

PREFACE

Much has been written about the influence of the media on teen sexual behavior. In fact, when it comes to teens decisions about sex, few topics generate as much passionate discussion as the relative influence of the media. One need look no further than the media firestorm generated by a just-released report from the RAND Corporation linking sexual content on TV with teen pregnancy. Simply put, when it comes to media influence on teens, everyone is an expert.

The goal of this report is to inform practitioners and program providers about what the most up-to-date research says about teens and media influence. Specifically, the publication examines in detail how the media influences—in positive and negative ways—teen sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Importantly, the report also offers practical suggestions for how those working with youth can use the media to reach young people and provides suggestions on how best to capitalize on the exploding world of digital media.

A number of thoughts occurred to me in reading through this publication.

- **Media can be—and often is—a force for good.** Although there is certainly much in the media ether that is—to put it kindly—off message, there is also quite a bit that is entertaining, informative, and influential. One example: The summer 2008 NBC reality series *The Baby Borrowers* had its supporters and detractors to be sure. My strong suspicion, however, is that teens who watched the show gave more thought about when, and under what conditions, it is best to start a family. That's a very good thing given that show reached millions of teens and parents.
- **Media helps shape the social script for teens.** File this one under "research catches up with common sense file." From the latest must-have fashions to celebrity baby bumps to what is seen as normative behavior—the media helps paint the canvas of what is cool for teens.
- **Media influence is not as simple as many might believe.** The authors conclude that media influences teens in powerful ways but perhaps not as directly as some might believe. Consider this: content research suggests that media has become much more sexualized over the past 15 years—the same time period that rates of teen sex declined and teen contraceptive use increased. Again, media is playing a role; it is just not as direct as many believe.
- **Media influence is moderated by other influences in a teenager's life.** It is not a stretch to assume that the influence of media increases if other powerful influences are either not present (parents, for example) or are not on the job (parents who pay no attention to the media their sons and daughters are consuming).

- **We ignore the media at our own peril.** As Jane Brown notes in her introduction, media is the air that teens breathe. Given this, practitioners should do what they can to embrace this reality and use it to their advantage (this volume provides some ideas). Parents should reject “turn that crap off” as a strategy and instead spend time discussing with their children what they see and hear in the media. Parents should also remember that, although they can not control the media, they can control the media consumed in their house.

The National Campaign wishes to thank the authors of this volume for their scholarship. Much that is said and written about the influence of media on teen sexual behavior generates more heat than light. We are grateful to Jane Brown, Ph.D. for editing this volume and to Michael Rich, Ph.D., Tilly Gurman, Ph.D., Carol Underwood, Ph.D., and Sarah Keller, Ph.D. for bringing clarifying light on the important intersection of media and teen sexual behavior. We also extend our gratitude to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for making this publication possible and, in particular, to Carla P. White, M.P.H., Alison Spitz, M.P.H., and Christine Galavotti, Ph.D. for their helpful comments and guidance through this entire project. Last but certainly not least, we also wish to acknowledge the important contributions of Anne Brown Rodgers, Susan Philliber, Ph.D., Susan Newcomer, Ph.D., and Katherine Suellentrop to the success of this volume.

We encourage those who want to learn more about media influence, to get tips for parents, and to review other relevant materials, to visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org.

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