids, looked at kids who uh, whose parents limited TV, basically just limited TV across the board to less than two hours per day. And they had half the rate of sexual initiation of the kids who did not early...early sexual debut of the kids who did not uh, even including those kids whose parents strongly disapproved and made a rule about, you know, you're not having sex until you're married. So to wrap up what I'm basically saying is that we need to think—now that we're in the media age and kids are using most of their time with media—we have to start thinking about media...as an environmental health influence, much like the quality of the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat. And we have to recognize that they are neutral, but very powerful. They are not inherently malignant so they can be used for good just as well as for bad and, you know, we can educate. We can connect. We can inform, but we also when we use them obliviously or thoughtlessly can do great harm.